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Recruiting the ‘charisma’ to innovate

Innovation

The Centre for Excellence in Public Sector Design appears to be a product of fads and posturing, rather than clear thinking

The quest for efficiency in public services is a continuing activity carried out under a variety of names, from the modest and unassuming “management improvement”, to bold claims of “reform” and “transformation”. These endeavours, with a long and varied history, are rarely analysed systematically. This derives in part from a pattern of much introductory fanfare followed by a slow termination. Such initiatives rarely die; they usually simply peter out.

There is a strong element of the Hawthorne cycle about some of the more overtly ambitious initiatives: a great flurry of early enthusiasm appears to yield some benefit, even enhanced productivity, but increasing familiarity brings with it relapse into other inert routines not very different from those they replaced. The need for reinvigoration soon reasserts itself.

As with many public services, the Australian Public Service has a long record in this type of bureaucratic indulgence. A current example will deserve passing scrutiny in the next couple of years.

Friday, January 27 (the day after Australia Day), and Saturday, January 28, seemed an unlikely time to advertise in national newspapers for expressions of interest in a new APS post: chief executive of the Centre for Excellence in Public Sector Design. The successful applicant will be employed under a labour-hire contract with the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science Research and Tertiary Education. The centre, however, will be located, rent-free, on the campus of the Australian National University. In the first instance, it will be established for a trial period of 18 months.

The Industry Department is the lead agency but the venture has the secretaries board’s blessing and arose from a recommendation in the 2010 management advisory committee report, *Empowering Change: Fostering Innovation in the Australian Public Service*. Other agencies contributing funds include the Australian Taxation Office, the Employment Department, the Immigration Department, and the ubiquitous Department of the Prime Minis-

ter and Cabinet.

The target readership in the search for expressions of interest are “influential thought leaders”. The field could be fairly small; the selected candidate is expected to have “a long-standing interest and passion for design thinking and innovation”. Among the key qualities sought in these “influential thought leaders” is “proven capacity for innovative and creative thinking, including receptiveness to, and promotion of, new ideas and new ways of working”. Another criterion calls for “demonstrated leadership attributes, including the ability to work productively with a multidisciplinary team and to build partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders across government, business and the community”.

Perhaps the major quality required is “*personal charisma* and capacity to influence and promote change within the senior levels of government” (my emphasis). There would be a legitimate apprehension that anyone genuinely meeting this part of the selection criteria is unlikely to be interested in this post; such an individual would already be much higher in the pecking order.

There is a let-out clause in the event that any seriously stimulating, unorthodox, creative, inventive thought leader makes it onto the short list. The next key quality calls for “understanding and/or experience of federal or state governments, *including political awareness and sound judgment*” (my emphasis again). In the retail metaphor so often favoured in contemporary administration, the successful applicant is expected to “deliver successful outcomes”.

This advertisement provides instructive illumination into the latest vocabulary active in the APS (and possibly Australian government administration more generally) to describe long-standing practice. It would seem from the raft of documents published in the past year or so that the APS has moved on – or, perhaps more accurately, moved forward – from an age of reform to a new age: an age of innovation. Clearly, for a new program or measure to progress, it must be seen, *inter alia*, as innovative.

This marks a refreshment of language but it’s not apparent that it marks any change in substance, let alone refreshment of thought. A recent lone blogger on one of the numerous sites devoted to innovation in government protests a concern that, notwithstanding “the whole APS initiative and innovation trundling forward for over 1½ years now . . . you’d be hard-pressed to see



any transformation in most places". (Alas, 'twas ever thus.) The blogger's apprehensions can be well understood when, elsewhere, a reader will learn that solutions include "the development of innovation metrics to identify and support progress against outcomes". (There should be a prize for those who can provide illustrations of innovation metrics.)

The creation of this body, if it passes the pilot stage, raises several important points. The lead agency is the Department of Industry, Innovation, etc. There may have been some justification for assuming this responsibility if the interest in "public sector design" embraced the entire Australian public sector: federal, state and local.

This, however, is an APS-specific initiative. It is a puzzle, therefore, that it has not been brought under the wing of the public service commissioner. That thought would probably give rise to historical superstitions about resurrecting the Public Service Board. Another appropriate location could be the Finance Department, notwithstanding its long-standing caution in matters of a constructive nature.

This centre seems a case of unnecessary Balkanisation of central public service administration in the APS; Balkanisation is poor policy and has very little record of sustained accomplishment. Success usually only attends such ventures when the objective is practical and specific. The main instances historically entail applying computing and IT to administrative process and activity. Otherwise, the evangelist, with a gospel to preach, however charismatic, struggles too much to find a place in the ordinary workings of a government body (or business organisation, in comparable private sector activity).

This would certainly be so with an abstract doctrine like design thinking. A methodology/philosophy of some longevity, it may have some relevance to issues presently alive in Australian government and administration, though perhaps more so at state and local levels. The recommendation from which it stems, in *Empowering Change*, is too vacuous to provide a firm foundation. It asserts that "collaboration and experimentation are two key inputs to realising innovation ... A key activity under this program would be the development and implementation of collaborative pilots and trials."

This same emptiness is again captured in

the *APS Innovation Action Plan*, which public service commissioner Stephen Sedgwick issued last year. It speculated that an APS design centre (or centres) could, among other things, help "develop and test new approaches to complex policy challenges and to enhance government program delivery", and "build agency and institutional capability for collaboration and innovation". A circularity of vocabulary betrays a circularity of thinking. To reassure doubters and sceptics, the action plan held out the hope that the "proposed initiative could inspire creativity and collaboration and provide a platform to test innovative solutions. It could help practitioners to adopt new perspectives in thinking about a problem."

This particular initiative has all the hallmarks of an Industry Department bid to gain a place at the top table on public service matters. But there are enough matters of national importance for that department to devote itself, exclusively and zealously, to its major assigned responsibilities, rather than dissipate its energies, in the words of a forbidding mandarin from an earlier era, like a hunter looking for a licence to interfere in other people's business.

Another question is, as ever, the centre's location in Canberra. This is conventional thinking at its most unimaginative. If service delivery is the focus, a location in Melbourne or Sydney would seem more appropriate. In this case, the operative theory is unquestionably top down.

Many observers have also been puzzled by the proposed centre's location at the ANU. Apparently, the reason lies in the university's offer of rent-free accommodation.

The ANU has been the beneficiary of much largesse during the Rudd-Gillard years, so it's perhaps unsurprising it wants to provide a home for this new centre. But the university, with a few exceptions, lacks, in the fields of government and public policy, a strong direct record for research or for constructive advocacy about the institutions, tasks or activities of government, administration or policy. In these fields, innovation is hardly its suit at all.

The University of Canberra could



argue it has a stronger record of practical contributions, and better links with the community and relevant interests. It is very dated administrative practice not to have explored whether the University of Canberra had an interest in the initiative and what it had to offer as a potential host. It may be argued that there is nothing to prevent collaboration between the two universities, and any others seeking involvement, but the record suggests this is unlikely. The silos in the university sector are pretty robust.

More generally, universities and their publications have been modest performers in the businesses of distributing and circulating knowledge and ideas. The university world is too often inward-looking, too sensitive to internal yardsticks of achievement and success, and too indifferent to the opinions of those beyond its pale; including, not least, public servants.

This state of affairs has left modern public administration in Australia highly exposed to cliché, fad and fashion. As is so painfully demonstrated in increasingly frequent use of the term “innovation” itself, too much innovation is simply the product of creative writing, not substantial thinking.

It would be untrue to suggest that “public sector design”, which has been the subject of recent active interest in Denmark, has no

place in development thinking about Australian public administration. But it is not, in substance, new; nor is it a natural fit with Australian public administration where government is, as Sir Keith Hancock taught us eight decades ago, rather viewed as a vast public utility. The idea seems to have found its way into Australian discourse through the South Australia-based Australian Centre for Social Innovation. But tracing its path from Copenhagen to Canberra not only raises pertinent questions of adaptability to Australian practices of public service, but whether there are not other compelling ideas on offer. It would be a valuable academic service to provide a comprehensive tour d’horizon to help policymakers.

It is attractive to pick up an idea prospering in another jurisdiction, and, in Australia, there has often been an attraction, as in this instance, to practice in Scandinavia. But the problem with the design concept is not only that it’s a doubtful contender for “innovation”. It would struggle to find a place in a register of novelties.

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