

The Australian Public Service

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The civil services of nation states are long-lived, perhaps even ‘immortal’ organisations. The Australian Public Service (APS) has existed in some form for over 120 years (since the 1901 Constitution), although it has changed hugely across this period. It helps ministers shape and deliver Commonwealth policies from its headquarter departments in Canberra and administers federal programs across all the states and territories. Liberal democracies rely on political processes to constantly energise bureaucracies with new ideas, and to closely supervise how public administrators implement decisions. Yet citizens’ rights and the operations of civil society are also premised on the impartial and equal administration of laws, regulations and services delivery, without any political favouritism and based on dispassionate (rational) advice – both factors requiring a delicate balance in how the APS operates.

What does democracy require for how the APS operates, and wider public service delivery systems?

- ◆ Services provision and implementation, and the regulation of social and economic activities, should be controlled by democratically elected officials. Decisions should be deliberative, carefully considering the interests of all relevant actors.
- ◆ Before significant policy or implementation changes are made, fair and equal engagement arrangements should allow service recipients and other stakeholders to be consulted in meaningful ways.
- ◆ The management of Commonwealth programs and services should be impartially conducted within administrators’ legally available powers.
- ◆ All citizens should have full and equal access to government and the services and goods to which they are entitled. Their rights should be protected in decision-making and ‘due process’ rules followed.
- ◆ Wherever ‘para-state’ organisations (NGOs or private contractors) deliver services, public value standards (action within the law, equal treatment and access, respect for human rights, and freedom from corruption) should apply.

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- ◆ Public services, contracting and regulation should be free from corruption, with swift action taken against evidence of possible offences.
- ◆ The public service should recruit and promote staff on merit, having due regard to combatting wider societal discrimination that may exist. Its social make-up should reflect the population being served, with recruitment biases addressed on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, historic under-representation or other factors.
- ◆ The public service should ideally be a ‘representative bureaucracy’, whose social make-up closely reflects that of the population being served – although this has often been hard to achieve.
- ◆ Government services should be efficient, effective and deliver ‘value for money’, with agency performance appropriately documented in timely public documents.
- ◆ The efficacy of government interventions and regulations should be assessed in a balanced and evidence-based way, allowing for consultation with both organised stakeholders and unorganised sets of people.
- ◆ Procedures for complaints and citizen redress should be easy to access and use, and agencies should operate them in transparent and responsive ways, fulfilling ‘freedom of information’ requirements.
- ◆ In a liberal democracy, the public service and the political executive have complementary roles. The public service should provide the impartial and non-partisan component and institutional memory and expertise, while politicians contribute the dynamic and voter-responsive political element. The mutual check-and-balance functions between the two should foster balanced and improved decision-making.

The Australian Public Service (APS) is responsible for designing and implementing federal policy and regulation (as specified by ministers and Parliament), identifying and diffusing standards, and delivering certain services directly to citizens. For example, Services Australia is the welfare/Medicare arm of government, while Business.gov.au hosts a wide range of programs designed to help enterprises and business. The Canberra federal departments provide funding to states and territories for national infrastructure (such as roads, schools, and hospitals), administer defence and national security arrangements, and supervise many APS agencies and some government enterprises, such as Australia Post and Snowy Hydro.

Line agencies at department level and below are grouped into five categories or ‘functional clusters’ ([APSC, 2023a](#)) to allow comparisons to be made between agencies with similar primary functions, as follows:

- ◆ Policy: organisations involved in the development of public policy (for example, Education, Foreign Affairs, Social Services or Health).
- ◆ Smaller operational: organisations with fewer than 1,000 employees involved in the implementation of public policy (for example, the Australian Digital Health Agency, Digital Transformation Agency, or Fair Work Commission).
- ◆ Larger operational: organisations with 1,000 employees or more involved in the implementation of public policy (for example, Defence, Home Affairs, Australian Tax Office, or Services Australia).
- ◆ Regulatory: organisations involved in regulation and inspection (for example, AUSTRAC, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, or the Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman).

- ◆ Specialist: organisations providing specialist support to government (for example, Australian Trade and Investment Commission, Royal Australian Mint, or Commonwealth Ombudsman).

In December 2023, these tasks needed a staff of just over 170,000 in the APS (see [Figure 14.4](#) below), plus just under 60,000 people in the Australian Defence Force ([APSC, 2022a](#)). This number was up from 154,000 in 2021, and from 120,000 in the mid-1990s (when Australia's population was around 18 million people, compared to just under 26 million now). Private contracting for federal government has increased markedly in this period, and estimates of the size of the 'para-state' of consultants, contractors and NGOs working for the Commonwealth under the Morrison Coalition government was 54,000 full-time equivalent staff in 2020–21 (37 per cent of the APS number that year), at an annual cost of just under A\$21 billion ([Guardian, 2023](#)).

The official values embodied in the APS from the outset, and codified in the constantly updated APS Code of Conduct ([APSC, 2022b](#)), have aimed at ensuring the highest standards of conduct in public office by maintaining:

- ◆ impartial administration, serving all citizens and enterprises equally
- ◆ non-partisan and apolitical advice, providing governments of whatever political persuasion with advice that is frank, honest, timely and based on the best available evidence
- ◆ staff who are committed to service and can sustain an 'institutional memory' of how to get things done
- ◆ administrative processes that are open and accountable to the community
- ◆ respect for different peoples and traditions
- ◆ strong ethical behaviours, with the APS acting with integrity, in all that it does.

These values all imply some considerable areas of autonomous action by APS staff – for example, in avoiding any suggestion of political favouritism, or preventing the use of state power and public monies for partisan purposes.

Criticisms of the APS have mainly come from the political right, who doubt that political controls are enough to ensure that staff with 'jobs for life' are working as efficiently and innovatively as businesses, and therefore seek to minimise the scale of direct government administration and employ private contractors instead. Others argue that by operating in a 'Canberra bubble' most APS staff lack immediate contact with everyday life across Australia. Some critics from the political left argue that the APS has 'sold out' on political impartiality, with Canberra's elite administrators aligning themselves all too easily with 'neo-liberal' values and viewpoints up to 2022, a view that has also been contested ([Shergold and Podger, 2021](#)).

Recent developments

Three recent developments illustrate some achievements that the APS can lay claim to, while also highlighting some evolving problems that the service still faces. The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a rapid and distinctively Australian style of administrative response at the federal level, and some interesting conflicts around federal and state policy-making as well. Prior to this, an Independent Review of the APS ([IRAPS, 2019a](#)) made some substantial recommendations for changes, some of which have been acted upon. Two of the key players in IRAPS also moved to top positions in the APS with reform responsibilities (see next section). Lastly, in 2023, a Royal

Commission on the Robodebt Scheme ([Royal Commission, 2023](#)) very strongly criticised the roles of senior federal officials and private sector consultants working for departments in a 2016 to 2018 welfare benefits policy fiasco, with some strong implications for how the APS in future gives policy advice, ensures that policies are legal, and operates department accountability to parliament.

Managing the COVID-19 crisis

Arguably Australia was a ‘lucky country’ throughout the international peak of the pandemic in 2020–21, because of its relative isolation from international air traffic and its effective governance of international borders. Advice by the APS strongly pushed PM Scott Morrison to ban tourists and other arrivals early on (in late March 2020). Like New Zealand, Australia’s response started early and evolved, drawing on strong, historical experience of how to combat threats of international disease. The robust enforcement of quarantine procedures (returning residents were required to spend 14 days in strict quarantine hotels) and the slow/careful process of shipping back citizens stranded overseas (in line with quarantine capacities), were also reflective of past APS approaches.

Of course, the key national political decisions around pandemic policy were made by Morrison and Liberal-National ministers, but the influence of the APS has been traced by many commentators in aspects of the effective handling of the threat in 2020–21, facilitated by political bipartisanship from Labor, and by coordination of policies with state governments across the federation via the National Cabinet ([Menzies, 2020](#); and see [Chapter 16](#)).

Australia’s record in the management of COVID-19 was a highly creditable one up to summer 2021, with just under 11.5 million COVID-19-related cases, just 19,600 deaths and a rate of COVID-19 deaths per million population that was less than a quarter of those in countries like the USA or UK, and the lowest of the Anglosphere liberal democracies ([Figure 14.1](#)). Even given Australia’s initial advantages from its relative isolation, federal policy implementation on overseas travel and state governments’ actions on lockdowns were both swift and effective, with additional economic help from the Commonwealth government to counteract the effects

of lockdowns and the impact on the travel industry. The APS was also perceived domestically and internationally to have managed COVID-19 effectively ([ANAO, 2020b](#); [Craft and Halligan, 2020a](#); [Haseltine, 2021](#)). Certain federal policy initiatives worked relatively poorly, including a COVID-19 notification app using the Bluetooth capability of Apple and Android smartphones. It was downloaded by only a small minority of the population – largely because state government requirements varied, and use of their tools took off much faster than the federal app.

Figure 14.1: COVID-19 management in the Anglophone liberal democracies from March 2020 to 3 October 2023

Country	Cases (in 000s)	COVID-19 deaths (in 000s)	COVID-19 deaths per million population
USA	103,804	1,124	3.4
UK	24,659	221	3.3
Canada	4,617	51.7	1.4
Australia	11,402	19.6	0.8
New Zealand	2,236	12.6	2.5
Ireland	1,704	8.7	1.7

Source: Computed from data at John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center ([2023](#)) ‘COVID-19 management in the Anglophone democracies, 31 August.

However, later policy controversy focused on the slow vaccine rollout and mixed messaging from federal ministers that appeared to criticise policies in Labor-controlled states – a lapse from bipartisanship that created significant public dissatisfaction. Although some vaccine supplies were received earlier, a comprehensive national vaccination plan agreed with the states and territories was only finally announced in late July 2021, and by early October 2021 the proportion of the population vaccinated was 62 per cent, placing Australia well down the lists of developed, wealthy countries internationally. However, thereafter the pace of vaccination picked up and reduced the pandemic's later-stage intensity.

Overall, though, senior APS staff felt that COVID-19 demonstrated their ability to cut through red tape and decision-making silos and engage in fast policy-making, budgeting and service delivery, moving from idea quickly to action. The experience also highlighted the importance of collaborative governance, defined as a 'cross-sector governance arrangement between government and non-government stakeholders to carry out a public purpose, designed to approach complex social problems with diverse stakeholders' (Butcher and Gilchrist, 2020). The use of collaborative instruments was already a feature of Commonwealth governance, but became more politically salient due to the imperative for whole of government responses to the dislocation caused by the bushfire crisis and then by the pandemic. The opposition of a minority of Australians to lockdowns and even vaccinations also called for careful behavioural management of policy measures that were always controversial for some.

Collaborative governance was also an approach that had been promoted in the IRAPS Review (IRAPS, 2019a and IRAPS, 2019b; see the next sub-section) as a key mechanism for building a 'flexible APS operating model that makes collaboration the norm'. In practical terms this meant:

- ◆ an approach that was task-driven, using horizontal teams to create a 'marble cake' apparatus that could span across sectors and focus tightly on policy problems
- ◆ getting the right people, with the right expertise, around the table at the right time
- ◆ cutting through policy and tier-of-government silos and spans of control to maximise effective action
- ◆ better management of stakeholders by leveraging off the wider administrative footprint of states and territories, cities and local governments
- ◆ focusing on outcomes-driven performance measurement, undertaken during the crisis in near-real time (Althaus and McGregor, 2019).

Specific examples established during COVID-19 included the Emergency Relief National Coordination Group, established in 2020 to ensure effective national distribution of emergency relief and identify opportunities for coordination. In addition, the National COVID Vaccine Taskforce was created in 2021 under Coordinator-General John Frewen with the mission of ensuring that 'every eligible and willing Australian will be vaccinated by the end of 2021' (Yousef et al., 2022). The Taskforce was a response to public dissatisfaction with the slow vaccine rollout, and the need to improve coordination and planning and increase public confidence through clear messaging

Other types of evidence also suggest that COVID-19 stimulated innovative approaches. In workshops with 80 senior APS officials in August 2021, we asked them to nominate examples of innovation. The most mentioned responses were IT-led innovation in communication, capability and collaboration, flexible working, and faster policy-making. Using collaborative delivery networks and adopting 'agile' methods of developing new IT were also mentioned as improving the quality of cross jurisdictional communication, enhanced the quality of collaboration and enabled flexible work (see below).

The 2019 Review of the Australian Public Service

The promising APS response to COVID-19 came just a few months after the 2019 publication of the 'Independent Review of the Australian Public Service' ([IRAPS, 2019a](#)), an important exercise based on an inclusive engagement process that aimed to be far more representative of views across the APS, a striking difference from previous attempts ([Evans, 2018](#)). The Review's 'priorities for change' aimed to bolster the APS's independence within Australia's 'Westminster system' tradition, upgrade institutional capacity, reduce hierarchy, and build a flatter, integrated and agile collaborative problem-solving capability around a 'One APS' culture ([IRAPS, 2019b](#)). Of the 40 recommendations, the government agreed to implement 15, and accepted aspects of a further 20 ([PM Morrison, 2019](#)). Two were noted, and three were rejected. The government did embrace recommendations for reinstituting regular capability reviews of agencies ([Podger and Halligan, 2023](#)). It agreed to establish separate professional streams for digital, data and human resources, and to build capability and support career paths in these critical areas.

The Morrison government repeatedly stressed that they would not amend the legislation in force, the Public Service Act 1999. And any recommendation that might potentially undermine the power of ministers and the government was rejected. Among these were some of the most important – covering a legal code and more APS experience for ministerial advisors, greater cooperation (in normal times) with state and territories, and giving the APS commissioner powers to initiate investigations and reviews. The PM also dismissed the idea that the APS should move to common core conditions and pay scales over time to enable it to become a united high-performing organisation, arguing that current policies around APS pay and conditions were working effectively. The Review's claim that too much reliance was being placed on external consultants was also dismissed. Critics argued that any proposals threatening ministers' control, or running counter to the government's agenda, were removed. Thus, systemic or long-run APS reform was again side-tracked, prompting calls for a parliamentary inquiry ([Podger, 2019](#)).

The 2023 Royal Commission on the Robodebt Scheme

As in most advanced industrial states, the Australian Commonwealth government makes key transactions with most citizens in two roles – first, as taxpayers via annual income tax declarations, run by the Australian Tax Office (ATO); second, as recipients of welfare benefits, many of which are income-contingent and run month by month by Services Australia, part of its Centrelink operation, and formerly under the Department for Human Services (DHS). The Robodebt Scheme began life in 2014 as an effort to check whether some people or households were being paid more in income-contingent benefits than they were perhaps entitled to, given the income they had declared to the ATO ([Wikipedia, 2023](#)). Liberal-National Coalition ministers in the governments of Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison were determined to compare between ATO and DHS datasets and to seek repayments from anyone found to have been 'overpaid', even though the two datasets were not easily (some might say legitimately) comparable. The Scheme pushed ahead in 2015 with a manual checking process, and was then launched as an automatic, IT-driven process in 2016 with a big fanfare about eliminating welfare 'fraud' estimated by ministers to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars ([Royal Commission, 2023](#); [Podger and Kettl, 2023](#)).

Households affected by the Scheme received strongly worded letters requiring them to immediately repay sums, based on the data calculations made without any appeal process or legal recourse to query the edict. In many cases, the sums involved were large and related to payments from years beforehand, so that many households could not afford to pay back money that had already been spent. Large numbers of citizens jammed DHS helplines without securing any answers, and these promptly collapsed under the load so that people could not make contact at all with Centrelink or the DHS ([Royal Commission, 2023](#); [Podger and Kettl, 2023](#)). Debt recovery agencies were quickly activated to secure the return of ‘overdue’ allegedly overpaid sums. Households or individuals with debts were cut off from other benefits until the debts were cleared, in a very coercive manner. Media and civil rights and pro-welfare groups quickly dubbed the project ‘robodebt’ and complaints and revelations about the Scheme sustained what a later Royal Commission into the affair termed a ‘crescendo of criticism’ through most of 2017 ([Royal Commission, 2023](#), p.153).

From 2017, several inquiries and investigations were made by integrity bodies (the Ombudsman and the Australian National Audit Office) and a Senate committee investigated the Scheme. They criticised aspects of its implementation but were assured by ministers and officials that it was well thought through, rested on solid legal basis and that they were confident in its soundness. The **2023 Royal Commission** raised serious questions about the possibility that officials and advisors gave inaccurate answers at this stage, effectively undertaking a ‘cover-up’ of the Scheme’s serious legal and administrative flaws. As a result, the Scheme ‘rolled on’ through 2018 and it was eventually terminated only in 2019. Following legal action, the government was required to repay some ‘overpayments’ collected back to the households involved. In May 2020, in the face of a class-action lawsuit, the Morrison government announced that it would scrap the debt recovery scheme, with 470,000 wrongly issued debts to be repaid in full, totalling A\$1.2 billion in all ([Henriques-Gomes, 2020](#)). Following the report, some senior civil servants’ careers were brought into disrepute ([Bajkowski and Ravlic, 2023](#); [ABC News, 2023](#)).

The Royal Commission ([2023](#)) also found that a considerable number of senior APS officials and advisors from the private sector went along with ministerial imperatives when they should not have done so, and then covered up the always shaky and perhaps illegal nature of the powers used to implement the Scheme from the outset. For many commentators, these were clear-cut and severely adverse consequences of the over-politicisation of the public services ([Podger and Kettl, 2023](#)). The Royal Commission report’s [Chapter 23](#) on ‘Improving the Australian Public Service’ opened with a quote from Gordon de Brouwer (the Australian Public Services Commissioner in 2023):

I think what we can see [in the robodebt episode] is that to some degree, the service, parts of the service, at times have lost its soul, lost its focus on people, its empathy for people. We’ll need to reflect on how we discharged our legal and ethical responsibilities under law, including in our leadership, and we’ll need to examine and act to strengthen our systems, including training and performance management across the service, to ensure that what we’ve seen so far isn’t repeated. ([Royal Commission, 2023](#), Report, p.637)

The Royal Commission also concluded that:

Many of the failures of public administration that led to the creation and maintenance of the Scheme can be traced to features of the APS structure. These features included:

- ◆ the separation of responsibilities between agencies in relation to the development and maintenance of government programs and the lack of clear definition of those responsibilities
- ◆ a lack of independence on the part of [*department*] secretaries
- ◆ woefully inadequate recordkeeping practices
- ◆ a lack of understanding on the part of some of those involved of the APS' role, principles and values ([Royal Commission, 2023](#), Report p.637).

But of course, it lay outside the Royal Commission's terms of reference to make concrete proposals for what detailed changes were needed. Instead, commentators noted a twin-track Commission approach ([Podger, 2023](#)):

- ◆ to clarify the role of the APS and to strengthen its independence particularly by addressing the processes for appointment, termination and performance management of secretaries, which would greatly dilute incentives for excessive responsiveness to ministers
- ◆ the 'naming and shaming' of individual public servants, including the referral of some for further investigation and possible sanctions, thus highlighting the potential consequences of excessive political responsiveness.

The Albanese government's reform agenda

Mounting concerns with post-COVID-19 governance under the Morrison government eventually contributed to it losing the 2022 election (see [Chapter 5](#)). Post-election, the Labor government paid greater attention to integrity and the mitigation of corrupt practices including:

- ◆ the establishment of a National Anti-Corruption Commission in 2023 comparable to ones already well-established at the state level
- ◆ securing a speedy Royal Commission into Robodebt (see above)
- ◆ reviews were conducted of grants administration and processes, along with issues with responsible government.

A more balanced executive branch with firmer checks and balances, and improved transparency and accountability became apparent.

The Labor government's program was partly an extension of the Independent Review process because of the continuity of key participants, but this was under a new agenda that addressed both the consequences of neo-liberal 'new public management' (NPM), and institutional strengthening ([Halligan, 2023](#)). The need to 'reshape traditions that fall on hard times' ([Davis, 2021](#)) and the craft of public administration ([Shearer, 2022](#)) came to the fore. The head of the Australian National Audit Office (Grant Hehir) publicly 'called out' the APS on the need for more integrity and criticised the failure of departments to follow the intentions of the Performance Governance and Accountability Act on applying performance management ([Hehir, 2023](#); and see [Macdonald, 2023](#)).

So, principles, integrity and values were now a priority. An overdue rebalancing of the system (Halligan, 2020) was now explicit in official statements about rebuilding capability through ‘increasing the number of direct, permanent public sector jobs, reducing the use of consultants and outsourcing, abolishing the average staffing level cap, and restoring the independence of vital public sector institutions’ (APSC, 2022a). The government’s APS priorities covered improving integrity (with the National Anti-Corruption Commission foremost here), enhancing capability, acting as a model employer and recognising the centrality of people and businesses to policy and services (Gallagher, 2022, 2023; Halligan, 2024).

By 2023, the Labor government seemed less keen to formally address the tricky issues of restricting ministers’ powers in relation to the APS. However, a ‘Public Service Amendment Bill 2023’ proceeded to implement some of the 2019 APS Review findings, so as to:

- ◆ create a new Australian Public Service (APS) Value of ‘Stewardship’
- ◆ require the Secretaries Board to prepare an APS Purpose Statement
- ◆ require agency heads to uphold and promote the APS Purpose Statement
- ◆ provide that ministers must not direct agency heads on individual employment matters
- ◆ require agency heads to put in place measures to enable decision-making to occur at the lowest appropriate classification
- ◆ require regular capability reviews [of departments]
- ◆ require the Secretaries Board to request and publish regular long-term insights report
- ◆ require agencies to publish annual APS Employee Census results and respond to relevant findings through an action plan (Parliament of Australia, 2023).

By 2023, the APS reform program was also defined around four pillars – integrity, placing people and business first, model employer, and capability – each with associated outcomes. Three phases of progress were envisaged: establishing the foundations, embedding and continuous improvement. The first phase entails developing the program logic, designing delivery and implementation architecture, launching initiatives, and developing a transformation strategy. Twelve departments and agencies are leading on 44 initiatives. Several are complete, for example, the National Anti-Corruption Commission, an employment audit, an in-house consulting service, and annual reporting on APS reform (APS Reform, 2023a). It is too early to tell what difference this ambitious program will make, or whether it will be sustained if there should be a change of government.

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
<p>The APS has a long tradition of political accountability. The APS culture has been non-partisan, able to work with governments of different political complexions and tackle new issues with competence.</p>	<p>In recent times, the APS’s claim to political independence was undermined by an increasingly interventionist political executive. Under Liberal-National Coalition governments, the PM and ministers increasingly sought to control who got top civil service jobs and to reduce the role that permanent public servants played in policy-making. The APS capability overall has been sapped by 20 years of restrictive staffing ceilings, tight limits on administrative spending, and the externalisation of public service work to contractors. Deficits in specific capabilities have been ignored.</p>
<p>Australian public administration has been generally effective and reasonably up to date in its organisational practices. The APS has had a well-developed pattern of continuous improvement and searching for best practices.</p>	<p>The dominant public management organisational culture became largely short-termist and risk-averse, since secretaries and deputy secretaries have short-run contracts only. This reflects the environment of political management.</p>
<p>The APS has performed well in comparative terms. It has been viewed as an international pioneer in the diffusion of best practice regulation, data management, digital tax governance, ‘one-stop shop’ service delivery, social inclusion, policy programming and the design of income contingent loans in higher education financing.</p>	<p>The extensive use of external consultants both in normal times and during the pandemic exposed a significant capability deficit in the APS (Jenkins, 2020). The former head of the Service, Martin Parkinson, castigated departments that ‘abrogated their core responsibility and have become over-reliant on consultants’ (quoted in Easton, 2018). In 2023, controversy swelled up over PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers) briefing industry clients with information obtained working on government contracts leading to one survey showing that half of Australians wanted government to rely less on consultancies (Australian Financial Review, 2023).</p>
<p>Australia’s record in digitally transforming public services has been a strong one, particularly in areas with large-scale citizen interactions (for example, tax and human services (OECD, 2024)).</p>	<p>Attracting and retaining skilled IT staff and changing APS culture to be fully digital have both been difficult. After 2016, the Digital Transformation Agency became more regulatory and less culture-changing in its mission. The robodebt fiasco was also an early effort to implement ‘big data/artificial intelligence’ (BDAl) methods that failed spectacularly.</p>

<p>Australia's cyber-security performance has been around average for liberal democracies, thanks to strong international cooperation.</p>	<p>As in all liberal democracies, the cyber-security threats to the security of APS departments' and agencies' information management systems have grown over time. Government's dependence on online services and cloud provision has also greatly increased.</p>
<p>The APS has had a strong tradition of contingency planning and resilience in crises, and effective front-line agencies. The government learned lessons from the bushfire crisis and put them to good effect in managing COVID-19. The establishment of the National Cabinet as the epicentre of COVID-19 governance, and the effective use of experts, both proved invaluable to the government's effective response.</p>	<p>Evidence-based policy-making tended to be the exception rather than the rule in the more ideologically-driven Morrison and Abbot governments. Since 2022, Labor ministers (with a far smaller majority) claim to have changed their approach.</p>
<p>Women are well represented in the APS workforce as a whole and are more present at the senior staff (SES) level than the average picture for OECD countries (see Chapter 10).</p>	<p>The APS has an ageing workforce that has remained unrepresentative of the community in terms of other diversity measures (see below).</p>
<p>The reporting of policy and administration has been improved through the Performance Framework, meeting the obligations of the Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act, passed in 2013.</p>	<p>Most APS reporting still focuses on output measurement, rather than outcome-based measurement. Productivity data for government services are not systematically collected or published, with most measures covering 'value for money' in ways that are hard to compare over time.</p>
<p>COVID-19 demonstrated the adaptive capacity of the Commonwealth departments and agencies to redesign and deliver government services under pressure. The APS's own surveys (APS Reform, 2023b) showed that 72 per cent of respondents were satisfied with public services.</p>	<p>The delivery of services has been hampered by siloed delivery systems, poor information and communication systems, unnecessary complexity, and poor delivery culture. Levels of public trust were lower in the APS survey (APS Reform, 2023b) at 61 per cent than levels of satisfaction.</p>
<p>Corruption and fraud by individual APS staff members in federal government have been rare, especially compared with the state administrations in Australia.</p>	<p>The previously long-entrenched ability of the APS to prevent political favouritism or ministerially mandated maladministration has clearly been eroded. The 'sports rorts' and car parks controversies (Karp, 2020; and see Chapter 13), the robodebt debacle (see above), and government advertising sailing close to the wind of being partisan propaganda in the run-up to the 2019 federal election (Lewis, 2019), all suggest that politically appointed secretaries at the DPM&C and in departments had little interest in or capacity for curbing excesses of ministerial power.</p>

Future opportunities	Future threats
The renewed importance of state intervention and good governance during the COVID-19 pandemic boosted pressures to secure the independence and authority of the APS within the federal system under the Albanese government (see below).	If the past erosion of the APS’s independence and authority resumes in the ‘new normal’, critics argue that the APS may be completely politicised, which the outsourcing of its functions to private sector consultants accentuates. In addition, government ministers (of any party) tend to want to avoid close scrutiny, creating continuing pressures on transparency, oversight, integrity and accountability (Podger and Kettl, 2023).
Outcome-driven policy, better program and service management and measurement, under ‘new public management’ (NPM) have long been expected to lead to better outcomes for citizens and increased public sector productivity.	Evidence of either productivity advances or of NPM practices improving government costs has remained elusive. Critics argued that in Australia, NPM tended to work against effective digital government by increasing the ‘separatism’ of management in departments and agencies, and under-emphasising the need to shift to a more joined-up ‘digital-era’ organisational culture (Podger and Kettl, 2023; Dunleavy et al., 2008).
After the 2019 Review (IRAPS, 2019a), the APS may be able to put more emphasis on building up staff’s professional skills and digital literacy, and recruiting a more diverse and socially inclusive workforce.	Government faces heightened competition for high-skilled knowledge workers, and hence tends to be driven back towards relying on external consultants, who contribute less to modernising organisational cultures and accumulating ‘collective institutional memory’. Three-quarters of agencies reported shortages of digitally skilled and technically qualified staff (Bajkowski, 2023).
The ‘footprint’ of APS staff in cities, regional towns and shires spread across the country could be used to promote more localism in federal policy implementation.	The continued relative isolation of many APS staff in the ‘Canberra village’ and nearby NSW fuels some distance from everyday Australians (see Figure 14.4). Citizen distrust can increase the costs of delivery – as with vaccine denial or hesitancy during the COVID-19 crisis.

The remainder of this chapter considers how the politicisation of the executive, policy-making and policy development has affected the APS. Next, the chapter considers the more enduring character of the APS as a whole and recent efforts to sustain its reputation as a modernising and efficient service.

The APS and the politicisation of the executive branch

Under Australia’s ‘Westminster system’ of government, the PM can extensively reshape the machinery of Commonwealth government and the operations of the APS to reflect their government’s political priorities, and their style of leadership. Relations between politicians and bureaucrats traditionally centred on the co-existence of the neutral public service and a politically accountable but ‘responsible’ government. Tensions between them were kept in balance by applying well-established conventions. However, this ‘balancing’ act has become increasingly dependent on the overarching role acquired by departmental secretaries and the willingness of the political class to stay in its lane.

The three most recent Liberal-National Coalition PMs took different approaches to this aspect of their role. Tony Abbott (2013–2015) demonstrated a ‘hard’, rather conflictual stance with public servants that focused firmly on budgeting constraints (Donnison, 2014). He appointed private sector business executives to undertake a ‘Commission of Audit’ (Guardian, 2014; Senate, 2021), which was sharply critical of the APS’s capabilities and performance: its report was seen as biased (Senate, 2021) and demanding ‘cradle to the grave’ spending cutbacks (ABC, 2014). During his time in office, APS advice was often treated as contestable, and cutbacks to achieve smaller government programs conditioned how the public service operated (Halligan, 2016). During his premiership, Malcolm Turnbull (2015–2018) offered more of an olive branch to the APS elite, and a more ‘liberal’ approach to modernising public service development (Easton, 2016), but this approach did not last. From 2018 to 2022, Scott Morrison’s style emphasised a reassertion of political authority and the importance of delivery on his political priorities – although this focus was then overshadowed and knocked off course by COVID-19. The introduction of the second largest fiscal stimulus package in the world, and the return of ‘big government’ to combat COVID-19, fundamentally changed his government’s fiscal strategy and heightened the role of the public service (Cranston, 2020).

However, across all three Liberal-National Coalition administrations, a dominant theme remained: the politicisation of the executive level and the expansion of the power of ministerial offices relative to the permanent administration of departments and agencies. In recent years, cabinet and other ministers have hired substantial numbers of political appointees to assist them with policy development and monitoring, as the ‘Anglosphere’ ‘Westminster system’ comparisons in Figure 14.2 show. Australia and Canada have been furthest along this road, with many more ministerial advisors, while the PM’s

offices there have accounted for less than one in six of all advisors, falling to one in eight under Albanese. The UK has been more restrictive, closely rationing advisors to ministers so that the PM’s office there has been dominant. Yet similar complaints of the politicisation of policy-making have been voiced by critics in all three countries.

Figure 14.2: Ministers’ and PMs’ politically appointed office staffs in Australia and in Canada and the UK

Country	Politically appointed staff in			
	All ministers’ offices	PMs’ office	Total	Per cent (%) in PMs’ offices
Canada	490	91	581	16
Australia	416	56	472	12
UK	70	43	113	61

Sources: for Canada, Craft and Halligan (2020b); Cabinet Office UK (2021); Finance Department, 2023, numbers as at 1 May.

Particular concerns have been raised when ministers intervene to force out the top officials (secretaries) for undisclosed reasons – with departures mostly occurring in three situations. The first has been when a secretary insists on providing professional advice to a mission-committed minister who both resists and resents it. Critics argue that: ‘Telling a minister what he or she does not want to hear will certainly result in being sacked – or not having the appointment renewed’ (Burgess, 2017). The second has happened when a secretary strongly supports the policy of the government of the day but becomes vulnerable with a change in the PM and a new allocation of government roles. The third situation has occurred when ‘machinery of government change’ needed for wider reasons has been used to dispose of dissenting voices. Morrison dismissed secretaries identified with the policy hub and who were advocates of an APS role in policy development, when he was initially fixated on reducing the APS role to one of just delivery.

Other prominent victims included Andrew Metcalfe, a supporter of a contested program and one of three secretaries sacked by Abbott’s government. He was later reappointed in 2019. Martin Parkinson ‘retired’ from the position of Secretary of the Department of Treasury when Tony Abbott became PM, then became Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet under Malcolm Turnbull, but was later replaced by PM Scott Morrison. The Turnbull years (2015 to 2018) were notable for a movement away from the more confrontational aspects of Abbott’s central control and a more tactful handling of secretaries’ appointments/displacements. Turnbull recognised the need to review the state of the public service with the APS Review. The Morrison government then reverted to type with the removal of five department heads in 2019, when the number of federal departments was reduced from 18 to 14. This machinery of government change was also made with little apparent APS advice or input (Bartos, 2019).

The Albanese government has made commitments that marked a redefinition of ministers’ relations with the APS. In particular, the Labor government will differ from the Coalition government on key aspects of public sector management. For example, Labor has promised to:

- ◆ abolish the Average Staffing Level (ASL) cap
- ◆ reduce ‘waste’ and ‘excessive reliance’ on contractors, consultants and labour-hire companies
- ◆ invest nearly A\$500 million in ‘rebuilding capability’, particularly in service delivery roles at Services Australia, Veterans’ Affairs, and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA)
- ◆ establish an Advanced Strategic Research Agency (ASRA) in the Defence Portfolio (Hamilton, 2022).

It remains to be seen how significant these changes and other commitments will turn out to be, but the changes are grounds for optimism.

Capability deficit

Policy advice and development capability is an integral component of the civil service in the ‘Westminster system’, but it has been identified as an ailing traditional skill that has been difficult for the current APS to revive. The strong managerialism of the era of new public management (NPM) pushed running departments and agencies to the forefront as the core APS activity and made it the primary responsibility of senior public servants. Policy advice was instead increasingly provided by the entourages of staffers that ministers brought in with them (see

above). But it was also attributable to the outsourcing of policy activity to consultants and to politicisation. Among the Anglophone countries, Australia has the heaviest reliance on consultants and outsourcing, which has undermined public service capability. The value of consultancy services increased from under A\$400 million to over A\$1.1 billion in the decade up to 2018–19 (ANAO, 2020a).

The APS's policy role changed under NPM, because senior executives were now expected to mainly manage policy delivery. The centrality of the APS's policy role within the advisory system was already downgraded by 2010 as political executives became more assertive. More recent analysis of departmental capability reviews (submission 26) presented to a Senate committee indicates that departments varied widely in terms of the quality and extent of their policy capability, ranging from well-developed to laissez faire (Halligan, 2021). They were generally weak on six dimensions: policy development, setting strategy, research and analysis, policy implementation, stakeholder engagement and evaluation.

Figure 14.3: How far Australian, New Zealand and UK public service participants in University of Canberra 2021 workshops agreed that potential features of the Westminster advisory system operated in their countries

Country	Percent (per cent) agreeing that:	
	Male participants	Female participants
<i>'Evidence is a condition of better policy-making'</i>		
Australia	94	97
New Zealand	97	97
UK	93	95
<i>'There is an ongoing tension between short-term imperatives and evidence-based policy-making'</i>		
Australia	84	85
New Zealand	85	87
UK	82	84
<i>'Work time is spent on retrofitting evidence to decisions that have already been taken'</i>		
Australia	76	80
New Zealand	73	78
UK	82	83
<i>'There is ministerial indifference over the facts'</i>		
Australia	64	62
New Zealand	59	63
UK	61	64
<i>'Work time is spent on developing evidence-based policy, programs or interventions'</i>		
Australia	24	20
New Zealand	27	22
UK	18	17

Source: Evans and Stoker (2022) *Saving Democracy*, London: Bloomsbury, p.114. Reproduced with permission.

Note: Numbers are the percentages of respondents agreeing with each statement.

The emergence of advisory capacity outside the public sector has created a more contested marketplace for policy advice (Tiernan, 2011) and greater ‘competition for the ministerial ear’. (MacDermott, 2008). Ministers have wanted to increase the range of inputs, and this may have improved decision-making. However, APS staff and external critics have claimed that before the COVID-19 crisis there was a fashion for deciding policy first and developing evidence to justify it later on – with so called ‘policy-based evidence’ entering the ‘Westminster-system’ lexicon (Varghese, 2016).

In workshops held between 2016 and 2020, we asked groups of senior policy officers in Australia, New Zealand and the UK what were the main barriers to evidence-based policy-making. The findings suggest that civil service elites in all three countries were champions of evidence-based policy-making but their political masters were generally not (Figure 14.3). Moreover, due to a combination of a short-termist pathology and the 24/7 media cycle, some staff said they spent much of their time engaged in ‘policy-based evidence-making’, retrofitting evidence to support decisions already made. They identified three key barriers: disconnection, mistrust and poor understanding between the worlds of ideas/research and action/practice; a static view of academic research that needed to be linked to ongoing exchanges; and the perception that there was limited capability or incentives in the system to use genuine research.

Policy scientists report that the best practice principles of policy-making are often overlooked. The Institute of Public Affairs analysed 20 public policies using the 10 criteria of the ‘Wiltshire test for good policy-making’ (Breheny and Lesh, 2018). The project was commissioned ‘to coax more evidence-based policy decisions ... by reviewing and rating high profile government decisions’. They found that only seven met these criteria, suggesting that more policy has been made on the basis of partisan convictions or ideology, rather than ‘what works’. The parlous position of the system was described by the former head of the public service, Dr Martin Parkinson, as the ‘degradation of policy expertise’. However, the COVID-19 crisis brought scientific and research expertise back into focus as key elements in policy decisions, for a time at least.

The character of the Australian Public Service

Looking comparatively, the APS has long been rated as effective by international observers, who see it as an active and reform-minded civil service. Australia ranked third in the International Civil Service Effectiveness Index (Blavatnik School of Government, 2019) – although that was influenced by ‘new public management’ factors and placed all the Anglosphere democracies highly, with the UK at no.1 (see Chapter 28). The World Bank placed the quality of Australia’s overall governance in its top 10 countries overall in 2021 (World Bank, 2021). The OECD (2024) ranked Australia fourth among its member countries in 2023 in terms of its development of digital services.

With just over 170,000 staff the APS has long been one of Australia’s largest employers, and so its staffing numbers and trends have been closely watched. Staff numbers grew by 3 per cent in both 2019–20, and then again in 2020–21, largely because of the need to respond to first the bushfire crisis and then COVID-19. Although the APS is routinely presented in the media as centred only in Canberra, in fact just under two in every five staff (around 65,000 staff) were based there at the end of 2023 (see Figure 14.4). The remainder were distributed across the

states and territories as shown. In line with the Australian population as a whole, additional analysis shows that around half of the APS staff worked in the large capital cities that account for the bulk of the populations of each state (and of the Northern Territory). So only about 1 in 10 APS staff worked in areas of ‘regional Australia’ more rural or remote than the state capital cities.

Women have been well represented in the APS compared to the civil service in other OECD countries, accounting for three in five staff in 2020, compared to just over half in the OECD average (see Figure 14.5). Women also made up 37 per cent of senior executive staff, above the OECD average (which was 32 per cent). However, the APS workforce was relatively older than Australia’s (admittedly young) population, with only one in eight employees aged under 30, and a third aged over 50 (APSC, 2020) In 2020, 22 per cent of the APS workforce were born outside of Australia, with England the most common overseas country of birth, though

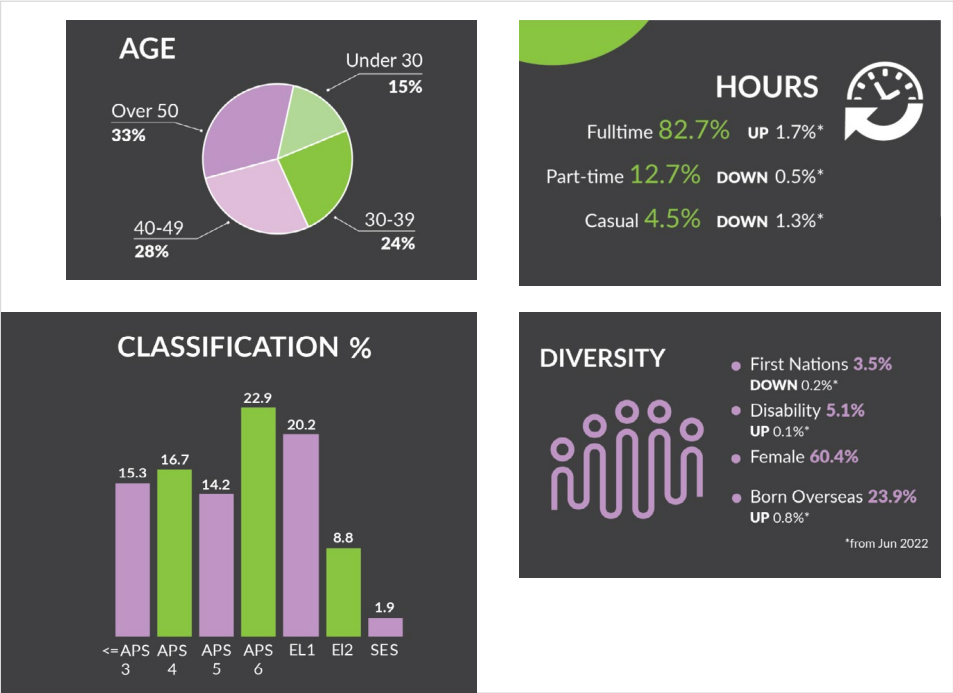
Figure 14.4: The number of APS employees and proportions (%) of the total workforce working in the states and territories (in December 2023)

State	2023	Per cent
ACT Canberra	64,940	38.1
New South Wales	28,290	16.6
Victoria	28,540	16.8
Queensland	21,560	12.7
South Australia	11,260	6.6
Western Australia	8,140	4.8
Tasmania	4,190	2.5
Northern Territory	2,010	1.2
Overseas	1,410	0.8
Total	170,330	100

Source: APSC (2023a) *Trust in the Australian Public Services – 2023 Annual Report*, online report.

Note: Numbers of staff in column 2 are rounded to the nearest 10, and percentages in column 3 are rounded to nearest 0.1%.

Figure 14.5: A snapshot view of the Australian Public Service in mid-2023



Source: APSC, 2023b. Reproduced with permission. See also APSC, 2023c.

the proportion from England has been falling. In 2001, nearly a quarter of those APS employees born overseas were born in England (24.3 per cent), but by the end of 2020 this number had fallen to 13.6 per cent. Seven of the remaining top 10 countries of birth were Asian. The proportion of staff born in India and China has been increasing with the general population. None-the-less critics argue that:

More than half of Australians are either first- or second-generation immigrants. However, our public servants [do] not reflect this diversity. The problem becomes acute at the senior executive level. Only 7 per cent of senior executives in the APS identify as being from a non-English speaking background. (Lin, 2024)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples constituted 2.2 per cent of the APS workforce in 2015 and grew to 2.9 per cent by 2019 and 3.5 per cent in 2022, but mainly in the lowest ranks. Improving their representation has been an APS priority for 2020 to 2024 (APSC, 2022c; Australian Government, 2020). Compared to many other occupational groups, the APS has maintained a strong emphasis on full-time working and makes only a small use of casual staff.

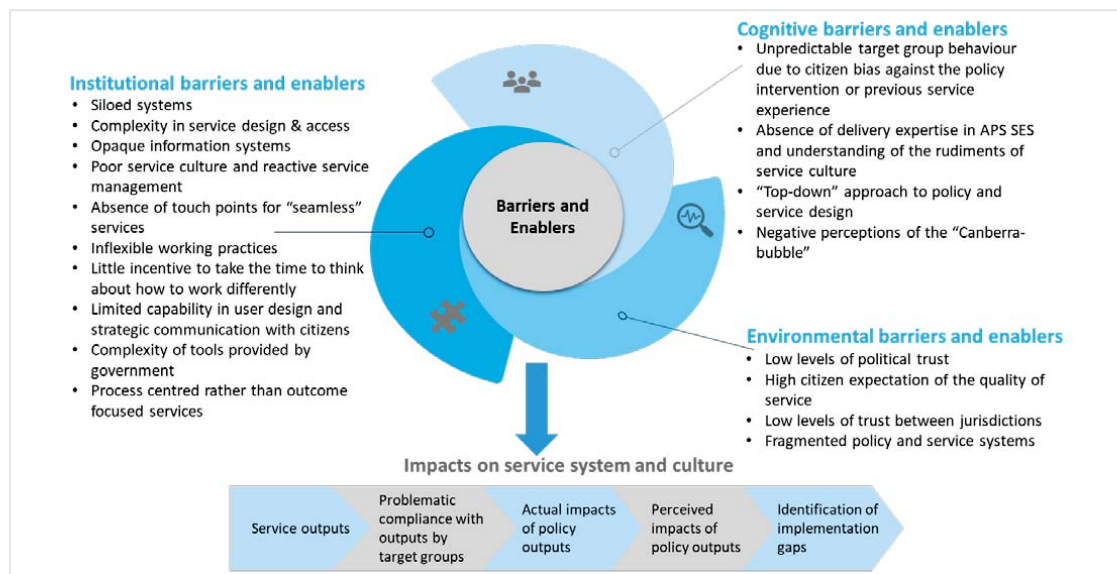
Enhancing service delivery and digital modernisation

Beginning in 2019, the Morrison Coalition government showed renewed interest in the quality of service delivery, demonstrated by the launch of Services Australia as a giant executive agency (not an orthodox government department) to ‘drive greater efficiencies and integration of Government service delivery’ (Gourley, 2019). The PM avowedly sought by this change: ‘some congestion-busting ... so Australians can get access to those services in a more timely and efficient way for them, making better use of technology and better integrating service delivery across different portfolio’ (Gourley, 2019).

The level of public trust in the APS initially increased significantly during the early COVID-19 period, rising from 38 to 54 per cent between 2019 and 2020 for the reasons discussed above (Evans et al., 2020). Subsequently, however, the slow vaccine roll-out and mixed government messaging over the risks of the AstraZeneca vaccine punctured public trust in government again within a short period (Evans, 2021). The 2023 Citizen Experience Survey showed four-fifths of respondents satisfied or very satisfied with APS services (up from pre-COVID-19), with three-fifths of respondents seeing services positively in detail, and half finding the time involved to settle issues acceptable (APSC Reform, 2023b).

Yet the APS also identified sources of public dissatisfaction with the delivery of public services, and in particular service complexity and the absence of a service culture that valued the time of citizens (APS Reform, 2022). Figure 14.6 shows the key types of barriers to improving regional (grass roots) service delivery that senior officials in a University of Canberra workshop said that APS senior officials have recognised and sought to tackle, including:

siloed systems that are not conducive to service delivery; complexity in service design and access; difficulty in finding the right information, at the right time, in the right context; reactive service management; poor communication with users about entitlements and obligations; users being required to provide information multiple times; and the complexity of tools provided by government. (Evans et al., 2019, p.88)

Figure 14.6: Barriers to improving service delivery recognised by senior APS officials in a 2019 study

Source: [Evans et al. 2019](#). *Trust In Australian Regional Public Services: ‘Citizens Not Customers – Keep It Simple, Say What You Do And Do What You Say’*, Report to the APS, Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra, Figure 7, p.89.

A fundamentally important way of enhancing the quality-of-service delivery in modern public administration (as in business) has been through the development of better digital and online services. This was a key contribution of the Turnbull government, and Morrison also sought to build on it in establishing Services Australia to make ‘best use of technology and digital applications’ ([Gourley, 2019](#)). In 2020, Australia was listed among the top five performing countries with very high E-Government Development Index scores ([UN, 2022](#)), based on its online service, telecommunication infrastructure and human capital. These performance indicators largely correspond with the implementation of ‘digital era governance 1’ (DEG1) interventions ([Dunleavy and Evans, 2019a](#)), which used technology to ‘join up’ activity across departments or tiers of government, creating client-focused agencies driven by ‘end to end’, user-focused redesign of services or the development of digital platforms for service delivery ([Figure 14.7](#)). The highest performing countries showed high investment in online technologies, followed ‘digital first’ targets for the delivery of core transactional public services and followed a whole-of-government approach – which has often been harder to do in federal countries.

Conclusion: A public service renaissance?

The APS has a strong record of achievement in providing the executive with high quality advice, maintaining the stability of the policy and service system over time, meeting the government’s fiscal strategy, and delivering effective Commonwealth governance. Its ability to adapt and respond to crisis has been impressive and departments and agencies have made significant strides in digital service transformation. However, the formal responsibility of the

Figure 14.7: Modern models of bureaucracy and how the APS use of digital technology has evolved in waves

Model	Main focus	Examples of the role of IT/ digital technology
<i>New Public Management</i> (implemented 1990–2010) focuses on managerial control and assumes a world with most data held as closed.	Managerial modernisation emphasizing disaggregation, competition, incentivisation.	Tokenistic adoption of IT for better service delivery, but undermined by oligopolistic IT markets, weak e-Gov, no citizen role.
<i>Digital Era Governance 1</i> (started 1995–2010) deploys new technology to enhance government’s nodality obligation at the epicentre of society’s information networks	Reintegration through shared services; digitalisation of paper/phone-based systems; system integration through new governance instruments; focus on user design.	Creation of major online transactional services and contact centres: Australian Tax Office’s My Tax; Services Australia integration across Medicare and social security/ welfare; myGov portal site for 15 departments’ services.
<i>Digital Era Governance 2</i> (beginning 2005–2020) embracing the ‘internet of things’ to enhance nodality and the social web and developing capability in big data analytics and artificial intelligence.	Acceptance of the mantra that digital services reduce or contain costs. Radical online modernisation of transactional agencies and older regulatory agencies (e.g., immigration). Strengthening the reintegration of services; proactive systems integration; more nodality; service design with the user experience centre-stage.	Improving call centres with AI systems; personalising services delivery more; using social media. Active accounts on MyGov increased to 26 million in 2023 (from under 12 million in 2017), and accesses to 350 million annually (Australian Government, 2023). Efforts to transform APS culture on digital change with the Digital Transformation Agency, reflected in high international rankings (OECD, 2024).
<i>A third wave of DEG changes</i> (starting 2022 onwards) focusing on big data/artificial intelligence approaches, algorithmic governance and cloud computing, allied with a strong focus on changing the whole organisational culture of civil services (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2023).	Exploiting ‘big data’ insights (Dunleavy, 2016), developing machine learning and other AI approaches. Speeding up new policy development via agile and cloud computing solutions. Diversifying IT suppliers. Absorbing Silicon Valley and tech industry working practices and consumer responsiveness into public administration and regulation (Dunleavy and Evans, 2019a and 2019b).	Development of fully robotic services (like e-passport gates, drones in defence and civilian uses etc); AI-driven policy initiatives (but unlike the premature robodebt effort). Digital estate treated as critical national infrastructure (Australian Government, 2023).

Source: Dunleavy and Margetts (2023), ‘Data science, artificial intelligence and the third wave of digital era governance’, *Public Policy and Administration*, Online First, Table 1.

APS under the Public Service Act 1999 to provide apolitical advice for ‘the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public’ has experienced historic challenges. The erosion of the Service’s independence and authority by ministers and advisors under Coalition governments in particular diminished its policy advisory role and capability, and accentuated the perceived remoteness of Canberra policy-makers from the citizens it serves. The Albanese government has sought to both address these problems and achieved some changes. However, Labor would need to secure a second term for ministers to succeed in embedding the long-term improvements in how public services operate envisaged by the APS reform agenda. In the past, the main causes of the failure of reform implementation were changes of government – and a future Liberal-National government would undoubtedly do things differently.

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