

## Rare Praise, Indeed, for Public Servants

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I nearly fell off my chair when I heard David Richmond, the chief Olympics bureaucrat, on the PM program praise the NSW Public Service for bringing off the 'best ever' Games. Usually people come, not to praise public servants, but to bury them. Ponder as I might, I can't recall a nice word being uttered about a bureaucrat for years — not even from another bureaucrat.

Yet it is ironic that public servants, derided and demeaned for a decade, were crucial to the success of this government-sponsored, government-controlled Games. From brain work to train work, from Richmond to the TAFE teachers who tutored volunteers in customer service, they succeeded where Atlanta's entrepreneurs stumbled. It wasn't a hotshot business executive who ensured the facilities were built on time, and the trains ran on time. (It was the private sector, however, who had early troubles getting the buses to run on time and in the right direction). The Americans can't get over it, nor can some Australians: a government that worked, that delivered.

Sadly, this is unlikely to turn the tide in favour of public servants. At federal government level, dismemberment of the public service is moving apace. Following a decision that has received too little publicity, every public service job is to be 'market-tested' to see if the private sector can do it cheaper. Only people over 45 can remember a time when the public service was respected, an honourable career for bright university graduates and a source of full-time start-up jobs for young people. But these days, parents would have to have rocks in their heads to encourage their children into the public service.

It's at the federal level you see the full impact of public service bashing. The thirst to privatise has not been quenched despite massive staff reductions and outsourcing. In a two-year period, 34,000 public service jobs were lost. Gripped by the notion that private enterprise is always smarter, cheaper, better, the Howard government is pushing ahead with more outsourcing.

The outsourcing of IT functions is just the start. Less well known is the government decision a year ago to 'market test' all public service functions: after IT, corporate services, human resources, legal work, fraud detection, financial services — nothing is sacred, not even, it appears, policy development. The aim is to invite private enterprise in to tender for all manner of public service business. A leaked memo from the Department of Finance's outsourcing agency, known by the forbidding acronym OASITO, shows the breadth of the government's obsession: no in-house bids will be allowed, and national security is about the only grounds for a department to avoid market-testing its work. Departments can't opt out even if the exercise would bring only 'limited efficiency gains'. If preliminary research suggests there is 'no market for the activity' — that is no one in private enterprise can do the job — that's no excuse, either. OASITO 'will work with industry to improve market capacity'.

If a department can demonstrate, through 'benchmarking results' that it is already doing the work efficiently, too bad. It still has to give the private sector a chance to take the job away. If the law is an impediment to outsourcing, the department must recommend how the law can be amended. And if the first market test shows the public service is more efficient, the department should market test again.

Pity public servants. Having survived the slaughter of '96-'98, they now face more years of instability and ingratitude. 'I realise that many people delivering corporate services may be feeling somewhat uneasy', writes Steve Sedgwick, the head of the Department of Employment Training and Youth Affairs, in an August memo to staff. What an understatement.

Whatever reforms were once needed, it's surely time to call 'enough', to rebuild morale and job satisfaction. The Olympics have blown the fallacy that the private sector is always smarter. We need a strong public sector, too.

### Note

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