Public Service Enquiries in Australia
Public Service Inquiries in Australia

edited by
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PMW
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Introduction

R. F. I. Smith & Patrick Weller

From the early 1940s to the mid-1970s the range of government activities and the size of the public services in Australia have consistently increased. In the first two years of the Whitlam government the growth in the size of the federal public service accelerated dramatically, but economic problems in 1975 and the advent of the Fraser government brought this to a halt. The sudden halt was not caused solely by a change of ministry: it also indicated a change of mood created by a long debate on the proper and practicable roles of government in social and economic life. Even before the change from Whitlam to Fraser, there had been widespread questioning of the functions, responsibilities and effectiveness of the federal and state public services in Australia.

The establishment of a wave of public service inquiries within the last five years was one significant symbol of this broad questioning. These inquiries included the Bland board of inquiry in Victoria (1973–75), the Corbett committee in South Australia (1973–75), a ministerial inquiry into machinery of government in New South Wales (1974) and, at the federal level, the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration (RCAGA) chaired by Dr H.C. Coombs (1974–76). On taking office, the Fraser government set up the Administrative Review Committee chaired by Sir Henry Bland. In New South Wales the Wran Labor government appointed Professor Peter Wilenski early in 1977 to inquire into state government administration yet again.

Public service inquiries have a long history in Australia, but the most recent group came after a noticeable gap. The Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration was the first wide-ranging inquiry into the federal public service since the McLachlan commission in 1919 and the economies commission in 1919–20. In the intervening period there were two other committees of inquiry—the Bailey committee in 1944 and the Boyer committee in 1958—but their terms of reference were limited to personnel policy. The situation was similar in the states. The recent Australian inquiries followed a number of prominent
inquiries in comparable countries—McCarthy in New Zealand, Glassco in Canada, Devlin in Eire, Fulton in the United Kingdom and Cronyn in Ontario. In all of these cases, whatever the action taken by governments, the reports themselves have provoked an extensive literature and provided information and cognitive maps for others wishing to explore the services they examined. At the very least they have become convenient mile posts—people refer, for example, to the post-Glassco and post-Fulton periods.

The essays in this volume examine the three state inquiries completed—in South Australia and Victoria, and the ministerial review in New South Wales—and RCAGA. Our interests are twofold. First, we are concerned with examining the reports themselves. The essays present a set of textual reviews which put the recommendations of the reports in the context of broader debates about the topics they discuss. Second, we are interested in the mechanics of the inquiries—that is, how they were set up, run and implemented. Thus the chapters on the state inquiries and eight of the chapters on RCAGA are concerned with the contents of the reports themselves. The state chapters also discuss the background to the reports. The chapters by Hawker and Schaffer view the activities of RCAGA from the inside, focusing on operational problems and the chapters by Matthews and Chapman examine problems of implementation, generally in the latter case and with specific reference to RCAGA in the former.

We cannot claim our coverage is exhaustive. In particular, since most of the reports were only published within the last two or three years, it is still too early to judge their final effects. Even though governments may praise reports loudly and claim to put their recommendations into effect, some of their more important results may occur through a process that is more akin to seepage than to the clear making of intended changes. If some of the standard jokes about the fate of committees have any truth in them—for example, that a unanimous report takes fifteen years to implement and that thirty years will elapse before some of the proposals of a divided committee take effect—then final comments may be a long time coming. The essays presented here can then be regarded as contributions to what may well be a continuing discussion.

The use of inquiries

Public service inquiries are part of a more general phenomenon. In the British system of government, as in others which follow a similar model, royal commissions, committees of inquiry and
advisory committees are familiar parts of the political and administrative process. American presidential commissions and Swedish investigatory commissions are comparable bodies, as are task forces, assembled for specific purposes and dispersing afterwards, which are used in a variety of institutional settings. The varieties of bodies relevant to a discussion of public service inquiries are therefore extensive.

One strand of the considerable literature on inquiries has been concerned with classification and categorization. This can be a barren enterprise, especially when divorced from the subject matter of the inquiries in question and the content of their reports. However, discussions of the reasons for setting up inquiries, the factors that affect their operations, and the problems they often encounter have identified a number of recurring themes, which can help to put the recent public service inquiries in Australia in a broader context.

Inquiries have been established and used for a variety of purposes. They can range all the way from precise fact-finding operations to attempts to gather intelligence about, and come to terms with, diffuse subjects. Although lists of possible functions can easily become extensive, the following one brings together some of the more recent common suggestions. Inquiries can be set up to do the following:

a) to establish the facts and make recommendations about subjects of limited compass.
b) to make general investigations on subjects where something has gone wrong, or there is a sense of malaise, or a general feeling that a review is needed. This may involve not simply finding facts but also redefining the terms of the inquiry and working out what kinds of recommendations may be relevant.
c) to secure a peaceful synthesis or adjustment of conflicting interests. This may involve the participation of interested parties as an inducement to compliance with the results.
d) to ‘educate’ the public or mobilize support for action which governments do not want to take solely on their own responsibility. Reports intended to legitimize public service retrenchments fit this category.
e) to show concern about a subject without actually having to do anything. At the very least this is a means of postponing awkward issues or taking the heat out of these situations. Such inquiries may have a large symbolic content.
f) to allow the expression of grievances. This may be either a symbolic activity or one leading to the proposal of remedies.
g) to follow up the suggestions of previous inquiries.
It is not hard to see how some items on the list could be divided and extended. Similarly, many combinations are possible in specific cases. This can make holding an inquiry an ambiguous exercise understood only imperfectly by both participants and observers at the time.

Items (b), (d) and (f) applied in varying degrees to each of the Corbett, Bland and Coombs inquiries, while item (e) was also involved in the Coombs case. The ministerial review in New South Wales, being private and more restricted in scope, is harder to characterize. All of the inquiries were set up by governments either recently elected or in the process of undergoing internal changes. The Bland inquiry was set up by R.J. Hamer after he had succeeded Sir Henry Bolte as premier and been confirmed in office by an election. In New South Wales the review took place as Sir Robert Askin was about to retire as Liberal premier. In South Australia the Dunstan Labor government, in office since 1970, was still trying to remould administrative structures built up during a generation of Liberal rule. In Canberra RCAGA was appointed by an inexperienced Labor government, recently forced to a "snap" election, and divided about what to expect from, and how to deal with, a diverse federal public service. Publicly and officially none of the governments described their public services as deficient, but each of them had private reservations. They did not, however, have a clear conception of what needed attention. Each of the public inquiries had a considerable task in defining the subjects of investigation. This was perhaps less difficult for Sir Henry Bland in Victoria, and still manageable for the Corbett committee in South Australia, but a daunting prospect for RCAGA.

**Terms of reference**

Just as inquiries can be put to many uses, many factors may affect their operations. We may begin with the instructions given by the government setting up an inquiry. Formulating the official terms of reference calls for sensitive drafting and interpretation. The terms of reference may disguise a government's uncertainty about what it wants done. Equally they may try to disguise an officially well-understood purpose or make such a purpose plain to all. How an inquiry interprets its terms of reference is important. This depends not only on the views of its members but on their relations with the government, as work proceeds as well as at the beginning.

Although the independence of inquiries is a much proclaimed virtue, wide terms of reference and a loose set of reins are mixed
blessings. The vicissitudes of RCAGA's experience amply reflect this. Just as defining a policy problem entails making a preliminary estimate about what to do, instructing an inquiry may require an appreciation of what it might find. But even if this appreciation is made, successful inquiries may not simply do as they are told.

Nor are they only appointed when the reports are foregone conclusions. As an inquiry proceeds it may decide that it needs to pose questions for investigation in a different way and to examine territory not included in its original mandate. This requires clear thinking on its part and an ability to carry the government's interest and support along the new course. In the Victorian inquiry Sir Henry Bland was able to do this for at least part of his work (his attention to statutory corporations) but in South Australia the Corbett committee stayed within its terms of reference at the cost of giving that state's statutory corporations (admittedly less prominent than in Victoria) less attention.

The appointment of members

There are no set formulas for the size and composition of inquiries. Sir Henry Bland sat as the sole member of his inquiry, the Corbett committee had three members (a professor of politics, the head of the Premier's department and a businessman) and RCAGA had five members (two senior public servants, a professor of law, a member of the industrial bench and a public service union official). Although RCAGA was sometimes described as a large commission it was small compared with some British commissions where numbers have ranged from three to seventeen. Fulton, for instance, had twelve members. On the other hand in Canada commissions of three or four are usual.

Getting agreement between commissioners was a greater task for RCAGA than for the other inquiries. Here the role of the chairman was always important. Dr Coombs adopted a consensual approach and did not, as some feared and others hoped, firmly carry the other commissioners in his own chosen direction. Professor Corbett and Mr Tom Lewis, the minister who led the New South Wales review, also preferred to adopt consensual methods. In other cases, particularly in Britain, one member could dominate proceedings; for instance in the Fulton committee, Dr Norman Hunt (later Lord Crowther Hunt), although not the chairman, made the running for the rest of the members by maintaining close political links with the prime minister and preparing the first draft of the report himself. On the earlier Haldane committee on machinery of
government, Lord Haldane not only himself proposed the inquiry, but chaired it and was pre-eminent throughout its work.9

Despite the implications of the size and composition of committees for their outcomes, governments quite often give these considerations scant attention. T.J. Cartwright has noted that British governments commonly appoint members one by one until they think that they have enough.10 They do not give much thought, at least at the time, to the pattern they are creating. This seems to have happened with RCAGA. Although arguments about the size and composition of inquiries cannot be concluded without specific situations in mind, there is a strong case for small committees, with strong chairmen, some balance between experts and interests, and a preference for members with well-articulated views on the subject of study rather than for those who are neutral about it. Andrew Shonfield has suggested that a committee of three is often best. Members cannot ignore each other, nor do they tend to assume set roles. As a result, he claims, perhaps within a single day each member may in turn be the successful advocate of a proposal, a vociferous dissenter, and a peacemaker.11

**Inquiries and research**

The ability of a committee to come to persuasive conclusions depends greatly on research, both by the committee itself and by others. Traditionally inquiries have relied extensively on "witnesses" who supply "evidence". Such methods often waste time, but witnesses can provide atmosphere, context and suggestions about what to look for. One proposal for getting the most out of people wishing to appear before an inquiry is to have prior and informal consultations with them about the substance and presentation of their views. This way an inquiry can secure their "second thoughts" rather than their first.12 But even so, for more substantial material, inquiries have to seek out information themselves.

Whether collecting material from witnesses or by research, an inquiry needs to have firm perspectives about what it wants to know. Shonfield has reported how the Duncan committee was not informed about relevant characteristics of structures of government dealing with its subject of overseas trade until too late to mount the thorough investigation that he thought was warranted. He rejects emphatically the "pragmatic fallacy" in the approach of many inquiries which he characterizes as follows:

> just plunge into your subject; collect as many facts as you can; think
about them hard as you go along; and at the end, use your commonsense, and above all your feel for the practicable, to select a few good proposals out of the large number of suggestions which will surely come your way. This method . . . derives from a view of public affairs which puts the functions of an investigator on essentially the same footing as those of a common-law judge. Such a person is supposed to know all about the underlying theoretical assumptions of those whose affairs he is examining. All he needs is facts.\textsuperscript{11}

Shonfield suggests that political scientists might be a good source of theory to help direct inquiries into key areas. There was little chance of such a contribution to the public service inquiries in Australia because few scholars of politics and public administration were equipped at the time to provide useful advice. RCAGA made extensive use of academic and other consultants but soon ran out of obvious people to approach. Inquiries can organize the most useful research programs if the research already being done in the relevant field is plentiful and of good quality.\textsuperscript{14} It is ironic that RCAGA, by its very existence as well as by the granting of consultancies, helped to fill the gap it suffered from. But the gap was too big to be filled in time for its own use. While scholars could afford to take several years to develop their newly awakened interests, RCAGA had a report to write. There is a further irony that such academics (including, we hasten to admit, the editors of this volume) provided a goodly crop of critics for RCAGA's report. At the very least we should acknowledge both our inadequacy and our debt.

Even where a substantial background of research is available a successful research program is not guaranteed. William Plowden is only one of many who have lamented the poor integration of the Fulton committee's research activities with its findings. He castigates

the magpie approach of Fulton, who accumulated a ragbag of miscellaneous and not wholly relevant information and then made various recommendations for which the essential intelligence underpinning is only now being done by the Civil Service Department.\textsuperscript{15}

Where an inquiry publishes the research it has commissioned separately from its own report, it is possible to see the links and discrepancies between research and recommendations. For this reason the Glassco commission in Canada did not release separate research papers. However academic and other consultants soon produced material based on their work for the inquiry. In Australia, RCAGA did not try to avoid this problem and published large amounts of commissioned and staff research in its appendix volumes. This was wise because once research has been done it is hard to hide.
Where a commission engages outside research workers it also has to cope with their tendency to adopt an independent approach. They may disagree with the formulation of the task they have been given or be interested mainly in producing material for academic publication. Geoffrey Hawker has described RCAGA’s experience of this latter problem. Academics do not adapt easily to tasks requiring the rapid gathering and reporting of information to clients, who themselves, rather than the reporters, make decisions about its significance and use. Inquiries need flexible researchers, akin to the technically skilled, politically sensitive and client-oriented analysts described recently by Arnold Meltsner, rather than people who in their own time produce rounded but possibly irrelevant reports.

**Relations with the bureaucracy**

Associated with the running of a research programme, and important even where extensive research is not necessary, are the quality of an inquiry’s secretariat and the support given by the departments most connected with an inquiry. Where a commission has to report in a hurry, the amount of initial thinking and planning done in the public service is vital. Once an inquiry is under way its secretariat has responsibility for managing logistics, keeping track of relevant material, preparing draft reports, and most importantly, providing reliable filters for important material which comes to hand late in the day when members of the inquiry are pressed for time. Sir Henry Bland worked largely on his own while the Corbett committee had a small and rather junior staff. RCAGA recruited a large staff but had difficulty in attracting people of seniority and experience. Although in the end the record of the staff was a good one they nevertheless had to spend a long time learning what to do.

One persistent problem facing commissions and committees is that by their nature they work outside the normal machinery of government. The reasons for setting them up and the resources they are given are decided by ad hoc processes. Particular commissions and committees have no natural place in the scheme of things. They must enter into complex transactions to ensure an adequate supply of funds, staff, information and bureaucratic and political support. Going outside normal bureaucratic structures always has its costs. In programme implementation these are, for example, in not knowing the location of procedural decision points or the disposition of friends and foes among related agencies. In intelligence gathering the costs are even more apparent. While established agencies can
live through fluctuations in political interest, these can be utterly debilitating for organizations whose working lives are by nature short. Inquiries do not even have the resources of a programme to administer. If a temporary body has responsibility for a programme there may be some point in answering its questions, but inquiries can only pose questions. Decisions are made elsewhere.

**Could governments do better themselves?**

Following from this, a popular criticism of inquiries as a technique of investigation has been to suggest that anything *ad hoc* commissions can do, governments can do better and more honestly themselves. When the amount of help inquiries need from governments is considered, this view has some force. Perhaps governments should take the full responsibility for investigations by creating appropriate regular agencies and giving the job to them. However William Plowden has suggested that the process of *ad hoc* inquiries may be as important as what they recommend. Ad hoc inquiries may be organizationally weak in that they do not have established resources, but they do not have vested interests. They can be more flexible and versatile than departments; they allow the views of specially recruited outsiders to be incorporated in the processes of administration; and their structures can readily be adapted to the organic variety associated with innovation. They can provide fresh looks and disinterested reappraisals which regular arms of government cannot do. Even if the latter can provide technically good work on their own, they cannot give it the credibility that comes from an outside review.

But Plowden also notes the variety of purposes commissions can be used for and asks whether all such uses can be valid. This is a penetrating question, especially when linked with his later comment that inquiries are so often vaguely conceived and casually embarked upon. It is a paradox that a technique which seems so suited to the creative production of intelligence should be so readily misunderstood and misused. Governments appear to have no procedures for learning about the nature of inquiries from past experience. While there may be agencies with responsibility for seeing that commissions and committees conform to particular formal requirements, there seem to be none whose business it is to review their substantive contributions and to advise newly set up bodies on what to do and what to avoid. Relevant experience and understanding are dissipated among agencies concerned with particular inquiries. Thus while one group may be learning how
to proceed another group may be forgetting or not passing on what they have recently learnt. The length of time since previous public service inquiries in Australia meant that at the beginning of the most recent wave of inquiries relevant experience would in any case have been of a quite general kind. The experiences of RCAGA have now generated an amount of particular understanding which simply was not available when it began work. But that experience may not be used for future benefit, not because it is forgotten but because it is deliberately ignored. The Fraser government's Administrative Review Committee did not try to build on RCAGA's experience: it was set up in a different way by a government suspicious of RCAGA and was in some senses a competitor. It regarded the lessons of RCAGA as irrelevant. However the most recent inquiry in New South Wales begun by the Wran government has been more interested in drawing lessons from the immediately earlier inquiries. It will be an interesting test case in the management of opportunities for learning.

**Inquiries and public policy**

What then can one expect of public service inquiries? How can one judge their results? What can they contribute to the making of public policy? The foregoing discussion suggests that inquiries are so closely connected with the context in which they operate that an evaluation of their work cannot be entirely separated from the wider processes of which they are a part. Inquiries are outcomes in public policy as well as inputs. The act of setting them up is an indication of concern even if it is only that an issue be efficiently aired. Commonly it is more substantial than that.

The contribution of inquiries to the making of policy is chiefly to the intelligence gathering section of the decision making cycle as conventionally designated. But actual policy processes do not conform to the neat sequential steps of the decision-making cycle and inquiries are not the only contributors of intelligence. Governments do not have to wait for an official report to take notice of information placed before an inquiry or the results of its research. Further, the input of inquiries is not just in what governments do with their reports. It is unsatisfactory to try simply to tick off the score of recommendations adopted. Such a process does not take account of things that would probably have been done anyway; nor does it distinguish between trivial and significant recommendations; and it does not encompass ideas of sufficient stamina and attractive-
ness to alter ways of thinking even if the government at the time wants to ignore them.

As Sir Geoffrey Vickers has pointed out, changing ways of thinking may be the most important contribution that public inquiries may make to policy making. To do this, a report needs to be of high intellectual quality and to emphasize the range of its central ideas as well as to work out how they might most immediately be applied. In some cases it may even be more important to concentrate on the former at the expense of the latter. This notion of the impact of inquiries cuts across the view expressed earlier that governments should know something of what they want when a commission is appointed. On Vickers’ argument, to set up an inquiry is to invite someone to change current modes of thinking. Not all inquiries, however, are cast in this role.

While much of what public service inquiries recommend may take effect indirectly or in unforeseen ways, this does not mean that strategies of implementation are unimportant. Implementing any complex programme is difficult and entails considerable ability to link proposals with possible effects from an early stage in the work. In the case of public service inquiries there is no uniquely effective strategy. A review of procedures followed by inquiries and governments, both in Australia and overseas, suggests that the number of different approaches to implementation is quite large. Styles of implementation can differ, for example, from the prompt endorsement by a government of general recommendations, not necessarily followed by substantive action, to the sustained and public reworking of an inquiry’s ideas by special task forces as they test the suitability of its recommendations for all areas designated for attention; and from the complete non-involvement of personnel from an inquiry to their systematic recruitment and use in the implementation process. Clearly it is important that settling on an approach to implementation is seen as an urgent task both within inquiries and within the government appointing them.

Thus in assessing the contributions of public service inquiries to public policy one has to examine both the intellectual and catalytic effects of such inquiries, and the processes by which they are conducted and their reports implemented—in short, one examines both arguments and procedures. As we said at the outset this is what the essays in this volume try to do. A concern with procedures may also contribute to increasing the stock of knowledge future inquiries can draw on when they begin operations, and a concern with arguments may help in distinguishing between recommendations with a limited life and those with continuing power and
attractiveness. We may end by recalling William Plowden's plea that more thought be given to the uses of inquiries:

All in all, it is precisely because the rather vaguely conceived, casually used device of the *ad hoc* commission is potentially such a valuable aid to policy-making that it is worth thinking carefully about how and where it can best be used.21

The experiences of the recent public service inquiries in Australia make this a compelling conclusion.

Notes


10. See “How Dr Hunt (aided and abetted by Harold Wilson) took over Fulton”, *Sunday Times*, 30 June 1968.

11. Shonfield, "In the Course of Investigation", 124.
13. Shonfield, "In the Course of Investigation", 123.
18. Plowden, "An Anatomy of Commissions".
19. ibid.
Administrative history is an essential companion for those of us who are, in the late A.H. Hanson's words, "searchers after origins". But, for those of us who become excited about what appear to be new fashions or new developments, and seek to analyze or describe them without much reference to the past, it can also be an awkward taskmaster.

I remember W.J.M. Mackenzie diminishing some university economists who were arguing that cost-benefit analysis was the great gift of mid-century economics to public policy-making. Certainly, he conceded, modern economics had done an important job in refining measuring techniques; but, as for the basic ideas, they were all there in Jeremy Bentham! Likewise the "new scholars" of public enterprise, in their first flush of excitement with post-World War II nationalization, were wont to see the public corporation as a great new innovation. To Sir John Anderson it was "probably the most striking development in administrative technique of our generation". Robson made some concessions to history: in his view the public corporation "in its modern form originated in the Port of London Authority, created by Lloyd George in 1908". But they knew little or nothing of earlier developments in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and elsewhere; indeed, they probably undervalued a good deal of earlier British experimentation.

Administrative history shows that broadly similar problems have been faced in the past, and that solutions not so different from modern solutions have been proposed. Even where the contexts seem far apart, there is a good deal of continuity in administrative thought and practice; we can gather useful insights from awareness of past administrative events.

I get the impression from the literature the present generation of public service inquiries has produced that our enthusiasms have made us see it as "all new". How often have we asked ourselves whether other major inquiries preceded McCarthy in New Zealand, Glassco and Cronyn in Canada, Devlin in Ireland, Fulton in Britain,
or Coombs, Corbett, Bland and now Wilenski in Australia—and, if so, what became of them? How often have we asked ourselves whether other countries have relevant histories—and if so, whether we can learn anything from them? Perhaps all the debunking the Haldane report had to sustain in the 1950s led us to forget?

I realize I overstate my case, that mostly we have some awareness of past generations of inquiries. It may be useful nevertheless to set the present generation of inquiries more firmly in a historical context.

**A widespread practice**

For Britain, as students of the traditional public administration used to be taught, the period between Northcote-Trevelyan (1854) and Fulton (1966–68) was punctuated by a series of major inquiries:

(i) **Playfair commission (1874–75):** appointed in the aftermath of the long period of piecemeal reform after 1854 to consider methods of recruitment, the question of transfer between departments, the possibility of grading the civil service as a whole and the employment of writers and temporary clerks.

(ii) **Ridley commission (1886–90):** considered whether the work of departments was efficiently and economically performed, whether it could be simplified and whether the system of control was deficient or unnecessarily elaborate.

(iii) **MacDonnell commission (1912–15):** considered methods of appointment and promotion, the working and efficiency of the competitive examination system and the existing scheme of organization.

(iv) **Haldane committee (1918):** the original "Machinery of Government Committee", appointed to consider the responsibilities of the various departments of the central government, and to advise in what manner the exercise and distribution by the government of its functions should be improved.

(v) **Reorganization committee of the National Whitley Council (1920):** introduced the familiar service-wide four-class system (administrative, executive, clerical, writing assistant) and offered what was to be an influential view of the distinction between policy and executive work. There was also a 1919 committee to inquire into the organization and staffing of government offices.

(vi) **Tomlin commission (1929–31):** reviewed the developments
of the past ten years in respect of coordination and efficiency, treasury control and conditions of service.

(vii) Priestley commission (1953–55): considered conditions-of-service questions such as pay, hours of work, overtime, allowances and superannuation.

(viii) Plowden committee (1961): examined the mechanics of treasury control over the whole range of public expenditures.

It is an arbitrary exercise to decide which inquiries to include in such a list. Some of those referred to have wider terms of reference than others; and the list does not include numerous inquiries appointed with relatively narrow frames of reference such as Bridgeman on the Post Office (1932), Assheton on civil service training (1943), Masterman on the political activities of civil servants (1948), Franks on tribunals and inquiries (1957), others on particular areas of public enterprise management and many more.

When we look to the USA, we think first of the two Hoover commissions of 1949 and 1955. Among other things, they are famed for their development of the task force technique; they set up numerous task forces to deal with particular heads of inquiry, and the individual task force reports were published as well as the final integrating commission reports. Before them, however, came President Roosevelt's commission on administrative management (the Brownlow committee, which reported in 1937); President Taft's commission on economy and efficiency (1911–13); and—earlier still, in the great age of the civil service reform movement—President Grant's civil service commission (1871–75). Once more, numerous other inquiries with narrower frames of reference are ignored in such a summary treatment. Such inquiries have also become a prominent feature of the public administration landscape in Canada, in New Zealand, in India, in Kenya, in Ghana and so on.

The first Australian inquiry?

The first Australian inquiry to be worthy of our notice must surely be that conducted by John Thomas Bigge, the commissioner appointed by the British government in 1819 to inquire into the condition of New South Wales, which colony then included Van Diemen's Land as a semi-autonomous dependency.

Bigge's three reports, printed as British parliamentary papers in 1822 and 1823, dealt particularly with the nature of the convict system in these two original Australian jurisdictions, with the workings of their judicial establishments and with the state of their
agriculture and trade. In compiling them and making his recommendations, Bigge gathered evidence widely, and largely informally, from colonists and government officials alike. Inevitably, since the effects of government were then so all-pervading, the reports present a great deal of information on the operations of the contemporary administrative system. They are essential aids to the student of early Australian administrative history, even though they have been heavily criticized for their failure to observe proper rules of evidence and cross-examination, and for their biased treatment of Macquarie's governorship. 6

Although there was little other inquiry activity of this sort before the coming of responsible government, the South Australian Legislative Council did appoint two select committees in the early 1850s. The first, charged with investigating the condition and working of the civil service, led the way to the passing of Australia's first civil service legislation, the South Australian Classification Act of 1852. The second, intended primarily to examine the system of keeping the public accounts, in fact "gave colonial politicians their first chance of examining and commenting on the work of departments in detail". 7

From responsible government to federation

When we turn to the period between the granting of self-government to the colonies 8 and the coming of federation in 1901, we find that the colonial governments and legislators made much use of the device of the public service inquiry. Looking at this history, the 1894–95 NSW royal commission reported:

How far the civil service of any country has been from attaining a lofty ideal may be inferred from the fact that Commission after Commission has sat throughout the great English-speaking colonies to inquire into the causes that have made it a by-word and a reproach. In order to ascertain what has been done in this matter elsewhere, we sent a circular to the Colonial Treasurer of each of the Colonies asking for full information on Civil Service Reform as it affected each particular Colony. We find that each Colony has had a Royal Commission, from Victoria, which led the way in 1859, down to Western Australia, where a Royal Commission commenced its labours in June last year . . . 9

My appreciation of these inquiries comes primarily from the administrative/historical research of scholars like Parker, Caiden, Knight, Hawker and Bourke. 10 I have also referred to the various series of colonial/state parliamentary papers, and in compiling the first of the tables which follow I have been helped by an appendix
to the 1894-95 NSW report which presented summary information on earlier inquiries in England, the USA, Canada and the other Australian colonies.

It is possible to see the inquiries of the later nineteenth century as falling into three groups (or waves). The first wave came early in the period. Caiden points out that the Northcote-Trevelyan report, just received in the colonies when the first of them became self-governing, "aroused speculation as to whether similar inquiries would reveal the same state of affairs"; and that the new governments, in "the first flush of enthusiasm . . . initiated public and private inquiries into the efficiency of the administration and the causes of staff discontent". Caiden is generous in his comments about the early Victorian and Tasmanian inquiries: the first, enlivened and informed by the intelligence of its chairman, Professor W. E. Hearn, then Professor of Law at the University of Melbourne, was "more advanced in ideas than the Northcote-Trevelyan Report"; the second was "one of the very first exercises in scientific management".11

These first-wave inquiries were concerned with questions such as civil service appointments, promotions, classifications, superannuation, security of tenure and means for securing more economical management. They set the stage for later exercises but, though they were not unaware of the need, they did not have to grapple seriously with the design of service-wide legislation.

The second wave of inquiries began in the early 1870s, when economic recession focussed attention once more on the alleged extravagances and maladministration of the civil service. To quote Caiden again, "When the pressure for reform mounted, Governments satisfied the critics by appointing committees of inquiry whose recommendations were embodied in subsequent legislation . . . or ignored . . .". Some progress was made in the devising of integrated civil service systems, though nowhere was government "bold enough to adopt the far-seeing recommendations of the Royal Commissions whose Reports fully supported the criticisms by public servants of the patronage system".12 The reports were now drawing attention to experiments in civil service reform elsewhere; notably Victoria's 1870-73 royal commission cited recent Canadian legislation establishing a central personnel authority for the whole service. Some experimentation followed in Australia, but it did not go far enough.

Efforts to secure the reform of the public services were renewed in the depression of the 1890s. By now the message about patronage and the need for independent central personnel agencies had begun to sink in, and a third wave of inquiries had considerable effect.
In particular, the Littlejohn commission in NSW paved the way for new legislation establishing a powerful Public Service Board with virtually complete control over the management of the public service. The NSW government's acceptance of the inquiry recommendations is widely regarded as forming "a watershed in the history of public personnel administration in Australia." It provided a model for the new commonwealth to adapt to its own purposes after 1901, and the philosophy it espoused was sooner or later to influence developments in the other states, although several of them conducted their own inquiries before introducing corresponding reforms. As Hawker's study demonstrates, the first of the relevant South Australian royal commissions actually preceded that in NSW although it went too far for the legislators, whose flagging interest rendered the too-energetic Reports . . . ineffective for more than twenty years, a situation which the [Civil Service] Association did its best to make permanent.

The comparable Tasmanian royal commission did not sit until after federation, when the states were adjusting to the transfer of sections of their public services to the new commonwealth government. However, it deserves to be included in this group because its objectives were broadly similar.

Table One presents some information about the inquiries of this period (see p. 31).

The First World War and its aftermath

The annals of Australian administrative history teach that one other identifiable wave of public service inquiries occurred between the three surveyed in the preceding section and that of the present era. Of course this new wave included commonwealth as well as state inquiries. F.A. Bland, a keen observer of these inquiries, explained that World War I closed an era in Australian politics and administration. The changes effected by social, political, economic, industrial and administrative measures in the closing years of the nineteenth century produced a new temper which was reflected generally in changed outlooks and attitudes. And the sacrifice of a whole generation to the insensate appetite of war precipitated the premature birth of movements that might otherwise have taken years to evolve. In the field of administration, unrest throughout the Commonwealth led to the appointment of Royal Commissions in Victoria (1917), New South Wales (1917–18), The Commonwealth (1917–20), and Queensland (1919),
and the consideration of the "rights" of public servants bulked largely in the reports.\textsuperscript{16}

By this time, moreover, most of Australia's administrative systems had a decade or more of experience with their new or "stiffened" Public Service Acts, and the time was ripe for review and revision. Bourke put it more simply:

The 1914–18 war provoked a new series of enquiries into the Australian public service[s]. Between 1914 and 1928 no fewer than twelve Royal Commissions or Select Committees surveyed their management.\textsuperscript{17}

Table Two provides summary information about these inquiries, in similar form to that provided in Table One (see p. 32).

The impact was considerable, the new emphasis on efficiency in several of the reports finding ready acceptance at least by the governments of NSW and the commonwealth. Thus Allard demonstrated how the NSW Public Service Board had slipped from the lofty ideals of Littlejohn in the 1890s and recommended a strengthening of that board; amending legislation in 1919 "incorporated the best of [his] thinking".\textsuperscript{18} The commonwealth had two inquiries reporting in 1920 (McLachlan and the economies commission), and the completely rewritten Public Service Act of 1922, the Superannuation Act of 1922, and the Public Service (Arbitration) Act of 1920 all drew heavily on the ideas they had expressed. The new Section 17 of the Public Service Act (which sought to give the new three-man board power over the economic and efficient working of departments) flowed directly from the recommendations of the economies commission.\textsuperscript{19}

The Queensland inquiry of 1919, conducted by J.D. Story as royal commissioner, was required to focus its attention particularly on the dissension that had been caused by a suggested scheme of classification for officers of the public service. It was unusual among such inquiries in that it heard appeals against the effects of that scheme; the report was, however, descriptive of personnel practice in general, and the outcome was a proposal for an entirely new classification scheme. The Story commission was also unusual in developing the "wheel model" as a graphic means of illustrating Queensland's ministerial/departmental organization and the classification relativities envisaged within each departmental area.

\textit{A long period of inaction}

From this survey, it will be seen that it was rare, from 1856 right through to 1927, for more than a decade to pass without a public
service inquiry in one or other of the Australian governmental jurisdictions. However, if the waves followed each other fairly quickly in that period, it is equally clear that something of a drought arrived in the latter year. At first glance it would appear that all seven jurisdictions turned away from the public service inquiry as a technique of administrative review and reform after 1928, and that they did not return to it until a Liberal government in Victoria and a Labor government in South Australia decided to hold inquiries in 1973, and a Labor government in the commonwealth decided similarly in 1974. The proximity of these decisions suggested that a new wave of inquiries had arrived, and of course the reports of this new (fourth) wave form the central focus of the present volume.20

There were of course many requests, and the absence of such inquiries cannot be taken to indicate that there was wide general satisfaction with the workings of our public administrative systems. The ceiling-imposing and staff-cutting operation early in Menzies' second prime ministership was sufficient evidence that he believed there was room for improvement and adjustment in the interests of economical management. His fellow-critics drew his attention to the inquiries conducted by the two Hoover commissions in the USA and there were suggestions that such an inquiry should be initiated in Australia. But the Public Service Board chairman advised that the government might be politically embarrassed,21 and Robert Kennedy, special assistant to Menzies, distributed a paper making several points in arguing against a Hoover-type inquiry:

a) The Hoover commissions were, in effect, an extension of the congressional committee system. Such inquiries were needed in the USA because there was "no direct line of control from Congress to the Public Service". But the "direct and clear cut line of accountability" in Australia gives parliament effective control and thereby removes the need. (How narrow his horizons: he was obviously putting the executive's rather than the legislature's view!)

b) Such inquiries take much time and are very expensive.

c) It would be difficult in Australia to find the necessary numbers of qualified people to undertake them.

d) Despite the Hoover recommendations for "substantial overall savings in the operation of government", the U.S. civil employment had continued to rise.

e) The standards of efficiency of the commonwealth public service "are high and equal to any private industry", and the recently-adopted system of calling on expert advisers from outside the service is likely to be productive.
A commission of inquiry "would relieve the Government of a tremendous amount of political responsibility"—providing "a ready repository for much criticism" and "a convenient political 'buffer' against many attacks". Menzies himself said in Parliament that he did not have the slightest sympathy with the idea, however comfortable it may be in a personal sense, to off-load that responsibility on to two or three people who are outside of government, who are not responsive to public opinion, and who do not know what the process has been by which governments today undertake responsibilities that our grandfathers did not think of...

Notwithstanding, the same government was prepared to set up a committee of inquiry to review recruitment standards and processes (Boyer), using as a model an earlier committee of inquiry on the promotion system (Bailey). Both committees conducted wide-ranging inquiries and made substantial contributions to administrative development. In particular the Boyer report, invigorated and informed by the work on that committee of Professor R.S. Parker, presented a most valuable review and critique of important areas of past Australian public service development, and is a far more significant document than those produced by many of the earlier system-wide inquiries.

At least one other inquiry during this "drought" period had fairly wide-ranging terms of reference. This was the committee of review on the civil staffing of wartime activities of 1945–46 (Pinner). And, as always, there were also numerous narrower-perspective inquiries. It remains true, however, that the device of the system-wide inquiry was much less popular after 1927, a circumstance which Caiden attributes largely to the very success of the post-World War I inquiries. The changes they had brought about "had obviated the need for similar inquiries before World War II", and the failings of the second war period were not deemed sufficient to justify a repetition of the vigorous inquiry activity of the late 1910s and early 1920s.

Caiden's explanation seems unexceptionable. But the work of Michael Roe on the decline of western liberalism and the rise of the progressivist movement in the USA suggests to me that there may be a second cause, more elusive but important nonetheless, for the decreased usage of the public service inquiry. Roe demonstrates how American progressivism, containing within it a number of strands like conservation, eugenics, city planning and scientific management, championed the cause of efficiency. The engineer, applying his science, was seen as the natural leader of society; the
belief in efficiency brought businessmen to support reform; turned to public administration, the movement quickly produced the cry for skilled executives in government. The period covered the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, and the temporal association with the civil service reform movement was far more than coincidental. While it is not easy to find direct attributions by Australian reformers to the leaders of scientific management and other strands of progressivist thought, I have little doubt that these intellectual currents also made themselves felt in Australia; and all the public service inquiries during the later nineteenth century and up to the 1920s can be seen in this context.

Roe shows also how the progressivist movement both hardened in the European drift towards fascism after World War I and weakened in Britain and America with the revival of “a kind of liberalism” which concerned itself with issues like civil liberties, saw “the separation of social welfare from moralism, efficiency and nationalism”, and increasingly looked to “workers and other out-groups” for government support. Roe admits that the post-World War I picture is confused, but insists that the pattern of progressivism and reform “was rent to pieces”. To the extent that such forces had provided a reformist drive for the Australian public service inquiries, their weakening through the 1920s appears consistent with the virtual disappearance of the inquiry for a long period after 1927. Of course the public service inquiry did not disappear from the British and American administrative landscape in the same way, indicating that other forces must also have been at work.

One was, of course, that satisfaction (or complacency?) bred of the reforms of the early 1920s, which Caiden noted. Another was probably the development of a new tradition of inquiry, that by the standing parliamentary committee, and especially the public accounts committee. Gradually governments and parliaments began to appreciate that such committees could do some of the work previously entrusted to the royal commissions and select committees which had hitherto been fairly consistently employed to inquire into matters concerning the public service. It may also be—though further exploration is obviously needed before we can be sure—that there is less demand for commissions or committees of inquiry in times of strong leadership within the public service. This possibility is suggested particularly by the circumstances of the 1850s. While Victoria and Tasmania then appointed inquiries, NSW did not; but NSW had the benefit of the very clear-headed and far-sighted Deas Thompson as colonial secretary on the eve of self-
government, and his views from inside were influential in shaping the machinery of government. It has been suggested that Australia came near to launching a new wave of broad-base inquiries in the 1960s: that the (Vernon) committee of economic inquiry was a foretaste of things to come, and in keeping with developments in New Zealand, Canada and elsewhere, but that the Menzies government's public "dumping" of its 1964 report set back the cause for nearly a decade. However that may be, and whatever other factors may have been at work, the accumulating force of overseas example clearly contributed to the great revival of the 1970s.

The problem of evaluation

Australian administrative history thus shows that the device of the public service inquiry has been popular at some times, unpopular at others. What can we say about the effectiveness of the device over the total period?

Evaluation of such inquiries—indeed, of most committees of inquiry—is notoriously difficult. One Sydney study of some twenty-one committees on a variety of subjects selected the Murray committee on the Australian universities as the most impressive success, for the reason that the government "knew what it wanted, and Murray gave it to them". Are they, then, only effective when they are rubber stamps, popularizers of already determined courses of action? The general body of criticism of the public service and machinery of government inquiries which are the concern of this paper accuses them variously of being

- subjectively oriented to the aspirations of certain strong members (Haldane);
- set up with fairly rigid guidelines, or with limited terms of reference (Brownlow, Hoover I, Fulton);
- "inside jobs" with only pseudo-independence and little criticism to make (Plowden);
- promulgators of administrative "principles" as facades for the achieving of political objectives (Haldane and Brownlow again).

As Corbett demonstrates from the Glassco and Fulton cases, these inquiries tend to be the products of particular moments; the real reasons for them, whatever the stated terms of reference, "must be inferred from the politics of the time". Moreover, by understanding these politics, Corbett suggests, we ought to be able to anticipate many of their findings.
It is clear from judgments already reported that quick and substantial results followed some of the earlier Australian inquiries. Thus Littlejohn in NSW (1894–95) was associated with the most spectacular breakthrough in displacing the patronage system—though whether it actually persuaded or simply focused views that had by now become widely accepted is debatable. And McLachlan and the economies commission in the commonwealth, Allard in NSW and possibly others adapted and adjusted so effectively that little need was felt for further major inquiry until half a century had passed.

In other cases, however, the recommendations fell mainly on deaf ears. Inquiries like Hearn in Victoria and Glyde in South Australia were obviously too far in advance of the legislative and public service opinion of the time. So there were no quick, spectacular results. But if they contributed in the long run to the development of a climate of opinion in which change could take place, should they be judged as ineffective?

Some were terminated before they had a chance to finish their planned investigations (Canning in Western Australia); others were little more than sinecures and smoke-screens to hide government inactivity (Garrard in NSW). Even the more obvious reform agents found some of their major recommendations ignored. To take a single example: McLachlan, like so many public service "centralists", hated all those separate areas of employment under boards, commissions, etc., and proposed a "provisional service" alongside the regular service to contain in a quasi-coordinated way all those groups of public employees engaged in functions of a provisional character or of a kind unsuited to the regular personnel machinery. He got this provision—along with many of his other proposals—written into amending legislation. But it remained a dead letter and was quietly repealed in 1954. However, if that was a McLachlan "failure", clearly there were a number of McLachlan "successes".

To grade these inquiries according to their degrees of effectiveness would therefore be a hazardous task. But one rough generalization seems possible: the broader the canvas of the inquiry, the more uncertain the impact is likely to be. As we have already noted, in the broad inquiries some recommendations are likely to be accepted, some not; and even where quick results cannot be seen, in the long term impacts may be considerable. Usually much simpler decisions are required to accept or reject changes recommended by narrower-frame inquiries. As RCAGA member Peter Bailey once correctly responded, my remark that it all became more difficult with the broader inquiries was a mere "truism". It is worth
remembering, nevertheless, how narrow-frame English inquiries like Acland on forestry, Weir on electricity and Crawford on broadcasting all speedily won their central practical argument—that new special-purpose public corporations should be created—whereas, in the same period, the very non-specific Haldane committee theorized generally that public corporations should not be created but was ignored by the system-designers.

A few interesting facts emerge from the data presented in Tables One and Two. Average membership of the fifteen inquiries surveyed in Table One was 6.5; that of the eight inquiries surveyed in Table Two was 1.75. The contrast is even more striking if we move the 1905 Tasmanian inquiry into the Table Two group: it then becomes clear that the smallest board or commission appointed during the nineteenth century (the first—Hearn) had four members, whereas the largest appointed in the early twentieth century period (Cooch and Meagher) had three. The device of the single-member inquiry became fairly popular in the twentieth century but was not known in the nineteenth; and no member of parliament has sat on any such inquiry reporting in the twentieth century.36

Elapsed times between appointment and final report have varied from about four years to about one month. But long and short inquiries are scattered through both periods, and there is little evidence to suggest that either has been more influential than the other—except that the four-year NSW inquiry (Garrard) obviously took too long and ran out of steam! As to methods of inquiry, the department-by-department survey and the cross-examination of witnesses have both enjoyed considerable popularity. Fortunately, by the 1920s the reports were presenting their data more analytically, in integrated service-wide presentations, a great improvement on the earlier common practice of devoting a chapter to each department surveyed. The publication in full of the evidence of witnesses was a common feature of the inquiries of the middle period, and several full volumes in the various Parliamentary Papers series are taken up with this material.

The first substantial use of expert investigators and consultants employed by the inquiring body came with the federal economies commission of 1917–20: the method was then novel enough to attract a great deal of criticism from the public servants being surveyed. It may well be that the development and expansion of these latter techniques have been among the most innovative contributions of the 1970s. Thus, even if Bland remained fairly true to tradition, the Corbett inquiry engaged its own research officers, and Coombs not only did this but also made extensive use of task forces and consultants. A second such contribution must surely be
the widening of the area of inquiry to include newly-recognized issues like access and the regionalizing of government services. The much greater readiness by governments and the inquiring bodies themselves to invite inputs from academia is another notable feature of the 1970s. Also, in the 1970s, there is some evidence that the inquiries themselves are beginning to pay attention to the problem of implementation. However, it is for other chapters in this volume to focus on these recent inquiries.

The contribution to knowledge

Almost inevitably, we come in the end to Corbett's lowest-common-denominator criterion. If nothing else, an inquiry may be worthwhile if it has "improved academic research and teaching in public administration". To be sure, there was not much academic commitment in the nineteenth century. Even so, it was in this very context that Hearn was stimulated to make his important early contribution to the study of government. Moreover, even if the academics were few and far between, there was still the possibility of attracting the interest of the "thinking public". Judged on this score, many of the Australian inquiries have at least been moderately successful. The later nineteenth century habit of cross-examining numerous witnesses and publishing all the evidence in full (partially restored in Coombs) clearly did stimulate contemporary public interest, and the thousands of pages of small print that resulted provide us today with a fascinating window through which the Dickensian operations of the pre-reform civil service can be viewed.

Public service inquiries bring into the open the successes and failings, the problems and needs, the ambitions and frustrations of the administrative systems with which they are concerned. They command newspaper space and—for a time at least—increase public awareness and understanding of bureaucratic operations. They up-date and enrich the teaching materials we use both in the academies and in in-service training programmes. And they attract new scholars, who bring new insights and new approaches to the field of public administration.

It is all happening now, as is demonstrated by this volume, by the late 1976 Saturday seminar on the Coombs report organized by the ACT Regional Group of RIPA, by the November 1975 conference of all the Australian Regional Groups of RIPA on "Administrative Review and Change", by the special panel discussion on machinery of government issues at the August 1975
conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association (an almost unheard-of focusing of interest on matters administrative by that academic body), and by other such manifestations of heightened interest in the way we run our administrative systems. But most of it has happened before.

Notes

5. For details of the U.S. inquiries, see P.P. Van Riper, History of the U.S. Civil Service, (Evanston (Ill.): Row Peterson, 1958).
6. J.T. Bigge, Report ... into the State of the Colony of New South Wales, Report ... on the Judicial Establishments of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, and Report ... on the State of Agriculture and Trade in the Colony of New South Wales, House of Commons papers 448 of 1822, 33 of 1823, and 136 of 1823 respectively. All three dealt also with Van Diemen's Land. For a critique see J.M. Bennett's biographical article on Bigge in Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1, (Melbourne University Press, 1966), 99–101.
8. 1856 for NSW, Victoria and Tasmania; 1857 for South Australia; 1860 for Queensland; 1890 for Western Australia.


13 Caiden, *Career Service*, 43. Also Knight, “Patronage and the NSW Public Service”; Parker, *Public Service Recruitment in Australia*, 28–30; Bourke, “Management and Control of the Public Service”, 303–4. The inquiries of this period reflect, in their titles and elsewhere, the gradual substitution of the term “public service” for “civil service”.

14 Hawker, “Development of the SA Civil Service”, vi.


17 Bourke, “Management and Control of the Public Service”, 312. See also Caiden, *Career Service*, 142. I have been unable to locate as many as twelve such inquiries. Perhaps Bourke’s tally includes those conducted by R.M. Anderson into the Post Office and sections of the Defence Department in 1915; they do not, however, appear to warrant inclusion in a genealogy of service-wide inquiries. Bourke also sees 1928 as the final year of this period of inquiry activity, but the last relevant inquiry I noted reported in 1927. Consequently I use the year 1927 in later references.

18 Bourke, “Management and Control of the Public Service”, 314. F.A. Bland’s early writings were also quite heavily influenced by the Allard reports: see esp. *Shadows and Realities of Government*.


20 The somewhat differently conceived NSW enquiry (on which see, e.g., H.H. Dickinson and G. Gleeson, “1974—Public Services Under the Microscope”, *Public Administration* (Sydney), 34 (1), March 1975, 10–12) should also be included in this wave.

21 Caiden, *Career Service*, 403.

22 “The Commonwealth Public Service—and the Hoover Commission”, undated document (1958?) issued with “the compliments of Robert Kennedy, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister”.


25 Its reports were not published in the PP series, but are summarized by Caiden in *Career Service*, 289–90.


28 Ibid. 54–5.

29 A similar kind of association can, I believe, be drawn between the dissemination of progressivist ideas and other significant areas of reform in Australia over the same period. I understand that Dr Roe is exploring this association in respect of the development of Australia’s public health services.

30 For comment see my “Concepts of Ministry”, *Public Administration* (Sydney), 29(4), December 1970, 324.
31. I am indebted to Professor R.N. Spann for this suggestion.
36. Unfortunately my analysis has not been deep enough to examine trends in the use of businessmen or public servants, though there have been some notable contributions by both groups. As for academics, Hearn in the 1850s and Parker in the 1950s are the only obvious cases in all the pre-1970 inquiries surveyed.
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<td>Civil Service Commission</td>
<td>R. Grice (b)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26/4/59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tas 11/1863</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Accounts &amp; Depts of Govt, South Side[c]</td>
<td>J. Whyte</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12/2/63</td>
<td>24/6/63</td>
<td>4 &amp; 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSW 115/1873</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Select Committee on the Civil Service</td>
<td>A. Osland</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12/11/72</td>
<td>5/3/73</td>
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<td>Vic 10/1873</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Public Service &amp; Working of Civil Service Act</td>
<td>T. A. Beckett (d)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8/8/70</td>
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<td>SA 97/1874</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Report on Civil Service Bill</td>
<td>W. Townsend</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6/7/74</td>
<td>30/6/74</td>
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<td>NSW 30B/1894[14]</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Civil (Public) Service Inquiry Commission</td>
<td>J. Garrard</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16/12/87</td>
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<td>RC</td>
<td>Public Service Commission</td>
<td>S. Glyde</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20/1/88</td>
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<td>NSW 34B/1895</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Royal Commission on the Civil Service</td>
<td>T. Littlejohn</td>
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<td>RC</td>
<td>Civil Service Commission</td>
<td>J. O'Loghlin</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>15/2/99</td>
<td>28/8/00</td>
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<td>SA 20/1900[16]</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Public Service Commission</td>
<td>R. Oldham</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30/3/04</td>
<td>21/8/05</td>
<td>1 &amp; 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tas 12/1905</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Royal Commission on the Civil Service</td>
<td>R. Oldham</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30/3/04</td>
<td>21/8/05</td>
<td>1 &amp; 7</td>
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</table>

(a) BI = board of inquiry, RC = royal commission, SC = select committee
(b) Always named first but not obviously chairman. Doubtless Prof. Hearn, who was also a member, played a prominent part in drafting the report
(c) "South side" = Hobart-centred establishment. "North side" = Launceston-centred establishment
(d) Was a member of the 1859 Grice Commission
(e) First and Second Progress Reports: the second recommended a Civil Service Act, which was passed in 1889, the royal commission then being withdrawn
(f) This commission toured the state and submitted progress reports on a number of individual departments. Since evidence was given confidentially, the reports were not tabled in parliament—though parliament several times requested and received reports on the commission's progress. There were several changes in membership over the long period during which the commission sat, the numbers shown in the membership column here appear to have applied for most of that time. The inquiry was wound up in 1892
(g) Ninth and Final Report: PP numbers of the eight major progress reports are 30/1888 (1st), 30/1889 (2nd), 30A/1889 (3rd), 30B/1889 (4th), 30/1890 (5th), 30A/1890 (6th), 30C/1890 (7th), 30/1891 (8th).
(h) The appendix includes several essays on the state of civil service reform (or descriptions of the prevailing civil service system) in countries as diverse as Great Britain, India, Salvador, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands and "the Continent" generally, written either by the secretary to the commission or by officers of the various consul services
(i) First and Second Progress Reports: The royal commission was terminated after submitting the latter
(j) Second Progress Report. The First Progress Report (20/1899) was a single-page holding report only
<table>
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<tr>
<th>C'wealth/State and Parl. Paper Reference</th>
<th>Status&lt;sup&gt;(a)&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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<td>VIC 7/1916, 15/1917&lt;sup&gt;(b)&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Royal Commission on State Public Service</td>
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<td>Qld 23/1919</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>RC on classification of O.P.S</td>
<td>J Story</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19/9/18</td>
<td>24/6/19</td>
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<td>Cwlth 49/1920</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>RC on Public Service Administration</td>
<td>D. McLachlan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2/10/18</td>
<td>6/1/19</td>
<td>3m&lt;sup&gt;(d)&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cwlth 176/1919, 84/1921, 63/1920&lt;sup&gt;(e)&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>RC on Public Expenditure of the Cwlth</td>
<td>R Gibson</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>6/4/21</td>
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<td>NSW 255/1918, 264/1918, 63/1920&lt;sup&gt;(f)&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>RC into the working of the Public Service</td>
<td>Mason Allard</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3/8/17</td>
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<td>SA 55/1922, 56/1922&lt;sup&gt;(g)&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>RC on the Public Service</td>
<td>P Whittington</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>7/3/22</td>
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<td>BI</td>
<td>Economy Board</td>
<td>R. Meagher</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18/8/22</td>
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<td>Vic 1/1927</td>
<td>BI</td>
<td>Methods in the Public Service</td>
<td>J Wallace Ross</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18/12/26</td>
<td>1/12/26</td>
<td>4½m</td>
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(a) RC = royal commission, BI = board of inquiry
(b) Progress Report and Final Report.
(c) The Appendix is a description of then-operating departmental records systems, questions of office management received prominent attention in this inquiry.
(d) In fact the report was not printed until 28 July 1920, 1½ years after McLachlan signed it. In some other cases the commissioners, etc., have not dated the actual final report, so that I have had to use the date of presentation to parliament. Difficulties in comparison may thus arise where a long period has elapsed between completion and tabling/printing, though this is the only such case of which I am aware.
(e) Based largely on McLachlan's own personal experience as first Public Service Commissioner for the Commonwealth.
(f) First Progress and Final Reports.
(g) The Commission commissioned a number of investigators and consultants, and based much of its report on their findings.
(h) First, Second and Fifth Sectional Reports. I could not locate others in the NSW PP series, which is in my view very awkwardly arranged---but obviously there were others. My calculation of the period in session runs from date of appointment of the RC to date of the Fifth Report, while my count of the number of pages covers only the three reports I have seen.
(i) First and Second Progress Reports.
(j) The material is, however, presented under primary subject headings, such as organization, office accommodation, accounting, auditing, public works, correspondence and records, stores and tender, printing and stationery, etc., rather than under primary dept-by-dept headings as in earlier inquiry reports.

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Table 2: Public Service Inquiries 1914-1928

R.L. Wettenhall
Inside the Inquiries
At its outset the Coombs commission was regarded as a reforming initiative of the Labor government elected in 1972. The new government worked the public service hard. New departments and new schemes were afoot, as in the arts, education, social benefits and urban development; there were uncomfortable experiments with commissions attached to departments; there were many other inquiries. An apparently deliberate policy used public service salaries as a pace-setting factor in the economy as a whole, and a restless rate of change brought promotion in certain sections of the public service so that middle management was stretched thin. Unexpected difficulties of unaccustomed office (none of the ministry had previous experience) were attributed, as is not unusual at such moments of apparently sudden change, to a lack of policy support and response from the bureaucracy for new political masters. Once-powerful and senior permanent heads especially felt the storms.

Possibilities and limitations

The parliamentary Labor party (the caucus) threatened to insist on its own inquiries in the public service, in part because the prime minister was less inclined than some of his colleagues to see the service as conservative, entrenched and necessarily unresponsive to the first Labor government for 23 years. That was an immediate explanation for the creation of a royal commission as a safe alternative, and for its large (five-person) and representative membership.

The legislative position of a commission of inquiry was, however, unhelpful. A commission which had to look at Australian administration had to adopt positions in relation to the centres of bureaucratic power in the existing administrative processes, above all the Public Service Board, the Treasury and the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Under legislation, this commission of inquiry was in effect a subordinate of the department of the
Special Minister of State, like any other commission of inquiry or minor agency. That meant it was not in a strong political position since it had a peripheral parent. And it was fully subject to controls by just those authorities at the very centre of the agenda of inquiry. The irony was complete but unenjoyable.

As the commission began its work, the gap between this background and its very broad and non-specific terms of reference left it wandering through relatively uncharted territory with little guidance. The one aim adopted from the beginning (June 1974) was the aim of reporting relatively fast; in fact the commission reported in July 1976. There are two possible strategies for a reform commission: to accept from the beginning that an inquiry will be a tedious medium-term operation or to try to make a quick _prima facie_ report while the commission retains something of its initial political support and interest (and hence resources) and the interest and enthusiasm of its senior members. That exercise would require rewriting the commission's own terms of reference and getting a renewed appointment and authority after a relatively short while. It could indicate what areas did indeed seem to be worth investigating with a view to action and change. It would then be up to others to say whether the commission should proceed in those directions.

Most commissions have adopted the first posture. Few have adopted the second. RCAGA seemed to have slipped between the two. It did not derive from its political setting what few most urgent tasks it should concentrate on, though like other commissions it was initially, and extremely temporarily, given licence to make such selection. Although the writing of an interim report on key issues was discussed vigorously at a very early point, no agreement could be reached within the commission; the subject was postponed and necessarily soon lapsed.

The commission then had still to confront the problem of time and how it could be handled. Administrative research by a temporary, _ad hoc_ and outside body working out the operational details of any specific administrative change: this was a daunting prospect. Irrespective of how to approach questions of administrative reform, the urgency of choosing what questions should be looked at implied criteria about choice. What ran through the whole of this experience was the large scale implication of small scale actions. For example, the filing system determined the way in which the oceans of material came to be used within the commission. Moreover, small questions of research and investigation, sometimes an individual case, sometimes a technical area (like departmental libraries, say, or promotion appeal procedures), had large scale implications for ultimate administrative change in the wider service.
All the problems of administration, like face-to-face relations between institutional insiders and outsiders or the break-up of large scale tasks into particular operations and the problems of overall control, supervision and a sense of direction and achievement, are present in a large-scale administrative reform commission.

Approach

The commission gathered its information and formulated its tasks and answers through a variety of methods, and largely as it went along: most important were formal and informal hearings, the operation of more or less expert task forces for particular problems and a wide-ranging research programme. In its early months, and again near the end, the commission had some closed and informal discussions with selected people and groups (such as parliamentarians, senior public servants, “high-flyers”, academics and businessmen). It advertised for submissions and held extensive formal hearings into some of the 700 which were received. It also went to great lengths to tour the country and make itself very open to those who had not made submissions. This exercise became known as “community hearings” and was one of the areas of the commission’s work where it came to focus particularly on problems of access relationships between the citizen and the bureaucracy.

Half-way through its life the commission established small task forces of commissioners, staff members and “outsiders” (including some public servants) to investigate questions relating to regional administration, economic policy-making, efficiency in government, health-welfare administration, science administration and training for aboriginal employment in the public service. One of the most obvious ways of involving people in the work of an administrative reform commission to increase its support and interest and perhaps to extend the time within which it is likely to be listened to is to issue discussion papers about its course. All but the last of the task forces did in fact issue reports as discussion papers, and other published papers arose from the research program on sex discrimination in employment, position and other forms of job classification and, again, on regional administration and economic policy-making. Almost all the working papers of the research group were made publicly available. Doubtless the written output of the commission helped to stimulate the written response of academics and others.3
Difficulties

The ways in which the task forces should immediately be used was a problem. That was partly due to the distribution of topics and also because there were different inputs: an attempt to graft workable ideas about decentralization to the somewhat oddly named set of themes which was currently being conjured up in Australia under the heading of regionalism, for example, and that hard ground of coordination, expertise and treasury management which was to be trodden about economic policy.

The ambitious research programme of the commission was another difficulty. Early documents which said that the commission would have a research programme indicated that there had been ritualistic rather than pragmatic thinking about research and that there had been no sense in which either the terms of reference or the political setting had been brought to a focus. Some of the initial papers, for instance, listed no less than 21 major areas for research topics; these formed no coherent plan or categories in terms of type of research. The first effort was to adopt some specific and fresh lines. There was in part a pressure to adopt a great range of “concerns” which were either topical or being put from particular standpoints. “Open government” was an example of this. The difficulty was that these approaches did not fit any empirical data, analytical method or sense of possible prescription. Certain ranges of concern, like science policy, came unexpectedly into the area of discussion. It was as difficult for this as for any other such reform commission to balance the work between particular sectors (like science or health), overall reform in the government machine, and fresh approaches to administration as such. In other areas there was empirical material such as about the rights of women in the public services, or work in progress in various parts of the government machine itself such as with alternatives to hierarchy in departmental organization. There was a range of concerns with community relations, decentralization or “working away from the centre”, the possibilities of regional organization, delegation and discretion, the location of government employment and federal/state relations. Aspects of these and other matters could, it was argued, be discussed in “access situations” and in terms of one particular method of analysis. This could also include problems of information for management and a greater emphasis in program planning on output and outcome rather than input data.

In the end the research successes came partly from action research. There was the possibility of undertaking experiments in government organization, particularly in local office organization,
in the relations between the federal, state and local governments, and between government and voluntary organizations. In addition to concerning itself with hearings, submissions and recommendations, a commission, while it had opportunity, resource and support could actually initiate and propose specific government organizational experiments. Action research of this sort about access situations in government local organization could also be an experiment in organization development. The responsibility for the details and conduct of the experiment could be left to officers and other workers, including voluntary organizations and community representative bodies, who would actually be engaged in the experiment. In this way experiments were undertaken with organization development, with ministerial councils (for securing the involvement of non-officials in departmental operations) and, most important, with a one-stop-shop (the Northwest One-stop Welfare Centre, or NOW shop). This established a storefront for government services in personal welfare, drawn from the three levels of Australian government together with some voluntary agencies: studies of customer and official views and of experimental work efforts were begun. The shop continued to function after the commission reported, even though the change of government in December 1975 brought other action research to an end and precluded the development of other experiments.

Perhaps the most important lost opportunity concerned a possible restructuring of the Treasury during the life of the commission. In May 1975 the treasurer asked RCAGA confidentially to suggest ways in which that might be done. The commission responded with a task force to investigate the question rather than with concrete proposals designed quickly to initiate change, and the rapidly declining electoral fortunes of the government meant that more pressing problems soon ruled out a reassessment of its approach. The ultimate recommendations of the commission were therefore left to the charge of an inviolate Treasury, not to one undergoing modification according to the prescriptions, in part at least, of the commission. A sort of action research, admittedly of uncertain and even fearful dimensions, was foregone, although the commission retained its potency to support experiment in this area until quite late. That does not mean that the commission ignored entirely the need to approach large-scale problems of organizational change.

**Implementation**

From a relatively early stage the commission and its staff considered
the problem of implementation. The main hope was that one key department, like Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM & C), would undertake overall responsibility. In particular it was hoped that staff from the department of Prime Minister and Cabinet would be detailed to work with the staff of the royal commission well before the final version of the major report was written and other concluding material prepared. Thus in October 1975 the chairman of the commission suggested to the then prime minister that the success of the eventual recommendations would depend upon the participation of his ministers and senior officials and perhaps others who would need to be supported by an appropriate secretariat. Agreement in principle was quickly obtained from the prime minister and his department head.

After the change of government, however, a response was delayed until March 1976, when a unit was established within PM & C, led by a senior public servant (previously unconnected with the commission) who reported to the department head. Later, the Treasury and Public Service Board each seconded a senior official to the unit. Later again, the heads of Treasury, the Public Service Board and Administrative Services (formerly Special Minister of State) joined the head of PM & C to form a committee to consider, for cabinet, the reports of this unit and of their own departments. This was a politically influential arrangement, though it consisted entirely of officials.

The appointment by the governor general on 11 November 1975 of a caretaker government postponed the possibilities of doing anything either about administrative reform or about preparations for implementation machinery. The constitutional crisis of November and the election of December meant more than a time delay, however. The election of December 1975 and the change of government brought into power the Fraser ministry. Fraser had already been much assisted by Sir Henry Bland, himself a former permanent head of vast experience, a chairman of an administrative reform inquiry in Victoria, and the author of the (RIPA) Garran oration of 1975. He had, then, spoken of an administrative reform very different from what the more radical and adventurous elements of the RCGA exercise were tending to follow.

The Bland committee

The prime ministerial press release immediately after the election on 21 December 1975 said that Bland would now chair the “Administrative Review Committee”. Its terms of reference were:
to review government expenditure, and recommend on ways to eliminate waste and duplications within and between government departments and between commonwealth and state government departments.

The committee was to:

investigate government programs and services and examine ways that activities may be curtailed without a significant effect on administration. It will advise on activities whose benefits do not appear commensurate with their costs, and on changes in arrangements that might be made to produce economies. The committee will examine and report on the degree of commonwealth government involvement in supervising expenditure by the states of funds supplied by the commonwealth and on avoiding unnecessary duplication and over-lapping of commonwealth and state activities.

It was widely thought that the Bland committee would make it possible, politically speaking, for quick action to appear to be taken, whilst more thoughtful, long-term or fundamental changes or a more general discussion of machinery of government changes would be left to RCAGA.

But that of course was not really the end of the matter, nor a satisfactory arrangement. The membership of the Bland committee and much of the terminology employed was significant. Apart from one of the public service board commissioners, the other members included a member of the New South Wales public service board and a businessman. The member from the NSW board underlined the commitment of the committee in its terms of reference to look at "commonwealth/state duplication", that is, to carry out the Fraser commitment to reverse the centralization of the Whitlam Labor government. The terminology echoed cost-benefit analysis. It did, interestingly, maintain a commitment to concern about "the efficient delivery of social services".

It was not then so surprising, though in other ways striking, that of all the RCAGA efforts the One-Stop Shop experiment was maintained and, in the end, further evaluation under the department of Prime Minister and Cabinet was continued. But this was at a time when RCAGA might, according to its original objectives, have expected its report to have been completed. It might at least have expected its implementation plans to get under way. Alternatively, more hostile observers might have expected RCAGA to report but be ignored by those at the centre of the political stage. Yet the concentration of the new government on questions of administrative change brought RCAGA willy-nilly into the limelight. But that was not at all the same as giving it an heroic or decisive role.

Bland mattered to Fraser, but it was not possible for a govern-
ment so committed to apparent tidiness to ignore the existence of RCAGA. The very first statements emanating from the new government talked about administrative change, not merely the appointment of Bland and his committee but also the reduction of the number of ministers from 27 to 24 and of departments from 28 to 25, the creation of an inner cabinet of twelve and so on. The signs of the reforms to be introduced were intentionally meant to sound a return to previous ways. But it was these early statements also which reminded people of RCAGA, then “expected to submit its report by April 1976”. That did not make life easy for RCAGA. Those on the commission who had argued for the political importance of saying something on federal-state relations were supported by the early statements from Fraser about administration and change. The bureau-shuffling which the new government indulged in also frustrated some of the work which RCAGA might have expected either to recommend or criticize. Significant things RCAGA wished to say on the structure of PM & C, on bureau-shuffling, on cabinet control and methods of coordination, were all being anticipated. At the same time, the creation of the Bland committee was far from winning universal support in the public service; at the very least, his operations threatened to render pointless the effort which departments had invested in the RCAGA commission.

Outcomes

The Bland committee did not represent the sort of research exercise RCAGA did. Bland sent out a questionnaire to heads of all departments but, were it taken seriously, the questionnaire would have taken a long time to answer and deal with. The committee either did not mean it seriously or did not understand research. Bland’s views as well as Fraser’s on the machinery of government were already known: his support for some bureau-shuffling exercises and for certain forms of restraint, such as the renewed imposition of staff ceilings, had an immediate impact. Beyond that, the picture was less clear. Drawing upon small and shifting groups of experienced public servants to comment on the operations of departments other than their own, by mid-1976, when RCAGA reported, Bland had already made a dozen or so short reports to the government. But none of them were made public and the government steadfastly refused to say which, if any, recommendations it had accepted. Certainly administrative reorganization continued apace into late 1976, although without fanfare. Department heads were moved around and the reshuffling of departmental structures
created new departments and abolished old ones. Inquiries into some government activities were established, some being carried out by public servants (broadcasting, employment service) and some by businessmen (CSIRO, statutory transport authorities). The view among Canberra public servants, however, was that most of this activity owed little directly to Bland as his work was quickly wound down, probably unfinished, when he himself became part of the process of change by accepting appointment as chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Some recommendations which did become public knowledge through "leaks"—to cut drastically the resources of the Industries Assistance Commission, for example—were definitely not taken up. Others seem to have been of an "organization and methods" nature and were quickly absorbed into the ongoing review activity of departments. Bland petered out.

The outcomes of Rcaga were not much clearer. Some recommendations were put quickly into effect by individual departments (for example, reviews of counter procedures) and preliminary work was done on others so that only decision was needed to carry them out quickly (certain revisions of the Public Service Act, including the nationality provisions). The leader of the opposition made a strong public speech in October 1976 endorsing the approach of the commission in general and some key recommendations (for example, about forward estimates) in particular. By then responses, favourable in the main, had come from the main unions in the public sector too. The government's responses, expressed chiefly in a parliamentary statement by the prime minister in December 1976, were generally favourable but many issues raised by the report were not addressed. The implementation machinery planned so long before was beginning to work but it was fully in the hands of the long-existing central agencies of the public service as was the further consideration of the commission's objectives. These agencies had been little affected by Bland, and their attitude to Rcaga, while not hostile, seemed unlikely to bring rapid change.

For a reform commission, the first requirement is to understand something of the strategy of the administrative reform process. What is involved is an ad hoc inquiry as against continuing departmental responsibility. That involves a decision about what the balance is to be between ignoring altogether or succumbing entirely to such political occasion as gave the inquiry its birth and the fresh atmosphere which is likely to enshrine its passing. Administrative reform is, in the end, a political process. It is about the rearrangement of deep commitments to significant institutional positions. Any specific inquiry into administrative reform is supposed to illumine
how such arrangements can be discussed so as to make them the more likely to emerge.

Notes

1. This is a revised and shortened version of a paper presented by Bernard Schaffer at a conference of the European Group of Public Administration at Tampere, Finland, in September 1976.


The research papers were:
Regionalising Government Administration, Formation and Co-ordination of Economic Policy; Sexism in the Australian Public Service; and Salary Classification in the Australian Public Service.

The major commentaries to date are:
Since this is an inside view, it deals with some incidents not apparent at the time to outside observers and with others which it is hard for anyone to recall. This must be so: anyone involved in the complex life of an organization sees many particular events, often trivial or incomprehensible, which are filtered from the view of the outsider who has a greater distance and a lesser commitment. At the same time, the insider is not well placed to trace the connections between the specific event and the general outcome, such as the impact of particular information on the inadequate perception of an important issue. He or she sees too much. But the participant observer is uniquely placed to gather the information which makes it possible for others to connect personality, social background and institutional procedures, say, with the world of ideas and writing. If this account appears to reveal too much of the irreconcilable and irresolute aspects of organizational life, it should be remembered that the commission did produce, more or less on time, a report which the media, the interim judges, thought was successful. This does not purport to be the whole story.

In order to look inside RCAGA I first want to look outside it at those elements in its environment to which the commission responded and which thereby helped to decide the nature of its internal operations. Throughout its life RCAGA was engaged in a series of transactions or exchanges with a variety of institutions and individuals. The commission was neither an isolated nor an entirely autonomous organization and it is important to understand the more salient of its external relationships and dependencies.

**Creation**

The first set of external influences on RCAGA were those that led to its creation, and naturally the commission had little control over them. The choice of the royal commission form as the instrument of inquiry was itself important. It meant that no special weight
was to be given to the concerns of any one of the bodies which had established the inquiry, including caucus, the prime minister, his private office, the Priorities Review Staff, the Public Service Board (PSB) and the unions. The decision to use the royal commission form was a compromise. Alternative forms included, for example, a parliamentary inquiry (which would have suited caucus) or series of task forces operating within the public service itself to investigate particular questions (which would have suited the PSB). The prestige and wide ranging powers of the chosen instrument allowed the inquiry itself to define what its concerns should be. Its broad terms of reference underlined the point. Little was ruled out of consideration but, equally, little was placed specifically on the agenda.

The membership of RCAGA further reinforced this openness. Some commissioners were known to have a special interest in some of the terms of reference (one commissioner in those dealing with personnel problems, for example) and some were on record with opinions about questions which might be encompassed by the terms of reference (one commissioner on the iniquity of staff ceilings and another on the undesirability of the lateral recruitment of permanent heads, for example). But in general the members seemed likely to approach their tasks with few preconceived views. They could be expected, in other words, to use their terms of reference and status as royal commissioners to undertake a very broad investigation of the public service. There was no certainty at the beginning about where their inquiry would go and what it would conclude.

**Interaction**

Ambiguity gave the commission its first task. It had to define problems, set them in some order of priority, and draw up an agenda of work. To do this RCAGA relied in part upon its own capacities, principally the knowledge of commissioners and staff. But it also searched for clues from its environment to guide action and even its strategy. Likewise there were those within its environment who sought to influence RCAGA to go in some directions rather than others.

The commission needed advice, information, and assistance across a broad range of developing tasks. What it offered in return was a report which would address those tasks, presumably to the varying benefit of the institutions and individuals in its environment. Some institutions and individuals had a positive interest in getting
things into the report, such as a justification of their activities or a redress of grievances, and for some this involved RCAGA in a process of arbitration. Some simply wanted RCAGA not to overlook a restatement of their existing situation. Some were forced into defensive action by the activities of other actors or by the growing inquisitiveness of the commission itself. The exchanges between RCAGA and its environment therefore served various purposes and took various forms: formal and informal, involving the whole commission as a body and sometimes merely members of it, brief and prolonged, cooperative and antagonistic, and so on.

One set of exchanges was between RCAGA and those individuals within the public service who made submissions to it, often about alleged injustices in the application of personnel policies. As many as one third of the submissions made to the commission were in this category. Another set of exchanges was between RCAGA and members of the community who had complaints to make about the operations of government and of public service departments in particular. An important characteristic of the commission's exchanges was that its needs were always immediate, whilst the reciprocating outcomes it offered might be at some rather distant point in the future. This applied to the submissions from individual public servants and from the community.

The commission needed those submissions and the hearings which arose from some of them to inform itself about where the shoe was pinching and about the likely reception for any recommendations it might make. But it could not respond quickly to individual submissions both because it lacked the resources to do so and because it had to agree upon some general formula against which to judge them. That last capacity took time to develop. I am suggesting that the community, welfare and special interest groups and the individual public servants who had made submissions or other inputs to RCAGA could do little more than to await its outcome with varying degrees of interest. Groups in the women's movement were very interested and RCAGA made a partial response to them by issuing a discussion paper on sexism in public employment. Other planned and actual discussion papers, on position classification, for example, were intended to show that the concerns of bodies such as the unions were not being ignored. The public availability of the research and consultancy reports of RCAGA served something of the same purpose, as did the hiring of consultants who had previously been associated with submissions.

Not everyone found these responses satisfactory. The public service unions, for example, wanted reassurances which the difficulty of arranging day to day exchanges with RCAGA made hard
to secure. Advisory committees of trade unionists were accordingly established in Sydney and Melbourne, as were similar committees of businessmen. Both groups were sent draft material for comment. The Council of Australian Government Employee Organisations, then known by the acronym CCPSE, was also successful in inviting the chairman of the commission to address its members while RCAGA was in mid-flight, though he otherwise tried to avoid going on record in this way. The "trade union commissioner" maintained informal contact with union officials and let it be known that he pursued a vigorous analysis of individual grievance submissions. No doubt RCAGA would have responded to similar demands from the business community but they never arose, which was always a matter of concern. The advisory groups of businessmen were a very inadequate answer.

Some elements of the commission's environment had a greater potency to elicit responses from it. Because they controlled resources of use to RCAGA and especially because their resources, like information, could not be consumed in a once-and-for-all-fashion, RCAGA found them of greater salience throughout its life. Two examples were politicians and the senior management of departments representing long-enduring departmental views. It is upon these two groups that I will concentrate. Each had the potential to engage the commission in prolonged exchanges and they thus had many opportunities—some slight, some strategic—to influence its operations and outcomes.

**Politicians**

In practice the politicians did not exercise their potential much. The commission was glad to reinforce this tendency, which was significant for the way it worked. The fact that ministers had established a non-political inquiry did not of course prevent them from seeking the help of RCAGA when that seemed advantageous to them. Sometimes this meant that a minister referred a question he found difficult to deal with. Prime minister Whitlam, for example, in an additional term of reference, requested it to examine the relationship between ministers and permanent heads after the earlier incidents of the loans affair had called their legal positions into doubt. Prime minister Fraser similarly asked it to report on the ethical question of public servants owning stocks, shares and other property. The commission accepted these new tasks reluctantly, since its agenda of work seemed always never-ending, but with the recognition that this sort of exchange was unavoidably imposed
upon it. At other times ministers less formally asked the commission for quick advice about pressing political problems, especially those involving machinery of government changes. In these cases RCAGA temporized. In late 1974, for instance, the prime minister sought its views about possible rearrangements to his own department. After the Terrigal conference of the Labor party, the treasurer asked RCAGA to advise him confidentially on rearrangements to the Treasury. Later the minister for repatriation and compensation similarly requested advice on the restructuring of departments concerned with health and social welfare. In the first case RCAGA appreciated keenly that it would have to rely upon the new secretary of the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM & c) for support in implementing its ultimate proposals and it did not wish to antagonize him at the outset of his term of office by being seen to interfere in the business of his department. More generally and in all cases, RCAGA wanted to avoid involvement in suddenly-arising political issues: because they were always urgent they would demand a rapid and large diversion of the commission’s scant resources of time, thought, money and staff; involvement in any such issue might encourage the reference to it of others; and the giving of bad or unwelcome advice might prejudice the future of its final recommendations. The commission responded to these requests by establishing task forces to examine the issues, but the task forces naturally took time to work with the result that political interest was dissipated, and with it any later possible increase in ministerial interest (or antipathy).

Yet RCAGA could not avoid entirely the politicians in its environment. At times it needed their active support, as when it successfully requested prime minister Whitlam to instruct all departments that individual public servants should be enabled to give evidence to it without fear of retribution. At other times it wished simply to interest politicians in its emerging concerns since it knew that its report would ultimately be turned over to them and be dependent on their understanding and goodwill. The commission found this hard to do. At a very early stage informal meetings were planned with groups of politicians from government and opposition with and without ministerial experience to explore questions which concerned them and which might concern RCAGA. These meetings were difficult to arrange because of political apathy and few were held. The reluctance of Liberal-Country party politicians to involve themselves with the commission was especially worrying. The commission understood that its findings might be put into the hands of a Liberal-Country party ministry one day and it never planned to make recommendations acceptable to Labor ministers alone. Only the
National Country party, the ACT branch of the Liberal party and a few individual former ministers made submissions to RCAGA, however, and the then leader of the opposition declared RCAGA to be "at least apparently a political body". An informal meeting to reassure Mr Snedden was achieved but contact with his side of politics otherwise remained exiguous. The position was little better with Labor. What contact existed was maintained at an informal individual level between a few ministers and rather more of their personal staffs and particular commissioners and staff members. The events of 11 November 1975 and the subsequent election convinced RCAGA that it had been right to avoid political stands but at the same time those events made its relationships with the incoming government even more uncertain. Its response after the election was to provide the new prime minister with short statements of its likely recommendations on key issues, to seek meetings between the prime minister and the chairman of the commission and to formalize the arrangements for implementation which had been outlined in early November. Meetings did take place and implementation did go ahead but at all times in an atmosphere of great uncertainty.

**Bureaucrats**

What of the departments? Here the position was more difficult for RCAGA and much more confused. All but one department made lengthy submissions to the commission and all appeared in hearings before it but their actions were broadly defensive of their existing positions. Departments were drawn only reluctantly into exchanges. The position of most was that its report was unlikely to be very helpful to them. From their point of view, the best thing would be for RCAGA to ignore them altogether. They therefore sought to contain their involvement with it. At an early stage, for example, the department of Social Security saw advantage in associating itself with RCAGA in a review of the efficiency of one of its offices. It confidently expected any such review to justify its procedures. But when it became apparent that RCAGA viewed efficiency in much wider terms than the department, to include a questioning of the whole definition of efficiency itself, the department saw less advantage in the collaboration, which did not go ahead.

At times also the initiatives of the commission brought forth an acutely defensive response. The department of Defence and the department of Science thus responded energetically, with information and mis-information, to the commission’s investigation of the
career structures of professional scientists. Its investigation of health-welfare structures also involved a number of departments in a fresh round of submissions and in a sudden willingness to provide their own officials to staff the inquiry.

Other departments came themselves to perceive advantages in being involved with RCAGA. The department of Foreign Affairs and the department of the Media both used it as a vehicle to publicize their claims for a greater coordinating role in policy and administration. The department of Aboriginal Affairs was able to use RCAGA in management reviews which it could not plausibly have undertaken alone.

But only the Public Service Board and the Treasury were involved constantly and more or less intimately with the workings of the commission. As central coordinating agencies both soon came under special scrutiny by RCAGA and they could not altogether avoid assertion, defence and response. The relationships that each had with RCAGA were nevertheless quite different. The Public Service Board put a good proportion of its resources into dealing with the commission. It attended all hearings, prepared many position papers on a range of issues, was involved with detailed inquiries for information throughout, provided some of RCAGA’s staff and engaged in more than one acerbic exchange about the unfolding development of the commission. Treasury on the other hand was reluctant to take initiatives and, though frequently in contact with it, was unwilling to go beyond its formal responsibilities to answer requests and comment on the proposals of others outside RCAGA which were referred to it.

Both departments, however, sought to influence the agenda by the timing of their inputs to it and RCAGA was heavily dependent on both for the validation of many of its insights and proposals. It sometimes worried that these would be the most powerful bureaucratic actors in any implementation of its report. Accordingly it was reluctant to disclose its findings about these agencies until the last possible moment when it had got all the help from them it could. Indeed, RCAGA was reluctant to come to any findings even internally until it had no other course to follow. Issues concerning the PSB and Treasury were thus among the last to be settled.

Departments could not do much in any public way to force RCAGA to alter its cautious strategy, even if they had wanted to. The commission asked the questions during its public hearings and, though some attempts were made to probe its thought during them, departmental representatives usually had to give answers. The commission made the news and it was well reported in the media as a definer of the ills of the public service.
Leaks from the commission which occurred both before and during the drafting of the report were another matter. The PSB especially was antagonized by stories, often misshapen, which seemed to indicate that RCAGA was taking up a number of positions in opposition to it. Other departments to suffer were the Treasury (on the commission’s proposals about economic policy) and Urban and Regional Development (on growth centres and location policy).

On the other hand, departmental representatives were able on less formal occasions, as when research staff sought their information and advice, to seek assurances that its intentions towards their department were not unfriendly. The constant protestation of disinterest was a characteristic of working relationships on the commission’s side. In addition departments could make their views on any issues before RCAGA known informally to the press. The PSB was fairly adept at this though other departments were less successful. The department of Science’s forcibly argued threat to fight publicly the recommendations of the science task force, for example, did not materialize. However, as I have suggested, departments in general wanted RCAGA to proceed as quietly as possible since there seemed only slight profit for them in opening up even further the inquiry.

**Priorities**

Some observers thought that the commission’s relationship with politicians and departments savoured of uncertainty and procrastination. Within RCAGA, it rather seemed that time was needed to develop a strategy to tackle the issues in the right order. Even to determine what those issues were appeared as a large task. The commission attempted at first to list all those problems associated with the structure and operations of the public service which seemed to fall within its terms of reference. The attempt produced a very broad-ranging paper, which was widely distributed, and an equally broad-ranging listing of possible research topics. Both papers reassured those within and without RCAGA who wanted an open-minded and comprehensive inquiry, but it found that even the broadest paper could not be conclusive. There were always new questions cropping up. Moreover, the statement of themes or problems and the statement of research topics were difficult to marry. Although staff members and commissioners as much as outsiders desired to have a clear and final statement of avenues of investigation as a framework to work within, such a statement
was not produced. A conclusive listing of subjects by their priority therefore could not be achieved.

Instead RCAGA commenced work on those few issues which it could agree were of high importance in any analysis whilst it investigated ways of defining others concurrently. Some issues which were regarded as important at the outset, like the use of unattachment and staff ceilings, became secondary as new concerns emerged. Others, like the role of PM&C and the tied funding of programmes to the state governments, were recognized as important but deferred for active consideration until they could be better defined. Still others, like work on minority employment, the status of statutory corporations and the operations of interdepartmental committees, remained important throughout. To enable it to discriminate between these and other issues RCAGA entered into a lengthy and even exhausting round of public hearings which lasted from November 1974 until April 1975.

Hearings gave RCAGA a public presence and a certain legitimacy also. This was just as well, for it is not clear that hearings did in fact help the commission to define its agenda very much. Less formal hearings were also arranged with those knowledgeable about the service, including its critics. These meetings were also of limited help. True, some concerns came out very strongly from both sorts of hearings. The case against the stringent controls exercised by the coordinating agencies was argued vigorously back and forth. The discontent of individuals within the community at the unresponsive government to their needs was made plain. Widespread doubts about the efficiency of the service emerged.

To some extent hearings were a method of defining the agenda of RCAGA, if only in response to the healthy discipline occasioned by a preparation of questions for them. The difficulty was that they took up much time and energy and RCAGA could not wait very long for the results of that expenditure of effort. Its other work and especially its research work had to be commenced as soon as possible to use painfully gathered staff resources and to provide any grounds for hope that research would deliver eventually whatever findings it was supposed to. (But the reader must make allowance here for my relative insensitivity, as research director, to the hearings; my involvement was simply less.)

**Research**

In order to commence research projects, or more generally to spend time in discussing issues with institutions or individuals concerned,
it became necessary to satisfy two conditions. First, the proposed subject of investigation should be able to be related in general terms to the range of concerns RCAGA had begun with. Second, some candidate whether staff or consultant should be definitely proposed to engage in the work.

These conditions were not always as easy to meet as it might be thought. Some suggested projects came too early, while RCAGA was still reflecting on the possible range of its concerns, and were ruled out though they might later have been acceptable. More frequently, candidates to undertake work simply could not be found. Yet new issues and candidates soon replaced them in the competition for resources. To allow the definition of issues in this way meant that many individuals within RCAGA had some degree of capacity to set the agenda, even to the point where one person’s possession of particular skills or interests could push one project rather than another forward. Projects could thus originate from the forcefully argued idea of one or a few individuals. The complex and costly investigation of statutory corporations, of a range of personnel practices, of access to government services and of the career patterns of public servants emerged in this way. The ultimate success of a project in meeting both methodological requirements and the emerging emphases of the commission’s interests bore no obvious relation to the manner of its initiation.

Efforts were of course made to restrict the scope of initiative, for example by limiting commissioners to particular terms of reference and associated research projects; but these were not very successful. In its early days and indeed for a long time afterwards the whole of the terms of reference were of concern to the whole commission. There were nevertheless restraints: projects involving the expenditure of funds required a consensus by the commission; the submissions and hearings did continually, if gradually, feed back into the process of problem definition; and every deployment of resources left less for the next proposal and decreased the likelihood of its careful scrutiny. In addition, the political and departmental relationships referred to above ensured that some questions would not be broached, for example those to do with large scale machinery of government changes, whilst those which elicited cooperation with the departments would be, for example promotion appeals, recruitment and mobility.

Certainly the approach of RCAGA did generate an agenda of problems. By the time the hearings ended investigations were under way into almost thirty different projects. In addition to those already mentioned, studies were being undertaken of programme budgeting, manpower planning, training procedures, the different
styles of public and private sector employment, the workload of ministers, the place of non-statutory bureaus within departments, a possible basis for freedom of information legislation, the relationship between public service, press and parliament, the effectiveness of cabinet structures and procedures and the deficiencies of the Royal Commissions Act. The commission, in short, was in full sail. It had reached its period of greatest creative activity. So, far from there being a disposition to define an agenda in definitive terms and to attempt to meet it, there was rather a growing concern to bring together the various projects into the best possible synthesis. Deficiencies would doubtless be revealed and supplementation called for but there was no longer a question of determining what RCAGA was about. To make that synthesis and agree on what deficiencies would need to be remedied became the next difficult task.

Yet new work did not stop altogether. On the contrary, a perception of evaporating time and money caused a few last projects to be pushed desperately forward. The NOW centre was thus opened in July after two months’ intensive effort, the haste of which had its effect on the centre itself and accordingly on the commission’s and the public service’s judgment of it. That way of setting up the centre was adopted because there appeared to be no better way. However imperfect the approach, it was not without effect on RCAGA. It was noticeable that it won immediate and widespread political support.

The experience with the centre also showed that action research could be a desirable strategy for the commission to pursue. Rather than simply investigating and evaluating the condition of the bureaucracy, RCAGA found that it could change some of its operations and judge the results.

This method seemed to open up possibilities for change which would convince practitioners as well as illuminate the thought of the commission. In the latter half of 1975 experimental research was thus begun on organization development, on the creation of ministerial councils to advise ministers on the management of departments through the participation of non-public servants, and on training schemes to fit aboriginals for public service employment. The change of government brought these experiments to an end because changes were made to the top structures of the departments concerned or because departments were forced by financial restrictions to reduce their activities. The experiments of RCAGA did not command a high priority then. This change did not effect the drafting of the report very much since the commission was disposed to see the experiments as valuable in their own right. Any
conclusions from the work would be by way of windfall gains. It was expected that the experiments would run beyond the life of RCAGA in any event, and conclusions from them would be at best tentative.

The fact that most of the action research was wound up was not crucial, but the experiments did involve some diversion of staff resources. As a consequence, other more orthodox projects were dropped, including for instance survey work on community expectations of government, on discrimination in government employment, on capital works expenditure procedures and on some futurology studies. These were seen to lie outside the established boundaries of the commission's inquiry, even though it was hard to make explicit and divisible what those boundaries enclosed.

**Problems**

I want to pause here to reflect about the process of problem-definition just described. Ideas for work had to be argued forcefully within a particular problem-solving context. It was always desirable that research projects should be capable of generating precise proposals which could issue in recommendations for specific changes. It was not much good making proposals which would take a long time to carry out. It was better to do a limited job than none at all. It was always necessary to be busy. These are the imperatives of any analysis of policy in an organization with a short life and too much to do. Of course the imperatives were not always met; after all, they took time to learn. No one on RCAGA had previous experience with a reform inquiry of its scope, and indeed probably only the two Vernon inquiries had been comparable in the previous 20 years. But on the whole the story of the commission is the typical one of resources, skills and methodologies finding limited tasks sufficient to maintain high levels of productivity and approximate answers. It could all have been done better but it could not have been done very differently.

This does not mean that alternative approaches are impossible to envisage—if some assumptions about the scope of the inquiry had been different. If RCAGA had been willing to be responsive to ministerial requests for advice on machinery of government changes, for example, it is possible to imagine that the "action research" approach I have just described would have been much more important at a much earlier stage of the commission's life. Involvement with politically sensitive questions could have made RCAGA a participant with a stake in the outcomes of administrative
change; and it becomes possible then to imagine how a sequence of involvements (PM & c. Treasury, Health-Welfare at least) might have given greater urgency to experiments with organization development, say, in those and other departments. My feeling, it can be no more, is that such an approach would have had an ironical effect of preventing the now experiment from beginning. Resources are as finite for action research as for any other kind.

Perhaps one point, more provocative, can be added. Because RCAGA developed its ideas on the run, its focus of attention shifted constantly and by no means did every question engage the attention of all commissioners equally. This placed staff members in a difficult position, though admittedly they themselves helped to create the difficulties, but consultants were especially affected. They were in only intermittent touch with RCAGA and they could not hope to be up to date at all times with its expectations. Some found the commission's invention of new questions awkward; probably others were even more disconcerted by its eventual indifference to a report it had once awaited eagerly. Most consultants preferred terms of reference which permitted them to work at their own pace, away as much as possible from the commission. The sudden enthusiasms and equally sudden confusions of RCAGA were not attractive characteristics and threatened projects with delay, even if not with radical revision. Consultants therefore tended to escape some of the frustrations experienced within RCAGA, probably to the benefit of getting their reports done but to its overall disservice.

Some conscious attempts to change the trend were made, but not with notable success. Most consultants did not want to make the pithy recommendations which RCAGA desired. Seminars were arranged between commissioners, staff, consultants and sometimes others, usually at short notice, to discuss issues of growing importance. One or two were very useful. However, some consultants, like one management consultancy firm, were simply ill-prepared to go even speculatively beyond what they had committed to paper. Others might have done so but saw their obligations to the commission as discharged when their reports had been presented. Some of them, and more besides, were aware like everyone else that RCAGA was a passing phenomenon. They wrote for ultimate academic publication, as some staff members also did.

No doubt more could have been done to integrate consultants with the work of the commission: different terms of reference emphasizing preliminary examination, different methods of receiving reports, different ways of paying people, and different and more flexible employment powers are some of the procedures involved. But they would not be enough. Underdeveloped as the study of
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public policy in Australia is, it is particularly underdeveloped towards the practical or reformist end. There was almost no habit of prescriptive policy analysis in the tertiary departments from which consultants came (for most of them were academics). Action research, to persist with that theme, was not of much interest to most consultants. It was foreign to their experience. If it was possible to maintain traditional methods of academic research in the face of a broadranging inquiry which called for new methods (perceived largely in retrospect, admittedly), new skills of policy analysis will surely be difficult to develop. With some future inquiry things may be different and better, but only if some of the questions raised here are answered first. When an inquiry makes up its mind about what it is doing as it goes along—a characteristic of almost all research activity—there is a need to have everyone who works for the inquiry responsive to its changing requirements. To achieve that is partly a matter of procedures, as I have just suggested, but it is a matter for the would-be consultants of the future to think about also. RCAGA showed how difficult it is in Australia to use consultants effectively: it revealed the problems, not the solutions.

Specialization

It was, however, clear at an early stage that RCAGA could not wait until everything to be done by staff and consultants was complete—that would have been a perilous course, given reasonable suspicions that some projects would never be finished. How to get from a position of commissioning work and reviewing it to a position of criticizing draft chapters was the problem. I have already mentioned that task forces were established partly as a response to ministerial requests for advice but there was another reason too: they seemed to promise quick conclusions in some especially salient areas. Task forces were set up into regionalism, economic policy, science administration, health and welfare structures and the efficiency of the service generally. Task forces had been suggested by the PSB in its first definition of what the inquiry should be about at the beginning of 1974. As established by RCAGA, the task forces drew as best they could upon existing commissioner and staff knowledge and work, found their own sources of advice in addition, and defined for the potential report a number of quite specific subjects.

But I should not make this seem a more orderly process than it was. The idea of having task forces came first, not any preoccupation with particular problems for which quick results were
especially needed. With the exception of the regionalism task force which was established before the others, task forces were a method at hand which sought problems to solve, rather than the other way round. It was in fact difficult to decide what questions the task forces should look at: what was salient? Establishing the task forces became a matter of defining the subjects upon which RCAGA had done enough preliminary work to make detailed investigation plausibly likely to generate new findings; of determining what people were available to be members of the task forces; and, importantly, of deciding what questions could be regarded as significant enough to warrant fresh work being given to commissioners. The task force method did succeed in the sense that the forces worked quickly and the reports of them all were completed by October 1975 and subsequently published as discussion papers. What delay took place was again occasioned by the need to negotiate the provision of information and advice with departments on a time scale acceptable to them as well as to the commission.

Even so, the task forces reported a little late for the purposes of drafting the report, which process began at the beginning of September. With the completion date being set at the end of 1975 or early 1976 drafting could be delayed no longer. Drafting therefore began with the findings of the task forces, like the findings of much of the research programme, still uncertain.

There was however another problem with the task forces. Each was headed by a commissioner, sometimes actively, sometimes not. Each commissioner thereby developed a special interest in and depth of knowledge of one part of the commission's work. Was this specialization to be carried through into the drafting of the report itself? Should commissioners draft a part of the report based upon the findings of their task force? It was decided not to do that. The total ambit of the task forces did not cover the spread of the commission's inquiry as a whole; individual commissioners had continued to take an interest in inquiries outside the boundaries of their task force; most wanted a wider stake in the final report; and specialization might force RCAGA to endorse a particular set of findings about which one or more commissioners were not enthusiastic.

Instead, the report was divided along different lines with commissioners taking responsibility for chapters of roughly equal importance and size. Some undertook the drafting themselves while others used staff members to draw sections together upon which they then worked. The result was not to divorce commissioners from involvement with the findings of their task forces but rather to
reinforce their tendency to be involved in drafting across the whole front of the report. Alternative versions of chapters did arise and were circulated for comment, criticism and amendment by all. The difficulty with this method was that the drafting of different sections of the report proceeded at varying paces. Some chapters reached a final stage quite early but others were not sighted until late. Adherence to the optimistic timetable of the commission only accentuated this tendency. One commissioner had been part-time from the beginning and another became so at the start of 1976 when it had been expected that the report would be finished. In fact it took another six months to complete.

_Writing_

The final period was the most difficult of all. The bringing together of overlapping, scanty, inconsistent and under-and-over-written material into one “received version” which was subject to extensive further revision, and the choosing of supplementary material to support the draft, was a slow and painful process which involved everyone within RCAGA to some degree. Whatever the detail, the process is in broad outline a familiar one, especially to an academic audience.

Only two points need emphasis. First, the passage of time was especially important. The commission knew it had a finite life and people grew bored and tired and wanted to be finished with the job. But the change of government in late 1975 introduced a new uncertainty into its environment. The whole of the report had to be reviewed to see that the early aim of political neutrality had in fact been achieved. This was an unconscious as much as a conscious process, as I have argued elsewhere. Undoubtedly the appointment of Sir Henry Bland to head the Administrative Review Committee also diverted and delayed the commission.

_Procedures_

Description cannot be left at that, however. The second point about the writing process which needs emphasis is that RCAGA was not a unitary body. I have maintained this convenient fiction more or less throughout, with no more than a few suggestions to the contrary. But of course it was never true that all commissioners (or staff members for that matter) made equivalent contributions to the written report, just as their contributions to the earlier work
had varied from case to case. This is almost self-evident, but in a situation of group interaction it is difficult to trace the precise nature of the connections between an individual and a written outcome. Yet there is cause to attempt to do this. Studies of institutional membership often assume a connection between the characteristics of individuals (their social class or socialization experiences, for example) and a pattern of institutional activity. Mediating behaviour in the particular case is hard to document; I would prefer to make my attempt in an anecdotal way. For the present it is still useful to see that not all aspects of the commission’s work were available to be divided up: some questions were not on the writing agenda and so lay beyond the reach of any particular person (or, if preferred, any particular set of interests).

An example was the access research programme. The full commission was won over to the value of the work by oral presentations at an early stage but no one ever had time to read all the voluminous written material available. Nor did RCAGA have on call a group of people who were conversant with that material and able to interpret its theoretical bases. Certainly Australian academics were poor mediating agents because access was new to them too. The commission instead accepted assurances, earnestly given by the staff, that the access report itself would be assimilable directly into the main report. And so it happened: the particular reforms of the access report were added to the recommendatory mix, undoubtedly to its great improvement. But there was no attempt to apply the perspectives of access theory across the whole field of the report.

In short, internal methods of work made some questions discussible and others not. The preferences of individuals were contained within procedural rules, many of them never stated directly but universally understood. Thus the passage of time, to repeat, made some questions simply too hard to approach in a thoroughgoing way, as with access. Other questions could not be divided up in a way which would satisfy all those with a stake in the question: at one point, for example, the subject of information was being analysed for or by three commissioners, but from different perspectives which proved impossible to combine. The subject shrunk.

The revision of draft material was in some ways the more difficult because RCAGA as an organization had acted upon its earlier expectations about its timetable by releasing many of its staff members. Changes were then difficult to bring about since it could not undertake some of the patching and filling work it later found it needed. Yet this irreversible process had its happier consequences.
As staff disappeared, the mediating barriers which had existed between commissioners disappeared also and they were forced into direct argument over the content of the draft and so, at last, to finality. It is hard for a participant to see that this would ever have happened if RCAGA had remained a whole organization. The need to reduce but intensify the use of resources of people and of time had always been foreseen, to be sure, but it took place in a way that was not planned and perhaps could not have been.

The commission had begun to dissolve itself well before the presentation of the report. By that time only two commissioners remained working full time to make the final editing changes. Contrary to earlier expectations, no one from the commission transferred to the implementation unit in PM & C in keeping with the department's desire to have a free field for its own operations. The recommendations of the commission passed to departments and politicians for action. Thus took place the long anticipated shift which had moulded RCAGA's whole approach. There is no reason to think that the implementation of the report, such as it has been, is any less powerfully influenced by procedural limitations than was the creation of the report.

The report showed well the influence the two most potent forces in the commission's environment had upon the internal processes which led to it. The report was more widely accepted within the public service than most observers had thought possible. Though the Treasury and department of Science were unhappy with specific findings, and though a few departments or senior public servants did not welcome its description of the inertia at the top of the service, the report in general crystallized departmental concerns in an acceptable way. Its criticisms and proposals were worded loosely enough to win an approval conditional at any rate upon further thought and action by the managers themselves. It was a report which reflected well the anxieties and moderate reforms which departments had communicated to the commission.

The large reforms of the report were conditional upon political activity. Reforms to the forward estimates and economic planning machinery, for example, called for commitment by politicians; so did proposals about freedom of information legislation, tenure in the service, the institutionalization of a programme review capacity and the relationship between the local member and his constituents and very many more recommendations. This emphasis was acceptable to the service, even welcomed by it. The report said, by inference but never directly, that changes in the service waited upon political will and that there was no reason to suppose that the service would not respond. This was a comforting conclusion for public
servants. It meant that RCAGA had defined the agenda for the politicians which it had not confronted during its life.

Yet we know that the division really is not as clear or as comfortable as that. The report was a product of the forces in RCAGA's environment as well as of its own internal processes, and its inability to make a final assimilation of them left its report incomplete. The commission's balance between administrative and political perceptions was surely the diligent and energetic product of difficult choices, but it is not a balance with which other critics should now rest content.

Notes

2. For a full account of NOW, see Sue Hamilton, "The North-West One-Stop Welfare Centre, Coburg", RCAGA Appendix 3, 371–400.
4. See "The Rise and Fall of RCAGA", above, 38.
Putting it Together and Keeping it Together

David Corbett

So far there have been three academic reviews of the report of the committee of inquiry into the South Australian public service. One was by the two organizers of the present conference. It appeared in the *Newsletter* of the ACT Group of the Royal Institute of Public Administration, it said some nice things, and its criticisms were mild. The next to appear was Jean Holmes' brief note in the *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, and it was particularly gratifying that she complimented the report on looking and working like a book, with an orderly structure and proper index.

That took a bit of doing. The book is no great beauty, but it was pushed through printing and binding in three weeks. Nothing could kill a report's usefulness quicker than not to have it immediately available to the public servants for whom it was written. The committee members saw their work as a sort of consultancy, not just to advise the minister but also to help public servants themselves to make the changes which they, the public servants, know to be needed. For that strategy to work, the report had to be written in agreeable style, and there had to be no delay before the readers could get hold of it.

**Contract permanent heads**

Elaine Thompson, who reviewed the report in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (35(3), September 1976), is also laudatory about nine-tenths of the report’s contents, but she does take the authors to task for not discussing the political implications of one of the report’s most important recommendations. This was that “permanent” heads of department be appointed for terms of seven years on a contract basis. Dr. Thompson sees a danger that this will politicize the public service because a government will have more chances to fill departmental headships, and will probably use these chances to choose people who agree with it. This in turn will induce the ambitious people lower down in the departments to show
their political colours in order to get on. Dr. Thompson goes on to say:

it is very odd that nowhere in its discussion of the contract system for permanent heads does the committee mention the problem of politicization, even to dismiss it. This is a major shortcoming.

Without presuming to speak for the other two members of the committee, I can say on my own behalf that Dr. Thompson is perceptive as usual in this comment, and deserves an answer. One can make excuses—for example, that a brief, positive report is better than one which tries to answer every possible objection as it goes along. Or one can point out that this very issue is discussed in only a slightly different context in the report at paragraph C 5.64, one paragraph before we take up the question of permanent heads. At that point we discussed the problem of contract appointees in general, and advised that such appointments be made in only a minority of positions, in order to protect “fearless impartiality in policy-advising”. Dr. Thompson herself notes this passage and comments on it. She agrees there is a problem, but comes down on the side of even freer use of contract appointment because “people under contract may well work harder, pay more attention to flexible solutions and, generally, be more efficient than tenured public servants”. With this I, for one, agree, but where does Dr. Thompson really stand when it comes to applying this reasoning to departmental headships? If she is worried about “ politicization”, how much of it is she willing to accept in order to gain more efficiency and flexibility?

To begin with, there is no reason to take it for granted that a government will have more departmental headships to fill in a three-year period under our recommended system than it does at present. Dr. Thompson points out that if all headships were filled on seven-year contract terms, about forty per cent of them would, on average, fall vacant within the three-year term of office of a government. One wonders what the percentage would be as things stand at present. Certainly, there are departments where the headship has been filled by a youngish person who has remained in the same position for twenty years or more; but there are many departments where the headship is routinely filled by the next in line, a few years before retirement, and where the turnover is quicker than once every seven years. The total effect of our recommendation to appoint them younger, but for a limited term, might well be to reduce the number of headships falling vacant in a three-year period. We were confident that it would also make for more vigour at this level, a point with which Dr. Thompson agrees.
In the second place, why assume that a government with numerous appointments at this level to make will choose people who agree with it? If the governments we have had for the past hundred years or more had chosen to do this, they could have, and no doubt they quite often have. But in spite of this, we have retained a conventional expectation that those chosen will be, first and foremost, fit for the position, and whether they are supporters of the government in power will be a secondary consideration, or, we hope, not a consideration at all. This is a sort of convention of the constitution, and it has been upheld, in the main, because it is useful to the system of government, helping to maintain its stability, a matter of importance to those who hold power.

Imagine a cabinet which comes back into power after a time in opposition. It is likely to be particularly aware of the advantage of continuity and professionalism at the top of the public service. This cabinet may find some of the department heads biased against it. What does it do about it? It can play tit for tat, and pack the departmental headships with its friends, not caring what its opponents think. That would perhaps be safe if the cabinet has no expectation of ever being defeated. But if it does look ahead to the possibility that its opponents will be in power again one day, this imaginary cabinet will quite probably play the game according to the conventional rules. It would fear that to play obvious politics with top appointments would only invite retaliation the next time around, and probably cause an outcry from the press, the public service unions, and of course the opposition.

A cynical political analyst would say, perhaps, “Don’t give me this folklore about conventions of the constitution: we all know how feeble they can be when they get in the way of the politicians’ ambitions”. While there is every good reason to take this warning seriously, nevertheless my argument is that the convention of impartiality at the top of the public service will be maintained by cabinets mainly for their own self-interest, not for any piety about the sanctity of conventions in general. In support of this proposition, one might look at what ministers have done rather than attack the convention head on: they have instead increasingly appointed additional ministerial staff, to bolster their political strength in dealing with the permanent administration. Career public servants will often say that much as they dislike the idea of ministerial appointments they tolerate it as the price that has to be paid to protect and preserve the integrity of the professional public service itself. And career public servants will generally acknowledge that a minister’s political tasks are important, that the pressure on his or her time is enormous and increasing, and that he or she needs
help in his or her political roles. Better to give the minister a political ministerial staff than to encourage him or her to foist partisan political work on the departments.

RCAGA said more about the political bias of the public service than did the South Australian committee of inquiry. The Coombs report in its second chapter argues that the public service may be politically complacent and insensitive because it is drawn from the privileged classes of the society. Dr. Coombs and his colleagues propose that this be remedied by making the public service more representative, by drawing into it more of the immigrants, the aboriginals, more women and more whose early background was disadvantaged.

Security of tenure and conservatism

Another way of explaining conservatism in the public service is to focus on security of tenure. People who need not worry about unemployment as long as the political system remains fundamentally unchanged are indeed likely to feel strongly protective toward the system which gives them this boon and cautious about policies which could change it. Security of tenure may be an even more powerful source of conservative bias in the public service than the socio-economic origins of public servants, for it does not take much imagination or observation of our surroundings to see that a person from socially deprived circumstances often becomes ultra-conservative once he or she has been admitted to the ranks of the privileged. If one were designing reforms intended to inject more social imagination and sympathy with struggling fellow citizens into the minds of policy-advising public servants, one might well decide against the RCAGA recommendation of more representativeness and, instead, go for the South Australian committee’s recommendation of more reliance on contract employment.

In fact, however, it does not seem clear that RCAGA’s analysis of the Australian public service would hold good for the South Australian public service. Does insensitivity predominate among South Australian public servants at the levels where policy advice is formed? It would be an exceedingly difficult judgment to make and no quantitative attitude survey would be of much help in making it. An observer’s impressions, based on only a slight acquaintance with a quite unsystematic sample of the perhaps three or four hundred people being considered here, would be that pockets of pro-establishment bias and insulation from the community would be found, if at all, among older and less qualified senior officers,
or in departments which do not have an exciting policy role in any case. One would not expect to find conservatism dominant in a modern social welfare department; in a modern education department one would expect to find a fairly even division between progressives and conservatives—division much the same as one finds among participants in educational debate in the community at large; in an agriculture department one could expect to find rural pressure group attitudes reflected—a mixture of mild radicalism where agricultural interests are concerned and conservatism where other social values are in question; and in departments concerned with engineering, construction of roads, running utilities and the like, one might well expect to find a typical engineering-professional bias, a hard-nosed realism often amounting to conservatism on social questions but only significant for policy-making in so far as the social implications of the work done may be neglected or given too little weight. These are not so much observations, however, as hunches about what one would expect to find, and I can think of several individual officers who seem to contradict these stereotypes as well as individuals who seem to confirm them.

Keeping a watchful eye on the political balance of all branches of a public service calls for much more care and subtlety than has been suggested so far. It surely is not a matter to be dealt with by proposing one or two across-the-board recommendations such as contract appointments, or more representativeness, or keeping politicians' hands off. One would have to begin with some definition of the objectives. Is the objective to keep the public service politically pure and sterile—to exclude from it everyone who manifests any political enthusiasm? Is it to keep out those whose partisanship is so unrestrained that they are incapable of working for or with people who do not share their political convictions? Is it to create a balanced mixture of political predispositions within each agency, or across the public service as a whole? And, since most public service appointments are made at a young age and last for many years, how would one judge the “right” political proportions to build into the intake so that, in twenty years’ time when the recruits are at a career peak they reflect what has happened in the meantime to the political predispositions of their contemporaries and the community at large? These and other related questions can soon become so thorny that one can well understand why public service commissioners and their advisers would generally prefer to have nothing to do with them and would try to wish them away by chanting the ritual phrase “public service neutrality”. But if they do that, and act accordingly, are they not likely to produce a public service neutral in favour of conventional middle-class
values? Is that what the public service should be—a system-maintainer, not a system-modifier?

The latter question used to be answered confidently by both realist and idealist political scientists. Realists would confidently say that a bureaucracy is a conservative force in society—nothing else should be expected of it. Even idealists, those who espoused democratic values and believed in the supremacy of elected representatives, would confidently say the bureaucracy should not modify the system—that should be left to the electoral process, the executive and the legislature. But, in the late twentieth century do these confident answers still ring true? We know about the extent to which important decisions, including many quite major decisions, have shifted into the hands of the appointed, career officials. To say that this body of officials should as a group dedicate themselves to maintaining an existing social, economic and political system and its values would seem to lock us all in. Public services need to be creative as change-agents, or at least some parts of them need to have that sort of capacity, the capacity to respond to, and even to generate system-modifying ideas and policy proposals; for if such capacities exist nowhere in the public service our political social and economic systems may well suffer the fate of the dinosaur. Which may, of course, happen anyhow; but one ought to be thinking about how to prevent it.
The State Inquiries
The committee of inquiry into the public service of South Australia was set up by cabinet on 14 May, 1973. The chairman of the three-man committee was Professor D.C. Corbett, an authority on public administration, "seconded" on a half-time basis from Flinders University; the members were D.M. Martin, director of D & J Fowler Ltd from the industrial sector, and a representative from one of the core policy-making areas of the South Australian government—R.D. Bakewell, the director of the Premier’s department. From the beginning, then, there was promise of action on whatever proposals the committee arrived at: Mr Bakewell undoubtedly would have had the issues of cabinet and public service acceptability and implementation in mind at all stages of the inquiry.

To this extent, the inquiry was "locked in" to the broad political process from the start. Cabinet’s views were well understood. The presence of the permanent head of the increasingly important and ubiquitous Premier’s department gave the inquiry status and, more importantly, provided for the “voice” of the service to be heard directly on the committee. Bakewell brought to the inquiry a clear knowledge of what was needed to make the service more efficient, and what would be acceptable to the service, particularly to its top echelons, and to the government. Radical changes were therefore unlikely.

During the inquiry, the cabinet set up a planning and priorities advisory committee (PAPAC) to act as a “steering” committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Don Hopgood M.P. (replaced in 1976 by H.R. Hudson M.P.), with a membership of R.D. Bakewell (director: Premier’s department and member of the committee of inquiry), E.J. Carey (under-treasurer), and G.J. Inns (chairman: PSB). PAPAC would “make recommendations to Cabinet as to the manner of degree and of acceptance and implementation of the proposals contained in the Report”¹. The membership of this committee reinforced the central and direct involvement of the government and especially of the Premier’s department in the process and implementation of the inquiry.
Background

The public service in South Australia had its genesis in the small civil service established at the proclamation of the colony in 1836. When the colony was granted a limited measure of responsible government in 1850, the civil service came under the partial direction of the legislature rather than the governor. By 1857, when full representative and responsible government was achieved, the civil service already played an important role in a rapidly developing colony. During the following 60 years, it slowly developed the form and functions of the modern public service, and various committees and inquiries brought minor modifications in the structure of the service. In 1916, following criticism that the public service was inefficient, mismanaged and generally chaotic, the government passed a new Public Service Act. This established the foundations, basic structures and formal functions that lasted until the 1973 committee was formed. In 1967, the single public service commissioner was replaced by a full-time Public Service Board of three members, but this change did not significantly affect the provisions of the 1916 Act.

The formation of the committee of inquiry began the first detailed study of the public service for 58 years. The explicit “reason” for the inquiry was that the number and complexity of government departments had burgeoned to a degree where reforms were essential, but the “environment” in which the committee of inquiry was inaugurated was one of general agreement that major and wide-ranging reforms were necessary and that constructive criticisms would be welcome. Premier Dunstan, announcing the committee, said “we have an excellent Public Service in South Australia, but it is a long time since anybody really considered its structure and conditions as a whole”. Liberal leader Eastick welcomed the inquiry, saying that “a constant review was essential”, but he also warned that the inquiry “must not be turned into a witch-hunt”. The Public Service Association also welcomed the “spring-cleaning”.

In 1955, one observer noted that

the last twenty years have witnessed certain developments in the public service which seem worthy of comment. First, the great increase in size; second, the steady improvement in conditions of employment; third, a decline in efficiency; and finally, the signs of a “progressive” attitude on the part of those in control.

During the “Playford era” (1938–65) there was some evidence of these developments, especially in terms of size, conditions and a
slow change in governmental and public attitudes to the public service. The number of employees subject to the Public Service Act was 2,563 in 1939; in 1955 this had risen to nearly 5,000, and by 1966 to 8,348. In 1974, when the committee of inquiry was meeting, there were no less than 14,169 public servants. The growth in this last decade was due, in no small part, to the policy initiatives of the Dunstan Labor government, especially in areas of development, public services, consumer affairs and community welfare, areas which had languished or had not been acknowledged under Playford. Conditions of employment had improved slowly under Playford, and received further impetus from the Dunstan government which also recruited more professional and semi-professional members into the service. Amendments to the Public Service Act were constantly carried out, especially in relation to conditions of employment. However in the broad area of "efficiency" there were evident problems, created in part by the explosion in the size of the service, the development of new policy fields and the consequent formation of new departments and the rapid growth of others. The decision to set up the committee of inquiry was a recognition of these problems.

The public service in 1974

In 1974 the 14,169 members of the public service constituted 3.1 per cent of wage and salary earners in South Australia. These public servants were employed in a total of 49 departments which ranged in staff numbers from three in the Agricultural College department and six in the Public Actuary department to 1,446 in the department of Education and 1,797 in the Hospitals department. These 49 departments were grouped under eleven ministers of state and under 22 separate portfolios. Hence, not only had the large departments become equal to the largest undertakings in the state, requiring management which was complex and demanding, but the proliferation of departments coupled with the number of departments under the umbrella of a few ministers had created problems of efficiency, management and inter- and intra-department activities.

Within this structure, a senior administrative group had emerged. Originally developed under Playford, it had slowly changed in membership and character under the Dunstan government. In 1955, S.R. Davis characterized a typical senior member of the public service in the following terms:
He will have entered the service as a junior clerk . . . he will have served his apprenticeship in his first department . . . he will have acquired the knowhow of government on the job . . . he will have had little or no formal training in the service . . . he will have earned his promotion fairly slowly by patience in the queue, by diligence, reliability and length of service . . . he will hold inflexibly to the convictions of his own administrative experience and will have little patience with novelties.4

However, in South Australia in the 1970s there was a growing core of senior administrators who refuted the portrait in almost every way. Thirty-two of the 116 senior administrators in South Australia in 1971 had less than ten years' service in the public service; they had joined and had been appointed to their existing senior positions since the election of the 1965 Labor government. Further, only two of the 116 had occupied their present senior position for more than two years. The age structure of this senior group did not reflect the usual picture of the “senior citizen” in the senior position: 75 of the 116 were under 55 years of age, and 14 were below 40 years of age. Of the 126 members of this senior administrative group in 1974, over 40 per cent were below 50 years of age, 27.8 per cent had occupied their positions for less than ten years and all but three held at least one tertiary degree.2

Terms of reference

The committee of inquiry was given wide terms of reference:

To examine and report to the Minister on the role, structure, management and staffing of the South Australian Public Service and to recommend any action which may be considered necessary to improve the effectiveness, economy and efficiency of the service in the discharge of contemporary public business, having particular regard to any:

- Improvements that should be made in the machinery of Government relating to the organization, co-ordination and control of departments including the possible redistribution of functions.
- Methods by which the efficiency of the use of resources might be improved.
- Changes in conditions of employment, recruitment, development and accommodation of public servants which may be necessary to ensure comparability with general community standards and equality of opportunity for further personal development and promotion.
- Provision for classification or divisional structure of groups or categories of officers.

These terms were interpreted broadly by the committee as requiring us to make a general appraisal of the South Australian Public
Service and the framework within which it operates with a view to suggesting any immediate changes considered necessary and to provide for future needs.  

However, despite these broad terms of reference and the wide-ranging aims of the inquiry, the report's scope and its implications were relatively narrow and essentially conservative. The latter point was recognized by the committee. While the existing form and structure of the public service were open to examination and reform, there was no "unqualified confirmation of the pessimistic theorists' strictures". The committee described its recommendations as

by no means radical or drastic, nor do they require fundamental restructuring of the role of the public service in the system, because we have found that the situation in the South Australian Public Service does not call for changes of that degree of severity (C 1.36).

The relative narrowness of the findings is implicit in this quotation, but it was partially derived from two other factors—the membership of the committee and the impact of three major submissions.

Methods of operation

The conventional wisdom about bureaucracy is that its inertia resists change and that any changes implemented will occur very slowly. When the degree of implementation of the proposals of the committee of inquiry in South Australia reached by March 1977, almost two years since the release of the report, is considered, it appears, at first sight, to be relatively slow progress. However, as the chairman of the inquiry pointed out, while "it is a slow process, . . . I submit that the test is the results, not the delay". One reason for the "delay" is that PAPAC must sort out the recommendations and advise cabinet whether they are consistent with government policy. This process has provided a valuable "filter", if a time-consuming one. Another reason for relatively slow implementation is that recommendations have not been "imposed from above" without consideration of reactions "from below". There has been a serious and relatively successful attempt to implement the recommendations "by consensus", through involvement of those concerned with the changes. The process, while slow, has been steady.
One early decision by the committee, to hear evidence in camera if requested, was intended to "encourage frank, and if necessary critical, submissions by public servants (C 0.8)". This may have achieved its aim, but there is no doubt that an "in-service" submission had the greatest impact. The committee invited persons and organizations to make submissions; it received over 250, and over 200 persons appeared before it. Among these submissions were three from the Public Service Board which obviously had a direct interest in the outcome of the inquiry. These submissions were detailed, valuable to the committee and important political studies in their own right. The first submission explained the functions of all departments, their historical development, the ministers to whom they were responsible, the main acts they administered, and staff statistics. Details were also given of the Board's responsibilities and policies and the objectives and structure of each of its divisions. The second submission outlined the areas which had been identified for review, following visits of two members of the psb to five overseas public services. The third submission contained a number of detailed recommendations and proposals by the Board. The tenor of the final report, and many if not most of the detailed proposals, were obviously based on these submissions.

The breadth of reform

The committee based its recommendations on certain assumptions about the purpose and role of the public service.

The Public Service, in its traditional role, exists to put into effect decisions, regulations and enactments of the Government. In more recent times, another role has become increasingly important, that of advising the government of the day on policy (C 1.2). . . . We have assumed that this [Westminster] system will continue . . . the system seems to us to be relatively stable and durable (C 1.31).

Further, there was the necessity to insure "impartiality and non-partisan objectivity" in relations with the public and ministers, to guarantee "honest and courageous" advice, and to avoid "the hallmarks of bureaucracy". In summary, the committee aimed to strengthen the "potential benefits" of the system—

professional, impartial service, courageous advice based on devotion to the public interest, and obedience to the Minister's will which reflects the voters' choice (C 1.35).

The recommendations of the committee took many factors into account: the apparent stability of the governmental system; the
necessity for a "flexible, adaptable and rapidly responsive organisational form"; the need for expert knowledge and consultation in the policy planning process; the need to reexamine traditional "hierarchical authority patterns" in the light of demands for broader experience; the expected demands in the future for "more complex, more precise and more far-sighted action"; and, not the least important, that the existing public service was essentially sound, efficient, available to ministerial authority and carrying out its functions well (C 1.31-1.36).

Hence the report made many suggestions for change, but at the same time emphasised that the South Australian public service was sound enough, small enough, sufficiently amenable to Ministerial authority and sufficiently imbued with professional responsibility and traditional public service values so that it can, by suitable reforms, be made to live up to the Public Service's proper role in the Westminster model and can be prevented from degenerating into the arbitrary, irresponsible bureaucracy which the system's pessimistic critics fear (C 1.36).

If the terms of reference were interpreted at their broadest, they could have led to discussions of three major areas. These could be categorized as "efficiency", "accountability" and "effectiveness". "Efficiency" would cover managerial functions within the public service, the organization of the machinery of government, the means of making and executing decisions, departmental structures and the general competence of the service. The area of "accountability" would encompass political relations between the service and the political institutions, between ministers and department heads, between the Public Service Board and the cabinet and between the major elements of the bureaucracy itself. The heading of "effectiveness" would concern the interaction of the public service with society and included such aspects as delivery of services, availability of information and the ability and willingness of the service to adapt to social pressures and changes.

A narrower interpretation of the terms of reference places almost exclusive emphasis on "efficiency". Despite the committee's own interpretation as "requiring us to make a general appraisal of the South Australian public service and the framework within which it operates (C 0.2)'", the recommendations were limited. While the report did encompass aspects of "accountability" and to a lesser extent "effectiveness", the main thrust of the recommendations were concerned with internal "efficiency". The emphases in the report are on structure, restructuring, internal accountability and relations on both "vertical" and "horizontal" planes.
Devolution . . . and control

In administrative (rather than policy) terms, the public service to 1975 was controlled by the Public Service Board. As the committee of inquiry noted:

the current Public Service Act stresses rigid centralized control over the whole Public Service through the agency of the Public Service Board and prescribes in detail the forms of such control. The major emphasis of the Act is on control by specific direction, by detailed approval, by close examination and by constant referral. The Act makes no mention of coordination, or control by the setting of guides and standards, and the comparison of performance with objective (C 2.01).

The committee considered this to be "an inappropriate management philosophy".

The committee proposed two basic changes to the role of the Public Service Board. From 1967, the public service was controlled by and wholly responsible to the PSB; equally, the PSB was formally separated from any attempt by the cabinet to provide policy directives. The inquiry recommended modifications in both areas, which by implication required a reduction of the authority of the Board. The first recommendation stated that

the Public Service Act be revised to provide for the Governor in Executive Council to be able to issue written directives on policy to the Board, and to require the Board to adhere to such directives (C 2.00).

This was a formalization of what had been part of the informal political process since 1967. The proposal was examined by PAPAC and rejected, but cabinet overruled it and endorsed the proposal. In the past the PSB, while formally distinct from cabinet control, worked closely with cabinet and sought its guidance in matters of policy. The new, formal situation is unlikely to lead to any significant use of authority by cabinet. The relatively smooth relations will probably remain, now that the actual situation has been formally recognized.

The inquiry appeared to make significant proposals for changes in the role of the PSB within the public service, when it recommended greater responsibility for departmental heads and, in essence, suggested delegation and decentralization of powers. However, this devolution was qualified by other sections of the report.

The inquiry proposed that in revising the present Act, detailed responsibility for ensuring the efficiency of departments be transferred to permanent heads. This matched the submission by the PSB, that its "function should be less regulatory and more of a service
role”. To achieve this devolution, the committee was “convinced that it is necessary for permanent heads to be held more accountable for the efficient and economic operation of their departments”.

The committee agreed.

It also followed the submissions from the committee in terms of the structure and functions of departments. In 1974, there were more departments in South Australia than in other states, in the Australian government or in any comparable government overseas. The reasons for this proliferation include the unique breadth of function of the South Australian public service. Functions performed in other states by statutory corporations or by commissions completely outside the public service were administered by public service departments in South Australia. The number of separate departments had decreased in recent years, from 64 in 1920 to 47 in March 1974, but many of these departments were small—13 of the 47 employed less than 50 staff each, seven of these less than 25.

The committee proposed “fewer, stronger departments so that they can manage their affairs and be held accountable for managing them” (C 6.00). It also recommended a regrouping of departmental functions and an emphasis on the development of regionalization and regional coordination in the public service. The basis for departmental reorganization “inclined a little more toward pragmatism than theory”, and the result was not “an elaborate restructuring of the cabinet’s machinery or an elaborate committee apparatus for handling its business”. The overall emphasis was “on the functionalist theory heavily weighted by other, more pragmatic considerations arising out of this State’s history and its particular administrative needs” (C 6.01). The possibility of creating more statutory authorities to reduce the number of departments was rejected. Despite the advantages of such authorities, including less frustrations and financial restrictions, wider representation at managerial level, economy and efficiency of management and administration, the committee was concerned that independence of action could lead to problems in, or even conflict with, government policy.

At one stage the committee requested existing departments to “state their objectives, the purposes for which they exist”. The report noted that “only a small minority could point to authoritative statements of their objectives, readily available and recently reviewed”. As a result it proposed that the objectives and functions of departments should be “clearly set out” and be “available to serve as terms of reference” to staff and public (C 6.60).

The main argument of this part of the report seems to be that authority should be devolved and decision-making and responsibility
decentralized. As the report put it, "the responsibility for the overall success or failure of departmental operations should move towards departmental management" (C 8.37), and away from the PSB. But, at the same time, the inquiry stressed the "important role" for the PSB—a duty "to adjudicate and make decisions on public service matters" (C 2.00), pointed out that the issue was "not whether but how this control and coordination should be exercised", and stressed that a power of revoking delegations of authority should remain with the board, to be used

if departments fail to comply with the broad requirements of Board policy ... if methods of standard-setting, consultation and persuasion fail ... [and] only as a last resort (C 2.13).

Hence an apparent emphasis on devolution was "balanced" by an equal emphasis on central power and authority. Departments and department heads were to be given more authority and responsibility but, at the same time, an ultimate authority over efficiency and accountability was placed firmly into the hands of the Public Service Board. Is it then a matter of "change without change"? The detailed responsibility for the efficiency of departments was transferred to permanent heads, but with the PSB retaining the functions and the authority of monitoring the performance of departments, providing the support necessary for efficiency, advising department heads, and reporting to the cabinet and parliament on the levels of efficiency achieved. Whether this notional devolution and decentralization will lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness and to real dispersion of power remains to be seen. Under the terms of the report, the "independent authority" of individual departments is limited both by the PSB which will have the power to monitor the efficiency, economy and operational effectiveness of departments and periodically conduct joint reviews in these areas with departments, and by the PAPAC which will oversee the conduct of those reviews.

A corollary to the recommendations concerning devolution of authority to individual departments was the emphasis on financial management of the departments. The inquiry recommended that the financial management advisory committee (established in July 1974) should reconstruct the budget of at least one department along "modern management accounting lines". By November 1976, this advisory committee had carried out, or assisted in, the restructuring of the financial systems of six major departments. Not unnaturally, the Treasury is closely concerned with such changes to government accounting systems, and is perhaps even more concerned as these changes place greater power and more responsi-
bility and accountability with individual heads of departments. In July 1976, the Treasury produced major proposals for service-wide financial systems, including intra- and inter-departmental economics and accounting. These are under review by departments and will probably be implemented in 1978. The overall purposes of the scheme are to achieve a closer reflection of policy objectives, to facilitate the review of policy and finances by departments and by government, to improve the quality of financial information for comparative purposes and forward planning and, not the least important, to increase the capability of department heads to manage and control their departments’ activities.

Apart from the changes in formal relationships which have been modified only slightly by the inquiry, the success of any proposals for devolution of authority depends to a degree on subjective factors such as the attitudes of the “managers” themselves. Hence, even with the “limited” devolution suggested by the Corbett committee, one problem may be an unwillingness of department heads, regional authorities and the upper levels of the public service as a whole to accept their new responsibilities. Are these “devolved authorities” ready to undertake the new role? In the past, with the Public Service Board holding a “policeman’s role”, with departments entrenched in a relatively stable and unchanging system and, especially under Playford, with initiative almost totally in the hands of the cabinet, if not the premier alone, such changes might have found the recipients of the new freedom unready for autonomy. However the “administrative elite” of the South Australian public service is notably young in years, new to their positions and, we can assume, less entrenched in the “system”. Also, the members of the Public Service Board are backed by an efficient and keen department and, most importantly, have produced the framework of the plan for the reconstruction which the inquiry recommended.

The inquiry devoted a major chapter of its report to “Efficiency and Accountability”, and had some critical comments, summed up by the statement that

much of the Service, however, gave us the impression that it was not concerned with efficiency at all. We have found too many examples of work being done where no form of efficiency or productivity control whatsoever was in existence, and some of the work we have seen being done, at what level of efficiency no-one knows, should in all probability not be done at all (C 8.03).

Equally, the committee saw a “need of reform” in terms of “accountability” which it defined as “the acceptance of the moral responsibility for actions and decisions [which is] ... valueless
unless the individual is called upon by management to give an accounting of his actions” (C 8.11). Whether the “devolution” discussed above will improve “Efficiency and Accountability” remains to be judged.

The process of communication

The Public Service Association of South Australia held a long and exhaustive seminar on the report of the inquiry. One of its criticisms was that

while appreciating that the Report devotes considerable space to questions of communication, information-giving and other “public relations” issues, it seems to us that inadequate attention has been given to the interaction between the Public Service and the community; to a system whereby each becomes actively involved in the interests of the other.

This is a valid criticism and springs from the emphasis by the inquiry on “efficiency” rather than “effectiveness”.

The committee reported a clear sense of unease about the state of communications both within the service and between the service and the public. The report commented that “in South Australia, there is evidence of widespread confusion and ignorance of government activity”, and it devoted a brief chapter to government information services on the ground that there was evidence of “poor communications at the level of public contact” (C 9.10). It proposed the formation of a state government information service which would explain government responsibilities and services to the public, and an information-receiving centre which would “glean information relating to the Public Service and the quality of departmental services” (C 9.324).

Implementation of these proposals may improve the public’s level of information and understanding, but the thrust of the committee’s recommendations in this area can be subsumed under the heading of efficiency rather than effectiveness. As the PSA noted, the recommendations are unlikely to achieve much in terms of a two-way interaction between public and public service. That is, there were no specific recommendations and solutions to the problems of responsiveness.

The inquiry also stressed the need for more intra-service communication and consultation, especially at the upper levels of the service. The important job of encouraging this was given to the PSB. A programme is already under way, including formal and
informal contacts between the PSB and departments and regional offices, expansion of the board’s monthly *Bulletin*, delegation of increased powers over organizational and personnel matters and the formation of a research and resources unit.

**Towards internal “democracy”?**

The committee of inquiry devoted a considerable amount of its time and its report to such topics as personnel policies, staff participation, job satisfaction and discrimination within the service. Proposals ranged from those that were relatively uncontroversial and simple to apply, such as delegation of authority for recruitment of employees from the PSB to departments, through a plea for increased formal and informal consultation by managers at all levels, to themes which have produced controversy and strong dissent, especially the issues of “industrial democracy” and contract appointments.

The committee’s proposals concerning “Women in the Public Service” were innovative and, except for one specific point, were welcomed by all interested parties. The Public Service Association felt that the appointment of a female as adviser on women’s affairs was “an act of discrimination”, but the proposal went ahead. The recommendations have either been implemented, or have been taken to a point where only the necessary legislation is required, and they complement the overall policy of the Dunstan government in terms of “equal opportunity”. An equal employment opportunities advisory panel, headed by PSB commissioner Stephens has been set up. Deborah McCulloch has been appointed to the position of women’s adviser in the Premier’s department, selection tests for prospective public servants have been changed to exclude any sex bias, anomalies are being examined and the cabinet has approved maternity/paternity leave provisions for public servants. There is little doubt that pressure for the implementation of these and further reforms will continue.

The report recommended a modified form of industrial democracy for the public service. Although limited in scope, it extended earlier recommendations of the committee on worker participation in management formed by the government in 1973. The report also noted that implementation of the recommendations of the 1973 committee had hardly proceeded in the two years since the report, and that action had been limited to the establishment of joint consultative councils in some departments. The report therefore urged that departments and the PSB “get on with it”.

At
the same time, the chairman of the inquiry stressed that the extended ideas

do not come from a belief that a government department can be or should be a fully-fledged democracy in itself. How could such a belief possibly be combined with the idea of a subordinate public service which carries out the will of Ministers who, in turn, must have the backing of the majority of the people's elected representatives.10

The Public Service Association examined this section carefully and recommended caution. It was "generally in favour of various forms of worker participation", but it noted that there was an evident degree of confusion as to what the term meant in practical terms. The PSA therefore called for "education and consideration rather than action", for explanations from the government and from the unit for the quality of work life of their intentions, for a long period of dialogue, and then for a further inquiry and report "to lessen fears held in some quarters that worker participation is a threat to unionism". By October 1976 the psb, the government and the premier had begun the formal and informal processes requested11. But progress will be slow in this area and the hesitation is not at the "employer" level; while the government is committed to industrial democracy in both public and private sectors, it is the "employees" who have doubts.

The inquiry endorsed the "general philosophy" of "worker participation in management", but not suggestions that this should apply at the level of the Public Service Board. It rejected proposals that members of the psb should be elected by public servants or that one member of the board should be nominated by the PSA. The inquiry was convinced that not only should "the merit principle [be] ... the overriding consideration here", but that there were "practical considerations":

the opportunities for "sweetheart agreements" inherent in such a situation would be difficult to resist ... we consider it inappropriate that any members of a Board called upon to act in a deliberative, or quasi-judicial, capacity should consider themselves to be the nominees or representatives of the parties which appear before them (C 2.21).

Hence, while the inquiry accepted the "general philosophy", it did not accept the final stage of the Dunstan government's programme, as set out in general terms by the premier, that "eventually workers should ... elect some Directors to the Board of Management ... workers should be represented at the policy-making level."12

Although at the time of writing PAPAC had not considered all recommendations in these sections of the report, the PSB and the departments had moved some considerable distance in the spirit of
the report. Joint committees are examining specific programmes to implement detailed recommendations concerned with job enrichment, management styles, consultation, semi-autonomous work groups, career counselling, graduate and non-graduate entry to the service and part-time study release. On the last point, it should be noted that the South Australian service has continued an important programme of part-time release for study. In 1975, the latest date for which detailed information is available, a total of 2,323 members of the public service were involved in part-time studies. Of these, 677 already held post-secondary qualifications. Further, a scheme to provide for full-time release on full salary for tertiary studies was introduced in 1974 and 31 such awards had been granted by 1976.

Two recommendations in these sections were innovatory. The inquiry proposed that staff appraisals should be introduced, with self-appraisal as a basic part of the process, and that this process should apply to all staff, including permanent heads who would be assessed annually by PAPAC. The PSB and the departments are cooperating to work out the details of this scheme. The second innovation concerned the formation of consultative councils at central, departmental and regional levels of the public service—in effect, the further implementation of internal consultation in the state public service. The evidence from the service is of strong interest and a high level of activity in the planning stages. In November 1974 the PSB inaugurated a policy on worker participation in the public service, and this plan has been assisted by the unit for industrial democracy (in the Premier’s department) and the PSB’s special projects branch. The recommendations in the report therefore support a process already well under way. The cabinet has already approved the appointment of industrial relations staff in larger departments to provide direct advice and assistance in intra-departmental industrial matters.

**Careers and contracts**

One major emphasis in the Public Service Association’s submission to the inquiry was on the necessity to retain a “career service”. The PSA was firm in the view that the public service should develop in its own ranks the skills and talents needed to fill promotional positions. The inquiry agreed, “in general” but also felt that “an infusion of new people in carefully chosen positions has an invigorating effect” (C 5.327). To achieve this, the inquiry recommended modifications to the concept of a “closed” career service.
This was justified as an attempt to ameliorate the problems of “tapering off”, that is, the irrationality of basing “a whole system on the assumption that everyone improves steadily in ability until retirement age” (C 5.60).

To deal with the problem, the inquiry recommended some minor changes, such as the appointment of permanent heads by PAPAC, the appointment to positions immediately below permanent heads by the PSB and the head with no right of appeal, and the removal of any right of appeal against appointments from outside the service.

The inquiry also agonized over the issue of contract appointments and the effects of such appointment on a “career service”. While committed to the concept of contract appointments the inquiry worried over:

> how to combine contract employment with the fearless impartiality in policy-advising and decision-making which is the prized characteristic of the best public servants (C 5.64).

Hence, while recommending “that more extensive use be made of contract appointment to the Executive Officer ranges and specialist positions”, every department or division should have “a majority of career officers near the top”.

Contract appointments at the level of permanent head were given special emphasis; the position requires “great energy, resilience, capacity to make decisions under pressure”, and these qualities would more likely be found “among young or middle-aged executives”. Hence all appointments at the level of permanent head should be “in the form of a seven-year contract”, and appointees “should preferably be within the thirty-five to fifty years age bracket” (C 5.65).

The Public Service Association reacted strongly; it admitted that a few contract appointments might be justified, but rejected the concept of contract appointments for career public servants as being “contrary to the principles of the independence and integrity of the public service”. Since the election of the Labor government in 1970 there has been a trend towards “outside” appointments at the top levels of the public service. The application of the recommendations of the inquiry will not significantly modify this trend. But the introduction of contract appointments would be a further radical change.

**Implementation and implications**

Was the Corbett inquiry a successful one? If judged by the extent
to which the report and the recommendations have and will be implemented, then the inquiry was a success. The government announced its "acceptance in principle" almost immediately and implementation is proceeding slowly but surely. One reason for this "success", of course, is the nature of the report. As Professor Corbett stated, "we came down finally in favour of modest, marginal changes and no radical departures from Westminster principles". Given the presence of R.D. Bakewell on the committee, it was understandable that the recommendations would be towards aims and along lines that the government would accept. A basic premise of the committee of inquiry was that the South Australian public service was already relatively efficient, effective and responsible. Given this, radical proposals for change which would have brought controversy and conflict were not likely to be made.

The traditional power centres in a government bureaucracy are the Treasury, the Auditor-General and the Public Service Board. Until 1965, the Treasury was the dominant department, under the control of Playford, who was served by a minuscule Premier's department with the sole function of offering a secretarial service. From the advent of the Dunstan Labor government in 1970 there were seemingly contradictory developments in the South Australian administration; a slow decentralization of power and authority, with individual departments and senior administrators having a somewhat greater degree of freedom of action and decision-making, but at the same time an increased central coordination of all administrative activity through the Premier's department. The formal instruments of coordination, checking, auditing and directing remained in the hands of the PSB; there is always the need to check that departmental resources are properly apportioned, to ensure that duplication does not occur, to maintain proper management of departments and administrative functions, to oversee government works and construction, and to maintain accurate drafting and interpretation of laws and regulations. But the Premier's department had become a "super-coordinating" body.

Under Playford, who was the premier, treasurer, and held varying positions from 1938 to 1965, the Premier's department was the premier. Under Dunstan, the new department burgeoned from twelve staff in 1965 to 198 in 1976, with an ever-widening range of activities and responsibilities, encompassing economic, planning, development, trade, administrative services and arts policy. There was little policy development which did not, at some stage, involve this ubiquitous department.
PREMIER'S DEPARTMENT – 1976

Deputy Premier — — — — — — — Premier — — — — — — Minister assisting Premier

Trade and Development — Agent (•) — Policy Division

Development (•) General — Unit for Divisions

Overseas (•) — Industrial — Parrliamentary

Trade — Democracy — Counsel

Interstate Trade — Economic (•) — Intelligence

Trade

Youth Unemployment Unit

Mines and Energy

Development Planning

Industries Services

Administrative Services

Projects

Coordination

Committee Secretariat

Planning Appeal Board

Arts Development

Finance

Committee Secretariat

Cabinet Secretariat

Women's Adviser

Ombudsman Staff

(•) To new Department of Economic Development, December 1976
In December 1976, following a recommendation of the inquiry, a department of Economic Development was created comprising four divisions which were hived off from the Premier's department (shown * on chart) and a statutory corporation division. This division of the original Premier's department is unlikely to modify the focus of policy-making, as the two departments are under the ministerial authority of the premier. R.D. Bakewell has become head of the new department while G.J. Inns, former chairman of the PSB, has succeeded him in the Premier's department.

In 1977, then, there were three important loci of power in the public service, and the implications of the Corbett report provided for potential tension between them. The parallel developments of devolution of authority from the PSB to the individual departments; and the centralization of policy, planning and development in the Premier's department and the department of Economic Development; and the assumption by the governor in executive council of the authority to issue policy directives has created, in effect, "a new ball game".

Notes

6. See Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Public Service of South Australia. Hereafter paragraph references (C x.x) to the report are inserted in brackets in the text.
8. Third Submission of Public Service Board, 1974, 3-1, 4-1.
Over the past 120 years there have been six formal inquiries into the Victorian public service, four in the last century and two within the first 25 years of the twentieth century. Thus for the last 50 years, the geography of the Victorian bureaucracy has been largely unmapped, and Sir Henry Bland found himself exploring what was virtually virgin territory in his inquiry. It was a journey which he undertook (if the analogy can be extended delicately) with evident enthusiasm and, one suspects, much enjoyment!

Background to the report

The first Victorian public service legislation was the Civil Service Act No. 160 of 1862. It made little impact on the rampant patronage characteristic of the first state self-governing administrations and it was not until a further act was passed in 1883, establishing a board of three commissioners to administer a "merit" system of recruitment and promotion that any real headway was made towards abolishing the patronage system.

This is not to say that a traditional Westminster structure of government with a minister served by his department immediately replaced the existing arrangements. A royal commission in 1917 recorded that the Victorian strategy of setting up separate instrumentalities and agencies, thereby by-passing the public service commissioner (the board had been reduced to one commissioner in 1901) was already well established. The 1926 inquiry reinforced the royal commission's report, and deplored the absence of flexible machinery whereby officers from the instrumentalities could be transferred to the public service and vice versa.

The persistence of this tradition of personal recommendation as the prevailing style of Victorian administrative arrangements has led to an Oakshottian perception of conservative politics as one of "attending to the arrangements of government" prevailing in the Victorian political and administrative scene up to 1949. Its
practical effect was to allow Sir Henry Bolte, when he captured the levers of political power in Victoria in 1955, to show how easily a regime of paternal political "bossism" could be superimposed on the Victorian machinery of government, set up as it was around personal domains.

It was 1946 before the powers of appointment and promotion in the public service were transferred from the Governor in Council (i.e. the premier) in Victoria, and a Public Service Board set up, with wage and salary fixing responsibilities. Small wonder then that in his first report Sir Henry Bland commented scathingly that the present-day procedures of the Victorian public service in many instances continued to conform to the principles and practice of a century-old vintage, when quills and high stools were sufficient equipment.

The present premier, R.J. Hamer, waited only to consolidate his leadership of the Liberal party with a handsome win in his own right at the 1973 elections, before appointing a board

to inquire into and report upon the role, organizational structure, management and staffing of the Victorian Public Service, and to recommend action considered necessary to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the Service, having particular regard to—

(1) Improvements that should be made in the machinery of government relating to the organization, co-ordination and control of departments, including the possible redistribution of functions.

(2) Methods of improving the efficiency of the use of human and allied resources; with particular emphasis on staff training and development.

(3) Possible changes in conditions of recruitment, employment and accommodation of public servants to ensure comparability with general standards elsewhere in the community and equality of opportunity for further personal development and advancement. 3

The Victorian inquiry was thus initiated in an orderly and systematic manner by a new premier, succeeding to office in a tidy and well-programmed transfer of power when Sir Henry Bolte resigned after seventeen years in office, the longest period for any premier in Victoria's political history. There was no hint of maladministration or corruption, just a suggestion of stuffiness and old-fashioned procedures dating from the last century, overdue for review and reform. It was a most appropriate way of initiating a Victorian board of inquiry, and the choice of Sir Henry Bland as its sole member was an equally "proper" decision. He had just completed an inquiry into the administration of Victorian transport, he was familiar with the temperate corridors of Victorian government power, and he was known for his strong commitment to the
ministerial traditions of cabinet government. Rarely indeed have the circumstances for a fruitful inquiry been so favourable.

Methods of working

Sir Henry confessed to some doubts as to how best to conduct his inquiry (B 1.1.10). He argued that in his experience of the ways of public services, nothing much really came of public sittings, and in this situation there were no contending parties eager to present their cases. Thus if his inquiry was to be productive he saw himself as needing to sift through the voluminous public documents available, and actively seek out and encourage contributions from all those who might help. He began by addressing questionnaires, requesting information and seeking advice from the Public Service Board, the departments themselves, the Victorian Public Service Association, the Federation of Printing and Kindred Industries Union, those holding offices involved in relationships with the public service, and finally by public advertisement from the public at large.

He also held lengthy discussions with parliamentarians, members of the Public Service Board and the service itself, and with officers of the Australian public service, the United Kingdom civil service, and with the Canadian public service commissioner. He preferred those discussions to take place in the interviewees’ own offices, saying that this gave him greater insight into working conditions, and made for more flexibility in meeting less senior staff. His working style as a federal bureaucrat was always one of seeking out information for himself, and this personal preference undoubtedly set the pattern for the methods of working adopted by the Victorian inquiry. Sir Henry operated with a small personal staff only, producing his four voluminous reports at a minimum formal cost. The accounts might of course look rather different if the cost to the service of complying with his bombardment of questionnaires and requests for information were to be included; but Sir Henry Bland clearly preferred the style of the one-man investigator, and it is unlikely that cost factors were significant in determining the conduct of the inquiry.

It was Sir Henry Bland’s inquiry from start to finish, and the reports are clearly his personal documents in a way in which RCAGA reports could never be those of the chairman. They reflect his administrative strengths and weaknesses, developed during a long professional career as a public servant which culminated as permanent head. Born and educated in NSW, he nevertheless seems to have absorbed the Victorian “administrative style” which values...
the personal and direct methods which are a legacy from the development of the patronage system in the service. Its persistence today is reflected in the unwillingness of structures in Victorian government to adapt to a more centralized administrative procedure, and as such is one of the important factors differentiating the state's fragmented machinery of government from that of the federal government and of the other states. In a curious sense the Bland inquiry throws into relief the administrative folkways of the Australian federal system, still so largely unexplored.

Identifying the problems

Sir Henry Bland found that his first problem lay in “delineating the ambit of the inquiry”. For instance, it was not possible to define simply the subject of his terms of reference—the Victorian public service. If “the service” described only those employed under the Public Service Act, 1958, it meant that teachers, policemen, the staff of Victoria's great public utilities, and those working within geographic confines would all be excluded from the inquiry. What in fact do we understand by “the public service” in Victoria? It seemed to Sir Henry Bland that his first task was to describe the nature of employment under the Crown in Victoria over the past 50 years, and the diligence he brought to that task has earned him the gratitude of those who have in the past sought such descriptions in vain.

This diversity of public employment in Victoria is set out in Sir Henry's first report. There are those employed in the sixteen so-called “departments”, some of them dating back to the granting of responsible government; those employed in five special departments to all intents and purposes subsumed in their attached statutory corporations; those employed in the more recently created coordinating ministries; those specifically exempted from the Public Service Act or employed outside it; those employed in the teaching service, the police force, and in the great public instrumentalities; and finally the judiciary and office holders appointed by the Governor-in-Council.

As a consequence, those employed under the Public Service Act in Victoria, about one sixth of the total, constitute but a minor proportion of the officers in Crown employment in Victoria. Whatever the reasons that have led Victorian governments, ministers, officials and parliaments to choose this fragmented, compartmented arrangement for their machinery of government, said Sir Henry, public administration in Victoria is clearly unrelated
to any philosophical framework or desire for consistency of decision. He therefore set about laying down the missing principles and concepts, a task clearly close to his heart and one he obviously relished for its own sake.

**Shaping the reports**

Reform in the conditions of public service in Victoria was seen by him to be urgent, and he therefore presented his report in four stages over several months. His first report, based on more than 100 submissions, was about 200 pages long, and was presented to parliament on 30 September 1974, less than twelve months after he had been commissioned. It is thus a considerable achievement on its own, particularly in view of the fragmentation of government structures in Victoria, and the difficulty of threading a path through its labyrinth. He prepared chapters on staffing procedures, training and promotions procedures, the nature of the relationship between ministers and permanent heads, the structure and composition of the Public Service Board, and regulatory practices and employee participation. He concluded with about 150 recommendations, ranging from proposals for completely restructuring the existing service divisions to minor points concerning the introduction of a dynamic suggestion scheme.

The second report presented some two months later was directed towards the premier's major concern with conservation, environmental and land use planning and the administrative arrangements centring around them. Although Sir Henry decided to deal with this subject separately, he did not tackle its investigation as a separate task, nor did he adopt a different strategy in his investigations.

Aware that it was a contentious and conflict-ridden area, he was careful in his introduction to point out that his terms of reference precluded him from responsibility for commenting on the appropriateness or otherwise of policies already determined by parliament and the executive; his inquiry was directed to administrative arrangements for the implementation of existing determined policies. This did not mean that he saw himself as having nothing to contribute to the area, for while he did not wish to arbitrate between "the rights or wrongs of the new evangelists and prophets of doom", and despite the "difficulty of even comprehending just what conservation, environmental protection and land use planning was about", he felt that a number of relevant points followed as a consequence of the general deficiencies of the service noted in
the first report. However exotic the policy area, in Sir Henry Bland's view the proper administrative procedures for implementing it differed very little from those pertinent to more pragmatic functions of government. He applied his litmus tests to the newcomers to government policy-making accordingly.

Not surprisingly, he was highly critical of the fragmentation of activity among agencies in the area, which as he saw it prevented the formulation of a comprehensive set of policy objectives and consistent decision-making and gave too little opportunity for ministerial control and responsibility. As a cabinet government traditionalist, Sir Henry Bland felt that the lack of opportunity reserved to the Victorian government to set its own policies in the light of its reading of community wishes was one of the most unsatisfactory consequences of Victoria's plethora of commissions, boards, authorities, committees, councils, corporations and agencies, protected from direct ministerial control by statute.

Thus the second Bland report's 20-odd recommendations for the organizational and administrative arrangements for conservation, environmental and land use planning in Victoria were directed towards his objectives of ministerial control and accountability in this area, in accordance with Sir Henry's basic principles of central direction of policy-making and its implementation by a career public service.

The inquiry's third report presented some months later was again directed towards an examination of the organizational structure, management and staffing of the administrative sectors of the Victorian Education department. The teaching service itself had initially been excluded from the jurisdiction of the inquiry by Sir Henry Bland, but he discovered in the course of his investigations that there were "deep-seated problems in the Department that needed resolution if it were to discharge its future responsibilities in an effective, efficient and economical manner". The challenge was obviously irresistible as the department is the biggest single employer under the Crown in Victoria and has a typically Victorian collection of statutory authorities attached to it, the most important being the Teachers' Tribunal.

Again the problem as Sir Henry saw it was one of divided responsibility. As a political response to sectional pressure in 1946, the Teachers' Tribunal had been given jurisdiction over a class of "professional officers" recruited from the teaching service for administrative duties, leaving the remainder of the administrative staff within the jurisdiction of the Public Service Board.

It was from this fateful decision of Parliament that many of the ills of the Department derive.
said Sir Henry, and a later extension of the dichotomy in 1967 added to its unworkability. A 1973 parliamentary extension of the tribunal’s powers to cover professional appointees qualified as psychologists, speech therapists, librarians and so on, brought opposition from the Public Service Board, which quite rightly pointed out that the proposed legislation opened up another avenue for competition between salary fixing and appointing authorities within the area of Victorian government employment. The whole issue of who are, and who are not “professional officers” within the jurisdiction of the Teachers’ Tribunal is shrouded in mystery, according to Sir Henry’s report, and a matter for the Crown law authorities to unveil to allay the disquiet and concern expressed by the Public Service Board and the Victorian Public Service Association (VPSA). The possibility of serious industrial unrest over the issue was thought to be very real by Sir Henry, a fear events in 1976 and 1977 proved to be well-founded.

In dealing with the problems facing the Education department in administrative terms of personnel, buildings, finance and general administration, the third Bland report pointed out that the terms of reference did not extend to a wide-ranging analysis of the schools and the community. Predictably, Sir Henry regarded the most pressing need as one of establishing a single “integrated homogenous administration, so that all personnel . . . have a common purpose and a single allegiance” (B III.7.10), and he directed his 30 or so recommendations towards establishing the clear lines of authority and responsibility, leading upwards towards the ministerial head he deemed desirable.

The fourth and final report was not presented until the end of 1975. Its content is something of a miscellany, picking up matters touched on in previous reports, and adding unrelated chapters on women in the public service, standards of accommodation, etc., in a kind of “clearing the desk” operation, rather than providing an overall summary of the inquiry. The most interesting material is to be found in Appendix A, an interim report dealing with the higher machinery of government specifically requested by the premier. Here Sir Henry made some attempt to grapple with the problems raised by the nature of the policy process in the modern administrative state, and examined the ramifications of the contemporary debate on how policy priorities are to be determined in Westminster style democracies.

Such is the character of government these days and what governments affect to imagine is expected of them, that it is virtually impracticable to catalogue at any one time the needs that should be met, and to fix time frames for their satisfaction. . . . Thus it is virtually impracticable
to identify the totality of policies and programmes that a Government will aspire to inaugurate, let alone in fact do so. He goes on to suggest ways in which the machinery of government in Victoria can be improved to equip and assist cabinet and ministers to reach the optimum decisions, and in so doing reaffirms his faith in the procedures of responsible government.

The thrust of all the proposals made in the foregoing is simple and direct. It is to maximise the prospect of Cabinet having before it all relevant material when it comes to the point of decision-taking.

Summing up the framework of values within which the Bland inquiry reports were shaped, it is clear that Sir Henry did not see his task as that of exploring the alternative ways whereby democratic governments might arrange their administrative structures today in the light of the new climate of policy-making in which experts are central to formulating feasible policy options. His belief that a cabinet system of government, "properly" administered, could meet the policy needs of contemporary governments was unshakeable, and his inquiry was directed wholly towards defining and solving the problems that he saw as preventing it from operating efficiently in Victoria. His reports reflect this belief, as well as being the outcome of the political expectations of the premier who instigated them (to whom Sir Henry gives a separate acknowledgement "for his continuing support and interest"). The terms of reference were set and interpreted accordingly. The Victorian inquiry into the public service is thus the creation of its one member board of inquiry, Henry Armand Bland, Kt., CBE, a retired federal permanent head, and a man whose family background and life-long personal interest has been in the principles of public administration.

**Recommendations and implementation**

**The first report**

The most voluminous report, this met with an immediate and direct legislative response to its recommendations. Bland considered that the existing Public Service Act was in fundamentals the 1883 Act, amended many times admittedly, but never completely refashioned so that it contained many provisions of detail philosophically inconsistent with provisions of substance.

The Public Service today is hardly changed in fundamentals from that inaugurated a century ago: fragmentation of activity, with its concomitant ill consequences is evident: communications between departments
are unsatisfactory so much so that in framing proposals full consideration may not be given to their implications in relation to the functions and interests of other departments; there is some ignorance of, and aloofness from, industry and commerce; in place of anxiety to try to understand new social forces at work, there is some resentment of their consequences for the added burdens they place on departments; the partnership relation between Ministers and their senior officials leaves much to be desired; there are major staffing deficiencies in key administrative areas; far greater attention must be given to the management and personnel functions; the Public Service Act is outdated and the approach to its administration leaves much to be desired. Corrective action is needed in all of these areas... The starting point must be reform of the Public Service Act (B 1.6.72-74).

Thus the first report contains a comprehensive and detailed account of the workings of the Victorian public service over the past fifty years, and, with its 150 recommendations arranged under a number of broad headings, presents a blueprint for its reform. The most important recommendation was that the old divisional structure, which restricted entry to the important administrative division to school leavers, should be abolished and replaced by a simplified, open three-divisional structure based on qualifications and merit. So that the quality of the grossly under-equipped (in educational terms) administrative division, with less than three per cent of its members graduates, could be improved, Sir Henry recommended that a graduate recruitment target of ten per cent should be set (roughly corresponding to the educational distribution of the population). As he rightly said, such certificates are no passport to administrative success, but modern public services make increasing intellectual demands on administrators, and Victoria's present administrative division was depressingly lacking in "adequate numbers of qualified staff competent for higher policy and advice support work... there must be a programme for the resuscitation of what is now the administrative division".

The Victorian Public Service Board also came in for criticism from Sir Henry, who concluded that "the manner in which the Public Service Board has been conducting its business leaves much to be desired." He blamed this partly on its antiquated promotion procedures, whereby it acted as an appeals board as well as a promotion authority, and partly because, involved in minutiae and detail, it had been unable to perceive "the full dimensions of the role of a central personnel agency" for the state, including the guardianship of its public administration. The board had taken almost no initiative in proposing administrative reform, he said, and had given little attention to the problems of overall management of the service, thus completely eschewing what Sir Henry called
a positive custodial role for securing the optimum in the adminis-
tration of the state of Victoria.

Recommending the setting up of a separate promotions appeal
board with an independent chairman, Sir Henry Bland went on to
devote a special chapter in his report to the Victorian idiosyncracies
of board composition. There are two boards in Victoria in fact, he
said, one operating in the mental hygiene division, and the other
in the general services division. Both divisions have a common
chairman, and a common appointed government member, but the
third member is elected, on the one hand by the permanent officers
of the technical and general division of the mental hygiene branch
(known as the mental hygiene representative), and on the other by
the remainder of the permanent officers (the public service repre-
sentative). The concept of a representative element on the Victorian
Public Service Board was originally introduced by Sir Albert
Dunstan, Victoria's notorious Country Party minority premier of
the 1930s and 1940s, but the provision only became law in 1946
under the Cain Labor government. Sir Henry Bland sharply
disapproved of the whole notion of employee representation on the
administrative board of a career public service, and described the
Cain bill as "a gem of sardonic irony." It transferred powers
previously held by parliament and the Governor-in-Council to a
Public Service Board composed of an independent chairman, and
three other constituency members—a "government" member ac-
countable to the government of the day, and two elected members
each with an electorate to please. Sir Henry said that his inquiry

was left in no doubt . . . that the view is widely held in the Public
Service that the "public service" representative is "instructed",
"influenced," "leaned on" or "follows the VPSA line", and that this is
reflected in the decisions of the Public Service Board (B 1.12.22) . . .
To claim that the Public Service Board is independent and should
remain independent is utterly irreconcilable with the representative
status of its elected member.

The Bland inquiry made a strong recommendation that the pro-
visions of the Act relevant to the elected representatives should be
discarded.

There is no place for representative status or election of a member of
the Public Service Board. . . . There is no room for conflict of duty
or interest in any member of the Public Service Board, for any possibility
that the credibility of his dedication to his corporate responsibility to
the Public Service Board might be questioned or for any compromise
of the rapport that must exist between the Government and the Public
Service Board (B 1.14.144).
Conflicting loyalties and a compromise of position are all that could be expected of such a board composition. There should be only one Public Service Board, composed of a chairman and two members appointed by the Governor-in-Council as the most “suitable” and “efficient”.

A new Public Service bill was introduced into the House on 19 November 1974, only six weeks after Sir Henry had presented his first report. Speaking to the second reading debate, the premier said that the government endorsed all the major recommendations save one, but

in view of the increasing trend overseas towards employee participation however, it was not possible to accept the recommendation removing the elected member from the board, and the existing arrangements would be retained.

It was a major triumph for the Victorian Public Service Association which had campaigned strongly against Sir Henry’s stand, and proof that the VPSA retained its 1946 grip on the machinery of Victorian government.

Hamer accepted the soundness of the Bland proposal to abolish the old administrative division. In its place, the bill set up a new structure which separated out the permanent heads in one group, and provided for the creating of a new first division, comprising “administrative and professional officers with important responsibilities” who are the likely permanent heads and senior executives of the future. A new second division catered for most of the remaining professional and administrative officers, and the technical and general division officers made up a new third division. Along with the new structure went the revised recruitment procedures recommended, new and more flexible procedures for transfers, promotions and appeals (including the setting up of the separate promotions appeal board), revised discipline procedures and the consolidation and modification of a number of general public service regulations relating to long service, women in the public service, and so on. Hamer finished his second reading speech by complimenting Sir Henry on the diligence and despatch with which he had completed his first report, albeit with a modicum of caustic humour, and the chief parliamentary counsel for his speedy preparation of the bill.

The opposition did not oppose the passage of the lengthy bill, and as a non party-political measure, the second reading and a number of minor amendments in committee went through the House without delay. Such a smooth, almost frictionless progress from the commissioning of the inquiry to legislation in a little over
twelve months may well have set something of a record for an inquiry of this nature, suggesting perhaps that it may constitute a blueprint for similar types of investigations. However, when the acceptable recommendations are examined carefully, it is clear that they are incremental proposals in line with contemporary career public service expectations, and politically easy to initiate given the parlous condition of the Victorian public service revealed by the Bland inquiry. The recommendation to change the status quo by doing away with what the VPSA called "the right of officers in the Service to elect their representative on the Board" was a very different matter. It would have led to political confrontation on an issue out of tune with the present-day social climate which favours worker participation. A "consensus" premier, Hamer tends to avoid unnecessary (as he sees it) and divisive conflict. Modest and politically acceptable reform is one thing, restructuring of the status quo likely to lead to political conflict something else, even if it is strongly recommended by eminent advisers.

The second report

The inquiry’s second report received a very different reception. It was Sir Henry’s firm belief that sensible comprehensive, integrated and coordinated public policies were only possible in Victoria if the functions of government came under the Public Service Act, and he viewed the plethora of agencies responsible for conservation and land use planning with particular disfavour. Victoria has certainly used the device of statutory corporations to deal with the functions of government with vigour, he said, but

it is to be doubted whether any dispassionate observer of the fragmentation of public administration in Victoria that has occurred could be found to remark that it has been an unmitigated success.

In fact, controversy has also surrounded the Ministry of Conservation since it was first set up in 1972, and there certainly seems to be no guarantee that the extension of ministerial control will dampen political conflict in the as yet undefined area of conservation and environmental planning.

Ad hoc legislative responses to the new demands, spawning a series of statutory boards and associated advisory and appeals committees, councils and tribunals was the problem in the administration of conservation and planning policies, as Sir Henry Bland saw it. Coordination was the answer. This is indisputable, but as Sir Henry wrestled with the difficulties of inducing agencies to coordinate in the Victorian administrative maze, he slipped further and further away from his ideal of one centralized administration.
Eventually he recommended that the three most important separate agencies, the Soil Conservation Authority and the Noxious Weeds Destruction Board, both set up in 1958, and the Environment Protection Authority set up in 1970, be brought together within a department so that responsibility for policy could be vested in a minister.

Because the divergent views and arguments on land use planning, arising out of a variety of community responses, had in Sir Henry's view so far produced little more than amorphous uncertainty and controversy, he considered that the principles of ministerial responsibility for planning had to be underlined. It was for the minister alone to essay an interpretation of the community's purposes, and to determine policy, including deciding the objectives to be achieved by the relevant administering agencies. Picking up the policy/administration debate characteristic of academic literature, Sir Henry attempted to lay down the principles which might govern the interplay between the two areas where land-use planning is concerned. However he was unable to add anything fresh to this perennial debate and ended by reaffirming his conviction that a Weberian hierarchial structure was the most satisfactory. In the crunch it is the man at the top who decides in Sir Henry's administrative world of reports.

The problem is that the real world of political conflict is somewhat different, and it is not always possible or desirable to screen the public administration world from the political envelope which surrounds it. The second Bland report hints at this difficulty and acknowledges that the existence of a number of independent agencies in the area, with a developed web of internal and external relationships, had to be taken into account. In recommending that a coordinating committee made up of representatives from these agencies be set up, Bland fell back on a device similar to the federal government inter-departmental committee mechanism. In addition, a commission for conservation, environment and land use planning was to be created, with the broad function of advising the minister and keeping something of a supervisory eye on the agencies for him. Its membership was to be varied, with regular members coming from the public agencies, Trades Hall, and local government; it was even to have a sociologist. Other utility members would attend on an ad hoc basis when matters relevant to their functions were to be discussed.

Bland was concerned to prevent each agency from acting independently of the others; the whole thrust behind his recommendations was
to provide integrated coordinated machinery to embrace the totality of conservation, environmental and land use planning

and to prevent the proliferation of separate authorities which, as he saw it, carried with it such heavy administrative penalties (B II.5.55). Yet despite his concern with administrative fragmentation, the effect of the second Bland report was to add two more tiers of responsibility, so that ministerial differences of opinion concerning jurisdiction in this sensitive area could be resolved. These were first, a standing ministerial committee to consider papers prepared by the Commission which could have a bearing on the responsibilities of more than one minister, providing a kind of pre-cabinet digestion process. Second, Sir Henry felt that the problem of strategic planning, largely unconsidered in Victoria, was urgent, and he therefore recommended that a state planning board be set up to service cabinet, made up of a small, highly competent, interdisciplinary staff. Such a board would need to be situated within the Premier’s department to ensure its authority, and it would also need a nucleus membership of high officials for the same reason. The Bland structure depended almost entirely on strong political leadership, something of a rarity in state politics, and he did not really face the problem of how central direction could be achieved in the face of entrenched agency separation and fragmentation.

It is more difficult to point to policy outcomes from the second Bland report, although Sir Henry himself commented recently that he thought Victoria’s planning legislation was beginning to work. Hamer’s main thrust has always been into planning programmes necessary to give substance to his “quality-of-life” values, and as such his government’s objectives have been completely different from the concern with economic growth and development which motivated the previous premier, Sir Henry Bolte. His 1976 budget speech began with a statement of his “softer” goals, and he went on to declare himself to be

somewhat dismayed by the modern jargon of economists—inputs and outputs, macroeconomics and microeconomics—and the tendency to forget that man, his fulfilment and his destiny is what life is all about.  

An important reason for his haste in bringing forward proposals for public service reform was the necessity to improve “quality-of-life” stemming from the changing role of government and its involvement in these new areas which had added to the already onerous responsibilities of the public service.  

Taken together his comments are clear indications of the distance which separates him from earlier premiers.

Sir Henry Bland’s second report on conservation and environmen-
tal planning recommended a *bureaucratic* planning structure, with most of the policy inputs coming from the public service. After collating, sifting and examining alternative options, public servant advisers would present the choices available to cabinet for the government to make its decision (*B* II.7.13, 14). Hamer on the other hand has constructed an elaborate planning hierarchy extending over the state, centred on the premier’s office. It includes Sir Henry’s cabinet coordinating committee as one of four cabinet standing committees, along with a cabinet policy and priority review committee which the premier chairs, and a companion policy and priority review board, bringing in experts from treasury, conservation, development and planning, as well as private sector representatives. This is also chaired by the premier. He oversees statements of planning policy which emerge from cabinet as a result of the planning process and provide the guidelines, and keeps a weather eye on the activities of the town and country planning board, the regional planning authorities, and the state coordination council, the agencies responsible for implementing his planning statements.

It has therefore become a much more political process than Sir Henry Bland envisaged, and there is little evidence that the public service inputs are significant. Whether Sir Henry was responsible for putting the instruments to further his policy goals into the premier’s hands, or whether Hamer with his judicial administrative mind shaped the outlines of Victoria’s planning machinery, is uncertain. The second Bland report is only 57 pages, and its “tone” throughout is less confident, while its recommendations make few major suggestions for change. Only three small agencies, the Environment Protection Council, the Land Conservation Council and the Port Phillip Authority are eliminated, and the additional machinery proposed more than offsets these, while the fragmentation of agencies remains. The outcome of the inquiry into the administrative arrangements for conservation, environmental and land use planning in Victoria seems to suggest that while stable administrative structures can be set up where policy priorities are settled and the major conflicts of interest have drained away, administrative arrangements by themselves are unlikely to do much to resolve political conflict. Bland’s recommendations do not really support his conviction that even in a contentious and conflict-ridden area proper administrative procedures can overcome the difficulties, and the divided environmental scene, fuelled by what Sir Henry describes as “the fervour of the new evangelism, focused on the quality of life and the prophets of doom”, still generates highly political issues in Victoria. The effectiveness of the inquiry’s bureaucratic solutions for subduing this conflict has yet to be
demonstrated, despite Sir Henry Bland's optimism for their efficacy, and political consensus on planning issues still has to be worked out as Hamer has found to his cost. His own Liberal party members are beginning to oppose his planning decisions and what seems to be needed is policy-making machinery to resolve the political conflict planning programmes provoke among experts and specialists, as well as among the general public. To the devising of these kinds of administrative structures the Bland inquiry makes almost no contribution.\textsuperscript{11}

The third report

It comes as no surprise that the recommendations of the third report were also directed towards integration and eliminating the dichotomy within the Education department arising from the cleavage between the teaching service administration and the public service administration, and the dual powers wielded by the Public Service Board and the Teachers' Tribunal over non-teaching personnel. A single homogeneous, integrated administration was a necessity in Sir Henry's view if the effective, efficient and economical function of the department was to be attained.\textsuperscript{12} One of the more telling illustrations which underlines the inefficiency of the departmental procedures is a chart setting out the twenty different administrative steps necessary to get approval to undertake minor repairs and alterations to schools. It concludes

The whole process takes months before any work can be started (\textit{B III.5.89 and III Appendix B}).

Staff members at schools would only agree wholeheartedly.

In terms of the Bland recommendations, the Victorian Education department is still largely "unreformed", a situation likely to prevail given the strength of Victoria's militant teacher unions and Hamer's consensus rather than confrontationist political style. Education has always had top political priority in Victoria, with a greater percentage of the state budget being devoted to its provision than in any other state.\textsuperscript{11} The Victorian premier however is more concerned with environmental planning policies and their implementation, and if his 1976 budget speech is any guide, he intends to stay with the tried and true staples of education policy—pupil/teacher ratios, increased grants, education allowances and per capita payments, and a building programme. Administrative reforms which might provoke the conflict-prone education sector into confrontation seems an unlikely nettle for the present Victorian government to grasp.
The fourth and final report

Sir Henry finished his inquiry by stressing the "human" aspects of the personnel functions of a career public service, saying that public services depend for their purposes essentially on their human resources and the way in which they are managed . . . and much leeway must be made up before the Service can regard itself as comparable with the practice of the broad run of industry and commerce employing like staff (B IV.8.2, IV.8.9).

Amenities needed to be upgraded, counselling services developed, and broad staff development policies established. The creaking machinery of the Treasury clearances system required overhauling, and the misuse of temporary employment needed prevention. Formal discriminations against women in the public service had been abolished in the 1974 Act, but Sir Henry felt that attitudinal problems remained, and it will be some years before [women] appear in the higher echelons of the service in numbers approaching, for example, the Commonwealth service.

He also made a number of functional redistributory proposals, but saw little point in discussing the various bases on which the functions of departments [in the Victorian government] might be distributed. On the whole in public administration coherence of function is the normal criterion, and if this was pursued in Victoria, the state should be able to manage very well with no more than half the present number of departments. However pursuit of logic has very little force where purely political considerations determine the number of Ministers to whom the departmental structure must be accommodated, and where the existence of small and relatively unimportant departments have positive value when Premiers face the task of allocating portfolios (B IV:6.6).

In the end, Sir Henry Bland, an archetypal Westminster bureaucrat, bowed to the realities of the political forces in a democratic system. It was a fitting finish to his inquiry, which he concluded by juggling the pieces of the Victorian administrative jigsaw around to bring about a tidier outcome. His final recommendation was that a Victorian Directory, containing information about the Parliament and the Courts, and under each department and agency, the legislation administered by it, and its functions, whereabouts, telephone, telex, etc. details, structure and principal officers be compiled. If no more ever came of the Bland inquiry than the continuing existence of such a map and glossary, it might still come
to be regarded as a sufficient justification for his efforts by those lost souls who have sought in vain for so long to find their way about the structures of Victorian government.

**Overall relevance of the inquiry**

Sir Henry Bland himself said in his preface to his final report that he did not pretend that every aspect of the Board’s terms of reference has now been covered. Pursuit of every aspect would be a never-ending commitment. Moreover the outcome of the Inquiry is not simply to be measured by what has happened or may happen as a direct consequence of the successive Reports: much has occurred in departments and agencies as a result of the free ranging discussions and exchanges the Board has had with Ministers, Permanent Heads, heads of agencies, senior officials and others.

He went on to say that he felt the service needed time to digest and implement the new Public Service Act and his many recommendations, and that when this had been done he had every confidence that sensible solutions to the problems discussed would be found.

Is this the ultimate measure of the effectiveness of the Victorian board of inquiry into the public service? It may well be that the catalyst function of such inquiries is their best achievement, supplemented by a modicum of long overdue reform legislation as political leaders seize the opportunity to bring in the changes which inquiry reports offer. Given the incremental public policy climate of contemporary western democratic societies it is unlikely that initiatives for radical reform will flow from formal inquiries and their “establishment” membership. Moreover Victoria is the state least likely to provide the exception. It is something of a quirk of the state’s administrative history that in the context of the state’s ramshackle and fragmented structures of government, an inquiry which recommended the conventional extension of ministerial control and cabinet responsibility under an integrated Public Service Act was in one sense putting forward radical proposals, if by radical is meant seeking to change the status quo. Sir Henry Bland’s recommendations were wholly traditional in their substance but this should not blind us to the political difficulty of implementing them in a state where “the Statute Book bulges with legislation establishing commissions, boards, authorities, committees, councils, corporations and other agencies, and where Divisions within them function as separate principalities, going their own way within a relationship akin to that between England and Wales”.
Ultimately administrative reform is an outcrop from the perspectives on social change that take hold, more likely to follow such changes than to lead the way.

**Administrative reform and social change**

Ideally administrative reforms would seek to structure changing social perspectives and values as well as follow on them. However, as Professor Self remarks, we once thought that the problem facing inquiries into the public service was one of ensuring that “the bureaucracy is sufficiently responsive to the political will”. Today we have only to state this clearly to know that it is no longer credible.

The implications which follow from this dual expectation about the outcomes of administrative reform were something Sir Henry Bland never really came to grips with in his inquiry. Convinced that bureaucratic responsiveness and responsibility in public policy-making is best achieved by extending ministerial control, he was unable to see that in Victoria the comparative weakness of the state's ministerial structures is partly the result of state politicians' direct understanding of the nature of political responsiveness. Electoral ferment arises: political leaders, desiring to meet the pressures directly, bypass the Public Service Board and Treasury control and legislate to set up direct agencies of government. Policy outcomes in turn become the responsibility of those agencies: the politician has a buffer between him and subsequent electoral pressures.

State political leaders understand intuitively that the structures of responsible government—ministerial departments staffed by career public servants—can be real stumbling blocks to such a direct political response and Victorian cabinets have shown no particular desire to find themselves rendered impotent by their own structures of government. Thus it seems likely that the creation of autonomous agencies will persist as an administrative response to political demands in Victoria, however much it runs counter to Sir Henry Bland’s principles of public administration.

Administrative reform and political reform are therefore inextricably mixed in the state. The present premier has superimposed upon the state's multiplicity of administrative structures, not super-bureaucrats but super-ministries, served by bureaucracies much smaller than those of the agencies with which they interact. For example, a tiny ministry of Fuel and Power is linked to the State Electricity Commission of Victoria, with its 8,000 employees, and
also the Gas and Fuel Corporation and the Victorian Pipelines Commission. A Transport ministry has attached to it the giant Railways Commission, and the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board. A ministry of Conservation attempts to reconcile the clashing agencies of land use in Victoria. The state's planning machinery consists of a network of committees and commissions which has bypassed traditional ministries and statutory corporations indiscriminately, and has developed an advisory and executive framework which owes little to the conventional precepts of public administration.

The real crux of Hamer's arrangements lies not so much in their structure—whether they are departments or autonomous agencies—as in the validity of his interpretation of Victorian citizens' expectations of political and social response. Do they want their environment to be more closely controlled than it has been in the past, and are they desirous of having their cultural life upgraded; or are they still concerned with the outcrops of economic growth—with better transport facilities, adequate electricity supplies, and so on? If the premier is correct in his assessment of the directions of social change in Victoria today, then his administrative arrangements will meet with electorate approval whatever they may be, but if he is wrong, then the administrative sector will share with the politicians the community's disapproval of the policy outcomes. Administrative reform cannot be considered in isolation from what Professor Self has styled the "social agenda", and the major weakness of the Bland inquiry was its determination to confine itself to a bureaucratic agenda for reform.

One of the contemporary tasks facing administrative sectors of government is the need to monitor social change to be able to select out those shifts in opinion which are relevant for public policy decisions. The traditional political transmission belts of party and pressure groups, dependent as they are on social categorizing developed in the nineteenth century, are severely limited as sources of policy inputs in a world where issues are often understood only by experts. Only by mobilizing expert opinion and subjecting it to open democratic scrutiny so that it too can feel the currents of social priorities for itself, can we hope to ensure the responsiveness of the modern administrative state. Sir Henry Bland's policy advisers hidden away behind a ministerial facade—the "faceless mandarins"—are no longer acceptable to contemporary democratic political opinion.

An inquiry which looked at the structures of the Victorian government as case studies in political responsiveness or as examples of the relationships that exist between social, political and bureau-
ocratic agendas would seem to have much to offer to modern public administration. Often those who have headed its autonomous agencies in the past, Sir Harold Clapp at the turn of the century, Sir John Monash in the 1920s, and more recently J. Fraser in the 1970s, have been articulate spokesmen for the new social values which their agencies were set up to serve. They were politicians as skilful as those elected directly by the “people”, administrators fully aware of the link between their organizations and their social clienteles, and as such masters of the art of administrative reform.

The major weakness in Victoria's autonomous agencies has been the absence of machinery for disbanding them when they no longer articulate and implement significant social values. Goal displacement of the kind exemplified by the Victorian Housing Commission in the early 1970s\(^4\) leads to a hardening of the arteries in the organizations as they age, a lack of responsiveness perhaps even more wilful than that of the entrenched career bureaucrats of contemporary folklore. How can we retain the impetus to social change which led to the establishment of the agencies in the first place? How can we build an element of responsiveness into their structures and maintain it? These are the key questions brought to mind by the Victorian administrative scene, the answers to which must surely throw some light on possible solutions to the administrative dilemma to which Sir Henry Bland's recommendations for more centralized ministerial structures only turn a blind eye.

There is something of a common thread of disappointment running through the reactions to and comments on Australia's present crop of administrative inquiries. Criticism of their unwillingness to confront squarely the problem of fitting the traditional administrative structures to changed social expectations is an underlying theme, and apart from some cosmetic reforms there is a sense that little has really been achieved as a result of the investigations. Have we expected too much of the inquiries? Is a catalyst function all that can really be looked for?

It seems likely that unless we regard such inquiries as a political activity, and appoint to them commanding political spokesmen with skills of articulation and leadership, we cannot hope for much more. For if the inquiries really were to act as agents for social reform, the members themselves would need to be social reformers, activists involved in the social issues raised by the inquiries and administrative agitators rather than representatives of prevailing social attitudes. If we put the problem into its context of social reform, we can see how unreasonable it is to expect demagoguery from the establishment figures conventionally appointed to conduct such
inquiries. We will in fact be fortunate if they perform even the catalyst function.

Professor Self suggests in his concluding paragraphs that Australia may have missed the opportunity provided by the recent inquiries to look into the future. "Are Australians too prosperous, phlegmatic and introverted to want to look ahead?" he asks. Perhaps the answer to his question lies in the intellectual strait-jacket that confines Australia; isolated and distant from the cultures of the other western democracies which are received at second-hand, we have never engaged much in comparative intellectual thought about the nature of Australian society. We may well pay too little attention to the kind of society in which we live, and too much to the pragmatic details of its day-to-day arrangements, a perspective which the recent inquiries reflect all too accurately.

Notes

2. Historical accounts of the political scene in the early part of the century by Sir Frederic Eggleston for instance, are richly adorned with examples of this prevailing Victorian political style.
The 1974 machinery of government review in NSW has already been described in three articles published in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration*. The first, by H.H. Dickinson and G. Gleeson, chairman and member respectively of the Public Service Board, contrasts the 'in-house' machinery of government approach of NSW to administrative reform with the wider more open and tribunal-like RCAGA and the South Australian inquiry into its public service. The second, by Barry Moore, then secretary to the cabinet sub-committee on machinery of government, outlines the way in which the sub-committee operated and the changes in the structure of state government which resulted from the review. The more recent, by B.R. Davies, then permanent head of the Premier's department, describes the reorganization of cabinet following the work of the sub-committee.

This chapter necessarily traverses some of the ground already covered in these articles, but it also speculates upon some of the political factors at work in the review; "speculates" because relatively little of the data is publicly available as yet, and not all of the key protagonists are willing to be interviewed. The paper is thus in many respects premature. However, in an attempt to provide the speculation with some substance, in the final section the review has been related to certain of the more popular notions about the character of government in NSW as well as to one or two issues in the field of administrative reform.

The origins of the review

One individual more than any other is credited with having initiated the review—T.L. Lewis, Liberal member for the country electorate of Wollondilly, then minister for Lands and Tourism, later premier but subsequently deposed and relegated to the portfolio of local government. As minister for Lands and Tourism he acquired a reputation as a reformist minister, particularly in terms of the
administration of his department. Lands, an "old line" department which traces its origins to the foundation of the colony, had something of a Dickensian image, reinforced by its location in an historic unfurbished Victorian building. It had an unenviable reputation for *paperasserie*—a single transaction requiring the minister's approval was often supported by documentation so voluminous that it was wheeled into his office on a trolley. Although Lands administrators had from time to time worked to simplify the procedure, a reformed system had never been pushed beyond the administrative level to cabinet. Rightly or wrongly (wrongly, as events later proved), public servants perceived Country party interests as immovably opposed to any change in the existing system of land tenure and its administration. No minister, they felt, would be able to alter the political status quo; yet Lewis did argue successfully for change and his reputation as an activist minister interested in administrative reform was launched. His influence also extended to the lower levels of the organization. When a disgruntled member of the public complained that to purchase a map from the department it was necessary to go to three separate counters (one of which was the cashier's office on another floor), and suggested what would now be termed job enrichment in the interest of client satisfaction, Lewis was quick to agree. Within two days procedures had been revised; purchases in future were to be made at the one counter and Lewis thanked the writer for drawing his attention to this antiquated procedure.

Here then was a textbook case of the "administratively oriented" minister sought by RCGA—a point which will be taken up later, as will the question of misperception by senior public servants of what is politically feasible. For the present it is sufficient to note that it was the image of Lewis as an activist minister clearing administrative infractions which differentiated him from his colleagues. Capitalizing on this image, he apparently pushed for a thoroughgoing investigation of the whole government machine—a no-nonsense, efficient, businesslike review which would tidy up the anomalies and illogicalities in structure and function resulting from 118 years of "ad hoccery". This investigation, however, was to be in the form of a *cabinet* review, thus locking the political element into the process of administrative reform. Another consequence—although this would not necessarily have resulted from cabinet's involvement as such—was the speed with which decisions were taken and implemented.

It is not clear whether a Coombs/Corbett style of inquiry with relatively wide terms of reference was considered as an option by cabinet; although RCGA had been announced only one month
previously, the South Australian inquiry had been at work for over a year. By July 1974 Sir Henry Bland in Victoria also provided another model. One factor contributing to the "in-house" decision (apart from the political necessity to differ from the approach of the federal government) may have been a feeling on the part of cabinet that the administrative machine lacked central coordination; that "the fast flowing currents" of powerful state authorities needed their power regulated by a political master control; that cabinet no longer directed and monitored public policy in NSW (indeed if it ever did). On the other hand this "power distribution" dimension of the review could well have been as much an unintended consequence of, as a reason for, the investigation. The major forces leading to the review may still have been the current fashion for public service inquiries and the interest of Lewis in machinery of government issues. The political state of play in cabinet at that time was conducive to the personal projects of ministers. The premier, Sir Robert Askin, was within six months of retirement and, according to his critics, was more concerned with establishing the record of the longest serving NSW state premier and his forthcoming overseas trip than with the day-to-day business of government. Then too the Public Service Board welcomed such an inquiry, as one of its long standing concerns was the lack of any effective central mechanism which viewed and directed NSW government as a whole, particularly the powerful statutory bodies. This "policy vacuum" aspect of NSW government will be taken up later.

Understandably the press gave only limited coverage to the announcement of the review, despite the enthusiastic claim that this was the first full scale analysis of state functions and structure since responsible government, and that greater efficiency would result from the sub-committee's recommendations and the consequent streamlining of state machinery—or "the Knives are Out—State to Cut Public Service", as the Telegraph put it.⁴ (The opposition's criticisms, which centred on the closed nature of the review, were virtually ignored.) No alleged or proved scandal led to the review —this at least would have ensured good media coverage; it was announced in relatively placid circumstances. And if public administration is a subject which lacks sex appeal, then machinery of government questions are likely to leave readers in a comatose state. Even in parliament the matter was raised only once during 1974 (apart from a brief factual statement by Askin during debate on an appropriation bill); that was in the form of a question by Neville Wran, then leader of the opposition, who asked the deputy premier how he reconciled his assurance, when announcing the review, that
it would in no way undermine the public service with a recent threat by the premier to stand down public servants.\(^5\)

The one group which did react strongly to the announcement was the Public Service Association of NSW. Its general secretary wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* criticizing the government not for the review itself, but for ignoring the association in the selection of members of the study groups.\(^6\) He went on to urge that the opposition also be represented, and the criticisms were repeated in the August issue of *Red Tape*, the association’s journal.\(^7\) The government did not accede to either demand.

**The operation of the review**

Details of the way in which cabinet went about the review have already been outlined by the former secretary to the sub-committee on machinery of government.\(^8\) Essentially its method of operation, as befitted the style of such an inquiry, was one which stressed efficiency in the classical sense of the term. Very few resources were allocated to the review, the first and major phase of which was completed within four to five months. Its one concession to “participation” was the co-option of ten business executives to the various study groups. On certain criteria the review was an irrationally conducted piece of “ad hoccery”; for instance, its methodology seemed to “emerge” as the investigation progressed. On others it was a relatively sophisticated exercise in rationality; witness the decision to involve ministers heavily in the review, thus committing them morally at least to implementation of the recommendations.

The review was overseen by a committee of four—Lewis (convener); Wal C. Fife, minister for Mines and Power and assistant treasurer; G.F. Freudenstein, minister for Conservation and Cultural Activities; and F.M. Hewitt, minister for Labour and Industry and Consumer Affairs. It was known as the cabinet sub-committee on machinery of government. Under this sub-committee were eight “study groups”, each chaired by a minister as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of study</th>
<th>Minister</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education, health and welfare</td>
<td>E.A. Willis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice and legal</td>
<td>J.C. Maddison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction and industrial</td>
<td>L.A. Punch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy and resources</td>
<td>T.L. Lewis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulatory, planning and development</td>
<td>Sir John Fuller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Wal C. Fife</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Government services                     G.F. Freudenstein
Other business undertakings            F.M. Hewitt
A later addition was:
Controlling agencies (Public Service Board,
Treasury, Auditor General's)             Sir Charles Cutler

This grouping differed from the existing allocation of portfolios and possibly owed something to earlier machinery of government studies undertaken by the administrative research committee of the PSB. Each study group, in addition to the minister, comprised the heads of about six departments and statutory bodies, two or three representatives from middle management and a senior business executive. The ministers were those regarded as the most influential and/or active at the time, and the business executives were current or past heads or directors of such companies as CSR, Unilever, Brambles and the AMP Society—"the doyens of the business world", according to the leader of the opposition.9 The study groups thus justified the adjective "high-powered". It is also worth noting that the deputy chairman of each group, a public servant who in some cases played a central role, was deliberately chosen from outside the area of study to counterbalance, to some extent, the influence of "insiders".

The terms of reference laid down by cabinet were that the study groups examine:
1. the necessity for the various functions of government being carried out and whether any can be eliminated,
2. whether the machinery at present existing for carrying out the various functions is the most appropriate,
3. whether any re-arrangement or rationalization of services would achieve better utilisation of resources, and
4. ways and means of effecting greater economies.10

The *modus operandi* of the groups has been described as:

First to require each participating organization to identify the principal and subsidiary functions it performed, to define the nature and extent of staff engaged, and their allocation on a percentage basis to the department's or to the authority's activities, and finally to show the total expenditure for each organization and broadly how it was allocated in relation to the identified functions.

The Government then formulated questions which it invited each group to study. While placing no limitation whatever on the range of matters that could be considered, these questions were intended to ensure that each group gave consideration to the fundamental issues which the Government had in mind in setting up the study. These fundamental issues related directly to the quality and efficiency of the outputs being produced by the New South Wales public sector as a whole.11
Within three months the study groups, which met twice each week, had reported to the sub-committee. Not surprisingly the key member of each group varied; in some cases ministers played an important role, in others deputy chairmen, although it appears that each of the business executives also contributed significantly to advancing the work of the groups. In monitoring the progress of the groups, the sub-committee (advised at its weekly meeting by a small band of important officials, particularly the chairman of the PSB and the under-secretary of the Treasury), encountered issues which could be resolved only after further studies had been completed. The majority of these were carried out by the public service, but some were completed by outside consultants on a contract basis. Even within this contract group of researchers, many were recently retired public servants with specialized knowledge in the field. This policy, although ensuring expert consultants, at the same time reinforced the closed nature of the review.

One striking feature of the whole operation was the shoestring basis on which the committee structure was serviced. Each study group had an “executive officer”, a middle ranking public servant who undertook the secretarial work in addition to his normal job (in some cases, of course, allowances for this extra load were made by the officer’s department). Even the sub-committee itself for some time had only one full time official, a former PSB inspector who acted as secretary, although this nucleus was later to grow to four as a machinery of government unit within the board. A good indication of the extent to which such husbanding of administrative resources was carried was the preparation of press releases outlining the changes flowing from the review—the entire inspectorate of the board was mobilized for one day to complete the releases.

The sub-committee’s method of working, then, appears to have been very much the empirical, pragmatic approach of “sensible” administrators who were recommending changes in structure and functions on the basis of their experience to provide a “logical”, tidy whole. But as has repeatedly been pointed out there are any number of alternative structures, each of which is “logical”. Herbert Simon elaborated upon the difficulties of “principles” for the practitioner faced with reorganization proposals over 35 years ago,12 and in answer to the question “why divide the functions of New South Wales government into eight groups?” the response “why not?” is not as glib or facetious as it would first appear. But to members of a sub-committee faced with the problem of imposing a pattern on governmental activities, and who were supposedly “natural order” men, “abstracted empiricism” offered little guidance or satisfaction. In its search for the philosopher’s stone of
machinery of government reform, the sub-committee discovered the 1972 report of the committee on government productivity (the "Cronyn committee") of Ontario, Canada, and for a time it seemed that here indeed was the agent for turning the base material of the study groups into a pristine whole. Two members of the sub-committee (Fife and Freudenstein), the chairman of the board and the permanent heads of the Treasury and the Premier's department visited Toronto to study the Ontario system, which the premier of that province had called "the most comprehensive restructuring of Government in this country".

The Cronyn committee, which consisted of an equal number of "outsiders" and public servants, operated on a broader basis than did the NSW sub-committee. It invited submissions, for instance, "from the public at large, from special interest groups and from public service employees". But of course the NSW delegation was interested primarily in the operation of its recommendations on the restructuring of government as well as in discovering the provincial advantages of Canadian tax sharing. The Cronyn committee recommended in addition to the existing management board of cabinet, the establishment of a policy and priorities board, comprised of senior ministers, which was to develop "strategic policy frameworks into which all government programmes would fit" and to advise cabinet on overall government priorities. A more controversial recommendation was the creation of a new kind of minister, the provincial secretary, who would be a policy developer, evaluator, coordinator and communicator. He would have no "executive" responsibility for programmes but would derive his authority from membership of the policy and priorities board. Finally, to improve coordination, three policy fields were to be established, namely social development, resources development, and justice, with four to six ministries included in each field. Three ministries remained outside these fields, Treasury, Economics and Inter-governmental Affairs, Revenue and Government Services, thus reducing the previous 22 departments to 17 ministries. Policy field committees under the chairmanship of a provincial secretary and consisting of ministers within each field were created to resolve conflict at a sub-cabinet level.

Some of the Ontario thinking is apparent in the structure of government finally recommended for NSW, a structure which reflects the report of the sub-committee and its adjustment to the political realities of late 1974, including the Liberal-Country party understanding as to the distribution of cabinet posts. (Of course the work of the study groups was also, to some extent, "political", but more in the sense of bureaucratic than partisan politics.) Cabinet
was structured along committee lines with the policies and priority committee at the apex. Comprising the premier and treasurer (chairman); the deputy premier; minister for Federal Affairs; and the chairman of four newly created standing committees, it considered the more important policy matters from the standing committees before referring them to cabinet as a whole. The four “policy” standing committees were:

Social Development: (Education; Housing and Co-operative Societies; Health; Youth, Ethnic and Community Affairs; Culture, Sport and Recreation).

Justice and Consumer Affairs: (Attorney General and Minister of Justice; Labour, Industry and Consumer Affairs, and Minister for Federal Affairs; Police and Services; Minister for Revenue and Assistant Treasurer).

Natural Resources: (Local Government and Tourism; Planning and Environment; Lands and Forests; Agriculture; Decentralization and Development).

Industrial Resources: (Public Works and Ports; Transport and Highways; Mines and Energy).

Each committee was chaired by a minister from within the group; NSW did not opt for the Canadian provincial secretary or “super minister” solution, probably because of the political difficulties associated with these positions. These problems have been amply documented especially by Canadian writers.¹⁷

The changes in ministerial portfolios—too numerous to detail here—were in many ways “bureau shuffling”. On the surface four departments were abolished and three new ones established, but few, if any, functions appear to have been eliminated. Briefly the major changes in portfolios were:

Local Government and Highways — Local Government and Tourism
Lands and Tourism — Lands and Forests
Transport — Transport and Highways
Police — Police and Services
         — Revenue and Assistant Treasurer

The major function of the former Registrar General’s department (Land Titles) was transferred to Lands and Forests; the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission reappeared as the department of Water Resources, embracing also the water supply activities of the Public Works department; the anachronistic Chief Secretary’s department, with its delightful miscellany of activities, was abolished, but many of its functions survived intact under the new department of Services. Another new department, that of Revenue, was to manage the revenue agencies, such as the
superannuation funds, which were brought together from various portfolios. There were, of course, a host of minor changes, such as the transfer of the Prickly Pear Destruction Commission from Lands to the department of Agriculture wherein it was absorbed.

Reactions to the restructuring were understandably subdued, given the nature of the subject matter and the low—some would say subterranean—profile of the review. The most passionate (and inaccurate) report occurred two weeks prior to the formal announcement when the *Telegraph* announced "Lewis Gets Out the Axe—Blitz on 'Useless' Departments", and in its editorial claimed that Lewis "admitted what most citizens have either known or suspected: that government departments are more often than not in a muddle, that some are completely unnecessary and wasting public money". But when the reorganization was announced, where were the functions which had been abolished, the waste which had been eliminated or even the decimation, in the literal sense of the term, of public service numbers? There was little over which journalists could enthuse, although the *Sydney Morning Herald* did pay tribute to the "sweeping reorganization of the way NSW is run" and followed this with a generally laudatory editorial headed "New Broom". The *Australian* was less impressed, viewing the changes as sensible and logical, but not radical. In terms of the history of NSW government, the *Herald*'s assessment was probably reasonable; in terms of the extent of change the *Australian*’s comment was not unfair. Even in parliament references to the review were few and sober, such as "it cannot be expected that major benefits in a financial sense will result in the short run", although it was claimed that in the longer term the "review would lead to improved efficiency and economy in a wide range of services".

At one stage it appeared that the staff associations would again provide the strongest reaction when the water resources engineers in the department of Public Works passed a vote of no confidence in their minister. Their objection, however, was not to the creation of the department of Water Resources as such but to their being "kept in the dark" about the proposed reorganization; the incident was short lived. However by May 1975 the Public Service Association was arguing that some structural changes would have "a profound effect on the careers and promotional opportunities of hundreds of Association members", and announced that following representations to the premier and a conference with the chairman of the board, union and board representatives would meet fortnightly to consider all matters arising from reorganizations affecting public servants. Apart from salary questions, however, the Association appears to have taken little interest in the outcome of the
review. A contrasting perspective was provided by Rydges, the business monthly, which conceded that the "shake-up" offered a model for any organization wishing to modernize its structure, but was also interested in whether the public service would allow a smaller volume of work to fill the space available.23

Implementation

Given the current interest of the discipline in implementation, the review is worth studying on this score alone. "Instant implementation" is the phrase which best characterizes the review, as the processes of formulation and implementation of recommendations were often contemporaneous. This was due partly to political chance, for Lewis the initiator became Lewis the implementor when he was unexpectedly elected late in 1974 to succeed Askin as premier on 3 January 1975. It was unlikely that a project with which he was so closely identified would be shelved, especially as the reorganization had considerable symbolic value, announced, as it was, on the day of Lewis' assumption of the premiership. Here was evidence of the proverbial new broom, of a style different from that of Askin, an indication that NSW was to see a period of reform. However the person of the new premier may not have been crucial to implementation of the recommendations, as not only was there political kudos to be gained from announcing the results of the review but most of the political trade-offs, exchanges and bargaining among the influential ministers had already occurred in the study groups and sub-committee. Certainly the only immediate major changes which appear to have been made to the recommendations in their implementation were the transfer of the Housing and Cooperative Societies portfolio from the Social Development to the Industrial Resources Standing Committee, and a decision not to create a department of Revenue to manage the revenue agencies.

The year 1975 saw the mopping up phase of implementation of the reorganization and here it should be noted that certain agencies did fight a successful holding action against the political incursion into their palatinates, assisted, it seems, by the political changes following the review. Certain sections of the department of Public Works, for instance, apparently were not incorporated into the Maritime Services Board, nor was the Protective Office amalgamated with the Public Trust Office. The year 1975 also saw the beginnings of what might be called phase two of the review. The sub-committee on the machinery of government continued to function under the chairmanship of Hewitt, supported by the
machinery of government unit within the Public Service Board. Project teams or task forces were also set up to examine issues which had been held over as too complex to solve within the short time allowed for the review—issues such as "make or buy", but the range of questions was now broadened beyond machinery of government matters to include "job rotation" for permanent heads, corporate planning and the use of project teams for matters involving two or more governmental bodies. In short, "management" questions generally now became the focus of the sub-committee.

To complete the descriptive section of this paper, a note on the demise of the sub-committee is necessary. At the May 1976 elections the Labor party came to power, but with an effective majority in the lower house of only one. Machinery of government reviews were thus not visibly high on the new government's agenda—political survival, casinos and nude bathing were. There were some changes in portfolios of an instant nature, as is usually the case when governments change. Although the cabinet committee system, after a brief lapse, was resurrected more or less along the lines of the Lewis model, a counterpart of the sub-committee has yet to appear and the machinery of government unit within the board has been disbanded. Also disbanded were those project teams of which a minister was a member; those comprised exclusively of public servants, however, are still operating.

Because the reorganization was in operation for little more than twelve months, it is difficult to assess the outcomes of the review. It has been claimed that the cabinet committee system worked reasonably well, despite some questions about its implications for the Westminster model. But overall, the impact on public policy output may have been limited. Tinkering with structure does not always produce tangible improvements, especially in the short term. And even politicians, in extolling the worthiness of the review, spoke about long term effects on efficiency and economy rather than any immediate savings. There may have been some improvements in service to the public in certain areas, and many public servants may have seen decisions made more quickly in various programs, but for the average citizen there was probably no discernible effect on his relationships with state government. It was, of course, a "tidier looking" structure, and one public servant observed in private, somewhat cynically although perhaps accurately, that "it is now easier for ministers to find their way around the machine and it is a much less arduous task breaking in new ministers".

The one area where the review could have had dramatic implications for state administration, had the Liberal-Country party government remained in power for a longer period, is in the entry
of ministers into the policy vacuum which appears to exist in many areas at the higher echelons of state government. Ministers were surprised to find how many agencies were pursuing relatively independent lines in the various programme areas and in asking the question “how do we control them?” found one of the ironies of state government. Statutory corporations have long had the image of powerful independent satrapies which determined much of public policy in NSW; yet in most enabling acts is a provision that “in the exercise and discharge of its powers, authorities, duties and functions” the corporation shall “be subject in all respects to the control and direction of the Minister”. Many statutory corporations in NSW thus provide a striking contrast between the formal and informal in government. With this blanket provision already in existence, some ministers began to call upon its authority to coordinate policy; Fife, for example, was reputed to “have made life difficult” for the department of Main Roads. Despite its title, the department is in fact a statutory body, and a good index of its autonomy is the recent expose which revealed that the cost of cleaning the department’s offices was three times that of the average for the public service, and higher than the cost of cleaning hospital operating theatres.

The review and public policy

Although the foregoing descriptive account has in places been related briefly to more general issues, this final section of the chapter concentrates on bringing these issues together. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the review is that it occurred at all. Previous inquiries into the public service—the abortive royal commission of 1887, the royal commission of 1895 and the Mason Allard commission of 1918—had also concentrated on economy and efficiency, but through the reform of the personnel system rather than through a review of the machinery of government. Patronage, nepotism and the quality of the public service were high on the list of areas to be investigated, as was the “scientific management” field of work simplification:

In my reports upon departments I propose showing where, in my opinion, work can be simplified; how duplication may, in certain instances, be avoided, and generally, as occasion demands, how modern business methods may be adapted to Public Service requirements.

In his first sectional report, Mason Allard catalogued in two pages the reasons which had led to public service growth, but he accepted
this state of affairs as given. Professor Ken Knight has argued that the 1895 Commission’s mistake was to look for inefficiency through patronage and nepotism as such, rather than through lack of coordination in the governmental machine. In fact it appears that the last time an outside inquiry examined the functions and structure of government was in 1822–23, when Commissioner Bigge reported on the administration of the colony under the governorship of Lachlan Macquarie. At that time the Sturm und Drang of colonial politics and the convict question itself were responsible for the inquiry, but in the environment of 1974 there were no comparable factors at work. Certainly the standard criticisms of the public service had not declined, but their intensity was no more than usual. If an inquiry were to be held then the prediction would have been that its form and content would approximate those of the two earlier royal commissions, especially in view of the recent precedents of South Australia and the commonwealth. The review thus provides a useful addition to the Corbett/Coombs and Bland (Victoria)/Bland (commonwealth) models.

The second notable feature of the review is that it was a very “efficient” and speedy inquiry in terms of its research, deliberation and implementation. Most work was done within the public service, either on an honorary basis or as part of the normal job; relatively few outside consultants were engaged. Its six months duration compares very favourably with the Corbett and Coombs inquiries. It involved ministers directly in the process of administrative reform; political commitment to the outcome was likely. It is thus a model in the area of the methodology of inquiries on three counts. First, problems of non-implementation were minimized, given the high level composition of the study groups and the fact that it was a cabinet review. Second, implementation was monitored and updated by the sub-committee on machinery of government which continued to function after phase one; the topic was not to be studied once and then ignored. Third, the review had the political support which writers have argued is so necessary for the success of administrative reform. It was a textbook case on this score.

Yet ironically this political dimension of the review also highlights its shortcomings as regards long-term effectiveness. The structure and functions of government, as the following typical Caiden quotation reminds us, will at any one time result from political compromises, personal preference of Ministers, historical tradition, continuity, bureaucratic in-fighting, pressure-group, and clientele demands, experimentation, deliberate fragmentation, the major tasks confronting the . . . Government, cycles of growth in particular
areas, vested interests, bureaucratic inertia, constitutional issues, intergovernmental agreements and so on.17

Thus, had the Liberal/Country party coalition under Lewis remained in power for a long period, the review and the continuing sub-committee may have proved their worth in contributing to the more efficient and effective running of the governmental machine. But even a change of premier within the coalition a few months after the review, when Willis succeeded Lewis, resulted in changes such as the resurrection of the chief secretary, a portfolio which Willis had previously held. And when the Wran Labor government came to power in May 1976, the machinery of government was again altered, this time markedly. For instance, the premier no longer held the Treasury portfolio, but he did assume responsibility for Ethnic Affairs, which probably provides as good an illustration as any of Caiden’s argument. Of course this is not to claim that all of the work which the sub-committee initiated, including projects within the public service, was necessarily futile.

This in turn raises two complex questions neither of which can be developed fully here. The first is to what extent the restructuring of the machinery of government, while functions are held constant (which is essentially what happened in phase one of the NSW review), will result in a significant change in output. It is trite to say that the reform of structure in no way guarantees the reform of output, but it is still worth repeating. This was probably the case in NSW, although the time scale and other obvious methodological problems mean that the foregoing statement is little more than a guess.

Second, to what extent was the review “rational” if its outcomes were marginal? In terms of the most crude of the social science definitions, “the appropriateness of means to ends”, the review was highly rational given that machinery of government questions are, empirically at least, as much a matter of politics as of principles or organization. However in the debate on administrative reform there appear to be at least two dimensions involved in the rationality question which at times may conflict. On the one hand there is the “political” rationality element which argues that the administrative structure of government should be “politicized” to varying degrees (the more sophisticated versions are in the “partisan mutual adjustment” tradition); on the other is the “administrative” rationality thrust advocating a “managerialist” approach, ranging from fairly traditional remedies which are in effect claiming that organizations should be more bureaucratic (although the word bureaucracy is never used), to the various systems approaches.18 The NSW review, despite its membership, began with notions of administrative rationality which were finally modified by political considera-
tions. This is understandable; are there clear answers, for instance, to the question of whether Consumer Affairs should be a separate portfolio or attached to Justice, or to Labour and Industry? Or to the problem of how to arrange the functions of agriculture, conservation, water resources and lands? If political considerations do become the final arbiters then it is not surprising. And, of course, arguments can be advanced that in the allocation of functions a more effective and even efficient government can result from a balance of coalition or party factions or from giving an incompetent minister little to administer.

One final point of relevance to the political aspects of the review ought to be made. The case of Lewis suggests that very little political credit is given for administrative reform unless success in this field is accompanied by other talents. The common view is that Lewis’ elevation was a prime example of the Peter Principle; this may or may not be too glib an explanation, but it is true that the review counted for little when weighed politically against, say, the ten cents per gallon petrol tax. Thus the arguments which are put forward for administrative dedication on the part of ministers (and there are good normative arguments on this score) ought to take into account the fact that the system at present contains very few incentives for ministers to devote their time to administration. Ministers do become keenly involved when politically they cannot ignore an “administrative” issue, such as a departmental scandal, but why tamper with a machine which is reasonably effective when the resultant difference in performance is likely to be below the limen of the public? In any case the public is quickly bored with minutiae of administrative reform. Even the arrival of the Bigge report in NSW, Ritchie points out, was upstaged by the sighting of a giant serpent near Liverpool.

Returning to the characteristics of the review, while it was a success according to the criteria of efficiency, political involvement and implementation, it was a failure according to the yardsticks of participation, public debate and range of issues considered. As David Corbett pointed out at the 1975 annual conference of the Australian regional groups of the Royal Institute of Public Administration, in any comparison of the NSW and South Australian inquiries the NSW review wins out in terms of rapid action but not in terms of participation. Thus a broader look at NSW government might have considered questions such as the relationships between parliament (as distinct from cabinet) and the bureaucracy; the satisfaction or otherwise of the clients of various programmes; and the divisional structure of the public service which was commented upon adversely by Mason Allard in 1918. And finally, was it a failure according
to its terms of reference in that publicly no mention was made of functions having been eliminated or of immediate economies in either staff or expenditure? It may have been an efficient review, but still an ineffectual one.

One defence against such a charge would be that for the Liberal/Country party coalition at least, it laid the basis for the central control of state government. The powerful independent statutory corporations were to be brought into the ambit of overall policy. In this sense the whole review fitted well with the notion of NSW government as strong executive government concerned with the management of services, an image, incidentally, which did not always sit happily in the past with the autonomous and powerful statutory corporation stereotype.

But given the difficulty of the department/corporation dichotomy, another way of looking at the review would be to view it as an attempt to fill the policy vacuums which are believed often to exist at the upper levels of state government. Put crudely, these vacuums result from senior public servants waiting for ministerial initiatives while ministers wait for initiatives from the organizations under their aegis, and both wait upon pressures from various interest groups before adjusting existing programmes. (And would this differentiate NSW markedly from other states?) In such an environment the empire building public servant should have flourished. Some have, but surprisingly few, and probably for two reasons. The first is a risky generalization, that senior state public servants place greater emphasis on the normative aspects of the politics/administration distinction than do, say, commonwealth public servants. After all, many were taught or influenced by the late F.A. Bland. This stance is probably reinforced by the notion that the functions of state governments are concerned more with “managing things” than with glamorous “policy” matters, in contrast to the federal government. They may thus either mis-perceive what is politically possible, or regard their intrusion into “policy” as improper. The introduction of Sunday sport and changes in the laws relating to obscenity are two examples. The second—again put forward on impressionistic evidence—is that the state public service has been influenced markedly during the past decade by a “managerialist” ethos, or more colorfully it has become part of the managerialist hegemony, which stresses the communality of administration. “Let the managers manage” may have become the catch cry; but very little has been said about public servants helping to shape policies at the political level. Nor, incidentally, is it clear how the “let the managers manage” bent of the sub-committee—particularly in phase two of the review—was to square completely
with the idea of bringing the straying statutory corporations back under the ministerial control. However NSW was conforming to the view which seems to be emerging from the recent inquiries (with the possible exception of those of Sir Henry Bland as inquirer, not as chairman of the ABC) that the statutory corporation pendulum has swung too far to the side of autonomy and a strengthening of accountability is required to counterbalance this effect. However, if Roger Wettenhall's theory is correct, a decade from now may see moves for freeing these bodies from what are then seen as the shackles of restrictive controls. The move to bring the corporation back to the centre could also be regarded as an attempt to halt the regression which has occurred over the past few decades.

Finally, the NSW review was both efficient and speedy, yet unlike the lengthy Corbett and Coombs inquiries no academics were involved. The question of coincidence or causality is left to the reader.

Notes

4. This building has since been modernized internally.
5. Sydney Morning Herald, 5 March 1966, 4 (“Ministers Fight Against Files”).
7. NSWPD, 111, 1974-75, 164-65.
9. Red Tape, August 1974, 7 Wran’s comments to the press on the review are also reported in full in this issue.
13. Canberra Times, 15 November 1974, 2, report of an address by G. Gleeson to the ACT Group of the Royal Institute of Public Administration.
15. Ibid., 63.
16. See, for example, Australian, 11 January 1975, 8B.
20. Australian, 11 January 1975, 8B.
24. B.R. Davies, "The Political Process".
25. See, for example, NSWPD, 112, 1974-75, 1473.
27. Australian, 22 March 1975, touches on this issue.
28. Sydney Morning Herald, 18 February 1977, 8, gives a brief account of the issue. The minister for Transport finally ordered that the contract be terminated.
29. First Sectional Report of the Royal Commission to Inquire into the Public Service of NSW, (Sydney: Legislative Assembly, NSW, 1918), George Mason Allard, xx.
33. This is similar to a distinction made by R.N. Spann at the 1976 Annual RIPA Conference, see AJPA, 35 (1), March 1976, 97.
35. R.L. Wettenhall, "Government Department or Statutory Authority?" Public Administration (Sydney), 27(4), December 1968, 350-59.
Jean Holmes and Ross Curnow have produced two interesting and lively chapters. Each contains so many points that it would not be possible to traverse them in detail. I will therefore identify four or five strands which are common to both, and seem to have continuing importance. In drawing out the strands, I have relied on my own experience with RCAGA and on what I have picked up about other inquiries, both here and overseas. The five strands I have identified relate to:

- The origins of inquiries
- Proposals related to machinery of government
- Statutory corporations
- The effectiveness of public service inquiries
- Output

**Origins**

Public service inquiries seem to be fairly few and far between—not only in NSW and Victoria, where the previous inquiries were in 1918 and 1926 respectively. Why is this? Some obvious and rather rude answers are unlikely to be the real ones. Is it that public services are, although the frequent butt of criticism, on the whole not too badly run? Is it that, rather like democracy, they are bad—but one can only imagine worse ones as the outcome of inquiries? Is it that public services themselves are so resistant to outside scrutiny that governments only prevail every half century? Is it that the products of an inquiry are so long in developing that, in the press of other events, only an urgently reformist government, or an extremely safely established one, get round to mounting such an inquiry? Whatever the reasons—and there is probably an element of each of the foregoing in the answer—inquiries in NSW and Victoria are not exceptional in their infrequency.

Both the recent state inquiries apparently had the personal
support of the premier, and the strong support of the head of government seems an important element in the holding of such inquiries. This involvement raises the issue whether the elected head of government is the right person to be primarily responsible for administration or whether that person should be especially allocated. The British post-Fulton arrangements, although untidy, may be worth more serious thought in the world of administrative reality than we have sometimes been prepared to concede.

Does the linking of public service and public policy suggest a new portfolio at a time when government employees represent a very substantial proportion of total employment? It may be that this is more significant at federal than state level, but in the two most populous states what is done for and with the public service has important implications for other areas.

**Machinery of government**

The NSW inquiry was successful, by the measure of acceptance of its findings, in machinery of government terms. The cabinet reorganization appears to have been precisely what was recommended. Curnow’s assessment is highly cynical—

In terms of the history of NSW government, the Herald’s assessment was probably reasonable; in terms of the extent of change the Australian’s comment was not unfair.

The main Bland report on reorganization—the second report on organizational and administrative arrangements relating to conservation, environmental and land use planning matters, appears to have been much less successful than the other reports in terms of implementation. Holmes suggests that this was because divergent political views embodied in a somewhat bewildering range of institutions proved not susceptible to recommendations relating to administrative coordination.

This dilemma is perhaps a central one and goes to the distinction between politics and administration. Both theoretically and pragmatically it is arguable that there is a distinction. It can also be argued that unless one accepts that there is a distinction, even if not always readily seen, then one ends up in a blur of confusion and, in the case of public service inquiries, in a pile of unadopted recommendations.

Applying this to the NSW and Victorian inquiries, it seems that machinery of government matters need a specific political initiation and that their outcome is determined by political rather than
administrative factors. For obvious reasons, NSW succeeded in this. But Bland failed. Holmes suggests that one of the reasons for his failure is probably that he did not don the political activist's cap, open his eyes and ears to the many interests and try then to come up with a solution. I wonder whether there is not something of a resolution to be found by typing machinery of government matters as very much political issues, requiring answer in political (or public policy) rather than in administrative terms, and other issues as administrative in nature.

It was this distinction which led RCAGA after a great deal of thinking and discussion to recommend that there not be a separate machinery of government unit, but that instead the Public Service Board should have a collecting function and the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet a policy advising responsibility.

**Statutory corporations**

The plethora of statutory bodies was clearly an aspect of state administration which worried both the NSW inquiry and Sir Henry Bland. Nonetheless neither report appears to have done much to reduce the numbers. Nor did either suggest criteria for the establishment or abolition of statutory bodies. In this RCAGA went a long way further and it is a little disappointing to find that the only comment about its handling of this important subject is a derogatory one.

Curnow writes about a pendulum. This is probably not only true, but may be desirable rather than undesirable, as he seems to imply. A pendulum effect would serve neatly the need for functional efficiency, in the "corporation" phase, and for accountability and political influence on policy or other matters in the "departmental" phase. In this, I find myself more attracted to continuing change than to a search for some final and all-embracing synthesis. It is, of course, this continually changing pattern of requirements and acceptable solutions that makes the practice of public administration so fascinating, just as it makes the theory so intractable.

A strand of particular interest in the Holmes chapter is the discussion of the role of the plethora of statutory corporations. Extending her point, it might be said that the large number of statutory bodies in Victoria might well be coming back into their own, as a means of involving the community rather more effectively in the outworking of administration. That is an important point, and one which we would all do well to bear in mind as we discuss the vexed question of statutory bodies (the issue is also raised, but
without resolution, in the Curnow chapter). However, her warning also needs to be heeded: if you cannot readily abolish statutory bodies (and this seems to have been the outcome in both NSW and Victoria), then perhaps you had better not be too carried away about creating them. The other side of the coin is of course the Coombs recommendations that departments themselves should develop ways of improving consultative relationships with the parts of the community they serve (RC 6.3)—an aspect on which, to judge from the Curnow chapter, the NSW inquiry was probably not too keen. The commission also noted that it is possible to use statutory bodies to facilitate open interaction between the administration and the community, for example the Grants Commission, the Universities Commission, the Schools Commission, the Social Welfare Commission and the Regional Councils for Social Development (the latter non-statutory).

Output

In terms of output, the Victorian inquiry was clearly much more satisfactory to the intelligent citizen than was the NSW inquiry. The reports were quickly prepared and were soon made public. That is as it ought to be. However, neither of the reports contains very much in the way of supporting material.

I have often said to the staff engaged on work for public inquiries that the appendices they produce—usually left reasonably untouched by the commissioners themselves—are likely in the longer term to be of more interest and possibly to have more effect than much of the reports themselves. This simply supports what I remember Professor Parker saying to a RIPA seminar in Canberra last year that the four Appendix volumes to the RCAGA report will in the longer term possibly be at least as influential as the report itself.

It is to be regretted that in the case of the NSW inquiry there is a total absence of background material and that in the case of the Victorian inquiries the background material is relatively limited in scope and depth.

The effectiveness of inquiries

Jean Holmes concludes that—

Administrative reform is an outcrop from the perspectives on social
change that take hold, more likely to follow such changes than lead the way

and asks whether the catalyst function of public service inquiries is their best achievement. Curnow suggests that the outcome of the NSW inquiry was good in terms of the recommendations, but poor in terms of participation. He has the somewhat circular proposition that

Problems of non-implementation did not really arise, given the high level composition of the study groups and the fact that it was a cabinet review but one is tempted to ask what was accomplished apart from some bureau shuffling and the cabinet committee structure. These, for reasons suggested in the preceding note on machinery of government, are perhaps hardly what public service inquiries are about.

In all the papers it is possible to detect a little disappointment. I find myself asking whether this is because there have been unreasonable expectations of public service inquiries. Are they not condemned to working within the framework? Does the feeling of disappointment really go to some illusory benefit that, for political purposes, usually of a short term character, we were led at the outset of the inquiry to believe would be achieved by it?

A further point to remember in assessing effectiveness is that apparently very small changes in existing arrangements may often have quite significant effects. For example, simply dropping the clause requiring all public servants to be British subjects will, over the years ahead, have a profound effect on the structure and possibly the working of the commonwealth public service. So also, in the longer term, may an apparently small change like dropping seniority as an element in promotions and leaving only “superior efficiency”. What is perhaps needed is closer attention to the longer-term effects of these smaller changes. One of the points one has to keep very much in mind as one is making recommendations in the public service field is the danger of overkill. It is often quite small changes which will produce all that is required—large changes, or even a number of changes directed at the same end, will almost certainly produce a result that is exaggerated in some other direction. The carefully balanced changes suggested to the arrangements for the employment of departmental heads in the RCAGA report are an example of the outcome of a very complex set of considerations—unspectacular, difficult to understand but if implemented of considerable significance in years to come.

As a final comment, it may be worth drawing attention to the essentially pragmatic nature of the two inquiries. In relation to NSW, it is left to our imagination to draw that conclusion, but Curnow’s
comment would certainly confirm any inclination one had in that direction. The same is true of the Victorian inquiry, where Holmes on several occasions mentions the hard-headed and practical style of the four Bland reports—a point which is underlined by reading the text itself. Perhaps the essentially pragmatic nature of the discussion and recommendations contained in the reports of public service inquiries is another illustration of the difficulty of being sure that there is an academic discipline of public administration.

**Note**

The Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration
The Career Service
and Public Policy

Kenneth Wiltshire

The precise meaning of the term "career service" has never been clear. Nor have the alternatives to a career service ever been delineated with sufficient clarity to enable a proper analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of this particular form of administration by contrast and comparison. It is one of those terms with which everyone would claim a general familiarity but few would be willing to list its specific characteristics.

Most students of public administration would realize that a career service has something of the physical appearance of a military pattern, and that, in commonwealth countries at least, its origins owe something to the evolution of the Westminster model of government, especially the doctrine of ministerial responsibility, set in the gradual evolution of modern constitutional monarchy. It is also commonly accepted that the notion of a non-politicized government bureaucracy, again an outcome of Westminster traditions although more specifically the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms, was a major element in spawning the idealized virtues of a career service.

But beyond this what can be regarded as the essential features of a career service seems to vary from country to country and from author to author. Neither the McCarthy report on the New Zealand civil service, nor Fulton in Britain, nor Glassco in Canada, came to grips with any fundamental reappraisal of the contemporary relevance and composition of their career services, although each was swift to reaffirm the importance of the concept and its essentiality to the functioning of government. Australia's record is no better: for example, Spann points out that public services in Australia share some common characteristics which grew out of reforms commencing in 1859 with the Victorian commission inquiry, and especially the 1895 NSW and 1902 commonwealth Public Service Acts. These set a pattern for our public services which traditionally incorporated the desire for a career service.
However, it was a pattern not without interesting variations, and which never extended itself to all positions. But it came to be the norm, departures from which, however numerous, have been felt to need special justification.⁵

In the commonwealth public service other important milestones in the evolution of that career service included the McLachlan royal commission of 1918–20 which recommended *inter alia* that all staff be brought under the Public Service Act to be controlled by a single public service commissioner, that the service be subjected to a general reclassification and grouped into four new divisions, and most importantly, that appointments be made by the commissioner directly instead of by the governor general.⁶ The Bailey report on promotions in 1943–44, the Boyer report on recruitment, the Vernon economic enquiry, the Vernon post office enquiry, the Coombs report on government expenditure, the Tange report, and a host of reports on superannuation, employment of handicapped people, the future of the ACT and probings of the public accounts committee of parliament, all tacked on a little more thinking to our notions of a career service in commonwealth government employment.⁷ However none of them paused to consider the concept in depth, to question its suitability or relevance. Instead each report commenced from the fundamental proposition that a career service was the best form of administration and then sought to tinker with it to suit revealed conditions within its sphere of investigation.

The result is that the commonwealth Public Service Act and regulations contain no specific definition of their career service and, indeed, the term does not appear anywhere in the legislation at all.⁸ For about a decade the best authority we have had to rely upon has been Gerald Caiden's perceptive analysis of the commonwealth public service and his interpretation of the type of career service it was.⁹

Consequently one would hope that the advent of such an all-embracing inquiry as RCAGA would at least afford the opportunity for a complete reappraisal of the relevance of this notion within the commonwealth administrative system. RCAGA hoped so too. In notes prepared for a press conference on 24 October 1974, a number of provocative questions were raised as pointers for discussion. They included:

What employment should the career service cover—departments only, departments and authorities, Australian government and also state or even state and local government which deals with the related problem of mobility?
Should the career service concept apply to all categories of employees?
Does the career service concept mean different things to different categories of employees?

Would a study of the "culture" of the public service in comparison with service in one or more large private companies be desirable?

More particularly RCAGA asked whether there was scope in a career service for lateral recruitment, part-time employment, the use of consultants and exchange schemes with non-public service employment. It then went on to question various conventions including neutrality, anonymity, tenure, mobility, classification and the divisional structure, concluding finally with these words:

What are the marks of a career service in the late 1970's and the 1980's and what emphasis should be placed on permanence and mobility, flexibility, participation and service?

Unfortunately this represents the only apparent attempt by anybody to query the fundamentals of the career service concept. If the commission had sought to throw down the gauntlet with this welcome attack on humbug and conventions, it was to be disappointed at the response. In their submissions to RCAGA the various public service staff associations strongly favoured retention of the career service without defining it in their own terms and without any attempt at a rational reappraisal of the principles. Perhaps this is not surprising given the fact that so many elements of the concept, for example, security of tenure, promotion by merit, absence of lateral recruitment are so close to the raison d'être of these staff associations. Witness for example this extract of terse staccato reaffirmations contained in the submission of the Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association

6. We support the concept of a career public service with open entry at the base level. We see security of tenure as a vital prerequisite to the concept of a career service.

6.4 We accept the principle of an entry examination to provide an "order of acceptance" list.

6.5 We recommend that all recruiting should be under the direct control of the central body, with standard entry to the administrative and clerical sectors . . .

6.8 We strongly oppose appointments to higher levels from outside the public service; we believe such recruiting denies the right for career opportunities to those who have entered through fair and open competition at the base level. We also strongly oppose the use of lateral appointments as a device to avoid the high educational standard requirements set for various positions in the service.

One might have expected a more original response to RCAGA's provocation from the Public Service Board. But this also was not
to be. In its first submission the board admitted that the term “career service” varied between different services but felt that it would generally embrace such characteristics as neutrality and anonymity associated with ministerial responsibility, open merit competition in recruitment, promotion on merit, a code of conditions of employment and security of tenure. But the key statement from the board was as follows:

At this stage it should be said that the Board regards the basic elements of a career service as stemming in a fundamental way from our system of government and, while some evolutionary developments may be justified (and indeed have occurred), the basic features of a career service remain valid—any major departure from these features would, in the Board’s view, present a risk of the most serious kind to the continuing availability of effective administration of ministerial departments.²

The board gave no supporting argument for this view except to say that Fulton had said much the same thing (although Fulton gave no supportive material either). A glance at this statement will reveal serious inadequacies. The board concedes that “some evolutionary developments may be justified”. How is a change to be defined as simply an evolutionary one rather than a revolutionary one, and how many such evolutionary changes (which the board admits have occurred) are necessary before the so-called “basic features of a career service” begin to disappear? In other words how would the board determine whether some change represented one of its so-called “major departures” presenting a “risk” of a “serious” kind? There are far too many value judgements implicit here and one can only suspect from the tone of the submission that the board would see itself as the sole arbiter of the degree of “evolutionary” change permitted to the system. Despite these shortcomings, it is important to realize that the board obviously saw the “career service” as a dynamic rather than a static concept and the rest of its submission in this field acknowledges the desirability and inevitability of many changes to the career service notion.

What did RCAGA make of all this? Very wisely it commissioned a study to determine whether public servants themselves perceived they operated in a career service. This was significant because reality and an employee’s perception of reality often do not coincide. The survey was a remarkable logistical effort which pounded 20,000 commonwealth public servants with a long questionnaire. The results of the “Career Service” survey are published in appendix volume three of the RCAGA report. It is a severe shortcoming that no analysis of the data is provided: space does not permit an analysis
of the copious tables but it is safe to say that this survey demonstrated that the attitudes of commonwealth public servants towards career service concepts are now far distant from original notions of the elements of a "career service". Indeed, many of the traditional institutional hallmarks of a career service thought to be so important in the early part of this century are now ranked much lower in importance by the present day public service. These observations are equally true of the findings of a Public Service Board induction survey which is also published in the appendix. However in the absence of any published analysis from RCAGA's research staff, it is difficult to ascertain which factors were dominant in determining its final recommendations in this area of its activity. It is not possible to say whether the results of the empirical research outweighed the conservative stance of the unions and the board.

The royal commission has at least provided one major service to future students of this element of public administration with its attempt at a definition of a "career service" (RC 8.1.12).

In the commonwealth administration, the general concept of a career service has come to mean:

(i) recruitment by merit (however defined and determined) to a
(ii) unified service (intended to mitigate the evils which result from a fragmentary service) subject to
(iii) independent, non-political control of recruitment and of the conditions of employment; and where the rights of career public servants are protected by
(iv) regulations which discourage the recruitment of "strangers" to positions above the base grade, and by
(v) legislated protection against arbitrary dismissal (termination being only for cause and by due process).

This unified service is characterized by

(vi) a hierarchical structure of positions defined by
(vii) a regular system of position classification of salaries (with incremental advancement within the salary ranges of particular positions), with the career public servant rising through this hierarchy of positions according to
(viii) a system of promotion by merit subject to
(ix) a system of appeals against promotions (designed to ensure that justice is seen to be done)—the final reward for long and loyal service being
(x) a distinctive retirement and pension system.

More importantly, the report added

The Commission feels that various elements of the "career service" concept have over time mistakenly been allowed to become inflexible dogma of public service employment. We feel that there are cases where these "principles" have come to be used to justify practices no longer
relevant to any discernible need; or which produce results in fact inconsistent with the objectives to which the principles were directed; that no assessment has been made in contemporary conditions of the costs incurred in terms of reduced efficiency and unfair treatment of certain categories of staff by the uniform application of these principles. The Commission, having studied submissions and other material before it, believes that there is justification for a reconsideration of these characteristics of a career service as a necessary and sufficient basis for the efficient staffing of the commonwealth administration in contemporary conditions.

Despite this healthy scepticism, the published reports do not give any further evidence of debate about the “career service” concept as a whole. This is not to say that it did not occur within the commission. We know that it did. However RCAGA chose instead to present its recommendations for each of its criteria for a career service separately so it is best to examine the recommendations 

Recruitment

The commission has recommended changes in the eligibility requirements to the service including abolition of almost all nationality restrictions, more realistic standards for health, character and security, abolition of the ten per cent limitation on non-technical graduate intake and removal of the special provisions for ex-servicemen. All of these are sensible changes which will merely serve to bring the rules governing recruitment practices into line with modern conditions and towards more equal opportunity for all members of the Australian public to gain entry to the commonwealth public service.

However a few other recommendations will probably prove unworkable. For example it is recommended that the Public Service Board should delegate more extensively to departments the power of recruitment, including lateral recruitment, and should itself only set standards and monitor procedures. The board will find it difficult to release its grip on the control of recruitment and especially on lateral recruitment. The most that could be hoped for is some delegation of authority with reserve powers remaining with the board for each appointment. Australians are too afraid of political and administrative nepotism in government appointments to give each agency carte blanche in recruitment, particularly at senior levels.

In this respect RCAGA should have been more definite and stated
whether its research and deliberations had shown a great or small need for an increase in lateral recruitment because the issue is of considerable contemporary concern and lies at the heart of the whole question of the future of a career service. A move towards more lateral recruitment would be welcomed by most people outside the service but there can be no doubt that fierce resistance would be encountered from the public service staff associations. These associations would probably not be as violently opposed to the other related recommendation, that officers with more than three years' experience who leave the service should regain their benefit entitlements should they return.

The final recommendation in relation to recruitment is that less weight be given to educational qualifications in selection and advancement, that mandatory qualifications be prescribed sparingly, and departments be delegated the power to specify such qualifications subject to the board's power to determine "equivalent" qualifications.Whilst most would agree that educational qualifications alone are a poor guide to administrative potential, in the absence of any superior substitute it is difficult to see government agencies responsible for recruitment abandoning their use in setting standards for entry to various positions and grades. Nonetheless, one can envisage isolated cases where previous work experience should certainly be regarded as a substitute for formal educational qualifications.

Equal opportunity or equality

Recommendations here relate to special programmes of recruitment, training and career development to overcome past discrimination or lack of opportunities for women, aboriginals and the handicapped; legislation prohibiting discrimination in government employment, and the establishment of an office of equality in employment within the Public Service Board.

The abolition of discrimination in public service employment is an admirable ideal. In the past there has been an excessive degree of discrimination in all Australian public services on the grounds of sex, race and religion. The problem is that nearly all the formal rules and regulations which were discriminatory have gone within the past decade: discrimination now remains mostly as an attitude of mind. No decree from any royal commission will remove this immediately. For example, the marriage bar for females was lifted ten years ago, but there is still a widespread lack of acceptance of working married women in permanent government employment
and more particularly in public service superannuation schemes and leave entitlement provisions. Even promotion procedures are still conducted in a way that primarily benefits males and single women. Because these things are for the most part covert rather than overt, it seems unlikely that the proposed office of equality in employment could do anything about them—if it is established. There are also many inside and outside the service who admit that discrimination has occurred but oppose any move to compensate for the sins of the past. They argue that the only practicable solution is to ensure equal opportunities from the present. Otherwise, so the argument goes, for how long will you perpetuate compensatory retrospective provisions—for one generation or a decade, or longer? A related question is “Can any proposals for special measures to secure adequate advancement of disadvantaged groups be implemented without engaging in reverse discrimination?”

**Motivation, rewards, penalties**

The commission recommends that the system of reclassification of positions according to the performance of the occupant should be extended to all professional areas where there is scope for personal initiative. The idea was to placate lawyers who complained that they sat at the top of their scale for too long and, because of a lack of promotional opportunities beyond that limit, were being underpaid for their expertise. RCAGA has been too glib in accepting this solution as the only means to rectify this anomaly. Even the lawyers have mistaken their problem. They argue that the incremental scale is too long but the real answer is that professional scales are not long enough. Professionals in all Australian public services have scales which take them so far, but to advance beyond that point they must leave their profession behind and become administrators. To do this they must compete with clerical/administrators who have an inherent advantage. The result is that there are many ex-professionals making bad administrators since the required qualities of both groups are often diametrically opposed, and the incumbents would rather have remained as professionals anyway. The answer is not personal classifications which would simply be unworkable and unwieldy, but rather an extension of all professional scales upward, perhaps with efficiency barriers at certain levels. The professional who wants to remain in his profession in the public service should have a career structure he can follow almost to the permanent head level. Otherwise we shall drain away the best professionals into administrative positions and end up with the worst
people in both areas. It is surprising that RCAGA was not lobbied more heavily on this aspect by the professional associations.

If staff assessment reports are to be made available to the staff themselves, as is recommended by the commission, and also to be made available to promotion, selection and appeal committees, some strict guidelines for the writing of these reports will need to be laid down, and a tight system of counterchecking will be necessary to prevent discrimination by supervisors. It is worth noting that some of the state public services have had difficulties with defamation proceedings where a third person saw a derogatory staff report. Legal implications of this aspect will have to be clarified.

Perhaps one of the most contentious of RCAGA'S findings relates to the definition of “efficiency” for promotion purposes. Here is one of the key elements of any career service, and the one dearest to the heart of serving employees. The recommendation is that efficiency be defined as “suitability for the work to be performed” and that this should be the sole criterion for promotions and appeals throughout the service. Selection for promotion is also to be by committee. The word “suitability” is vague. Does it incorporate the number of years in the service or in a specific area, that is, seniority, and how will educational qualifications, general demeanour, and past records be weighted to determine this “suitability”? But it is the second element which gives cause for concern: “the work to be performed”. Does this include potential for advancement to higher ranks or is a person’s suitability to be determined solely in relation to the particular position to be filled? This is significant because there is a growing feeling in Australian public services that promotability itself should be a component of the test as to whether a person can be promoted—their potential to ascend further up the hierarchy. But if this is taken into account in making promotions, would it not wreak havoc at promotion appeals with one candidate endeavouring to pit his “potential” or “suitability” against another’s?

The commission has recommended a number of salutory reforms to the mechanism of promotion appeals making them more open and accountable to all participants. This should ensure a greater measure of justice and make for speedier hearings. These reforms include notification of unsuccessful applicants, reporting on committee activities, advertising all vacancies, limited appeals for non-applicants, better documentation by applicants, limited use of interviewing and different forms of appointment of chairmen of committees.

The commonwealth public service has, since the war, become softer in its approach to unsuitable and recalcitrant employees. The
benefit of the doubt has tended to be given to the staff member in most cases. There has been a lessening in the number of probationary appointments annulled and the incidence of disciplinary procedures is so small as to be almost non-existent. The Public Service Board would like to believe that this is attributable to changes in probationary procedures since 1971, resulting in supervisors taking more interest in new recruits. But the seeming lack of discipline in the service has become an issue with the Australian public who have always become restless when public servants, whose salaries they are paying through taxation and who are given security of tenure, seem to be able to get away with various forms of misconduct. The commission has recommended changes which on the surface would seem to point to a toughening of discipline in the service. These, however, for the most part involve a devolution of power from the board to departmental management. Whilst it can be conceded that a permanent head and his senior officers should be able to run a tight ship and ought to be more familiar with the individual problems and inadequacies of particular staff members, one suspects that the old cries of favouritism may arise again. For the serious offences at least, the board should be the schoolmaster applying punishment. After all, there is nothing in anybody's definition of a career service about having an easy ride through a soft system.

As part of this package, the commission has also recommended changes to procedures for voluntary and compulsory early retirement and moves are already under way to implement these suggestions. The board however prefers to use the more euphemistic language of voluntary and "management-initiated" early retirement. The unions want the former but not the latter and a trade-off seems the most likely result. Greater emphasis on early retirement was long overdue. There have been too many square pegs in round holes in the commonwealth public service for which a lack of mobility around the service is mostly to blame. In these cases, the general public, the public service, and not least of all the employee concerned would all be better off if he or she retired early.

However there are other aspects of this issue. This reform ought to be accompanied by a national superannuation scheme for Australia to encourage mobility in and out of the public sector at any age and to remove the pressure for early retirement. We ought also to be thinking about education and retirement planning for those who will be leaving the service when they are fifty-five. These matters go well beyond RCAGAS terms of reference but they are worth mentioning because the government will grasp these early retirement recommendations eagerly as a means of keeping un-
employment down and expanding opportunities for young people, but will probably overlook the needs of those retiring. Of course the whole assumption behind these moves is that it will be only the ill, maladjusted or inefficient who will depart early; time alone will prove or disprove this assumption.

**Abolition of divisions**

Undoubtedly one of the major recommendations is for the abolition of divisions in the commonwealth public service. It is true that the presence of divisions is fundamentally incompatible with all notions of a career service since the barriers so created inhibit freedom of movement from bottom to top of the pyramid.

The actual recommendation is that the divisions be abandoned and replaced by a system of categories and occupational groups to be developed by the board and departments but not set down in the Act. The main opposition to the abolition of the divisions will come from the public service unions whose membership has been geared to the divisional structure. But divisions have long been an anachronism perpetuating false and harmful distinctions of status and pay with little relevance to ability, and too much false respect for the old pre-Fulton British civil service class system.

However, the alternative being suggested is too vague to be fully comprehended and smacks of the board having "snowed" the commission. What are these occupational groups? How will their relativities be determined and what effect will this have especially for industrial relations? What provisions will exist for cross-movement between occupational groups? Will the top public servants be drawn equitably from each of those occupational groups or solely from within one of them? And what of that ubiquitous and enigmatic occupational group, "clerical/administrators", who might come to dominate the others? Admittedly the commission had limited time to develop an alternative structure, but such a profound change required more positive direction than simply leaving the whole reform to the Public Service Board to devise.

All these remarks apply with equal, if not stronger, force to the proposal to abandon the second division and replace it with a "senior executive category". The second division is meant to perform the thinking function of the service and it contains many fine people as well as a lot of over-rated overpaid fast talking egotistical con-men. It has been a source of great contention from the time of its inception, through reforms suggested by Professor Parker in 1942, and the Boyer committee. Then it was moulded quietly by
Sir Frederick Wheeler while no-one was watching. It was always intended to be an elite, and consequently was regarded suspiciously in Australia. Whilst it remained fairly small it could be tolerated, but the Labor government undoubtedly focused attention on it by allowing it to increase its size by over fifty per cent in three years. How large can a select group become before it ceases to be an elite?

This recommendation for a change in the title of the second division seems to be merely a change of name. Instead of the second division we will now have the “senior executive category” with all its existing problems, unless there are harsh attempts to prune its membership: and this will be fiercely resisted. Elites are hard to abolish; they tend to reappear under different guises, as has been demonstrated in Britain despite the Fulton committee’s determination to revamp the executive class. We must accept the inevitability of elites in human organizations for there is too much theoretical and pragmatic evidence to hand to allow us to do otherwise. But they must be kept small and accountable and be selected as far as is possible on merit and personal characteristics of imagination, intellect, leadership and even an amount of “fantasy” which the French regard as a virtue in their top public administrators. But this proposal and the accompanying argument in the text of the report do not signify any major departure from the status quo.

A unified service

The recommendations for a unified service are welcome and long overdue, although it should be realized that the commission’s findings add virtually nothing to the Public Service Board’s submissions on this aspect. Since the war semi-government bodies outside central administrative control and on the fringe of parliamentary scrutiny have proliferated. The same is true for the states, and inquiries there have also expressed concern about this matter. Critics within the statutory bodies and “quangos” will no doubt point to a seeming contradiction between the desire expressed by RCAGA for the decentralization of decision-making and grouping them under the one Public Service Act. But if they think the implication through they will see that these two notions are not incompatible. All that RCAGA is saying is that the de facto political controls over statutory bodies should now be made explicit and that there exist few reasons for affording these bodies preferential treatment over the traditional departmental form. More importantly this will facilitate mobility within the service and, since pay and
conditions in many statutory bodies have always been monitored by the board, there will be no problem in equating terms of employment. Within these overall common conditions of employment there is still ample room for devolution of decision-making in personnel administration for permanent heads.

Another recommendation relates to the redefinition of permanent and temporary workers according to the length of time for which they are engaged. This too was suggested by the Public Service Board and was a wise recommendation because false and inequitable distinctions had arisen, and the phenomenon of the “temporary” employee who had spent nearly all his or her working life in the service was all too common.

**Industrial relations**

This area bears on career service principles to the extent that public service conditions lead or lag behind those in the private sector and the states and thereby affect movement in and out of the Commonwealth public service. RCAGA’s recommendations in this field have but one object, to make the public service’s industrial relations procedures identical with those applying in the private sector. No doubt many would mourn the passing of the public service arbitrator, the veto powers of the Commonwealth government over public service pay rises and the restrictions on striking. It is true that there were many benefits in having procedures and bodies suitable for and expert in public sector problems. But in the 1970s it has become more important that public servants be seen to have equal treatment with their private sector “counterparts” to avoid further accusation of privilege (or retardation) for the public sector.

For the advocates of worker participation the recommendations on the joint council and consultative councils will appear far too tame. The joint council, until very recent times, has been an ineffective body, but it could lead to a genuine involvement by Commonwealth public servants in the management of their own departments. Surely RCAGA could have been more venturesome here and given a lead to the private sector and state governments.

**Tenure**

This is probably the most fundamental element of the career service concept and it is one aspect which has come under intense public scrutiny in the past decade. However RCAGA confronted the problem
tangentially. Relevant recommendations are scattered around the report. Permanent heads are to remain permanent although more scope for mobility and broader selection processes are proposed. Staff exchanges are envisaged with the private sector, state and local institutions, academic institutions and larger voluntary agencies but always with "adequate safeguards for employees and the institutions concerned". Changes to probationary and early retirement proceedings have already been mentioned as have the redefinition of the permanent/temporary dichotomy and reforms for handling of grievances. Officers in management services are to be moved out periodically on rotation.

The overall impression given by the report is that security of tenure for commonwealth public servants remained largely unquestioned. The commission seems to regard intra- and extra-service mobility as a substitute for any wholesale reform of the permanent tenure convention, despite the fact that the career service survey revealed permanent tenure to be only one of a number of elements regarded as important by public servants and certainly not always the most important. The suggestions by RCAGA about the permanent/temporary problem seem to imply that they would favour more public service work being handled by staff on a fixed term contract basis—"a permanent organizational structure beyond which the fluctuating margin of work is met by temporary employment" as Gerald Caiden said in 1967. The subsequent statements of one of the commissioners confirms that this thinking was in the mind of the commission:

The Royal Commission has I hope paved the way for an interesting development. It has suggested that employees should be able to decide whether they wish to sign on for long term tenured employment or to join on a shorter term basis when contract employment would apply ... The classical argument for granting tenure to public servants is that it gives the senior public servant the kind of certainty which enables him to withstand political pressures. There is a good deal to be said for this but it clearly applies only to a relatively small group of senior people. If the link between tenure and occupancy of a particular position can be broken without prejudicing the rights of the public servant, new fields are opened up for the use of the tenured form of engagement.

However well intentioned RCAGA may have been one remains sceptical about the scope of application of these reforms. Would these new contractual provisions apply across the whole second and third divisions for example? Consider the following conservative remarks of the board in its RCAGA submission:
Undoubtedly there has been increasing mobility in employment and a lessening tendency for employees to spend a full working life in one organization. This trend does not, in the Board’s view, provide a strong argument against having an appropriate degree of security of tenure for those who desire it and those whose particular skills, built up over lengthy service in the public sector, may not be readily translatable into other employment . . . The Board sees merit in an increase in engagement from outside the Service of persons with special skills and expertise on a form of contract, provided that the numbers, along with separate lateral recruitment, do not unduly damage the prospects of the career staff. . . . The Board would have strong reservations about adoption of a ‘contract type’ scheme, in the Australian administrative environment, for all senior staff, even if the renewal of contracts were a matter for a central personnel authority.

And then the final dampener—

It is not clear to the Board that there are persuasive reasons for advocating such a basic change, to offset the significant risks involved. It is doubtful if much would be achieved in terms of a ‘spur’ to individual performance improvement compared with the damage that could be done to recruitment and retention of suitable staff.

No supporting argument was given for the above-mentioned outlook. The so-called “significant risks” were not elaborated upon and the doubts about a “spur” to improvement remained simply doubts. Clearly this is inadequate on an issue which is vital to the Australian public. Why, for example, can’t the whole of the fourth division and the bottom two-thirds of the third division be placed on contract? As Bailey says, do they really require security of tenure to withstand political pressure?

Far too little is known to make bold assertions proposing radical change or advocating conservative stagnation. We do know now that only about one-third of those who join the service on a permanent basis stay in it until retirement but it does not seem to have concerned the board that it has no comprehensive information about the reasons why people leave the public service. As usual in most large organizations much more attention is paid to the entrance door than to the exit.

RCAGA has given some opening to the view that tenure should be removed. Tenure has been the special privilege of the public sector in an age when special privileges for public servants are no longer justifiable. Of course it has to be conceded that the events of the past few years have demonstrated that if the board and the government really want to, they can sack public servants: the rules do allow it. Or in the more characteristically blunt words of Sir Henry Bland:
There is no difficulty in firing public servants in Australia. All it takes is the intestinal fortitude to do it."

**Retrospect**

The evidence tendered to RCAGA demonstrates that in terms of actual experience with staff movements and in relation to the feelings and aspirations of its members the commonwealth public service is a long way from being a pure career service.

While the RCAGA recommendations are not sweepingly innovative, they would move that service even further away from the old ideal, so far in fact that this process of evolution will have made the service sit most uneasily within traditional Westminster conventions. This is especially true as RCAGA failed to come to grips with the question of ethics for public servants. It is difficult to visualize the sort of "career service" the RCAGA report would produce. For example, can there be a regionalized and decentralized career service composed of occupational categories, with a fair degree of lateral recruitment, management-initiated retirement, staff exchanges, and contractual appointments? Presumably so. At least it can be stated that RCAGA did endeavour to answer the questions it raised at the early press conference.

For the most part RCAGA's recommendations in relation to the career service concept tend to rectify past anomalies, to take account of objections raised by public service unions, and to seek that magic point of balance between the need for efficient administration and the requirements of justice for public servants—"efficiency and equity" as the main chapter is called. These two concepts are in many ways mutually exclusive because the demands for equitable treatment of public servants are in many cases a hindrance to efficiency. The private sector in Australia has long been amazed at the internal trappings of public service personnel systems which are time-consuming and seem to protect the lazy and the unproductive. Predictably the result has been a compromise between efficiency and justice for public servants.

A number of these recommendations are vaguely worded which has the advantage of allowing flexibility in implemention but suffers from the disadvantage of allowing government bureaucrats to manipulate or ignore the intent of the recommendations. Most of the changes will require amending legislation and so change will inevitably be slow.

One is little wiser, after wading through a report, four appendices and a host of evidence as to what form of career service is in the
"public interest". In fact the general public has barely rated a mention in the sorts of aspects considered in this paper. This royal commission has probably fallen for the problem of all royal commissions: they rely too heavily on oral and written submissions for the "public viewpoint" or the "consumer viewpoint". Some commissioned research into the general public's attitude to the public service might have thrown a little more light on whether Australians desire a career service in the commonwealth government. For this reason it is more a bureaucrat's document than a citizen's document. At least we have a new definition of a career service, although it will still continue to mean different things to different people.

A few questions remain to be answered even after all RCAGA'S investigations and submissions by various bodies. The most important one concerns the implications for public policy of having a career service. Is it still true that the career service tends to produce top public servants able to offer sound, neutral, fearless advice in the public interest because of their long timespan in the service, their anonymity, and their protection behind the screen of ministerial responsibility? Is that advice superior in any way to that given by qualified advisers appointed laterally and/or on a patronage basis? Has the quality of Australian public policies suffered as a result of the infusion of these outside advisers especially during the 1970s? Does the traditional career service produce elites isolated in Canberra, unrepresentative of the nation's demographic structure, income distribution, and cultural character? More specifically, can a top commonwealth public servant really come to grips with the problems of ethnic minorities living in the slums of industrial cities? If not, is this a case for more lateral, more representative, recruits? Where would such recruits come from and how could they be identified? More importantly, would they produce "better" public policies which were just and which reflected an efficient allocation of resources?

The answers to these questions can only be found through experimentation. However this will not occur as long as agencies like the Public Service Board operate on the assumption that the old-style career service is still intact and still desired by public servants themselves and the people they are supposed to serve.

Finally, it is, of course, easy to criticize the career service ideal-type but not so easy to suggest an alternative—a "career service mark II" suitable for present day Australia—although RCAGA'S findings when grouped together do convey the grey outline of such a potential model.
Notes

1. Each of these reports acknowledged the existence of a career service and made some attempt to interpret its characteristics but no attempt was ever made to track the concept back to its origins to determine whether its underpinnings had rusted away.


5. This is not to say that the legislation does not refer to many of the individual elements of a career service but rather that the total concept is not mentioned.


10. The very valuable contribution by Hugh Emy in *Appendix One*, debunking the myth of ministerial responsibility is highly relevant here.

11. See for example the most original contribution by P.H. Bailey, "A Career Service?", an address given to the annual seminar of the Royal Institute of Public Administration, Queensland Regional Group, 15 September 1976. (Proceedings of this seminar will be published as a monograph entitled *Bureaucrats on the Brink*).


17. However there is very little evidence to suggest that Sir Henry Bland ever sacked anyone during his long public service career.
The position of permanent heads was one topic considered by RCAGA which attracted much attention. Many submissions, apart from my own consultant's report, made reference to the matter, the Public Service Board put up a number of proposals, and in July 1975 the then prime minister specially asked the commission to look into the relations of permanent heads and ministers.

Permanent heads do indeed play a key role in the Australian public services. They have, especially in Canberra, considerable power and prestige. It is true that they became more vulnerable to displacement after 1972, and the RCAGA report thinks we should stop using the word “permanent”. Still as one permanent head (with business experience) said during my survey, many company managers would welcome a permanent head's discretion. It is true that major reorganizations involve the PSB, but the board also protects permanent heads from many troublesome staff problems. They have a large say in the fortunes of their subordinates. They have a fairly extensive control of communications to the outside world and the minister. They find it hard to get rid of inefficient staff, but can do a lot of moving around if they want, and legislation may make "management-initiated retirements" easier. The RCAGA report wishes to give them greater discretion than they have at present to vary the organization of their departments (RC 4.5.4), in financial matters, and in relation to common service agencies, though at the same time subjecting them to efficiency audit, and insisting that there should be more delegation and less rigid hierarchies.

Some critics have said that I have too rosy a view of permanent heads, and of the public service generally; this view may seem to be confirmed by the fact that the 1976 report of the PSB gives prominence to remarks of mine saying inter alia, that I believe "that the Public Service, and permanent heads in particular, have served this country well during the years since World War II" and that "I know "of no alternative model" which could be "claimed with great confidence to work better than the present arrangements"."
The Coombs commission left this bit out of my report when they printed it, an action in which I had acquiesced; it is no doubt the kind of windy generalization people who abridge reports find it easiest to cut. I quote it here only to say that I stand by it. One complaint that I have about the RCAGA report is its inadequate recognition of some of the merits of the public service, and of ways in which it has been adapted to new needs.

Actually although the tone of the report sounds broadly unsympathetic to the bureaucracy, its proposals are much more cautious, at least when it comes to firm recommendations.

Some background considerations

Articulating the conventions

This is a matter on which I feel a bit querulous. I made the point in my report (stimulated mainly by discussions with Sir Arthur Tange, a public servant who has not lost his liveliness) that there was a case for “articulating the conventions”—developing a reasonably up-to-date body of doctrine about the character and role of the public service, and of top public servants in particular. My point was that a good many of the old conventions or “understandings” about the public service were widely thought to be out-of-date, yet we had not found much to put in their place. So lip-service continues to be paid to the old conventions, yet in practice a change of government, as in 1972, or even a change of prime minister, as in the case of John Gorton, may be followed by a period of fairly arbitrary upset and “ad hocery”. This in turn tends to become discredited without bearing any of the fruits of thoughtful experiment, much less of planned development. My own remarks on this matter were written before the change of government in 1975; but they seem to be borne out by what has happened since.

I applied this idea particularly to the relations of ministers and permanent heads. But my notion attracted almost universal snubbing. People seem to resent the thought of any halfway house between utter vagueness and the most rigid of legalistic formulations. The RCAGA report cited Hasluck as saying that such agreed formulations would be too rigid. Bland as saying that they could only be platitudinous, views not perfectly consistent with each other.

However, having indicated that in general it was a bad idea to formulate such understandings, RCAGA goes on to say that there are some matters on which it would be useful to have a few conventions.
I must admit that they do not use that word; they refer to "a body of knowledge and experience of normative developments in administrative practice" (RC 4.2.11), but I think that was broadly what I was talking about. The report lists a number of examples, including cases whether the minister has asked a public servant to do something illegal or in conflict with cabinet understandings. It is proposed that the PSB gather a body of case-studies on similar matters, available to guide future action, and to enable "well-recognized procedures" to be developed.

The report also states a few principles of its own. For example, it sees no reason why a minister or a public servant should not be allowed to discuss certain matters with the chairman of the PSB, the prime minister or (in the case of a public servant) the secretary to cabinet. The matters are defined as "problems which emerge in the course of administration of a kind which, because of their sensitivity, cannot readily be handled through the normal machinery". The wording is cautious, and does not mention the secretary to the Attorney-General's department. Perhaps this would have come too close to endorsing the behaviour of Sir Frederick Wheeler in the loans affair (RC 4.2.12).

There are various other matters in which the report, without using the language of conventions or of "understandings", enunciates "the practices, procedures or principles which we consider exist or should apply" (RC 4.2.12). Let me give examples:

we consider it is appropriate for departmental heads to obtain the approval of their ministers for any significant changes in organization (RC 4.2.13).

In relation to appointments of senior staff, it would normally be appropriate for a departmental head to let the minister know what he had in mind so that he might take account in his final decisions of any views the minister might care to express (RC 4.2.13).

staff should not be confused by potentially conflicting instructions from minister and departmental head. This will not prevent a minister indicating to his departmental head that he wishes, for example, to receive advice from individual officers or have them assigned to certain tasks, but the arrangement of [decision on?] these matters should clearly rest with the departmental head (RC 4.5.6).

where there are differences of view within the department . . . practices [should] be adopted whereby the minister becomes aware of those differences (RC 4.2.14).

It is necessary to clarify the relationship of the head of a department to statutory bodies which are in the minister's portfolio (RC 4.5.5).
Interdependence

The pre-eminent fact that has to be taken account of, in discussing the problems of modern government, is increasing interdependence. Governments are more and more involved in very complex systems of cooperation and ramifying networks of mutual influence, in which it is becoming harder and harder to assign specific powers and responsibilities. The RCAGA report recognizes this with one eye, not always with the other.

Various things seem to me to follow from this. One is that, however we divide up functions, we must expect a great deal of overlap and the need for much close and sympathetic interchange. This is relevant to the whole question of relationships between ministers and departments, as it is to their relations with one another, of commonwealth and state governments and so on.

In particular, the distinction between policy and administration is becoming harder to make. Policies need devising in relation to an intricate context of machinery for implementation and often with close reference to what is going on elsewhere in government and society; they also need continual modification in the light of changing circumstances. As the people in the closest touch with this feedback are commonly the day-to-day administrators, policies and plans with which they have no sense of close association will not work.

This makes it difficult to think in terms of rigid demarcation lines, even when we recognize that ministers and permanent heads have at the same time distinctive functions—on the contrary, there is a need on both sides to work towards a sympathetic and intelligent understanding of how the worlds of politics and administration interpenetrate.

As the RCAGA report makes very clear, we also have to reckon with increased interdependence between departments. Today many policies overpass departmental boundaries, both in their making and their implementation. They are the responsibility of the government, not the minister. So the context of permanent heads includes the prime minister and cabinet as well as the minister, and also coordinating agencies such as the Treasury, the department of Finance, the PSB, inter-departmental committees. This kind of interdependence has all kinds of implications. How far should senior public servants and ministers be brought together collectively, in cabinet and other committees? How far must the prime minister, as leader of the government, have a concern for its administrative arrangements, as part of his general concern for all the larger matters of government business?
As I said in my report:

One of the hardest tasks of modern government is to create the appropriate machinery and to evoke the required attitudes that will make this central concern a reality. Yet if political direction of the administration is to mean anything nowadays, it cannot mean twenty-odd ministers each pushing his own barrow—if that were the only prospect, one would seek, I think, to maximize the influence of non-political mechanisms of central coordination, and simply hope to insulate the public service as far as possible from political caprice and ill-judged intervention.  

This passage was written in 1975, in a period of gloom about the weaknesses of the Whitlam administration, perhaps in the very period when some corrective processes had been set on foot.

The RCAGA report recognizes the facts of interdependence:

We can see no way by which the precise roles of ministers and departments can be defined . . . it is not possible to separate 'policy' from 'administration' (RC 4.2.15-6).

Interdependence between departments

In the area of policy-making, the report has some specially interesting remarks on the “Collective Problem”, the tendency of modern government continually to raise issues overpassing departmental boundaries.

While the collective power of ministers is much more far-reaching than the sum of their departmental responsibilities, the administrative machinery supporting them is not designed correspondingly to promote collective knowledge and consciousness among them but for the most part is naturally engaged in developing distinctive approaches bearing on items of policy.

Indeed more and busier ministers and top public servants means that contacts between them are often less than they used to be in earlier days. Thinking “in aggregate terms” tends to get left to the prime minister and treasurer and their departments, and to such bodies as Public Service Boards, while other departments pursue their own narrow interests (and simply giving ministers bigger personal staffs might only intensify rivalries and second-guessing).

How can this situation be improved? Not all the Coombs formulations seem to be helpful.

Each minister has a continuous teaching function to perform in his department, pointing out where and how his government needs to be served as a collective entity (RC 4.1.6).
There is an implication here that the horizons of ministers are regularly broader than those of senior officials, because of cabinet and party contacts (and fear of losing office); whether this is generally true in practice, I rather doubt, but it may be so.

The report attaches much importance to the development of collective bodies including both ministers and senior officers, such as the mixed ministerial-official committees which are to plan forward expenditures (RC 11.2.). It also refers to the possibility of grouping departments on functional lines, each group to be presided over either by a senior cabinet minister, or by "a Policy Board, consisting of the relevant ministers with support from their senior advisers" (RC 4.3.34).

Some of this enthusiasm may have stemmed from the apparent success of such arrangements in Canada and of some latterday experience of the Whitlam government, such as the expenditure review committee. In my own report I expressed surprise that after some fruitful use of departmental officers by cabinet committees in the days of Chifley, and even in the early days of Menzies, it became a rare event for permanent officials to attend ministerial committees, both under Liberal and Labor governments. (There seems to have been some revival under Fraser). It may be a function of the insecurities of our ministers. There is also a view among officials (which I have met in the Treasury) that regular appearances of senior officers before committees "tend to cut across responsibility to the minister, which is primary". However, it has been said that in Canada such participation strengthens the hand of ministers by leading to more

probing of officials by ministers; less monolithic advice from the bureaucracy; more consideration of issues beyond departmental boundaries; and a greater ability of ministers to send a matter back to a department for further work or for the development of a different proposal.

The report has another line of attack on the problems of interdependence between departments—greater rotation of staff, and better career planning. I touched on this in my own report.

The best way to encourage a broad approach to the problems of government is to place an officer for a period in a department from which he may observe, and where he has to some degree to cope with, the whole range of governmental activity, in which there regularly arise policy questions touching on the concerns of many other departments.
Interdependence within departments

Here RCAGA takes a fairly conservative line, so far as formal changes are concerned. It firmly rejects most proposals for collegial or statutory bodies that might incorporate significant functions of ministers or permanent heads: or for special "policy units" on Swedish or other lines, that might tend to split policy-forming too much from operations. It envisages a modest role for ministerial staffs, mainly as facilitators of communication. It approves of assistant ministers for the larger departments, as a way of reducing the minister's workload and as a training-ground for promising backbenchers (RC 4.3.33).

The report accepts the fact that the traditional departmental style of organization is "generally the most appropriate for giving effect to programmes reflecting the policies of particular ministers and governments" (RC 10.5.16). An important reason for this is that it believes that the ministerial department is a very flexible instrument, which can be adapted to many purposes.

The whole thrust of our thinking is rather towards reintegrating the management and the policy functions and using the flexibility of the departmental structure to avoid excessive resort to the creation of separate statutory bodies [my emphasis] (RC 4.3.39).

As in the case of interdepartmental relations, RCAGA attaches importance to the greater interchange of staffs within departments, and as between policy and operations. Otherwise, the report is disappointingly vague about how to improve modes of policy advice to ministers. One feels that there must be more to be said about this by experienced insiders or ex-insiders, who might (for example) analyze some of the more successful ways in which, under Labor, permanent officers and short-term advisers or staff units were brought together in complementary fashion.

I was also surprised how summarily the report deals with the proposal for departmental boards and similar devices designed to produce a more "collegial" or corporate approach to policy-forming and management, though I agree with what they say. I had had the impression that this was regarded as a fairly important issue, and spent more time than I otherwise would have done looking into it.10

It seemed to me that a crucial point, if one is talking of a board of any consequence, is that one cannot imagine most ministers agreeing to work through boards. When a minister wants to go beyond the permanent head, he wants to talk to the individuals concerned with particular matters. In any case his life is so hard to plan ahead the chances are, if there were such a board, the
Minister would attend only intermittently. It would be the permanent head's board. Even this, if it were a main source of policy advice or management decision, would be a clumsy and time-wasting instrument. It is true that ministers already have dealings with statutory bodies, but these are commonly either bodies with final decision-making powers on most matters or concerned with formulating long-term policies (as is the universities commission), not with the many immediate problems that face a permanent head.

So my own conclusion was roughly the same as, and as unexciting as, that of RCAGA, that (in their words) departments should “explore various methods of collective decision making, and that ministers, from time to time, [should] involve themselves in the work of the groups concerned” (RC 4.3.12). Quite a bit of collegial machinery already exists in fact. If sometimes called “executive”, it seems to be mainly of an advisory and informational kind, and the permanent head can still go away and do something different if he wants to.

One trend that may make formal provision less necessary is that in the normal course of events “authoritarian and hierarchical features are being steadily drained from higher administration”.

A small piece of evidence bearing on this is that most permanent heads I talked to (perhaps I had a biased sample) seemed remarkably relaxed about direct access of their senior colleagues to the minister, though they reasonably wished to be informed in a general way of what was going on. I noted in my report the comment by a senior officer that, if a modern permanent head tried to monopolize access, it would be mainly felt as an indication of his own inadequacy.

The permanent head and the minister—roles and relationships

If one accepts the conclusion that the formal structure of departments remains broadly unchanged, and that they continue to be the main instrument for advising ministers and governments, and for implementing their policies, what can be helpfully said about the roles and relationships of permanent heads and ministers? I touch here on some points not very fully dealt with by RCAGA.

Neutrality and impartiality

One problem area is the whole question of the “neutrality” of the top public service. Some people think the concept is meaningless, or deleterious, or so imperfectly realized in practice as to be a very misleading bit of ideology. I do not agree with this, though I agree it is not at all easy to formulate the doctrine in a clear way.
However, some things can be said. There are certain things that it clearly does not mean. As the former head of the British civil service has said, the whole system would break down if a permanent head were asked to be neutral as between the government and the opposition. His impartiality lies in loyal support of the government in power, whichever government that happens to be. More significant, I think, is that this loyalty means more than giving good advice when asked and faithfully implementing instructions when received. As I expressed it in my report:

A permanent head has a duty to promote and protect the minister’s and the government’s interests just as he would if they were wholly acceptable to him personally.

One can argue (I would) that a modern permanent head should go a long way in easing his minister’s path, and be prepared to take the initiative in creating and maintaining good relations, if only because the minister is liable to be increasingly at a disadvantage as government gets more technical. Senior officers have to make even greater efforts to make clear not only their own views, but also the various options, their likely consequences and how they are related to the apparent political aims and general outlook of the government. I think it a dangerous doctrine that permanent heads are guardians of the public interest, though in a certain sense this is true. Certainly ministers have no sole right to determine the public interest, but the effectiveness of the permanent head seems to me in the long run to depend on what I have called an “intimately reciprocal” relation with ministers, and the balance seems to me to depend on their being allowed a very full mobilization of expertise and professional skill, in exchange for a virtually unquestionable loyalty to their political superiors, in the active sense I have indicated. Though I have in general been a defender of Australian permanent heads, in the Treasury and elsewhere, against some scapegoating that has gone on, I concede that in relation to the “high” doctrine of loyalty outlined above, there may have been shortcomings.

Of course, such close relationship between minister and public servant is extremely hard to achieve, and is only possible under certain conditions.

First, it involves great freedom for the permanent head and senior officers to argue with the minister in private, and in a certain sense as equals. Walter Bagehot put it best a century ago:

Important business can only be sufficiently discussed by persons who can say very much as they like to one another. The thought of the
speaker should come out as it was in his mind, and not be hidden in respectful expressions or enfeebled by affected doubt.  

There are some important conditions of such a relationship, quite often not fulfilled in Australia. They are partly a function of intelligence, partly of psychological and moral factors such as defensiveness, lack of personal compatibility, and so on, partly deeply rooted in social background. This would be an interesting area for further research.

Second, if a permanent head is expected in the end to subordinate his judgment, he is entitled to some protection from outside criticism. It seems to me a regrettable feature of recent years that some ministers have been ready to turn on their departments or permanent heads (or the prime minister has done it for them). This certainly does not mean that top public servants should be exempt from criticism. Indeed, I think we need recognized ways in which a minister can register dissatisfaction with the general record of his permanent head. One simple point I made in my report is that the PSB should regard one of its tasks as being to communicate periodically with ministers, from whom it seems to me unduly isolated. If a minister persistently doubts the quality of advice or executive performance he is getting, I see no reason why he should not make this known in the proper quarters, including the PSB. The RCAGA report thinks that departments should be able to use annual reports to reply to criticism (4.3.27).

Finally, there is the knotty question of what happens when loyalty to the minister seems to conflict with loyalty to the government of the day. The modern conventions, in a world of interdependent departments and cabinet committees, should certainly allow for this.

**Attitudes to (and of) ministers**

What attitudes to ministers in fact emerged from my discussions with permanent heads? A few were very critical of them. One complained that they got away with incapacity and incompetence more readily than public servants do, and that it was astonishing (perhaps a credit to official loyalty) that journalists seemed to know so little about their failings as seen from the department’s point of view. More generally, I think it significant that most of the adverse comments made to me about ministers related not to hyperactivity, overbearing behaviour or interference, but to inaccessibility, indecisiveness, laziness or doubledealing.

So far, at least as the policy-forming function goes, there is not the least evidence that senior officers prefer weak ministers, or
people who will accept everything that is put in front of them. Most clearly prefer a capable minister, who can advance the interests of the department in cabinet and elsewhere, and make clear and consistent decisions on policy questions. Typical comments by permanent heads are:

X was a difficult minister in many ways. But he was searching, and had the capacity to interrogate his department. He asked sensible questions, threw out suggestions . . .

In my official career I had dealings with ten ministers; we had real problems with five. Two created great difficulties in managing the department by underhand methods, one was utterly dependent on the department, one was a “slow reader”; and so on.

It is true that such attitudes relate mainly to the policy-making area. When it comes to departmental management, commonwealth permanent heads seem mostly to believe that ministers should only have a very limited power to intervene. This is especially true of personnel questions, but largely true also of questions of administrative structure and methods of implementation; section 25(2) of the Public Service Act is widely held to give statutory force to this view.

This view has not led to great conflict between ministers and permanent heads, because it is consistent with the view of many ministers about their role. In Canberra a minister tends to be a very “political animal”—more so than in the state governments, where ministers are more liable to see themselves in a management role. And, as the RCAGA report and others have pointed out, there are special factors in Canberra which encourage this. Ministers are usually operating far from their home base, so there are many instances where they try to conduct much departmental business from home, outside parliamentary sessions or at weekends; and the continual need for their presence at parliamentary divisions during the session encourages them to do what they like to do anyway, which is to make their parliamentary office their base.

Personal contacts with permanent heads seem to vary enormously between ministers. My own responses on this point varied from the permanent head who spent part of most days with his minister, or who saw him about ten times a week, except when the House is sitting, then at least once a week (late evening 9 p.m. to early a.m.). Hardly a week-end goes by without a two-hour telephone conversation from his home-base to permanent heads who were “lucky to see him once a week”, or one whose minister was “hard to see at all”. Many contacts are
in the unpeaceful surroundings of parliament house, or in conversa-tions on the way to airports.

As a result of all this, ministers not merely do not have, but usually do not claim, much say in matters of departmental management. Many such matters are doubtless best left to officials. All the same, if it means that ministers get little say (even in a broad sense) in how policies are implemented, this is a serious limitation on their power. First, it puts them in too weak a position in relation to officials.

What usually counts is how policy hits the ground, and it may not be too difficult to run the department so that things do not really happen as the minister intends. Then the minister can jump up and down, but there are always twenty-four good reasons that the permanent head can give for acting as he did, reasons that are hard to refute.

This argument may not appeal to those who think it best that public servants should run the country. They may be impressed by another argument—that under the present system ministers and cabinets remain more unsophisticated than they need be about adminis-trative problems, and that this has deleterious effects on policy-making. To quote from a submission by two public servants to RCAGA, ministers “need to give greater attention to ensuring that their policies are workable and that they work”.14

There are no easy remedies, but my own conclusions and the RCAGA report agree that one can give one or two pushes in the right direction. I suggested that it should be made unmistakeably clear that a minister is entitled to concern himself with all departmental matters except those specifically reserved by statute (some personnel matters) or by well-recognized convention (such as access to cabinet papers of a former government). The RCAGA report seems to agree, though I believe that it pulls its punches about this, partly because it also wants to preach the gospel of accountable management, which depends on assuming that the bureaucracy is an independent power in the land. I cite some representative passages from the report on the subject of ministerial-bureaucratic relations in the section below on accountable management.

Permanent heads and their roles

If ministers see themselves as “political animals”, more permanent heads than I expected saw themselves as primarily managerial. I was surprised to find that, although some important permanent heads think of their primary role as providing policy advice to ministers, including guiding the steps of new ministers15 and continuing to protect them, many of those whom I interviewed saw
their most important task as "management"; though they might see policy-formulation as something that is itself part of the management process. Correspondingly, the real constraints they felt on their power were often management constraints, including such things as lack of power to dispose of inefficient staff; or their own lack of management skills or management experience.

At any rate there is a fair amount of variety in the way permanent heads see their roles. Nor does it seem necessary that they should be good at all of them; even if they were, in most departments they do not have the time to carry them out adequately. Sir Henry Bland (who has seen both worlds) correctly said recently that few senior businessmen "work with anything like the pressure that the top civil servants do", and for complex reasons this is hard to change. Is there any reason why a permanent head who prefers to concentrate on policy should not delegate a good part of the management function to another senior officer? I quote from a former senior officer of Foreign Affairs:

Two permanent heads I have known in Foreign Affairs were both very able International Affairs men but poor administrators—one of the two was not prepared to recognize the fact, and that did create problems.

Conversely, the British Fulton committee's proposal for a separate senior policy adviser of deputy secretary rank arose at least in part from the belief that a permanent head who gave really adequate attention to the management function—they thought that British permanent heads neglected it—would simply not have enough time to devote to policy matters, especially forward planning. I referred in my report to the interesting situation in DURD, where the main policy adviser to Mr Uren was a member of the department "on contract", with broadly the status of a deputy secretary, and I added that one or two other departments might be encouraged to experiment.

However, it is all very tricky, at least for those who see the undesirability of dividing policy and implementation, or planning and operations. Again, we need more intelligent comment from experienced insiders.

A glance at accountable management

A good deal of what RCAGA says about the need for ministers and senior officers to become more mixed up together, both departmentally and interdepartmentally, seems to me (as I have indicated) very sensible. However, there are certain problems about it. There are various other tendencies in government with which it comes
into some conflict: in particular, various "managerialist" conceptions of the role of permanent heads; and along with this the effort to move certain policy areas out, or partly out, of the sphere of "politics" by such devices as the statutory authority. I shall confine myself to the first point.

The RCAGA report sees the problem:

On the one hand, if ministers involve themselves in decisions to a degree necessary for them to accept responsibility for them, officials are less likely to feel personally responsible and the outcome may therefore be less efficient. On the other hand, attempts to acknowledge and give precision to the responsibility of officials and to hold them accountable for its exercise may be seen as weakening direct ministerial accountability and therefore political control (RC 2.1.8).

The report says that it is necessary to "hold the balance" between these competing principles. But it seems to me that the thrust of the report, at least where questions of administration and implementation of policy are concerned, is "managerialist", though it is an odd anti-bureaucratic form of managerialism.

A satirical way of putting it would be to say that RCAGA is so set on making bureaucrats accountable that it is determined to find them an independent field of action to be accountable for. They do not of course put it that way:

the realities of contemporary government require that the bureaucracy be seen as exercising some powers in its own right; that the independence of those powers requires that those exercising them should be held accountable.

On this view the administration is a separate estate of the realm, with a definable role.

Indeed, one senses that the RCAGA report is not pushing hard for most ministers to take an active interest in the administration of their departments. The following seems to sum up their position:

the structure should not be such that an energetic and able minister cannot, if he so chooses, play a very active role in departmental operations. Nevertheless, the more usual need seems to be for arrangements by which ministers can be relieved of some of the instant pressures of management so that they can provide general and political leadership and get on with their other jobs—and so that departments on their side are not continually hampered by being unable to proceed for want of authority.

Unless they are simply thinking here of matters of petty detail, I cannot help feeling that this last sentence consorts ill with the two paragraphs which follow, where we are told that ministers
need to be encouraged to concern themselves with problems of administration and implementation, and to understand these problems better... One of the obstacles to ministers becoming more involved with their departments is that they have very little opportunity, particularly when Parliament is in session, to spend time in them (RC 4.2.16-7).

Perhaps I am juggling with words. What we all want, I suspect, is simply a minister with enough intelligence and administrative capacity and powers of executive leadership to "be able to state clearly what service he expects from the department, and to get what he wants"; and to have an informed and sympathetic understanding of his department's problems and constraints. Professor Parker interpreted my view correctly when he wrote that, by my account,

the difficulties lie far more on the side of politicians (specifically, ministers) than of the law, the public service, or the permanent heads... The personal qualifications, experience, idiosyncracies and strength of character of ministers determine whether they give the departmental leadership that permanent heads appreciate.17

I add only that I am doubtful about the effectiveness of efficiency audits, at any rate so far as controlling permanent heads is concerned. I believe, as I said in my report, that

much will continue to depend on broader forms of check, including care in initial appointments, greater concern of ministers and Cabinets for administrative matters, more "open government", better peer-group control, and so on.18

Appendix I—Appointment and removal of permanent heads

Appointments to commonwealth permanent headships are made by the government, normally from within the public service. Though the wording of the Public Service Act suggests that the PSB will normally be consulted, it is also made unmistakeably clear that "appointments to the office of Permanent Head may be made by the Governor General without reference to the Board". In its submission to the RCAGA commission, the board expressed the view that the final decision should remain with the government, though it would like to see firmer conventions about consultation established.19

My own main impression of such appointments was how "carelessly" some of them are made—I use the word advisedly, meaning without the lack of haste, formality, attention to detail and
sometimes considerable heart-searching with which, in my experience, senior university appointments are made. This seems weird, when one considers that good permanent heads are a vital part of our system of government.

I said in my own report that there should be an agreed set of conventions about procedures, though the final right of the government to make its own choice should be preserved. I thought that, in particular, limitations needed putting on the rights of individual ministers, who seemed to me to be on the whole bad choosers of permanent heads. Nor did I think the PSB should be the sole authority (as it has tended to be in states like NSW), though its chairman should play a significant role, and the board should be a much more efficiently organized information centre about talent than it has been in the past. I thought that there was a place for a fairly large formal committee of top officials (including rotating members) which might also include one or two outsiders. Such a body might also be used for some statutory appointments. I thought that permanent headships should very often be advertised, though I am shaky on this point. (Commonwealth heads have occasionally been appointed from outside the service, but never as a result of advertisement.) If outsiders were appointed, I saw no reason for giving them a tenure any different from insiders.

Long before RCAGA could express a view on the matter, Mr Fraser had made a statement, on 9 November 1975, about what a Liberal-Country party government would do about this matter. This did spell out certain broad procedures for producing a short list. Final discretion should be with the Government, but if the choice was not made from the final short list, “the succeeding government would be free to review the appointment”. The Public Service Act was to be amended accordingly.

The RCAGA report did not go into detail about procedures; it approved of advertisement, but only “whenever circumstances allow” and when the prime minister approved; it approved of a panel (nature unspecific) to draw up a short list, but thought that this panel should be chosen by the prime minister and the minister “after consultation with the Chairman of the Public Service Board”. The final selection would need the approval of the minister concerned; and of the cabinet (as was said to be already the case). A crucial point here seems to be free choice of an apparently ad hoc panel by the politicians. It saw no advantages in legislating (or being much more precise) about procedures; but later on the report does envisage a statutory distinction between insiders and outsiders. This is not, of course, the distinction Fraser had drawn, which was between candidates, inside or outside, appointed from
the final short list (in later jargon, "established candidates") and others.

The Fraser legislation has been slow to appear. In mid-1976 it was reported that the chairman of the PSB had been participating in a review of procedures for selecting permanent heads in the light of the prime minister’s 1975 statement, presumably in consultation with other senior officers. The enquiry apparently also included appointments to full-time statutory office, though these are not dealt with in the legislation. No doubt there was argument on a number of points, which one may guess included how much provision should be made for the possible appointment of outsiders, how important a role various individuals, such as the chairman of the PSB, should play, where exactly the line should be drawn between tenured and less-firmly-tenured heads; and so on.

Legislation was finally introduced by the prime minister in November 1976. Its most important provision is the distinction drawn between “established candidates” and others. An “established candidate” for a permanent headship is, broadly, one who has been shortlisted by either the chairman of the board (who has some independence in this matter) or by a committee of permanent heads appointed and chaired by him (after consulting with the prime minister). But any permanent head, or ex-permanent head still in the service, is also “established”, even if not shortlisted. If the prime minister—and it is made clear that it is the prime minister, not the cabinet, who advises the governor general—recommends anyone else, then it is to be for a maximum of five years, subject to reappointment, and a new prime minister can get rid of him earlier if there has been a change of party government (carefully defined). Provision can be made at the time of appointment for compensating outsiders; non-established insiders who are removed are to be found an “appropriate” lesser office by the board or have the option of retirement.

The bill goes into some detail about the procedures required to become “established”. The main initiative rests with the chairman of the board and his committee of permanent heads, but the prime minister can insist on advertisement, and he or the minister concerned can suggest additional names. The prime minister, in his second reading speech, made clear some procedures not covered in the bill, such as the right of the prime minister and the minister concerned to interview shortlisted candidates at any stage. He added that the term “permanent head” was possibly now “inappropriate” (as RCAGA thought), but would be kept for the time being; and that in his view it would be “most unlikely” that positions would be advertised. He also said that his government’s appointments to
permanent headships had “been made in conformity with the principles of the legislation”, though no formal committee had been established. I have little information about Fraser appointments, except what has appeared in the press. The PSB was said by the prime minister to have been “fully and adequately” consulted about Mr Alan Carmody; Mr Tim Besley was chosen for the department of Business and Consumer Affairs from what was described to the Canberra Times as “quite an extended short list”. Most Fraser appointees have already been permanent heads, so they would have been “established candidates” anyway, whether shortlisted or not. If there has to be discrimination between some permanent heads and others, I think the Fraser formula is better than the RCAGA one; an internal appointment can be just as arbitrary, political and risky as one from outside. One difficulty with the Fraser scheme is that a new “non-established” permanent head who will often (one imagines) have been recommended for the short list but failed to make it, can hardly be expected to be on good terms with the leading permanent heads, nor will his minister.

It has been commonly held that a permanent head could not be removed from his position without his consent, unless his department (and hence his position) were abolished. The latter possibility is nowadays not academic, when departments are regularly reconstituted under new names—or even under old ones.26 Of the permanent heads serving when Labor came to power in December 1972, under half were still permanent heads two and a half years later.

All the same the PSB attached importance, in evidence to RCAGA, to the principle that a permanent head’s agreement to his own transfer was needed. There seems little justification for this, and in some cases it has held up desirable change; or tempted governments into the device mentioned above. At the same time, permanent heads need some protection from the arbitrary demands of particular ministers, especially new ministers. I attach importance, as RCAGA does, to the old-fashioned argument that reasonable security makes it easier for a permanent head to give objective advice to a minister, and not be “tempted, even subconsciously, to withhold or moderate unpalatable advice for fear of incurring displeasure and putting his job at risk” (RC 4.5.13).

My own recommendations and those of the RCAGA report differ only in minor respects—both suggest in effect that if the prime minister recommends compulsory transfer it should be only after consultation with a panel. The RCAGA report also agreed with many submissions that permanent heads should normally expect to be
moved after five to seven years, and that regular machinery was needed to review appointments and recommend relocations.

I was myself struck by the number of senior officers prepared to agree that after five to seven years in a department even very good permanent heads have often "spent their intellectual capital" and their powers as initiators begin to fall off. The work is often very exacting—indeed not a few permanent heads, especially in their later fifties, get bored, even burnt out, and would welcome a different sort of job or retirement on reasonable terms. The report agreed with me in rejecting a proposal which at first seemed to attract some favour, and which was one of the recommendations of the South Australian committee of inquiry, accepted by the government of that state—that all permanent heads should have fixed term contracts. They say—rightly in my opinion—that a universal system of this kind would introduce a degree of rigidity . . . which governments could find highly inconvenient and an impediment to the execution of their policies. A fixed term may have the effect of lengthening the period a person should serve, just as it may arbitrarily cut a period of service too short (RC 4.5.16).

There is, I might add, a strange belief in some quarters that a more mobile and politically "responsive" group of permanent heads would necessarily promote responsiveness in their departments. I believe that it could equally well lead (as has often happened in America) to the growth of many inbred and resistant sub-empires within departments. A good permanent head and his deputies, who carry with them the respect and loyalty of divisional and branch heads, but are also attuned to the policy desires of ministers, can be excellent instruments for injecting more drive and coordinated movement into a necessarily somewhat conservative machine.

Appendix II—Background and career patterns of permanent heads

The following analysis is based on information obtained from the Public Service Board and from Who's Who in Australia, and relates to 28 permanent heads serving in mid-1975.

Age

Average age on appointment to a permanent headship: 48
Average age in mid-1975: 53
Average age on entry to Australian Public Service: 27
Outside career and war service

Only five of the 28 had a substantial career outside government. Another four had a few years' outside employment as young men. Nineteen had no appreciable employment outside government. Of 21 old enough to have served in World War II, 13 were returned servicemen, eight were not.

University degrees

All but one had university degrees. Of first degrees, 17 were degrees in economics and commerce, or BAs with a strong economics element. Five were in science or engineering, two in arts, two in law, one in medicine.

About half the university courses for first degrees were attended directly after leaving school, with the first degree completed by the age of 23. The other half were after some career already started, and were usually part-time degrees, though they also included one or two full-time cadetships. About ten degree courses were attended after entry to the public service and four after starting some career outside the service (as teacher, bank officer and so on).

Number of government agencies served in (on a full-time basis)

Including their present Department, of the 28 permanent heads, seven had experience of only one Commonwealth government agency. Four had served in two agencies, five in three, and twelve in four or more.

These figures include about ten who had some significant period of service with statutory bodies (CSIRO, Universities Commission, NCDC, Australian Atomic Energy Commission, etc.).

Special experience

I have tried to collect below some information, relevant to the discussion in the main text of the report, on experience of special relevance to a permanent headship. Unfortunately I have had to rely on imperfect data, supplemented only partially by personal inquiry. So the information below is not precise, though I believe it is not seriously misleading. I include it only with this reservation.

(a) Service with Public Service Board, Treasury or Prime Minister's Department. This is intended as a rough index of experience in agencies that try to look at governmental problems "in the round".

Treasury: 6
Public Service Board: 1
Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet: 529

However, it is clear that not all this service gave experience of the type indicated—some of it was in very specialized branches. A truer conclusion might be that about a quarter of all permanent heads have had some significant experience in departments concerned in overall coordination, personnel and financial management. One or two of these also had “management” experience of other kinds before they became permanent heads.

(b) “Management” experience elsewhere. At least six other permanent heads had significant “management” experience in other government agencies before they became permanent heads (as, for example, managers of statutory bodies, or in personnel, finance and management services units in departments such as Air, Works, Supply). Two others had substantial management experience outside Australian government.

Almost none appear to have formal “management” qualifications, though they included a Harvard MPA, an FAIM, and several with specialized accounting qualifications.

Appendix III—Section 25(2) of the public service act

This is the section of the Public Service Act stating that

The Permanent Head of a Department shall be responsible for its general working and for all the business thereof, and shall advise the Minister in all matters relating to the Department.

Two questions have been raised about this. The first is what is its legal status; the second is, should it be amended and, if so, how?

The first point is discussed both in my report and in the RCAGA report. The solicitor-general, who gave an opinion at the former prime minister’s request in June 1975, agreed with Dr Evatt that it was not a legal limitation on the minister in his direction and control of administration. I queried this view, which is partly based on some dubious analogies between Australia and the United Kingdom. The RCAGA report (though extremely cautious in its language and writing without direct reference to my discussion of the point) seems also to query it. Its final word, after referring to this section and others, is:

Taken as a whole, the Public Service Act can be said to represent a deliberate decision by the Parliament to confine ministerial authority in relation to the employment and management of departmental personnel (RC 4.2.6).
“Management of departmental personnel” is a somewhat ambiguous term.

My own view—though by no means a firm one—was that the section might well be amended by adding “to the minister” after “responsible”, and deleting “and for all the business thereof”. Parker thought there could be a case for redrafting the phrase “shall advise the minister in all matters”. The RCAGA report does not propose a precise form of words, but finally says that the section should “incorporate direct references to the responsibility of the departmental head to the minister (provided there is recognition of the broader setting of senior officers’ obligations to cabinet)”.

It points out that a departmental head has also to take account of the decisions of other ministers . . . for instance, Cabinet decisions, Treasury rulings and Board advice . . . Occasions can arise when a departmental head senses conflict between a proposal of his minister and the understood intentions or policy of the Cabinet.

The commissioners recognize the difficulties of saying this in legislation, and leave any necessary redrafting to others.

The report makes a firmer proposal that section 25(2) include clear reference (as is true of the New Zealand State Services Act) to the permanent head’s responsibility to ensure “the efficient and economic administration” of his department.

Notes

1. Pat Troy has expressed the view that the Coombs recommendations will on balance strengthen the position of permanent heads (as cited by Bruce Juddery, Canberra Times, 13 September 1976).
3. At a different level, the confusion and surprise at the actions of the governor general which brought about the 1975 election, and various weird suggestions made as a result, also seem to illustrate the value of the regular reappraisal and articulation of the “understandings” of our system of government.
4. The 1976 Report of the Public Service Board also sees fit to comment on this matter (7–8):

   The Board believes that all permanent heads accept without question that the loyalty of each is to his Minister and to the Government of the day [my emphasis]. If a delicate issue arises the permanent head must ultimately rely on his own judgment and experience, in the light of all the circumstances relevant at the time of the particular issue, in deciding what action he should take to carry out his responsibilities to his Minister and the Government [my
emphasis]. This would include the permanent head deciding what action is
required to satisfy himself whether there is in fact justification for raising
the matter at ministerial level.

The last sentence in particular seems to this reader like a discreetly approving
nod in the direction of Sir Frederick Wheeler.

5. RCAGA, Appendix I, 225–6.
6. See Chapter 4, “Ministers and the Administration”, 57–59, and Chapter 11,
“Coordination and Control”.
8. G. Robertson, “The Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the Privy Council Office”,
(Toronto: Methuen, 1973), 57.
10. RCAGA, Appendix I, 249–52, for my own comments; pp. 280–81 for R.S. Parker’s
interesting views.
11. Alan Davies, “Politics in a Knowledgeable Society”, Public Administration
(Sydney), 29(2), June 1970, 98.
13. The RCAGA report makes this point. See Appendix 3 of this chapter on section
25(2) of the Public Service Act.
Government Administration, 1 October 1974.
15. One had had 8 ministers in just over 3½ years.
17. RCAGA, Appendix I, 276.
18. RCAGA, Appendix I, 274.
19. Permanent Heads, Memorandum No. 1 to the Royal Commission on Australian
Government Administration, Canberra, 1975, 14.
20. Some states have advertised permanent headships, or deputy headships with
a conventional “right of succession”, and the commonwealth (in a few recent
cases) have advertised deputy headships and positions of “permanent head
status”, such as the Australian Statistician.
22. See Report, 4.5.9. I say “ad hoc” because it seems to be on 98, though not
on 101 (4.5.18).
23. See the fairly complex discussion in the RCAGA Report, (RC4.5.20–4.5.23), which
also recommends the departmental heads should become statutory office holders.
24. See Public Service Board, Report, 1976, 7; and Prime Minister’s speech on
25. Public Service Amendment (First Division Officers) Bill.
26. Administrative Services was abolished and recreated on 22 December 1975, with
a different permanent head, and new functions.
27. I.e., department or statutory authority. However of these, two had experience
with other governments, and one had previously served on the prime minister’s
personal staff.
28. Includes one economist with experience in a number of war-time agencies.
29. Two of these were also included in Treasury figures.
30. RCAGA, Report, 414; see discussion (RC 4.2.6–4.2.9). For Parker’s and my
comments, see Appendix I, 231–39, 278–79.
31. This is my interpretation of what they say (RC 4.2.9), but it can be also read
as hinting that such redrafting may not be very easy to do at all.
In this chapter I am concerned with the range of RCAGA's discussion of central coordination and control as well as with its specific proposals. On such a topic a commission's ability to ask interesting questions, clarify issues and bring information to bear on them is probably as important as its actual recommendations. The commission's wide terms of reference gave it a clear opportunity to be adventurous. But having a wide field within which to choose topics for analysis and recommendation also carries the risk that the less tractable topics will, consciously or unconsciously, be edged to the side.

This seems to have happened with the commission's treatment of coordination and control. Whatever the considerable merits of its report in opening up discussion on topics such as access and devolution, and in collecting and publishing a vast amount of material, it does not bite hard on coordination and control. Two reasons for this may be considered. First, despite the commission's wide terms of reference and the explicit invitation in them to examine relations in government between politicians and public servants, conditions at the time made this invitation a daunting prospect. It would have been tempting for some politicians, including ministers, to accuse the commission of trying to tell ministers how to run their own affairs. The abrupt change of government in November 1975 introduced a further complication. Second, whatever the political situation, questions of coordination and control lead rapidly into intractable topics. In these the questions to be considered can be defined in many different ways and institutional solutions to some problems themselves become the source of trouble if problems are defined differently.

Institutions of government and public policy

At their most general these questions can include ones like the following: what can governments control? when and in what
circumstances do they get overloaded? Which sorts of institution should be responsible for particular tasks of coordination and control? Responses to such questions vary. Some analysts have concluded that there is no theoretical foundation for prescribing how administrations should be ordered. In their view problems of administrative structure are situational and changeable. While generalizations about problems and structures may still be useful, it is wise to be sceptical when talk of blueprints begins. Such arguments have been presented for many years and recent studies of policy-making structures and processes have tended to give them further weight. By contrast some economists, management specialists and scholars of public administration have more faith in institutional engineering and the effects of rationalistic management techniques. Theirs is the language of strategic planning, specifying objectives, rationalizing budgetary procedures and measuring performance. This holds out the promise of a more controlled and predictable machinery of government and a stronger connection between intention and effect in official policy. Yet another view, also influenced heavily by the thinking of economists, proposes that the institutions of government have little effect on public policy. More important influences are social conditions and levels of economic development. Naturally this view is subversive of any extended discussion of machinery of government questions.

The view presented here is that while the shape and construction of governmental institutions are indeed important for public policy it is by no means clear that the scope and direction of institutional influences can be readily controlled. Policy processes are often diffuse and confused. Bernard Schaffer has put it this way: "Decisions are convenient labels given post hoc to the mythical precedents of the apparent outcomes of uncertain conflicts". Moreover the incentive systems of organizations and the circumstances in which they work play tricks with their stated objectives and with the way they respond to developing situations. Reflections of this may be seen in Hugh Heclo's characterization of the process of social learning as

a maze where the outlet is shifting and the walls are being constantly repatterned; where the subject is not one individual but a group bound together; where this group disagrees not only on how to get out but on whether getting out constitutes a satisfactory solution; where, finally, there is not one but a large number of such groups which keep getting in each other's way."

Both Schaffer and Heclo make one aware of the blinkering effect of seeing policy-making in terms of a neat setting and gaining of
objectives. A similar point, the more compelling in this case because it comes from one who does not see policy processes largely in terms of confusion and conflict, is made by Sir Geoffrey Vickers. He states "I have described policy making as the setting of governing relations or norms, rather than in the more usual terms as the setting of goals, objectives or ends. The difference is not merely verbal; I regard it as fundamental." Further, he states: "The goals we seek are changes in our relations or in our opportunities for relating; but the bulk of our activity consists in the 'relating' itself". Vickers does not present his notion of policy-making in the context of complex governmental arrangements but the relevance of his point is clear. If relations are more important than objectives many of the commonly accepted ways of looking at government institutions suggest misleading diagnoses of their problems.

Such perspectives do not allow the formulation and resolution of central machinery of government problems in simple and unchanging terms. In any review of a particular situation the discussion and proposals, however appealing, will be contingent. The problems faced cannot be solved. They have to be re-defined and re-solved as events proceed. Ministers and senior public service officers rarely have the time or inclination to reflect on the bases of the arrangements they work with. They meet difficulties as they come and make changes incrementally. They have to act as if they know more than they do; otherwise they would do very little. In discussing topics such as coordination and control a commission of inquiry has the opportunity to make it possible for busy officeholders to consider more aspects of their situation than they ordinarily have time to do. A critical examination of relationships between central institutions and the activities and aspirations of the groups of people involved would not necessarily lead to immediate changes but would provide a source of information and argument for use in the continuing struggle to keep such institutions in working order.

However understandable RCAGA's failure to take this course, that it has failed to do so is to be regretted. It has settled for the safe and uncontroversial. Rather than explore difficult fields of inquiry it has assumed them away or shaved out of the report references that might bring them to the forefront. In its concern to produce "justifiable and practicable" recommendations it has produced ones that break little new ground. It has failed to see that, even if the times made bold recommendations impolitic, a cogent discussion of the central machinery of government problems facing contemporary governments could have been more useful than what it has done.
Ministers and public servants

How RCAGA handled relations between ministers and public servants gives an indication of its timidity. By and large RCAGA suggests that public servants are indeed the loyal and obedient servants of the ministry in office. This is particularly strong in the chapter on coordination and control, where the first sentence links ministers and their departments inextricably together: “The minister and his department together form the basic standard unit which wields the executive power of government” (RC 11.1.1). While earlier RCAGA reported some criticisms of prevailing relations between ministers and public servants which suggested that the “standard unit” was not quite so indivisible, it brought its discussion to a close with a bland affirmation:

The Commission is convinced that an effective partnership between the elected government and its senior officials is fundamental to effective government, that significant elements in this partnership have in recent years been defective, and that blame for these deficiencies lies with all the parties involved (RC 2.3.9).

It does not explore the ambiguities inherent in relations between senior officials and ministers, the power-plays which can originate within departments, the difficulties of deciding when public service work stops and party politics begins, and the difficulties that some senior public servants who are used to working with ministers from one party may have in adapting to ministers from another. Ascribing blame for deficiencies to all concerned does not tell anyone how to make the relationship better and leaves the traditional model of the relationship, which RCAGA elsewhere acknowledges can be questioned, intact.

Two quotations from a recent interview with Lord Armstrong show how a senior British civil servant saw the issue:

We, while I was in the Treasury, had a framework of the economy basically neo-Keynesian. We set the questions which we asked ministers to decide arising out of that framework and it would have been enormously difficult for any minister to change the framework ... I think we chose that framework because we thought it the best one going. We were very ready to explain it to anybody who was interested, but most ministers were not interested ...

And,

The only time when I felt that I simply had to step out of line was when it really came to the final crunch and it was a question “do we have an election or not”. Now the question of an election or not is
a highly political matter, something on which no civil servant would dream of having an opinion and yet it seemed to me it was a move in the chess game that I had been playing with the Prime Minister and I couldn't refrain from giving him my opinion."

Despite Lord Armstrong’s meticulous concern to maintain a sense of detachment and neutrality his views illustrate succinctly several elements of the problems that may arise: the sheer weight and persuasiveness of civil service advice; the lack of interest by politicians in the intellectual underpinning of the advice that they receive; and the interweaving of administrative and party political issues. Even if politicians managed to be formidably curious about the advice that they received, and personal relations between ministers and senior civil servants were always impeccable, the other two questions would lose little of their force. These points are highly relevant to the situation in Australia. Although in both Britain and Australia the distribution of points of friction and ambiguity in ministerial/official relations is not the same across the whole ministry, the ever present potential for disruption as well as for smooth working relationships should be given its full weight in any discussion of problems of coordination and control.

**Cabinet arrangements**

The commission is also hesitant and tentative in its approach to problems of cabinet arrangements and their implications for public service work. It does not present a consolidated discussion of the topic although it has said enough in various places to suggest that it either had the material in hand for a more extended discussion or at least had thought seriously about trying to collect it. For example, at an early stage of the report it suggests that, in turning an incoming government’s ideas into specific programmes, public servants should be actively associated with the ministerial committees which do this (RC 3.4.3); it proposes that ministers need more information presented to them not as individuals but as a group (RC 4.1.3); it reports the view that a cut in the number of departments would allow the formation of a smaller cabinet (RC 4.3.28); and in a more extended discussion of arrangements in the social welfare field it suggests that a system of coordinating and subordinate ministers could be appropriate (RC 10.3.19, 10.3.23). But except in the last case it does not present its proposals with much elaboration or force.

In discussing the relations between ministerial committees and associated teams of public servants, either in the case mentioned
above or in other places, the report does not review at any length
the variety of ways in which public servants may be asked to make
contributions and the problems associated with some of these ways.
For example, should public servants be drawn only from the
departments of the ministers involved? should they be grouped in
standing committees or in less formal and more changeable task
forces? should ministers and public servants meet together? and,
if so, should public servants take part in ministerial discussions and
on what basis? These are important questions, the more so when
the task in hand is not as RCAGA says “converting the generalities
of the political programme into a blueprint for action” (RC 3.4.3),
but responding to situations in government on which the party
machinery as such has produced no specific or helpful views.
Relevant Australian experience which could have been discussed
does exist and Canadian experience in this field is not only rich
but much of it is readily accessible.

The commission’s suggestion that ministers need a common pool
of background material is followed by a statement that the details
of appropriate administrative machinery would be a subject for
“evolving review”, a reservation that is unimpeachable. But again
the commission is reluctant to discuss relevant experience. It is quite
forthright that departments should not be built up to provide advice
to ministers on cabinet affairs not directly affecting the departments
concerned, but then recognizes that departments may nevertheless
have a role to play in the process. When it comes to discussing
other possible sources its remarks are allusive rather than substanc­
tive. Ministerial staffs are cautiously and briefly mentioned as are
bodies like the central policy review staff (CPRS) and priorities review
staff (PRS) (although these are not named). The commission’s
language only becomes more positive again when it exhorts min­
isters to make more use of the resources of administration for
collective purposes.

Each minister has a continuous teaching function to perform in his
department, pointing out where and how his government needs to be
served as a collective entity (RC 4.1.6).

But how ministers might be motivated and organized to do this
is subject to even less comment than the institutional devices that
they might want to experiment with to secure collective advice.

Discussion of the number of departments and the size of cabinet
is brief. The commission refused to endorse arguments advanced
in favour of less departments and a smaller cabinet but does suggest
that “on the whole” the number of departments should be reduced
rather than increased (RC 4.3.32). It also suggests that departments
have no ideal size and that there could be some quite large ones as well as rather small ones. Where large departments are created it argues that there would be a case for having more than one minister. It notes the important paper by one of the commissioners, Professor Enid Campbell, stating this is probably constitutionally possible, but does not suggest that there is any urgency about testing whether her view would be upheld. Its comments do however introduce the whole question of coordinating and assistant ministers, and this is taken up again in its discussion of social welfare arrangements. The commission’s analysis of problems in relating the affairs of the departments of Health, Social Security, Repatriation, Aboriginal Affairs and, for some purposes, the department of Environment, Housing and Community Development to each other and to the numerous statutory commissions also in the field is detailed and draws on the work of the task force on the subject set up by RCAGA in 1975. Here it is possible only to discuss the ministerial arrangements proposed.

The commission recommended the appointment of a minister for social welfare, supported by a small policy department in the Swedish style, who would chair a committee of other ministers from the welfare group. It also suggested the establishment of a consultative council to advise the minister and a bureau to sponsor and conduct research on social policy. The minister for social welfare would be a senior minister and, where there were an inner and outer ministry, the only one from the group in cabinet. He would have either no other departmental commitments or another portfolio outside the welfare area. The commission recognized, as is often said, that such a minister might have an inadequate power base, but argued that his responsibility for research, policy reviews and the preparation of a welfare budget would probably give him a good chance of success. But it did not explore this at any length although the difficulties involved where a coordinating minister reaches into another minister’s territory, especially on “access” matters which are so important in the social welfare field, are considerable. It is also unfortunate that RCAGA did not relate these proposals to other cabinet arrangements or canvass the possibility of similar committees for other policy areas. This would have taken it into the whole question of cabinet and cabinet committees.

The commission’s failure to consolidate and extend its discussion of cabinet arrangements allows it to avoid a number of critical problems in connecting political and public service institutions. One of these arises from the reputed role of cabinet itself as a means of coordinating government activities and making strategic decisions. The mystique of cabinet, fostered by ministers, cabinet
officers and generations of academic writers, has a practical value in maintaining some privacy for cabinet members as they go about their business. But it has also hindered understanding, even by participants, of how cabinets actually behave.

Available empirical material on cabinets in Britain, Canada and Australia suggests that they fulfil much less than the heroic role customarily ascribed to them. For example, they get too big, include the wrong people, avoid strategic discussions and depend significantly on the role assumed by the prime minister. Cabinet committees fluctuate in importance. Much of the most sensitive business is transacted informally by ministers and their associates rather than actually in cabinet and its committees. This is where the role of the prime minister is so important. He has more political resources available to him than any of his colleagues and if he wants to change cabinet committees or ignore them and conduct business by talking to select and changing groups of his own choice, there is little to stop him.

In Australia the problems of the post-Menzies coalition cabinets and of the Whitlam Labor cabinet are well known. Whitlam’s cabinet committee system underwent an important metamorphosis in 1974–75 which illustrated the difficulties of designing and sticking to specific cabinet arrangements. The experience of the Fraser coalition cabinet has also suggested that such arrangements may be fluid. It is easy to deplore this and to concentrate attention on devices for restraining prime ministerial discretion and channeling ministerial activities along a more rational course. On the other hand it may be necessary to accept that frequent fluctuations will take place. Thus RCAGA’s proposed arrangements in the social welfare field might work in one situation at one time but not in another. Further, the connection between cabinet and the elaborate process proposed for the making of forward estimates could be eroded. The commission proposes that the forward estimates would be brought together in the economic committee of cabinet and comments that in the Whitlam government the appropriate committee would have been the expenditure review committee (ERC). But it overlooks the strain under which the ERC would have been placed had restraining expenditure not been so important in 1975 and assumes that the economic committee has indeed had an effective life. Some doubt can be cast on this assumption. If these points have any weight then RCAGA has skirted around a central problem.
Coordination, control and discipline

To the extent that RCAGA deals with such issues it proposes rationalistic solutions. These can only apply uneasily in a situation where mutually supportive cabinet and public service arrangements are hard to organize while mutually disruptive ones seem to be self-generating. The Commission’s views are put forward in the introduction to the chapter on coordination and control which comes near the end of the report. The problem is defined in terms of the need to acknowledge discipline and constraints. The constraints are the collective responsibility of ministers, limitations on available resources, and electoral forces. Coping with these constraints is a matter for coordination. Thus RCAGA states:

The machinery of government, in both its ministerial and administrative aspects, will need to be designed to make effective the discipline of these constraints. This process can briefly be referred to as “coordination” (RC 11.1.5).

This makes coordination synonymous with control and in the next few pages the word “discipline” appears as often as in the hortatory utterances of a newly inducted head prefect. But RCAGA does not like discipline that is externally imposed. It argues “that a serious effort must be made to base coordination to a greater extent on voluntarily accepted discipline at all levels” (RC 11.1.10). The core of the disciplinary process would be the participation of ministers and departments in a revised budgetary process with improved forward estimates. The aim of this seems to be control without controllers. The framework in which government institutions are set, rather than selected and powerful institutions, would exercise control.

It may be useful to set RCAGA’s approach to coordination in the context of other conceptualizations of the term. Coordination is a protean word and the process itself has many manifestations. The commission has pinpointed some of these but left others to one side. First we may recall Lindblom’s sparse definition of the term:

A set of decisions is coordinated if adjustments have been made in it such that the adverse consequences of any one decision for other decisions in the set are to a degree and in some frequency avoided, reduced, counterbalanced or outweighed."

He explicitly leaves out any implication that the more the adjustment the greater the coordination. As is well known, he then makes a persuasive case that coordination may take place by partisan mutual adjustment as well as by central direction. Pressman and
Wildavsky extend the discussion when they point out that coordination has different meanings depending on whether participants in proceedings agree on common purposes, are in conflict over basic goals, or have to share responsibility with others who can neither be ignored nor coerced. Coordination can thus be a process of adjustment within an agreed framework, the exercising of a form of power, or another word for consent. They conclude:

Telling another person to coordinate . . . does not tell him what to do. He does not know whether to coerce or bargain, to exert power or secure consent. Here we have one aspect of an apparently desirable trait of antibureaucratic administration that covers up the very problem—conflict versus cooperation, coercion versus consent—it’s invocation is supposed to resolve.¹⁰

Leon Peres narrows the discussion down again when he offers a forceful definition which, like RCAGA, equates coordination with control.

Coordination is one of the fraudulent words of politics and administration. It dresses neutrally to disguise what nakedly is pure political form. Coordination is a political process by which the coordinated are made to change their value positions, their policy conceptions and their behaviour to conform with the conceptions and expectations of the coordinator.¹¹

The number of underlying assumptions (and their permutations) which can be specified when evaluating recommendations about coordination is thus considerable.

What RCAGA tries to do is to avoid making coordination either a cloak for coercion or simply a matter for partisan mutual adjustment. It seems to envisage a situation where the different elements in the process of government would be induced to accept a common appreciation of the need for budgetary discipline. Shared values combined with the opportunity to participate in the making of decisions would lead to voluntary and orderly adjustments. This is ingenious but not convincing. It overestimates the possibility of diffusing shared values and underestimates the incentives for politicians and public servants to corner resources, drive hard bargains and exert power. Further, too much depends on the forward estimates process. Despite the ever-present importance of budgetary considerations, and their present intensity, government is about more than budgets. Moreover the practicability of making useful forward estimates both in principle and in the form proposed by the commission is open to challenge. These points are taken up in Patrick Weller’s chapter. Here I am concerned with what RCAGA says about the principal coordinating agencies in the public service
and with the way they work in matters extending beyond budgeting. The commission generally favours reducing the central control of the Treasury and the PSB and not building up the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet too much. At the same time it favours the devolution of powers to operating departments and proposes increasing the role of the Auditor-General to cover efficiency audits and the creation of a major new economic department—the department of Industries and the Economy (DINDEC). While it does not question the established configuration of coordinating agencies its emphasis on reducing their relative importance is moderate but insistent.

Central coordinating agencies

The commission reports prevalent criticisms of Treasury's doctrinal attitudes to economic management and its poor relations with client departments in matters of financial control but does not support radical organizational changes on the grounds that however economic policy is conducted it is likely to lead to discontent and also, following Treasury's own arguments, that economic management and financial control are interlinked. It suggests that Treasury should be more forthcoming in relations with other departments but does not look closely at the internal arrangements which over the years have contributed to the department's stance. Similarly it sees a need for a source of alternative economic advice. This it would obtain from DINDEC which would be concerned with the medium and long term aspects of the industrial structure of the economy. In this respect it would provide a partial range of alternatives to Treasury advice. The commission explicitly prefers this course to building up the economic strength of the department of PM & C but its reasons are not entirely clear. Its advocacy of DINDEC has a "McEwenite" ring to it although in other respects its organizational conservatism is not hard to support. Some of the difficulties in economic policymaking in recent years may owe more to specific factors inside Treasury (and to a run of indifferent treasurers) than to its general structure. The commission's problems in trying to explore such factors are obvious and its inability to induce Treasury to be more open about them has prevented it from making this section of the report more incisive. Two other aspects of RCAGA's discussion of economic matters should be noted. The first is the explicit introduction of elements of partisan mutual adjustment despite the attempt to avoid this in the chapter entitled "Coordination and Control". The second is that the government's
decision in late 1976 to divide the Treasury has opened up, whether by intent or not, the possibility of internal changes within two now separate departments.

In discussing the department of PM & C, RCAGA wishes to distinguish between the roles of the prime minister as leader of the government and chairman of cabinet and to see the distinction reflected in the internal organization of the department. This distinction can be made analytically to bring out different aspects of a prime minister's work but it is doubtful whether prime ministers themselves are sufficiently concerned about it to allow it to serve as a basic organizing principle for the department of PM & C. The commission refers to the "presidentialization" of the prime ministership in the Australian and related systems. This often-used characterization encompasses part of the truth at the cost of obscuring another equally important part. Recent prime ministers have indeed tended to draw more power more obviously to themselves, but equally they have done it by exploiting resources available to holders of the office for a long time. Once prime ministers do this it is not surprising if they require bureaucratic support from an integrated department. In Britain and in Canada no prime minister's department has been created but in Canada the PCO and the PMO, although constituted and recruited differently, seem to have such close and overlapping working relations that one may ask whether there is a substantial functional reason for their separation. Similarly in Britain the amount of energy expended in squashing the notion of a prime minister's department suggests that the work of the prime minister and his support staff helps generate some support for the idea.

As chairman of cabinet the prime minister has more to say than anyone else about how it conducts its business. Within the department of PM & C the dividing line between cabinet work and work in the policy divisions is no more than a fine one. At the top of the department the work of processing cabinet papers and recording decisions is inextricably linked with the wider tasks of advising the prime minister on policy, organizational and political problems. Such problems commonly resist disentanglement even into these three divisions and they have to be tackled by the prime minister not only in cabinet but elsewhere as well. In this context attempts to have separate components of the department divide up tasks on a firm and continuing basis seem unlikely to succeed.

In its concern to separate out the functions of the department, RCAGA gives too little consideration to the role that the department may have in collecting information about the implementation of government programmes and suggesting that departments pursue
policies differently or in a more vigorous way. Nor does it consider the problems that the department may have in collecting appropriate information and the antagonism that this may generate. It is not irrelevant to note that for its efforts in a similar enterprise the Premier's department in South Australia is sometimes known as the "Mafia" or "SS". The commission does however see a role for the policy unit that it proposes within the department in formulating "overall programmes for implementing the government's objectives" (RC 11.5.21b) and in evaluating the effectiveness of ongoing programmes. Of the other tasks for the department RCAGA considers, it sees a need for officers of the department as well as of the PSB to consider machinery of government questions. However, it concludes optimistically that "substantial changes are likely to be called for only intermittently" (RC 11.5.29) and that there is therefore no case for establishing a machinery of government unit in the department. The amount of change in recent years, even under the Fraser government, suggests, though, that such a unit would rarely be short of work. More positively, RCAGA sees a role for the department in monitoring the work of interdepartmental committees. The import of RCAGA's recommendations on IDCs is to bring them much more to the notice of the ministry and to use other means where possible of settling policy differences between departments. It also suggests that where IDCs are not making appreciable progress the secretary to cabinet might make recommendations to the prime minister about how to deal with the issue. Finally, despite RCAGA's emphasis on the role that the department should play for cabinet as well as for the prime minister, it does not consider the problem that anything set up to provide more assistance for cabinet as a whole may ultimately have the effect of strengthening the prime minister even more. The recent evolution of the department suggests that as it has been given more tasks by activist prime ministers its responsibility to anyone but the prime minister has become even less possible. Overall RCAGA's discussion of the department has lagged behind the development of the department itself.

In discussing the three central agencies RCAGA gives its most detailed attention to the PSB. In broad terms it does not propose any diminution of the board's authority although it does suggest that on a wide range of staffing matters operational decisions should be delegated to departments. It proposes that the system of making bulk establishment approvals should be extended and that the board's main role should be focused on the making of forward estimates of manpower use. However, the board's responsibility for making checks on the actual use of staff within departments and
agencies would remain. Associated with this RCAGA suggests that the board's role as a source of consultancy services and advice should be greatly developed. This would entail a substantial reorientation of the board's activities. It would move away from specialized tasks of position creation into less defined areas of work calling for a substantial understanding of the functions of departments. The commission's stipulation that staff should be moved through the board on rotation from departments is of particular significance here. While in other areas of the report RCAGA sometimes tends to incorporate recommendations on increasing rotation of staff as a routine measure, in this case it has a distinct relevance. The commission also makes a large number of other suggestions about the future work of the board. These reflect the close contact between RCAGA and the board during the course of the inquiry and the board's own willingness to propose changes. This contrasts with the sparseness of detailed comment about desirable internal changes in the Treasury and the conservative nature of its recommendations for the department of PM & C.

The commission's treatment of the coordinating agencies contains a number of interesting details but over all it does not have great impact. The forward estimates process as spelt out by RCAGA would have limited use in redefining the relations between the coordinating bodies and other departments and agencies. Just as RCAGA has avoided the hard questions posed by the fluidity of ministerial arrangements, so for the most part has it avoided the implications of bureaucratic politics. While the PSB may, if it wishes to, be able to devolve responsibility for staffing, the Treasury/department of Finance and the department of the PM & C have tasks which require the exercise of power as well as of persuasion. Whether relations between departments in the public service are adjusted in idioms of consensus or of conflict, bargaining and power plays are rarely far from the scene.

Decentralization and federalism

This chapter has been concerned with coordination and control at the centre. It has not dealt with RCAGA's discussion of these processes within departments, and between federal government agencies and other levels of government. But, in conclusion, it is relevant to note the difficulty that RCAGA had in working out consistent ideas on devolution in administration, and the brevity of its discussion of federalism. The problems with devolution are illustrated by RCAGA's recognition that it may be easier to devolve responsibility from the
central coordinating agencies to operating departments than from
the top. Canberra-based levels of these departments, downwards
and away from the centre. It thus proposes the establishment within
the department of PM & C of a coordinating unit to oversee the
process of decentralization. Further, RCAGA had trouble in deciding
what should be subject to uniform standards, what should be left
to local initiative, and how disagreements about such questions
should be resolved. The commission talks of decentralization in an
open-handed way but when it comes to specific points it avoids
issues of policy-making. It does not try openly to distinguish
between policy-making and administration but gravitates to this
position without discussing the restrictive implications that this may
have for the kinds of decentralization that are possible.\textsuperscript{13}

When it comes to the related question of federalism, the main
point to be noticed is the gap. The commission does advocate
increased cooperation between federal and state agencies, including
the delegation of federal work to state officers, and it did set up
the NOW shop as an experiment in integrating the welfare services
of different levels of government. But it is reluctant to discuss the
familiar problems federalism creates for a wide variety of expensive
programmes. The political objections to such a discussion by RCAGA
are obvious but the cost of not confronting them is also high. This
may be illustrated by reference to RCAGA's brief comment that where
the federal government provides money to the states for specific
purposes it "should be able to assess how a programme is
developing" (RC 7.4.13). The commission hopes that such
assessments could be carried out by joint federal-state teams headed
by independent assessors and that agreement to this procedure could
be secured in the bargaining before programmes were begun. This
modest and rational proposal would however be hard to implement,
not least because it would sometimes not be in the interests of one
or more governments for any detailed assessment to take place.
Further difficulties could also be specified. On this topic the division
of jurisdiction between federal and state not only makes the review
of policy and administration difficult but it has also inhibited RCAGA
itself from even discussing the ramifications of the problem. As was
seen earlier this shying away from difficult problems has also
characterized much of RCAGA's treatment of central coordination and
control.

Notes

1 Bernard Schaffer, Introduction to special issue on access, \textit{Development and
Change}, vi, 2, 1975, 3.
4. Ibid. 33.
12. Even if *RCAGA* did not want to recommend a machinery of government unit it might usefully have canvassed more extensively the ways in which governments might be supplied with timely advice on machinery of government questions. Such questions are often related only ambiguously to issues of substantive policy. In the pressure to resolve policy problems, questions of machinery tend to be left to take care of themselves. The speed with which machinery questions may arise, and the difficulty of predicting where they will come from, may make it difficult for a machinery of government unit to respond with a fully backgrounded set of proposals, but the need to develop a readiness to respond to such questions is strong. It is a pity that *RCAGA* did not at least recommend that an experiment with a machinery of government unit be conducted.
Towards a Professional Bureaucracy

R. D. Scott

In a remark made during discussion of another paper, Professor Wilenski offered a convenient three-point summary of the objectives and recommendations of the RCAGA report: improved central coordination, greater flexibility for the heads of departments, and more use of non-hierarchical structures of management. Each of these points can be equated with one of three analytical models which Professor Spann identified as relevant to the RCAGA recommendations: a “political” model based upon traditional notions of individual and collective ministerial responsibility; an “accountable management” model based upon establishing a clear area for internal bureaucratic control by the permanent head; and a “participatory” model aiming at responsiveness to the clients of the organization and the lower ranks of the organization in contact with these clients.

The key problem was seen by both commentators to be the tension and contradictions which exist between these three models and the aspirations based upon them. In order to avoid repeating points made elsewhere, the focus of this chapter is on the second model—the notion of internal, self-regulatory structures of management, according greater autonomy to the service in order to let it manage itself. This is related to a claim by public servants to have themselves regarded by the public and by politicians as trustworthy professionals—in Mill’s terms, as “governors by profession, which is the essence and meaning of bureaucracy”.

Prestigious bureaucracies have a need to maintain an air of professionalism and this requires support for administrative reform. Such bureaucracies have often ended up sponsoring administrative reform activities that are carefully circumscribed and oriented so as to pose little threat to the bureaucracy’s power and prestige . . . Alternatively prestige bureaucracies are likely to demand that the responsibility for operationalizing reform proposals be left to themselves in order that some control can be gained at that point.

I would not want to assert that Grove’s comment is relevant to the Australian scene—he is obviously concerned with unsophisticated less developed countries—but his reference to “an air
of professionalism" can be a starting point for commentary on the three papers in this session and related discussion of the RCAGA report. Underlying the major reform proposals and directly linked with notions of a career service, neutrality and objectivity is a theme of the capacity of the public service to regulate itself in the public interest. In acknowledging the weakness of traditional assumptions about political control via ministerial responsibility, the report and its consultants all see the best alternative to be a strengthening of internal regulatory devices and the espousal of self-discipline and an independent code of ethics. As Spann notes, the report states the pious hope that ministers will pay more attention to their administrative duties but assumes that they will not and then argues from that assumption that accountable management is the only solution.

Emy's report in Appendix I of the report links together the topics of the Spann and Wiltshire papers when he argues that

there is a close relationship between the requirements of ministerial responsibility, as a doctrine of political control, and the separate concept of an impartial and objective career service. Both concepts, for rather different reasons, tend to emphasise the same values of anonymity, neutrality and impartiality on the part of the public servants.'

Whereas Smith's paper concentrates on devices and institutions to improve the level of awareness of what is happening in the bureaucracy at the level of ministers and cabinet, the primary focus of Wiltshire and Spann is on the bureaucrats. Both accept that the nature of modern government is forcing a more positive role on bureaucrats and particularly on permanent heads who are becoming increasingly autonomous in the management of their departments. Spann is concerned about the implication of loss of anonymity (partly the product of insensitive ministers trying to dodge responsibility) and also seems a little unhappy about any doctrine of "high loyalty" which would allow bureaucrats to set their own standards of ethics in response to political direction. But the drift of his proposals, particularly in the longer report to the commission, would be towards decentralization of control into the hands of permanent heads and an acceptance of a wide range of discretion vested in the service itself.

Wiltshire is mainly concerned with the implications of a strengthened career service (aided by greater internal mobility). He seems particularly concerned about the existence of elitism and irresponsibility which might be produced by permanence. While regretting the failure of the commission to gain knowledge about options outside the service, he hazards a few generalizations of his
own: “Australians are too afraid of political and administrative nepotism in government appointments to give each agency carte blanche in recruitment, particularly at senior levels . . .” but “a move towards more lateral recruitment would be welcomed by most people outside the service”; “the seeming lack of discipline in the service has become an issue with the Australian public who have always become restless when public servants, whose salary they are paying through taxation and who are given security of tenure, seem to be able to get away with various forms of misconduct”; and the elite of the second division has always been “regarded suspiciously by Australians”, (perhaps because Wiltshire reckons it includes “a lot of over-rated over paid fast-talking egotistical conmen”).

Wiltshire then proposes that it is necessary to accept the inevitability of elites but that the elite must be kept small, accountable and selected by merit. The last is unexceptionable, the first is rather illogical (since smallness has no virtue in itself) but accountability is the central concern. Wiltshire offers no magic formula to ensure accountability, and it seems from the evidence of the report and its voluminous appendices that none exists. There is the recurrent theme about the need for increased effectiveness in the supervisory activities of ministers, cabinet and parliament but an underlying pessimism about this possibility and, as Self and Smith both point out, the report is not really directed towards politicians. It is a “tame”, “insider’s” report, so it stresses internal arrangements which will offer the possibility of accountability based upon the bureaucrats’ sense of “responsibility” and adherence to a code of ethics.

And it is in this sense that the “air of professionalism” rises from the document and its consultants’ reports. It occurs to Emy, for example:

The function of the career service concept is to ensure that there will be men available of sufficient intellectual integrity to make objective advice a reality . . . A new system of control would need to recognize the professional responsibilities of public servants themselves to safeguard both standards of performance and integrity in the administrative process.

The same theme occurs in the edited evidence of several senior public servants commenting on Spann’s report, all defending the proposition that there are significant areas of decision-making where the permanent head has final authority—summed up in Tange’s comment that “Departments are not the possession of permanent heads; but they are not the possession of individual ministers either”. Spann makes a similar point, with some equivocation: “I
think it a dangerous doctrine that permanent heads are the guardians of the public interest, though in a certain sense this is true. Certainly ministers have no sole right to determine the public interest”.

The theme of professionalism is made most explicit in the evidence of Hasluck concerning the appointment of permanent heads, when he argues that

there seems to be a greater need than ever for a permanent head to have professional competence, which really means professional training and experience. I also believe that public administration is a highly specialized professional task different from either business management or the successful practice of politics.

He then goes on to expound the widely accepted view that appointments to permanent head should be channelled through a committee of peers so that

in effect all the officers who are considered by their own colleagues to have the capacity to become a permanent head should be listed for consideration by ministers.

Here we are getting close to one of the primary characteristics of professionalism, the notion of peer group control. Add to this the notion of a specialized technique and a sense of collegial responsibility based upon an ethical code (Spann’s articulated conventions) and—a point implicit at several points in the report—“relative freedom from lay control and from lay judgments as to the quality of the professional service performed”.

We are moving some distance along the spectrum of professionalization or, in Hoyle’s terms, public servants are claiming a higher degree of “professionality”.

Schott makes the point, already made some time ago by Crisp, that generalist public administrators still have a long distance to travel along that spectrum before full professional status will be accorded to the occupation in its own right. The whole question of professional training as a basis for accreditation is obviously still unanswered, not only because there is disagreement about what should be offered in such a training but because there is even disagreement about whether public administration itself is a genuine discipline appropriate for study in its own right.

But, following Price, Schott offers the following typology and explanation as a basis for analyzing the relationship between professionals, administrators and politicians:
Don K. Price's study of the relationship between science and government led him to a consideration of the societal roles played by four basic groups or “estates”—science, the professions, administration, and politics. These estates can be arranged along a continuum from the search for truth (science) at the one end to the exercise of power (politics) at the other.

Science is concerned with the discovery of knowledge; the professions with the application of knowledge; politics with the selection of ends or values; administration with the translation of these ends and values into practice (thus setting the parameters for the activity of the professions where they intersect with government). Entry into the scientific estate requires the longest and most specialized training and is the most meritocratic and peer-oriented; entry into the political estate requires no formal training at all, access to it being granted by the electoral market-place. In terms of career development, it is relatively easy to move from left to right along the continuum: a scientist may become a professional, a professional an administrator. But movement in the opposite direction is usually difficult, due largely to the time and effort required to gain the requisite knowledge for the adjacent, more “knowledge-intensive” estate on the left. Movement from left to right also involves a decrease in status: pure scientists look down on “applied” professionals, professionals on administrators, administrators on politicians. What is especially striking in Price's analysis is the hard distinction between the professional and the administrator. These for him are two separate activities, two worlds, two estates distinguished by their own norms and values.

There are numerous points which can be made in relation to this typology and its limitations, but the boundary between politician and administrator is one which obviously reflects upon the discussion of accountability and the role of permanent heads and ministerial advisers.
Where Schott was concerned about the infiltration of professionals into the ranks of administrators in the US federal system and the consequent weakening of norms of political accountability, perhaps we should be concerned more about the tendency manifest in the evidence and encouraged by the RCAGA report for administrators to shift their norms towards those of professionals.

The danger of course lies in the fact that administrators in a public bureaucracy can only strive for professional autonomy at the expense of external accountability. Other chapters in this volume—particularly those by Parker and Self—indicate that there are contradictions implicit in many of the specific recommendations relating to internal management, client responsiveness and ministerial responsibility. The danger is that these contradictions may be resolved in practice in favour of justifying non-interference in the actions of bureaucrats, legitimating masterly inactivity. It should not be forgotten who the masters are—as Parker’s original statement to RCAGA reminded them, “departments should not exist for the benefit of the employees, but for the service of the public”.

There remains the problem of defining “the public”. As Wiltshire points out, there was little effort to find out what was the general public’s attitude to the public service. It may be that it has no attitude, or that there are lots of partial “publics” with differing and conflicting views. And these views are more likely to relate to some specific activity of particular departments rather than to the public service as a whole. This raises the problem of client participation in decentralized decision-making, one of the subjects of the next group of chapters. The evidence provided by two consultants’ reports cast doubt upon the virtues of participation as a device for accountability: Tom Smith noted that non-statutory boards such as advisory committees were often resented by public servants because they infringed bureaucratic monopoly over advice and were often criticised by outsiders because the committee’s findings were screened and modified before they reached the minister.

Matthews would have typed this participation as “ritualistic” and was also critical of the extent to which access was differential, in that “public interest” spokesmen were often given less encouragement because they had little to offer in return compared to sectional groups. He also noted the tendency for participatory exercises to lead to questioning of professional expertise and to a consequent bureaucratic response of resorting to devices which minimize the impact of these exercises. The danger remains that autonomy may be preserved by using ritualistic participation to offset the demands for political responsibility at a higher level. (This seems to be the
case in the ACT with the NCDC fending off the Legislative Assembly by conducting its own community consultation as a basis for physical planning.) The public servant is then able to decide which are the "real" interests being articulated and which are merely selfish, partial interests, which ought to be ignored.

If on the other hand, the public interest is to be interpreted by political leaders in cabinet and parliament, then the problem of generality arises. How is it possible to create a system of accountability which will not be so general that it will be irrelevant in the particular? Throughout the report and its appendices, there are constant references to the unwillingness of politicians to interest themselves closely in the administrative process—what can we do about the politicians, Parker asks. Smith's paper at least takes us some way along the road to accountability by emphasizing the essentially political and incremental nature of the policy-making process, but ultimately he can only offer structural changes rather than behavioural modification. Even the setting of audit and evaluation procedures does not seem to guarantee much, as recent US experience with guidelines would indicate.

Ultimately, the pessimistic "solution" may have to be the acceptance of a very limited degree of external control over the vast public bureaucracy, an acceptance that the bureaucrats will be responsive to the professional norms which will be the only effective control mechanism in a wide area of public activity. This takes the findings of the commission in those aspects which rely on self-regulation of the bureaucracy firmly into the mainstream of the "new public administration", with its concern for the establishment of an autonomous value system for public servants able to impose their own (better?) view of the public interest rather than that provided by mere politicians.

But, in reviewing the remarkably similar developments in Canada, Kernaghan pointed out that

the new public administration movement draws attention to the actual and potential power of the public servants and to the importance of their value system for decision-making in government; however, it does not resolve—indeed it complicates—the issue of finding an appropriate balance between the power of the public servants and that of elected representatives.

The problem is, like much else in the "new" public administration, a rehashing of arguments from an earlier era. The technology may have changed, especially in the field of communications which now gives credence to claims by bureaucrats to "know" what the people want. But the dilemma is the same as it was in
the 1940s as typified by the exchanges between Friedrich and Finer over the nature of administrative responsibility. Friedrich argues for “a dual standard of administrative responsibility”, requiring an acceptance of the fact that

there is arising a type of responsibility on the part of the permanent administrator, the man who is called upon to seek and find the creative solutions for our crying technical needs, which cannot be effectively enforced except by fellow technicians who are capable of judging his policy in terms of the scientific knowledge bearing upon it.17

Finer attacks such a dualism and urges the pre-eminence of political control over administrative discretion, which he sees as central to any notion of responsibility and not to be confused with subjective notions involving individual conscience or peer group assessment. He contests Friedrich’s judgement that “technical responsibility” can only be effectively secured by granting officials considerable leeway and asserts that

never was the political responsibility of officials so momentous a necessity as in our own era. Moral responsibility is likely to operate in direct proportion to the strictness and efficiency of political responsibility, and to fall away into all sorts of perversions when the latter is weakly enforced. While professional standards, duty to the public and pursuit of technological efficiency are factors in sound administrative operation, they are but ingredients, and not continuously motivating factors of sound policy, and they require public and political control and direction.18

As a somewhat older student of public administration phrased it:

We must decide whether our object in setting up the guardian class is to make it as happy as we can, or whether happiness is a thing we should look for in the community as a whole. If it is the second, our guardians and auxiliaries must be compelled to act accordingly and be persuaded, as must everyone else, that it is their business to perfect themselves in their own particular job.19

Perhaps the Coombs commission was more concerned with keeping the guardians happy, and shared Plato’s faith in the guardians’ and auxiliaries’ devotion to the selfless pursuit of the common good. Let us not forget Lucas’ warning that

history has shown that even meritorious meritocrats may over the generations come to be more alive to their own interests than the interests of those they nominally serve

and his appeal (largely unheeded by RCAGA) that
somehow, somewhere, sometimes the non-professionals need to be brought into the picture and allowed to have their say. For, after all, it is they, as well as the professionals, who are expected to obey the law, and whose cooperation is required if communal purposes are to be achieved.  

Notes

2. H.V. Em, “The Public Service and Political Control”, RCAA, Appendix 1, 16.
3. Ibid. 45.
4. RCAA, Appendix 1, 288.
5. RCAA, Appendix 1, 289.
9. I have not been diverted into the well-trodden path of discussing the problems of relationships between professionals (in the narrow sense of technical specialists) and “ordinary” administrators. Wiltshire makes reference to this problem without offering much in the way of solutions. Attention might be given to the Canadian academic practice of paying a “market allowance” for particular disciplines which command a high premium on the general employment market, allowing people like medical professionals to be paid commensurate salaries without raising their status above that of their non-medical peers. For a perceptive discussion of the wider problem in relation to teachers, see Beare, “Teacher Participation in Education Management”. Note in particular his description of the tendency towards “unionization” of the professions and the conflicts of interest that this can generate, especially in situations aiming at some form of participatory management such as the ACT Education Authority.
10. RCAA, Appendix 1, 281.
11. RCAA, Appendix 1, 393–95.
12. RCAA, Appendix 2, 342.
13. RCAA, Appendix 1, 277.
14. See “Policy Implementation—Guidelines”, Policy Sciences, 7(6), 1976. The whole number of this journal was a discussion under this heading.
The efficient use of resources was the first of the major problems considered by RCAGA. It proposed that “the conclusions we reach [on this topic] are relevant to our consideration of all the functions which the administration performs” (RC 3.1.2). The commission believed that efficiency could be achieved if six conditions were fulfilled. These conditions were:

(a) the objectives to which work is to be directed and the priorities attached to them are stated clearly;
(b) decision makers at all levels have scope to act entrepreneurially;
(c) officers are able to identify themselves with the objectives to which their personal efforts are directed, and with the ways in which these objectives have been determined and the related work organized;
(d) staff involved are appropriately recruited, trained, organized and promoted;
(e) managers at all levels have access to both the information upon which their actions should properly depend, and to the appropriate expertise in managerial and related techniques;
(f) performance at all levels is regularly assessed and those responsible are held accountable for it in ways which ensure that the assessment bears upon their rewards, standing and future (RC 3.2.12).

These basic ideas illustrate one of the fundamental beliefs of the report—that management should be accountable and that power should be decentralized from the centre to departments and within the departments to the more junior officers. The report wants to reduce the detailed control by the central departments while retaining a general guidance of policy direction. Efficiency was to be achieved primarily at departmental level.

But all these plans depend heavily on the first of those six conditions and, to a lesser extent, on the fifth. The report itself recognizes this fact. It refers to the development of the system of forward estimates as “the first and critical step in the achievement
of greater efficiency" (RC 3.3.14). If the system of forward estimates is defective, then the feasibility of important sections of the report can be thrown into doubt.

Any discussion of the allocative processes of governments is fraught with danger—and faced with scepticism. Not without reason. Overseas examples in developed countries that follow the Westminster system of government are not encouraging. In Britain, the system of five year forward estimates (widely known as PESC after the Public Expenditure Survey Committee that prepares the annual white papers), has become well entrenched. Occasionally it has been praised; for instance, Heclo and Wildavsky declared

No nation in the world can match the sophistication or thoroughness found in the British process of expenditure projection.¹

But more recently the whole system of PESC has been viewed more critically. In general terms there have been frequent large discrepancies between the forecasts and the outcomes which have remained unexplained; in particular instances there has been a "failure to limit the monetary costs of expenditure proposals to planned levels".² To some extent the ever-increasing growth in public expenditure in Britain can be explained by political and bureaucratic factors; PESC after all is merely a means of showing what future changes are envisaged. But it does show why the control of expenditure is regarded as PESC's Achilles heel. PESC is inadequate as a control mechanism primarily because it is intended as a planning system. The forward estimates are calculated in constant price terms, which in theory facilitate the choice of priorities between the various sectors with full knowledge of the implications of those choices over the next five years. But in an inflationary period the system does not determine precisely how much money should be spent on each programme for each year and, as the ongoing programmes have at least theoretically received government support by their inclusion in the white paper, so departments have a case for seeking additional funds for their already agreed responsibilities. The failure of PESC to control monetary costs led in early 1976 to a cash-limits system by which departments were now given specific sums within which they had to operate.

A second major weakness of PESC has been its failure to develop a comprehensive system of monitoring ongoing programmes. Only recently have the Policy Analysis and Review (PAR) procedures been increased in number. Yet one critic has argued that there still exists no suitably rational means of choosing which programmes should be cut and which should be increased.³

Notably both PESC and PAR are, at least in promise, done openly.
The PESC white paper is published annually and is the subject of parliamentary debate, although that debate has seldom been instructive. More scrutiny is achieved by the activities of the Public Expenditure Committee. In the most recent speech from the throne in the UK, the government also promised that twenty PARS a year would be published. Information at least may become more public.

In Canada less is done. Departments do prepare their own forward estimates, but they are regarded with derision in the Treasury Board as little more than wish-lists. The Treasury Board works out its own three year estimates, based on the current year’s expenditure; these forecasts include both financial and manpower demands and allow the Treasury Board to devise a public expenditure budget. Analysis of ongoing programmes is usually carried on only within the usual annual budgetary round, although some particular programmes may be subjected to the scrutiny of the technically high-powered planning branch of the Treasury Board. In the Treasury Board’s public expenditure budget, which is drawn up independently of the department of Finance, a contingency sum is included to meet new demands or emergencies that may develop during the year.

In Australia the forward estimates have so far scarcely been worthy of the name. As I have discussed elsewhere, they are in their present form little more than a wish-list on the departmental side and can be useful for the Treasury primarily as a means of increasing its information and for use for bureaucratic control purposes. The annual budget is devised by what one commentator described as the “hired gun” approach. Each department fights for its own allocation of funds with little concern for the overall picture or for the implications of its programme for those pursued by other agencies. As a result, at the level where implementation can be seen in terms of bricks and mortar, the lack of coordination and the incidence of unnecessary overlapping can be disturbing.

In neither Britain nor Canada, for a wide variety of political and economic reasons, have the proposals for forward estimates been notably successful in allocating resources, controlling expenditure or developing more effective systems of planning. Other experiments, such as the now-famous introduction of zero-base budgeting in Georgia and the across-the-board development of PPB in the USA, have been equally limited in their success. At the same time participants in budgetary processes argue instinctively that some planning must be better than the existing incremental “ad hoccerity”. But they have failed so far to devise a scheme that can bring political uncertainties, technical shortcomings and vague aspirations into a coherent and binding system—or indeed to illustrate that such a scheme is feasible at all.
Any consideration of the RCAGA report must therefore be considered with this background in mind; it is not that Australia must follow overseas precedents or that a technique that is found wanting in the face of Britain's massive problems might not work successfully in Australia's more prosperous economy. It is simply that there is sufficient similarity in the various systems adopted or proposed to pose comparable questions, even if not identical answers.

The Report

One problem with a detailed analysis of a report is to determine what the objectives of the commissioners were. At the one extreme a report may provide a detailed blueprint of what should be done; at the other it may merely suggest that, if a certain line of action is to be taken, then a variety of factors should be taken into account. It leaves the working out of the actual details to the practitioners or professionals. Criticism may miss the point if a report espouses the second approach and is then judged by the standards of the first. But that is the inevitable problem of a critic who does not know the inside story of the commission.

In the case of RCAGA the situation is made harder by the tendency of the report to drift between these two positions, without explaining precisely how the report should be judged. At times it is extremely specific; on other occasions its recommendations are so vague that they provide no firm basis for being turned from policy into programme, an evolution whose problems they are aware of in the political arena. I shall therefore take the recommendations on forward estimates and related subjects as they stand and take the chance that my comments probably cover ground discussed and, for some reason, rejected in the compilation of the report.

As we have seen, the report argues that the first requirement for the introduction of efficiency is the clear statement of objectives and priorities. It states that "it is only in the preparation of a budget that the determination of priorities becomes precise and realistic" (RC 3.3.3). It therefore proposes that, as the annual budget often does not include explicit ministerial decisions about the value of many ongoing programmes and as anyway it is seldom a blueprint for the government's plans, a system of forward estimates should be developed.

These forward estimates were intended to achieve two objectives: to assist macro-economic management and to allow the use of resources to be planned efficiently. The report argued that to be effective the forward estimates had to fulfil five requirements:
a) The estimates had to be prepared within guidelines set by cabinet as to the level of resources—both financial and manpower—to be allocated to the government’s activities;
b) they had to assess needs in terms both of money and manpower;
c) they had to become the main vehicle for competitive bidding for resources between ministers;
d) their preparation had to involve ministers, and their adoption became a matter for cabinet; and
e) once adopted by cabinet they had to be seen to embody the government’s priorities and be available for use as a basis for planning.

The report accepted that the forward estimates would have to be revised annually on a rolling basis, but believed that the exercise would force departments and ministers to state their objectives more explicitly.

In chapter 13 the report spelt out in some detail the procedures to be adopted—or at least the flow of information it considered desirable. A committee of cabinet decides the total proportion of potential GDP to be spent in the public sector, the general priorities and objectives for the period covered by the forward estimates and the marginal amounts to be reserved for contingencies or new programmes. These decisions are based on advice on broad trends from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Public Service Board, the Treasury, the department of Employment and Industrial Relations and the new department of Industries and the Economy (DINDEC) which the report proposed should give advice on long-term trends in the structure of industry and the economy. Within the constraints so determined—and presumably within the budgets so prescribed—departments then draw up their financial and manpower needs for the next three years. These needs are to be prepared annually on a rolling basis. These bids would then be reviewed by a cabinet sub-committee, chaired by a nominee of the prime minister but containing mostly junior ministers. This sub-committee would be advised by the supply divisions of the Treasury on the financial implications, by the PSB on the manpower estimates, by DINDEC on the effects for the general distribution of resources and by PM & C on its consistency with government policy. The resulting paper would thereafter be considered by the economic committee of cabinet and by cabinet itself.

The commission hoped that the paper produced by this process would then provide a framework for the planning of departments and agencies. The firmness and clarity of that framework would provide a context within which ministers and the heads of departments and
agencies could be allowed significant freedom to modify within the approved totals, the precise pattern of planned employment and expenditure (RC 11.2.14).

The key elements of the process were the increase of ministerial involvement in the determination of priorities and in the review of the costs of ongoing programmes, and the desire to give the minister and his department the incentive to make economies.

To help achieve these objectives the report made several other proposals. It argued that the existing system of manpower estimates should be integrated with the forward estimates and proposed that the use of staff ceilings be abolished. The manpower and financial estimates were to be brought together at the level of the officials’ committee which supported the cabinet committee.

The flow of information also received attention. The report asserted:

> Information is power. It gives distinctive strength to those who possess it: to public servants, to individuals or to groups who have access to it. The classical dictum of Lord Acton that all power tends to corrupt has applications to this as well as other forms of power. Because information is power and is capable of abuse, questions of access to it, of authority to withhold it and of the privacy of those who supply the data on which it is based are of much importance (RC 10.7.1).

The report exhorted departments not to regard as “their own” the information they obtain. But it made no clear recommendations on how this inter-departmental traffic in ideas would be assured.

In discussing these proposals of the report, I will concentrate on two questions which are central to the recommendations. First, I will consider whether the forward estimates as presented in the report are designed for control or planning purposes and what the implications of either choice are. Second, I will look at the question of the provision of alternative sources of advice to cabinet on a single topic.

**Planning or Control?**

When writing of the debate on planning, Wildavsky commented:

> If planning is to be more than an academic exercise, it must actually guide the making of government decisions. Government actions (and the private activities they seek to influence) must in large measure conform to the plan if it is to have effect.°

Similar comments could be made about methods of controlling
expenditure. If they are to mean anything, they have to ensure that expenditure can be restrained within prescribed limits—and they probably have to be seen to be binding.

In Britain the PESC white paper is published annually. The first two years’ forecasts are meant to be firm while the third year is regarded as the “focal year”. As a result of the publication, outcomes can be compared with forecasts. It is true that the Plowden committee originally was sceptical about the possibility of the publication of the figures; it thought it doubtful

whether any Government will feel able to place these surveys before Parliament and the public. To do this would involve disclosing the Government’s long-term intentions for a wide range of public expenditure; and also explaining the survey’s assumptions about employment, wages, policies and all the other main elements in the national economy.

It would be surprising if any Government were prepared to do this.”

W.J.M. Mackenzie translated this statement (with considerable relevance to the Australian scene) to read, “Unfortunately we can’t believe that politicians would have the nerve to publish it; nor could we in our capacity as political secretaries, advise them to take the risk.” But the publication of the PESC white paper has not led to the undermining of executive power in Britain, even if it has not led either to the greatly increased scrutiny of the executive by parliament. Nevertheless many of those involved in public expenditure matters in Britain, particularly at the political level, argue that without publication the estimates would be meaningless.

The RCAGA’s report never directly discusses the question—or even hints at the importance of the topic, although, hidden away in its lists of items to be included in departmental reports, can be found “information and comment on the forward estimates of the department” (RC 4.3.27ff). While it is true that the report presents no timetable for the introduction of the system and would have considered it impractical to offer a particular date by which the estimates should be published (if that indeed was considered desirable), to avoid the subject altogether ensured that one of the main props of the system in Britain was ignored entirely.

Further the report also chose not to discuss the question of how the estimates should be calculated—or rather it ignored many of the technical questions which may be crucial in such matters. In criticizing the report of one of the consultants to RCAGA, the Treasury commented

there is no recognition of the precept that control over how a thing is decided is very close to control over what is decided.”
By declining to specify what technical factors should be involved, the report leaves its outline in procedural terms, assuming presumably that any details based on this outline would abide by the spirit of the proposals. I would not be so confident. Not only will any group of senior bureaucrats who fill in those gaps naturally have their own conceptions of how, for what purpose, (and even if) the forward estimates should work but managerial feasibility—or at least managerial ease—may soon become dominant over the broad-ranging conception of the report.

A couple of examples may make the point. The report does not explain whether, as with the present forward estimates, departmental requirements should be calculated on a constant price basis. In an inflationary period this becomes important because of the need to calculate how much extra any programme would require. It is vague about whether the estimates include new projects that ministers might hope to introduce in two or three years time. Are these included in the estimates, in the "contingency" bid or subsumed in the proposal to give departmental heads greater flexibility in the management of their resources? Each year, the report recognizes, the forward estimates would have to be revised. It hopes that the revisions would be made within the parameters originally proposed by using the contingency sum to meet new commitments. But they also would be revised to meet the demands of macro-economic management. If public expenditure must be cut, if the estimates originally given to the cabinet committee were not met, then the whole structure of the estimates would have to be reconsidered.

It is here that the major weakness of the report's proposals are most obvious. The forward estimates are annually adjustable; they are not binding—on anyone. They are not intended to force departments to live within their means, as they might if they were designed primarily as a financial control mechanism. Nor do they guarantee departments the use of an exact level of resources, within which they can plan and allocate their internal finances.

The estimates, in fact if not in theory, must be renegotiated annually. Certainly the changes that occur would have to be marginal. But they have always been marginal. No-one can calculate exactly how much of a government's expenditure is "locked in", that is, how much is already committed by legislation and by programmes which are politically impossibly to reverse (like a reduction in pensions). Many estimates put it at well over 90 per cent of the budgetary expenditure. The room for manoeuvre is therefore small. Already departments and the Treasury (or now,
the department of Finance) argue over their marginal amounts; they can usually assume a certain level of expenditure.

Therefore the revision of the forward estimates will mean a marginal renegotiation. Departments will have no guarantees and no assurances of that marginal amount of their funds that they always compete for. This situation is at least in part the result of the report's own failure to explain clearly whether the system it proposes is for planning or control purposes. As Lord Diamond has remarked, control means restraint." Since treasuries would use any such system at least in part to improve their information about departmental intentions, it would not be surprising if departments regarded the proposed forward estimates with some scepticism. It is true that RCAGA recommends that the Treasury should communicate more freely with departments, that the relevant supply officer should "be seen as a helpful and friendly adviser and critic" (RC 11.3.21), and that there should be greater career mobility in and out of the Treasury. But exhortation is no substitute for prescription. To change the style of financial control in Australia would take longer and demand more fundamental changes even than the forward estimates themselves. Departments might reasonably expect that when the proposed forward estimates undergo their annual revision, any savings they have made in their original allocation will disappear in the cause of general austerity.

In other words, if one of the objectives of the forward estimates is financial control or an introduction of discipline, more specific changes would be needed. Not only the current year but also year two of the estimates would have to be binding (given the need to revise the constant price basis and to calculate the relative price effect of public spending), with something like the PESC system of cash limits also being proposed. Certainly this was the general direction in which the Treasury was developing the existing estimates.

Control and planning are not incompatible. Far from it. One man's limit is another's guaranteed sum. But many of the mechanisms do differ. Since the report talks of turning policies into programmes, making priorities explicit and setting general parameters for the government's directions, it obviously wants the forward estimates to be used for improved planning. But even in this area there are many areas of fundamental importance which its scheme ignores—or skirts around.

First, the report recommends that the economic committee of cabinet should determine priorities, the amount of GDP and manpower to be allocated to the public sector and the size of a contingency vote. Quite apart from the fact that the report takes
the existing cabinet committee system as given and fails to recommend an alternative ideal (why the economic committee, for instance? why not the priorities and planning committee?) the recommendations assume that cabinets have the desire or ability to delineate objectives, to relate them to programmes and to agree to those final marginal allocations of resources. Few democracies have shown that they have the capacity to be so explicit—indeed there is in fact a case for arguing that to be explicit for two to three years ahead is positively disadvantageous. It reduces flexibility.

Generally all politicians favour planning; like motherhood, it sounds so virtuous. It is considered desirable because it is systematic rather than random, efficient rather than wasteful, coordinated rather than helter-skelter, consistent rather than contradictory, and above all, rational rather than unreasonable.

But experience suggests that while politicians accept it as a theory, when it comes to limits on their own empires or ambitions, it is considered a nuisance. The Labor party has its platform, which does not contain any set of priorities; the Liberals, particularly in the last year or so, have deliberately avoided any but the most general and flexible priorities. Indeed politicians of both parties are not even prepared to accept binding decisions on an annual basis. The present budget, presented each August, is supposed to express the government's priorities. Yet every year ministers ask the Treasury for more funds for existing programmes within three months of that budget. If annual budgets cannot be made to work, what likelihood is there of politicians abiding by three year plans?

Further, the proposed scheme takes no account of the pressure of federalism. Marginal adjustments to state grants are a major political resource which a federal cabinet might see itself losing if all its expenditure patterns are published in advance.

But even supposing that a cabinet committee can be so organized, what are its capacities to make such plans? A successful allocation of resources must be based on a fairly detailed knowledge of the resources available. The report paints a grand picture of a cabinet being briefed on the growth of the workforce, on the developing industrial structure, on manpower demands and the future economic situation for the next three years. These estimates can be made, but whether they can be considered reliable is another matter, particularly when at present it seems difficult to forecast economic trends a mere month or so in advance. These forecasts may well be based on a wide range of differing, even contradictory, evidence. For instance, the financial and manpower estimates would be
prepared in the Treasury and PSB respectively. Although doubtless there would be some cooperation between the two, as the report proposes (again exhortation only), the main coordination of the two would presumably take place at the level of the official committee which serves the cabinet committee. At that stage it would be far too late to ensure that the two schemes are based on similar assumptions.

Further, and a fundamental failure for any discussion of the forward estimates as a means of resource planning, the report is vague about the way in which priorities are to be set and resources allocated. It proposes that general social, economic and political objectives be established (which is laudable), but does not say whether these objectives should be based on departmental, sectoral or any other schemes. In another section of the report, it suggests the establishment of a social welfare group of ministers, but does not extend that into other areas. Sectoral allocations may be more logical; so are functional classifications of expenditure (which the report supports). But the estimates are calculated on a departmental basis and there is no suggestion on how that allocative process can be made to work.

Finally, the coordination required to fulfil all the needs of the scheme might well overload the coordinating capacity of the central departments. It would consume scarce resources of time, information and manpower. Since the main supporting officials are assumed to be senior, the system would reduce their ability to tackle other problems. To illustrate the point, it may be worth considering the steps that would be required for at least one of several possible scenarios. After the original cabinet committee has decided the basic parameters for the total budget, it must also determine what percentage of finance and manpower should be allocated to each department, or to each group of departments. Unless departments are given some indication of their own limits, their forward estimates may be no more than wish-lists that describe the maximum ambitions of each department.\(^{12}\) If the allocations are sectoral, then the ministers involved or their officials must determine between themselves what share each should have. If this division of potential funds is not done in advance, it is difficult to see how priorities could be operationalized. Departments would then prepare their estimates within (or at least within range of) those outlines. Their forward bids would be reviewed by the Treasury, by the sub-committee of cabinet and finally by cabinet itself. In other words, the report ignores two or three crucial allocative stages in the process. Even if it is done differently, some resource allocation is required before departmental estimates are drawn up.
The problem of excessive coordination requirements is made worse by the failure of the report to recommend any structural changes to the central institutions of government. Although it does propose that they should become more helpful, it does not explain how. The proposal to divide the Treasury was discussed briefly and rejected. (Perhaps fortunately, and certainly for the wrong reasons, Fraser has ignored the advice of the report, the economic task force and consultants in this respect). The report seems to admit no midpoint in that argument. The choice seemed to be between a split and no change at all. There was no discussion of altering the internal arrangements of the Treasury or the PSB, or of shuffling their functions. For instance, manpower and financial forward estimates might well have been united along Canadian lines.

The workload for these departments will be exacerbated if the forward estimates are in fact used more to control than to plan. The RCAGA report assumed that, while the forward estimates scheme would add to the workload of central departments, the additional workload would in part be offset by relaxing the detailed controls previously maintained by those departments. If all aspects of their proposals were accepted this might in part be true. But if, as seems more likely, the forward estimates are introduced without relaxing these controls, then the workload of those departments will be increased and the need for coordination more drastic.

Further the report does not tackle the problem of how those central units which examine the new estimates are to operate. It regrets that many existing programmes are retained without regular scrutiny. But the same problem must exist with the forward estimates. To scrutinize all in detail, looking at their assumptions, performance and finance would require a counter-bureaucracy; merely sampling interesting topics or pilot projects is haphazard. The hope that the central departments will retain familiarity with the general outlines, while pretending to be interested in everything, is in effect the situation that already exists. These problems are much greater than the report seems to recognize.

By failing to prescribe the procedures by which its proposals can be put into effect, the report runs the risk of its scheme being turned from one designed primarily to allow priorities to be translated into policies into one in which control functions will predominate. This is even more likely to happen under a government dedicated to cutting public expenditure. Departmental initiative would mean independence to find cuts, not to plan expenditure. Since procedures may define outcomes, the devices and questionnaires adopted may determine whether the forecasts are used centrally to restrain expenditure or whether departments are guaranteed the
sums accepted, at least for year two, with equal guarantee for maintaining the programme at that level in an inflationary climate. That guarantee will be the minimum needed for useful departmental planning. In the existing climate I cannot see it occurring. The annual revision of the estimates, which is probably politically necessary, particularly after a change of government, may well reduce the system to a means of central control, in which the estimates are used as a limiting device alone. The revisions are anyway essentially incremental changes to an already existing, and largely discredited, system.

Various Sources of Advice

In discussing the formulation of economic policy, the report argues:

Our proposals are . . . designed not to duplicate economic advice unnecessarily but to spread the sources of advice in a way which will ensure that, as far as possible, the viewpoints of those involved in different aspects of the economy and those who see the economy as a whole from a different viewpoint and with a different time horizon are presented in ministerial committees. Such an arrangement would provide the basis for a more balanced range of advice and at the same time reduce the possibility of one source of advice or one analytical or conceptual set of principles becoming unduly dominant (RC 10.1.10).

The report then recognizes that there may be several formulations of a problem, all of which may be valid and should be presented to ministers. Further it advocates this multiplication of advisory channels as a means of avoiding the necessity for splitting the Treasury, which it considers would either fail to have the desired effect or weaken economic advice. It prefers to use other means “to reduce the ‘monopolistic’ character of Treasury” (RC 10.1.16).

The main method it adopts is to try to spread information and access to ministers on key areas of policy. The forward estimates are clearly the key instrument. The Bureau of Statistics (made independent of the Treasury), the PSB, Employment and Industrial Relations, DINDEC and the PM & CS policy unit would all advise the cabinet committee on general trends. Treasury, PSB, DINDEC and PM & C would advise the subcommittee on the detailed estimates. Advice would come from a wider range of departments, a change that would be both desirable and necessary.

Each cabinet committee would be served by a committee of officials chaired by PM & C. This group would presumably act as the filter for the various strands of information so that, although one submission might finally be presented to the cabinet committee, all
the information would (or should) be readily available to ministers who wanted the detailed reasoning behind the proposals. These committees would of course be important and the personalities involved would be crucial at particular times. The stature of the economic sections of PM & C would inevitably be enhanced and the Treasury's monopoly of advice would indeed be broken.

But what is more difficult to accept is the view that the various departments could define their roles as neatly as the report seems to suggest. In dealing with the financial implications of bids, the Treasury traditionally has looked at the policy and manpower results. It will probably continue to try to do so. I doubt that the neat plan presented by the Commission will work in practice. Further I doubt that information will flow readily between these central departments as they compete for influence. Here the report is no help at all; it admits the importance of the problems, but except for vague exhortations fails to present proposals for ensuring that information is indeed shared.

Nevertheless the proposals for broadening the range of economic advice are encouraging and significant. They would institutionalize a wider range of advice on broad ranging questions to more ministers. No longer would the treasurer and the prime minister alone get briefed on all the economic implications of present trends. It is easier for a department with its own set of principles to persuade one man than several; but it becomes difficult for one department to dominate economic policy and the allocation of resources if advice based on different formulations of the issues is also available. Despite the likelihood that committees would become bureaucratic battlegrounds, they would probably have greater effects on the development of public policy than the more grandiose system of forward estimates.

When announcing his decision to split the Treasury, Prime Minister Fraser said

**Particular emphasis is being laid on improving capacity to service the Government's requirements for forward planning, priority setting and the strategic planning of government initiatives.**

Later, on 9 December 1976, when speaking in the House on the report's emphasis on forward estimates, he claimed that immediate action would be undertaken to examine these proposals. An IDC, chaired by Ian Castles of PM & C, had been established to make a report. But the emphases both of the government's decisions and of the personnel selected for the officials' committee suggest that the decentralization of power may not follow the introduction of
the forward estimates—if indeed they are taken seriously at all. The government’s main emphasis has been on efficiency audits and expenditure cuts; the latter have often demanded across-the-board savings. The officials are exclusively from the central departments. Control of expenditure, not departmental planning, appears likely to be the main result. In 1976 forward estimates were drawn up for one year only (and as such they were early budget bids); they were used as a means to the May 1976 expenditure cuts.

If this chapter appears pessimistic, it is only partly because of the report itself. Certainly the report left too many factors unstated. Many of its recommendations were interdependent, but were not satisfactorily coordinated: it was proposed, for instance, that the use of staff ceilings be abolished and that they be integrated in the forward estimates, but there was no timetable for implementing the latter. Indeed, as Fraser showed when misquoting the task force report to justify splitting the Treasury, the report and the supporting evidence can be used to justify almost any action. The report’s vagueness on methods can easily mean that its proposals will be redirected. If RCAGA wanted forward estimates as a control device, it should have discussed subjects like cash limits; if, as is more likely, it wanted them to help plan resources allocation with greater departmental independence, it should have looked at the question of guarantees. One or the other will have to be taken up if the system is to get beyond the process of dreamtime wish-lists that at present exists.

But other reservations are more general. First, I doubt that the information will ever allow the accuracy that RCAGA requires if major annual revisions are to be avoided. Second, I would question that the amount of coordination required is feasible. Finally, and most important, I doubt that politicians or bureaucrats would want in the last resort to be so explicit. Ambiguity has its political value. It can be used to appeal to more than one group at a time, to change direction less obviously, to avoid fulfilling promises and for a wide variety of other purposes. Rolling plans in particular sectors may work; the Defence department’s five year rolling plans and the old-fashioned university triennia show that. But politicians and bureaucrats have fallen short of drawing up a system of binding allocation of resources across-the-board. The problems are institutional, rather than personal.

Given the likely problems and the prevailing political climate, it seems probable that the report’s plans for the translation of political priorities into the allocation of resources and for the establishment of greater departmental initiative will become a means of restraining expenditure and even tightening central
control. And it will be done in the name of the RCAGA. This development might be better and more organized than the present system; it could scarcely be less so. It may give better indications of the trends of programme expenditure and of future commitments and hence better information. But it will not achieve what RCAGA desired. On such a grand scale, I doubt that any pluralist democratic society could.

Notes

4. See Patrick Weller and James Cutt, *Treasury Control in Australia*, (Sydney: Novak, 1976), 70–73, for comment on the forward estimates and generally for a discussion of the Australian budgetary process.
10. Lord Diamond was chief secretary in Britain from 1964–70. His responsibility as the second minister in the Treasury was the overview and control of expenditure. For his account of the system, see *Public Expenditure in Practice*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975).
11. Wildavsky, “If Planning is Everything, Maybe it’s Nothing”, 141.
15. In reply to a letter asking for his comments on the introduction of efficiency audits, Sir Arthur Tange replied that they should be introduced only if permanent heads were also given the increased powers proposed by the RCAGA report.
Accountability and Efficiency

James Cutt

Accountability for the use of scarce resources in both the public and private sectors may be seen as requiring the derivation, processing, and presentation of information on the costs and/or outcomes of activities or programmes. The process whereby that information is presented, assessed and reported on we shall define as auditing. The notion of accountability—and, correspondingly, auditing—has both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects of accountability are apparent inasmuch as those responsible for particular programmes or activities can use information on previous cost and outcome performance to improve future performance and is most frequently considered in relation to internal audit, where a constituent part of the organization in question has the responsibility of determining and assessing organizational cost and outcome performance. Here the objective of accountability and audit is performance improvement.

Unfortunately, the negative aspect of accountability receives most attention. In this situation the person or organization has to account in various levels of detail for the use of scarce resources, and the objective of accountability and audit is to ascertain and attest that these scarce resources have been used in the manner specified; clearly such specification may occur in various forms and in various levels of detail. The negative aspect of accountability is most frequently associated with external audit, where the determination and assessment functions are vested in an organization external to the organization under assessment.

In fact, both internal and external audit procedures may have positive and negative aspects, and the distinction between the positive and negative aspects of accountability and audit emerges most accurately as positions along a spectrum rather than in terms of two discrete categories. The other side of the coin of accountability and audit—both internal and external—is control and, ultimately, the aspiration to improvement in performance. We shall be concerned in this paper exclusively with accountability manifested in external audit procedures, and we shall argue that the positive
aspect—or, at least, the potentially positive aspect—of audit is in
direct proportion to the comprehensiveness of the audit procedures,
which, of course, is a function of the objectives of the audit; these
latter objectives, in turn, reflect directly the objectives and cor-
responding comprehensiveness of the organizational accountability
under consideration.

**Efficiency I**

Accountability may be defined in a hierarchy of increasing sophisti-
cation and potential usefulness, but corresponding increasing opera-
tional difficulty. First, the lowest level of accountability may be seen
as fiscal or fiduciary accountability, which is defined exclusively in
terms of the actual expenditure of funds and procedures by which
that expenditure is accounted for. In general, the question is likely
to be defined in terms of accounting conventions and reporting
procedures which demonstrate the propriety and legitimacy of
expenditures within the activity or programme. This concept of
accountability relates entirely to inputs, and does not deal, except
by implication, with the outcomes attributable to these inputs. By
definition, such analysis of the use of funds will occur *ex-post*, after
the activity or programme has been concluded or at some discrete
defined point in its life. Such analysis is clearly widely used in both
the public and private sector. In the public sector, this type of
accountability may be considered to correspond to the traditional
control-oriented or input-oriented stage in budgetary evolution,
where budgetary allocations were made with respect to detailed
inputs or objects of expenditure, outcomes were ignored, and
accountability was related to the checking on the use of funds in
the detailed manner prescribed. These skills required for analysis
under the first concept of accountability may be considered to be
entirely those of conventional financial auditing, the only distinction
worth noting relating to the varying degrees of detail with which
financial auditing procedures can be carried out. Accountants and
conventional accounting practices may thus be held to dominate
this field. It is difficult to translate this first concept of accountabili-
ty into anything which might be called efficiency. More properly,
it might be seen as regularity or financial propriety. Perhaps we
might be allowed to say, however, that the performance assessment
which is carried on in the context of fiduciary accountability has
as its objective the determination of Efficiency I. Correspondingly,
we use the term “financial audit” to describe the auditing pro-
cedures appropriate to the determination of Efficiency I; synonyms
in the literature are compliance audit, regularity audit and tradi-
tional audit.
We now move up the hierarchy to distinguish a second and more sophisticated form of accountability which we call efficiency accountability, associated with the pursuit of what we call Efficiency II, and determined through what we call efficiency auditing—synonyms for which include performance auditing, management auditing and operational auditing. Efficiency accountability (and thus Efficiency II) may be defined in terms of the ratio of some physical measure of output from the activity or programme to the costs of that activity or programme; the analogy to the idea of "productivity" is apparent. The crucial distinction between this level of accountability and the first level lies in the inclusion of outcomes, and their juxtaposition in one way or another with costs. Although we define the various concepts of accountability (and corresponding concepts of efficiency) in a hierarchy, and have thus implied that less sophisticated concepts develop into more sophisticated—so that lower measures may be considered a surrogate, albeit an imperfect one for higher—it is important to stress that the definitions and procedures used under a less sophisticated concept may bring that concept into direct conflict with the more sophisticated one. Normanton summarizes the difficulty in this case:

The most wasteful, extravagant, foolish and ill-planned activities are frequently regular in a technical sense.

We assume in the development of the set of concepts of accountability and corresponding concepts of efficiency and auditing that a more sophisticated concept entirely subsumes a less sophisticated. This has, of course, two implications: first, the definition of and procedures used under the less sophisticated concept must be such as to be consistent with, rather than in conflict with, the corresponding aspects of the more sophisticated concept; but, second, the definition of and procedures used under the more sophisticated concept must include fully the (consistently defined) requirements of the less sophisticated concept—the point here is that Efficiency I must not be sacrificed to, or forgotten under the pursuit of, Efficiency II.

We also stress that a more sophisticated concept, albeit one defined as required above, is vulnerable, through reversion to traditional, simpler and more tractable procedures to what might be seen as a collapse or disintegration into a less sophisticated concept. In this case Efficiency II might slip back into Efficiency I, and we argue then that a concept must not only be defined properly in the hierarchy, but have that definition, and the associated procedures, vigilantly maintained.
Analysis under Efficiency II will generally occur *ex-post*, but may be relevant in an *ex-ante* sense inasmuch as productivity targets etc. may be set. Too much should not be made of this *ex-post/ex-ante* distinction; clearly, *ex-post* analysis of this year's activities or programmes contributes to decision making on next year's programmes in an *ex-ante* sense. Nevertheless, in general terms, the time at which it is considered important to do analysis with respect to an activity or programme is an important dimension in our classification of concepts of accountability and efficiency. Efficiency II clearly has a place in both the public and private sectors, but it must be apparent that it would be difficult to pursue in large segments of the public sector which do not produce physical outputs of any kind, or, at least, physical outputs which are directly related to the objectives of the organization in question.

Again with specific respect to the public sector, the phase of budgetary evolution which corresponds to Efficiency II may be called the management-oriented or performance-oriented phase, in which expenditure inputs were specifically related to outputs of public programmes defined in physical terms. This phase, first major reference to which can be found in the Hoover Commission reports in the USA in 1947–49 and 1953–55, emphasized the establishment of quantitative (physical) indicators of such outputs, and the development of work-cost measurements as a means of evaluating the efficiency of programmes.

The analytical skills required under Efficiency II which, we have argued, must subsume Efficiency I, may still be considered to be dominated by conventional accounting skills, though now by a wider and deeper set of accounting skills which go beyond conventional auditing procedures to include concepts and procedures of cost and management accounting. Here too, we might expect the accountant to work closely with, or to assume some of the functions of, the engineer in the development and measurement of physical output indicators of various kinds. If we accept that the pursuit of Efficiency II and its examination through efficiency auditing require the analysis of organizational and technical matters (in addition to the financial matters embraced under Efficiency I)—and there is agreement in the Australian literature that this should be so—then we may envisage that the skills of social psychologists and related specialists in personal and organizational behaviour would also be necessary.

*Efficiency III*

The third and most sophisticated form of accountability that we
distinguish we call effectiveness accountability. This is associated with the pursuit of Efficiency III, and determined through effectiveness auditing—the most frequent synonym for which is programme auditing. There is a well known distinction between efficiency and effectiveness. The efficiency of an organization may be defined in terms of its capacity to achieve results for the given expenditure of resources—in short, the ratio between organizational inputs and outputs. Effectiveness may be broadly defined to refer to the degree of success an organization enjoys in doing whatever it is trying to do. The two concepts are clearly related but need not always coincide; for instance, an organization's attempts to husband its resources in the interests of efficiency may seriously limit its effectiveness. Depending on the measures that are used, efficiency may be either complementary to or in conflict with effectiveness. The distinction lies in the fact that output is usually closely related to, but may not be identical with, the objectives of the organization. A corporation may have as its objective the maximization of profit, but have as its physical measure of output, say, the number of automobiles produced annually. Efficiency defined simply as productivity, or the ratio of physical output to dollar costs will be related to but clearly need not coincide with—indeed, in some instances, may conflict with—the objective of profit maximization seen as the measure of effectiveness. Similarly in, say, a tertiary educational institution we might contrast an objective defined in terms of production of excellent graduates, and an output measure defined simply in terms of the number of graduates or student credit hours. In this case the pursuit of efficiency, defined simply as the ratio of the number of graduates to total university costs, may not coincide with the pursuit of effectiveness defined in terms of excellent graduates. It is clearly possible to be ineffective efficiently, just as it is possible to be inefficient within the bounds of regularity.

Returning to the question of Efficiency III it is clear that it requires, as does Efficiency II, the conceptualization and juxtaposition of both inputs and outputs; as distinct from Efficiency II, Efficiency III requires that the output measure used reflect the attainment of the objectives of the activity or programme in question. Retaining the corporate analogy, we might consider the automobile producer moving from an Efficiency II position in which he considers cost in relation to physical output to an Efficiency III position in which he considers cost in relation to the objective of the organization, which we might consider to be profit maximization. The profit maximization analogy might be extended to those public sector programmes where outputs (reflecting objectives) may
be conceptualized in monetary terms. More frequently, the attainment of a public sector objective will not be easily conceptualized in monetary terms, and will have to be defined in terms of an indicator specially designed.

We stress that while Efficiency III and corresponding effectiveness auditing are concerned with the attainment of objectives, they are not defined to include an assessment of the desirability of, or set of priorities among, these objectives. Efficiency III covers (1) the implementation of policy—looking at the question, "Have the policy objectives been achieved?"; (2) consideration of alternative ways (programme designs) by which these objectives might be achieved—looking at the question, "Given these objectives, might they not better be achieved by a design of this nature rather than that?"; and (3) possibly also a re-definition of objectives—looking at the question, "Are these objectives feasible or attainable?". It does not extend to an examination of the desirability or legitimacy of policy—looking at such questions as, "Are these objectives desirable, and are the weights or priorities appropriate?". Accountability for such questions is entirely political, and we exclude an assessment of the overall policy or strategy of government from the scope even of our highest level of efficiency and audit.

In many cases, it seems reasonable to consider Efficiency II and Efficiency III as lying in their appropriate positions in the hierarchy, with progressively better efficiency measures (i.e., efficiency measures which come progressively closer to a measure of the attainment of objectives) essentially developing into measures of effectiveness. Such a juxtaposition will not be appropriate, however, where the pursuit of an efficiency measure in physical output terms is in conflict with the pursuit of effectiveness. So again, we require a cumulative definition, and define Efficiency III to subsume Efficiency II, so that, on the one hand, the definition of and procedures used under the head of Efficiency II must be consistent with, rather than in conflict with, the corresponding aspects of Efficiency III, while, on the other hand, the definition of and procedures used in the name of Efficiency III must include fully the (consistently defined) requirements of Efficiency II. We also note that Efficiency III is a considerably more difficult concept than Efficiency II in conceptual and particularly in operational terms—and may be considered vulnerable, unless pursued with vigilance, to a collapse back into Efficiency II through a concern perhaps with more tractable physical measures of output, or a pre-occupation with "economizing" at the expense of the attainment of objectives.

The stage in the evolution of budgetary practice to which Efficiency II corresponds is what is generally referred to in the
literature as programme budgeting as distinct from performance
budgeting. The development of programme budgeting was closely
related to the development of the whole range of analytical
techniques during and after World War II including national
economic accounting, increasingly sophisticated (if singularly un-
successful) macroeconomic models, more accurate data on public
revenue and expenditure and the increasing use of microeconomic
techniques to appraise competing public projects. It also sprang
from the development of a series of decisional and informational
techniques coming out of the operations research procedures
developed during World War II and culminating in what has
generally come to be known as systems analysis. That can be
broadly defined as a continuous cycle of defining objectives,
designing alternative systems to achieve these objectives, evaluating
these alternatives in terms of their cost and effectiveness (which
may or may not be in monetary terms), questioning the objectives
and other assumptions underlying the analysis, opening new alter­
natives and establishing new objectives, and so on. Programme
budgeting links the procedures of budgeting and planning, and may
be generally defined as a long-term rolling planning system, under
which budgeting is an allocative process between competing claims,
and the budget itself as a statement of policy for the appropriate
planning period—so that, for instance, in a five-year planning
period, the budgeting statement in any year \( t \) will present cost and
output information for the year in question and the subsequent four
years, that is to say, till year \( t + 4 \); the budget for year \( t + 1 \)
would present consistent data until year \( t + 5 \), and so on. In terms
of formal definition the complete implementation of programme
budgeting requires the development of a multi-year financial plan
and a corresponding multi-year programme plan, the former
specifying the estimated inputs or costs of the appropriate govern­
ment agency or institution in terms of its activities classified and
displayed by a set of objective-oriented programmes, the latter
specifying the corresponding outputs or benefits either in single-
benefit or multi-benefit terms. The number of years over which
inputs and outputs are estimated will reflect planning practice in
the organization in question.

In sum, we envisage accountability and a corresponding notion
of efficiency as defined in a hierarchy of increasing sophistication,
the concepts being cumulative in two senses: first, in that definitions
of and procedures under less sophisticated concepts are considered
legitimate only insofar as they are not in conflict with the
Corresponding aspects of the more sophisticated concepts: and
second, in that definitions of and procedures under more sophisti-
cated concepts must embrace all the (consistently defined) requirements of the less sophisticated concepts. Clearly, these definitional constraints are frequently, perhaps even generally, breached in practice; our intention here is to establish a consistent set of definitions and a correspondingly consistent basis for evolution and improvement.

The Auditor-General and RCAGA

The existing statutory role of the Auditor-General in Australia is oriented primarily towards Efficiency I:

The current provisions of the Audit Act 1901–1973 are designed primarily to ensure the regularity of financial transactions and to provide the Parliament with an assurance that the accounts of the Treasurer (which include the accounts of all departments) have been kept correctly and that the Treasurer’s Statement is in agreement with those accounts.3

In short, the Audit Act presently provides no specific authority to go beyond financial auditing to efficiency or effectiveness auditing. Numerous amendments have been made to the Audit Act since 1901 which are directed toward increased audit sophistication, but

... none of these [amendments] has altered or will alter the 19th century concept of “regularity” or “compliance” auditing as being the beginning and virtually the ending of the Auditor-General’s role.4

Section 51A of the Audit Act (“The Auditor-General shall include in any report made by him under this Act such information as he thinks desirable in relation to audits, examinations and inspections carried out by him in pursuance of the provisions of this or any other Act.”) might be interpreted to provide the Auditor-General with scope to go beyond Efficiency I, and the Auditor-General has indeed been using Section 51A as the basis for pursuing “value for money” (effectively, Efficiency II) considerations in the course of both financial and what are referred to as “operational audits”.5

He has, however, stressed the need for a “specific authority for the Auditor-General to evaluate whether expenditure, though regular, is nevertheless wasteful or non-productive”6 and, in his formal submissions to RCAGA has drawn attention to what he refers to as the “urgent need” for a statutory widening of the role of the Auditor-General into Efficiency II considerations.7 In this submission he had the support of the PSB and other departments.

Significantly the Auditor-General quite explicitly argued that his role should not be extended in Australia beyond Efficiency II to
Efficiency III; his argument, developed in the context of a comparison between his role and that of the Comptroller-General in the USA was based on the differences in the governmental systems in the two countries and the special role of the General Accounting Office as an "arm of Congress." RCAGA found itself in agreement with the Auditor-General but, rather curiously, only after a firm, definitional embrace of Efficiency III:

For the purposes of this Report, effectiveness is one of two distinguishable elements in efficiency. Effectiveness is concerned with the relationship between purpose and result. Thus, an action or program is effective if it achieves the purpose for which it was initiated. But efficiency involves additionally a consideration of the resources used in achieving the result. A program is efficient only if its effectiveness is achieved with an economic use of resources. Efficiency is therefore also concerned with the relationship between resources used and the results achieved; between 'input' and 'output'. It comprehends both economy in this sense and effectiveness (RC 3.1.4).

Having defined efficiency in this way, RCAGA then went on to place the major weight of analysis of public sector programmes on the extension of the role of the Auditor-General into efficiency audits (Efficiency II). The pursuit of Efficiency III was mentioned only briefly, and almost incidentally, as a function which might best be performed by a unit in the department of PM & C. No formal link of the revised roles for the Auditor-General and PM & C was proposed, though it was remarked that the latter would "draw heavily on the work of the Auditor-General as revealed in his reports" (RC 11.4.4) and that in the groups responsible for Efficiency III reviews in PM & C, "there would frequently be merit in including an officer from the Auditor-General's staff since he would give the group access to a wide range of relevant information and judgment" (RC 11.5.20). The nature of such an information flow is, of course, crucial to the iterative, ex-ante/ex-post character of Efficiency III, and the almost casual reference is hardly satisfying. It is difficult to take much comfort from the further recommendation that the Auditor-General seek advice in the establishment of his new role from a committee comprising representatives of the heads of Treasury, the PSB, PM & C, and Administrative Services (RC 11.4.13).

No formal role for the Auditor-General in relation to Efficiency III appears to be envisaged, not even the role currently envisaged for the Canadian Auditor-General in ascertaining whether or not departments themselves are engaged in the pursuit of Efficiency III, and including such information in his report. RCAGA did suggest that internal audit procedures in departments be improved, but only
to the Efficiency II stage. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that while RCAGA envisaged an extended and improved role for the Auditor-General it failed to make a serious commitment to the concept of a comprehensive (effectiveness) audit implied in its own definition of efficiency. A related failure to develop some of the detailed implications of its proposal might be considered more understandable. One such omission underlines, however, the more general difficulties experienced by RCAGA in coming to terms with efficiency. There is no examination in the report of the cumulative nature of efficiency, and of the importance of ensuring in a system oriented to Efficiency II, (1) that the set of output definitions used does not conflict with measures of effectiveness; and (2) that the pursuit of Efficiency II does not slide inexorably away from a view of efficiency which at least takes outputs of some kind into consideration, through a preoccupation with "economizing" back to Efficiency I.

Despite the limitations of the proposal, the government appears to be impressed in general terms and has announced that it intends to proceed with the recommendation that efficiency audits be introduced. No announcement has yet been made on whether this role will be given to the Auditor-General, or what the relationship, if any, of efficiency audits will be to other processes of analysis of public activities.

Some overseas comparisons

Although the recommendation of RCAGA seems timid in terms of the apparatus developed in the first section of this chapter, and is certainly incompletely argued, the general form of the recommendation accords with the expressed wish of the current Auditor-General and a range of other government departments. Before offering a few tentative suggestions on how the RCAGA recommendations might be improved, or at least placed in a wider context which attempts to follow the logic of a commitment to a comprehensive audit, it is perhaps worth reflecting briefly on the reasons for the Auditor-General's wish not to go beyond Efficiency II, and the acceptance of that view in the RCAGA recommendations. This is particularly necessary since at least one serious study in Australia has recommended that the Auditor-General be required to move to effectiveness auditing, and since such a role for the supreme national audit body is embraced and apparently vigorously pursued in the USA and Sweden.

The classic and impressive argument is that the traditional role for the Auditor-General in countries with the Westminster system
of government would be inconsistent with his surveillance of Efficiency III. The executive and legislative arms of the governmental system are not formally separate in the Westminster system, and the government or executive is formed from the party which can find a majority in parliament. The majority vote of that parliament in turn provides legislative authority to government policy. The Auditor-General is an agent of parliament, and it is argued that he cannot fulfill this role—with parliament as his client—and at the same time oversee the pursuit of Efficiency III which would involve criticizing the implementation or indeed intrinsic nature of government policy, which has received legislative authority in parliament. The respect accorded the observations of the Auditor-General is, it is argued, very much a function of his independence from what is at least in substantial part, a political debate on policy. Significantly the role of the Auditor-General in the other Westminster-type countries—the UK, Canada and New Zealand—is undergoing reform but in no case does it seem likely that the role will be extended to a major surveillance of Efficiency III.

This argument seems to explain fully the different roles and scope of the Auditor-General in Australia and the Comptroller-General in the USA. In the latter case, the Comptroller-General at the head of the General Accounting Office has as his client the congress (the legislative branch of government) and his business the surveillance of the executive branch. The two branches of government are distinct and no conflict of interest is involved in Comptroller-General's surveillance of Efficiency III. The argument also seems to go most of the way to explain the case of Sweden, where the role of the national audit bureau is to survey Efficiency III in the executive agencies which implement policies which are made in the ministries. The bureau audits the agencies, not the ministries, and, subject to the constraint that its auditing role does not extend to the making of policy in the ministries, avoids the conflict of interest problem.

It seems likely that preoccupation in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia with the independence—and thus sharply constrained role—of the Auditor-General is at least as convenient for the government as for the Auditor-General, and becomes a means of curtailing a comprehensive audit of public policy and thus blunting political criticism. What is interesting to reflect on is a role for the Auditor-General in Australia which, consistent with his present status and autonomy, nevertheless makes his role a fundamental and formal part of a continuing process of comprehensive audit or public activities.
**Alternative strategies**

The first component of such a package is a commitment by government to a continuing, comprehensive process of analysis and evaluation of public programmes and activities, with a related awareness that such a process requires an ongoing cycle of interdependent *ex-ante* and *ex-post* analysis. The comprehensive process of analysis and evaluation refers to the comprehensive audit, or what we have defined as effectiveness auditing. Such a commitment should be in terms of the cumulative definition of Efficiency III and the associated auditing procedures. Further, lest the important contributions of Efficiency I and Efficiency II be lost, the definition of Efficiency III must fully incorporate the (consistently defined) aspects of Efficiency I and Efficiency II. In short, analysis must be directed at making programmes efficiently effective in a manner consistent with regular financial procedures. The commitment of government should also involve vigilance against downward “slippage” of Efficiency II and Efficiency III.

Given the first component of the package, there is no reason why the entire burden of analysis should fall on one institution or why the role of the Auditor-General in Australia should be changed in a way that appears to curtail substantially his traditional independent role. He might continue to operate primarily in an *ex-post* mode, but must surely, as the second component of the package, be given the primary role in the *ex-post* analysis of Efficiency II. Consistent with the part Efficiency II plays in the larger process of analysis, the definitions and procedures used must be consistent with Efficiency III, and further with a general set of analytical terms of reference which maintains consistency between the various forms of analysis of any one programme, and between the analyses of different programmes. Further, Efficiency II must not be allowed to slide back into Efficiency I. In short, we are arguing that the Auditor-General in Australia not move into Efficiency II in a vacuum as it were, but in the context of a comprehensive approach to analysis.

Third, there also seems to be no reason why the Auditor-General cannot, consistent with autonomy, go at least as far as the Canadians propose to go, and monitor in his *ex-post* Efficiency II analyses the extent to which departments themselves are evaluating their own pursuit of Efficiency III; the corollary here is that departments be encouraged and ultimately required to pursue Efficiency III. The existing track record is very patchy indeed.

More important, however, is the fourth component of the package which requires on the one hand, a body which will have primary
responsibility for *ex-ante* Efficiency III analysis on a continuing, systematic basis constrained, of course, within what was defined above as the appropriate limits of effectiveness auditing, and, on the other, the continuing movement of information and staff between this body and the office of the Auditor-General. It might be possible for a unit in PM & c or in another of the coordinating departments to undertake the development and implementation of a methodology for analyzing public performance in terms of Efficiency III, but it seems unlikely that a body defined in almost residual terms, and without separate statutory authority, could do more than conduct a few, selective examinations which, although useful (say, by analogy with the Programme Analysis and Review (PAR) practices in the UK) cannot contribute seriously to, and be a functioning component of, a comprehensive approach to analysis. We argue that a new body, of the sort envisaged by Caiden in his proposal for an Office of Policy Analysis and Administrative Management (OPAAM)\(^{13}\) should be set up, adequately funded and staffed with the necessary range of talents, and given the statutory authority to develop and implement a methodology for examining the pursuit of Efficiency III. As part of the normal process of operation of this new office and the office of the Auditor-General, there should be a complete flow of information in both directions, so that each body, although pursuing a separate function, can have full access to the data and thus perspective of a comprehensive approach to analysis. There also seems no reason whatever why there should not be the frequent and systematic movement of staff between the two bodies, so that staff become familiar with the methodology of both bodies and overcome what appear to be problems of comprehension and ability but turn out to be mainly problems of communication and language.

The fifth component of the package envisages a coordinating body on which representatives of the OPAAM-like body and the Auditor-General (and such other coordinating bodies which continue to have a role in analysis) would sit, the function of which would be, in cooperation with but independent of government, to establish a consistent set of analytical terms of reference which would then be used by the various analytical bodies, including the internal audit units within departments, as a means of establishing consistency and comparability between analyses of various kinds and at various levels.

We might also envisage a sixth component which recognises the movement along the negative/positive accountability spectrum into positive prescription and management consulting, and recommend formal coordination between the two major analytical bodies and
the departments such as the PSB and the department of Productivity, which have the function of providing advice and implementing change. Again, such cooperation would take the form of information flows and the movement of staff; the latter would seem particularly useful inasmuch as it would permit staff to move between primarily negative and explicitly positive activities.

The political context of the package must, of course, be stressed. The Auditor-General reports presently to parliament, and, in terms of detailed consideration, to the public accounts committee. We envisage the Auditor-General in the widened role described above as continuing to report to the public accounts committee. It would, however, be a public accounts committee with wider and deeper functions, embracing a general analytical supervision function and the specific review function presently assigned to the house of representatives committee on expenditure, and with a substantial supporting secretariat. The OPAAM-like body, and the body which coordinates the Auditor-General and OPAAM, are also envisaged as reporting to this transformed public accounts committee.

With a technical staff of its own, we also envisage the public accounts committee as responsible for the effectiveness audit of the auditors, that is of the Auditor-General and OPAAM. It might be expected that this auditing of the auditing function would rely heavily on internal audit procedures within the two bodies under scrutiny, but would also involve an external auditing dimension which the public accounts committee would be responsible for, possibly using external consultants to supplement its own staff resources.

Inevitably, there are problems of various kinds, and various degrees of difficulty, with the proposed package. The tools of analysis, in both the Efficiency II and Efficiency III areas, are imperfect and partial, and have tended to be heavily oversold. The public sector is not homogeneous, but, on the contrary, may best be seen as a multi-product firm producing and delivering in a whole variety of ways a wide range of goods and services. It is possible to think of the set of public goods and services as lying along a spectrum of diminishing amenability to existing tools of analysis, with commercial and quasi-commercial activities lying at the end of the spectrum most amenable to analysis and human resource and redistributive activities lying at the end where analysis is most difficult and where, furthermore, the temptation to use Efficiency II output measures which are in direct conflict with Efficiency III measures is greatest (one otherwise harmless Ontario minister of education distinguished himself in the mid-1960s by suggesting that
the appropriate efficiency slogan for universities should be "more scholar for the dollar").

To the problem of imperfect tools must be added the shortage of personnel with the required capacities to make the best of a bad job. The record of management training in Australia is recent and has neglected the public sector, and the current level of analytical sophistication in most public service departments must be considered on the average as unimpressive. The question of public service receptivity to new information requirements must also be considered; no matter how good the tools, or how able the personnel, a receptive and positive attitude on the part of those most affected by the changes would seem to be a precondition of successful introduction of the suggested new procedures.

The moral to this point is that a new approach of the order suggested, or even indeed a new approach of the modest dimensions envisaged by RCAGA, cannot be introduced quickly. USA experience with all the panoply of PPBS in the mid-1960s should stand as a classic lesson to proponents of administrative and managerial change in the public sector. Change must be introduced selectively, consistent first with the availability of analytical tools which, although imperfect, nevertheless can be considered as useful means to a wider and deeper information base for public decisions; second with the availability of trained personnel; and third with the attitudes of public servants which, we may hope, will already be changing in a way more congenial to analysis.

There are two other difficulties relevant again to both the modest RCAGA proposal and the more ambitious scheme. The first relates to the nature of a federal system, and the difficulty of extending analytical practices to the state and local spheres of government where the authority of federal bodies extends, if at all, only in a very loose sense. The authority of the Australian Auditor-General appears to be much more constrained, in practice if not always in law, than that of his American counterpart. Again the only hope seems to lie in gradualism, and in the establishment of cooperative relationships between state and federal Auditors-General, on the one hand, and state and federal bodies concerned with Efficiency III on the other. For what is beyond dispute is that a new system in Australia which gives extended authority to the federal Auditor-General (and possibly also some other body or bodies of the sort suggested above) but in which the state Auditors-General (and, in the wider package, state Efficiency III agencies) do not follow suit, will be a reform of a very partial nature indeed. It is at the state level that the actual implementation of expenditure in a wide and increasingly important range of total government expenditure takes
place. Efficiency II or Efficiency III considerations which exclude this expenditure by the states, and indeed ultimately in important areas by local government, would not only be partial but possibly also of limited use even for the portion they cover in that they would lack the overall perspective required to give meaning to particular evaluations. To this point, it appears in Australia that state Auditors-General are without exception, but with varying degrees of enthusiasm, being drawn into Efficiency II considerations much like their federal counterpart. The full development of this role requires, as it does at the federal level, statutory authority. No such authority exists at present in any of the states, but the legislation currently under consideration in Queensland—which essentially assigns an Efficiency II role to the state Auditor-General indirectly by spelling out the accountability of permanent heads and making the Auditor-General responsible for ascertaining whether they have discharged their defined role—is an important precedent.

The second difficulty that is raised from time to time is that the information requirements of a wider and deeper analytical system in the public sector are inconsistent with the attitudes and practices of an open, pluralist society. There might clearly be difficulties with an extensive new analytical apparatus and enthusiastic analysts, and these difficulties would have to be carefully guarded against; again gradualism would seem the best route. But the larger issue is surely that of ensuring improved performance in the public sector. In a world of scarce resources that sector which is unable to present an articulate defence of its activities is likely to lose at the margin. So also, within a sector, those areas which cannot or will not articulate a case for their existence and development would seem likely to lose relative to those which do. The case for the analysis of performance in the public sector is the case for the public sector itself.

Notes

2. Public Service Board, “Efficiency and Economy in the APS”, PSB Memorandum No. 22 to RG 64, Canberra, September 1975, 5.
3. “An Examination of Proposals for Extending the Role and Activities of the Auditor-General”, in Submissions by the Auditor-General to the RG 64, Canberra, October 1974.
5. Operational auditing was introduced in late 1975 on a limited and experimental scale, and has as its basic aim the assessment of "whether or not reasonable value has been obtained for expenditure made or incurred" (Auditor-General's Office Administrative Circular No. 47, October 1975). It has been confined to "value for money" considerations in relation to physical resources, and excludes a comparable examination of staff organization structures and personnel policies (i.e. human resource considerations).

6. D.R. Steele-Craik, "The Office of Auditor-General; Retrospect and Prospect", address by the Auditor-General to the Royal Institute of Public Administration (ACT group), 17 April 1975.

7. "An Examination of Proposals . . ."

8. In discussions with senior staff in the Office of the Auditor-General in Canberra, this writer did not find a single advocate of the view that the Auditor-General should be given responsibility for Efficiency III.


One of the main themes running through RCAGA’s report is a sense of unease about the way the federal public service interacts with the public. This unease is strengthened by a participatory sentiment that is clearly announced in the early part of the report, and reiterated in the sections dealing with relations between the administration and the community. The commissioners espouse greater delegation, more openness in the style of decision-making and the use of information, and a very cautious step in the direction of decentralization and regionalism. Concern is expressed about the “public face” of the bureaucracy in its relations with clients, and with the frequent dissatisfaction expressed by applicants for government services.

Although the sentiments appear sincere, the tone of the discussion and the recommendations are cautious. As with most committee efforts, the qualifiers and the sub-clauses are much in evidence. The general tone of RCAGA’s approach is well summarized in the following passage, which follows a lengthy discussion of community participation:

In the end the official must be guided by the weight his minister attaches to various forms of participation, but in turn it should be recognized that in making a judgment the minister will be influenced by departmental advice and that, in practice, much will be left to decisions by officials themselves. We suggest . . . that an official should see it as proper to be “responsive” to those who seek to participate: at least to perform his tasks in a more open style, to be accessible and to be a good listener; behaving in effect as if his accountability to the minister required also, as does the minister’s, an accountability directly to the community (RC 6.1.8).

This statement precedes a discussion and recommendations concerning service delivery, grievance procedures, the role of voluntary

*Many thanks are due to former members of the Royal Commission staff who assisted me in collecting information for this article, and to staff and volunteers at the NOW centre, Coburg, who provided information and answered questions.
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agencies, and the responsiveness of the administration to public pressure. Subsequently chapter 7 of the report discusses the issues of delegation, regional administration, and the "one-stop-shop" experiment. Separate sections, such as the recommendations concerning service delivery, contain much which is very valuable. But as a whole, particularly given the promise held out by the "grand vision" that we are given a glimpse of in the more reflective, philosophical discussion that introduces these topics, the result is disappointing. We can attribute some of this to the signs of caution I have mentioned above, and it is quite clear that the commissioners, as a whole, were not a very radical body (trendy, perhaps, but not radical). But the shortcomings go further. The "vision" intended to unify these various aspects of the question of relations between the public and the public service does nothing of the sort. The approach is piecemeal and the recommendations are piecemeal. In the report, the relationships between problems of access to government services, regionalism, participation, and delegation are not at all clear. In fact, the participatory sentiment as it is framed in the report is not sufficient to provide a coherent set of objectives on which to base recommendations for programmes of action. We are dealing with a much more varied, complex and, on occasions, contradictory set of ideas and objectives.

A major aim of this paper is to clarify the distinctions between the various concepts included under the broad heading of "access". We shall also look at some of the research undertaken for the commission regarding the access problem, and some of the recommendations arising from that research.

Access to government services

Schaffer's work on the access problem was the starting point for the commission's research staff. The problem of access is concerned with "relations between the administrative allocation of goods and services and the people who need them or for whom they are intended". Schaffer and Lamb isolate three elements in the access situation; "gate", or the ways individuals succeed or fail in meeting eligibility requirements; "line", or the order in which eligible applicants are dealt; and "counter", or the offices and counters where the outcome of the encounter is decided. How do individuals go about gaining access to a service; what happens to them at the point of delivery, and what do they have to do to show they are eligible? What are the rules of eligibility? What are the barriers set up by these rules and the way they are implemented? What
effect, for instance, does the physical location of an office, or the way counter staff treat applicants, have upon ease of access? Are there ways of jumping the queue? How do these factors affect the intentions of the programme in terms of pick-up rate, equity and so on? At what level in the institution is a decision taken on eligibility, or an appeal, or a complaint? What are the appeal procedures? And so on.

Access in this sense is concerned more with the quality of delivery than the content of the programme being delivered. Thus we are not concerned directly with the distributional effects or impact of a programme, but with those aspects of any programme that concern how encounters between claimants and decision makers are initiated, what happens during those encounters, and how outcomes are decided. In these situations the use of different kinds of “voice” on the part of the claimant is a major consideration. Schaffer and Lamb distinguish between three kinds of voice. “Data and appeal” concerns the presentation of relevant information to prove eligibility, including via appeal or review procedures. “Mobilization” refers to collective political action on the part of claimants, and often arises from the failure of administrative “data and appeal” approaches. “Brokerage” entails the use of individual intermediaries to intervene in the administrative process, either for the purpose of queue-jumping or for the purpose of setting aside a normal process of determining eligibility.

The commission’s recommendations on access to government services arose almost entirely from a process of problem definition, research and analysis conducted by staff and consultants of the commission. Bernard Schaffer participated in defining the issues and framing the research programme. The research dealing with individual encounters with the bureaucracy is a self-contained piece of social science research. But as a source of recommendations on the access problem it has limitations, some of them admitted by the research staff. It was a fairly narrow investigation, focusing on that range of access problems that arise from encounters between applicants and officials at the counter. Observations of counter interviews, plus surveys of officials and applicants, provided the major sources of data. Additional descriptive material was collected on review and appeal procedures, and on breakdowns and delays in service delivery.

The survey was conducted at the Melbourne offices of the department of Social Security, the Australian Taxation Office, the Australian Housing Corporation, and the Australian Legal Aid Office. The results were fairly critical of the quality of service delivery. Shortcomings were noted in the physical design and
location of offices and the manning of counters (for example, officials all leaving their counters for tea breaks at the same time); criticisms were levelled at information services and at the frequency of delays in processing applications and dealing with complaints, especially regarding lost cheques; disquiet was expressed at the apparent complexity of procedures for determining pensions, and so on. Some intriguing findings emerged: "each application for a social security benefit and papers associated with it are handled by up to 28 people and transported up to 27 times between different parts of the office" while "85 per cent of all inquiry staff respondents indicated that they sometimes needed to cut corners in order to get things done quickly or effectively"; asked what applicants, if any, were given priority, 44 per cent of counter staff respondents replied that nobody received priority over others, while from the free choices open to all respondents the following topped the list: "referred from MPS" 24 per cent, "referred from departmental head/boss" 14 per cent, "trouble makers" eight per cent, "loudmouths" eight per cent, and "those who can apply enough pressure" six per cent; on appeals against unemployment benefit determinations, of the 5,900 lodged from 10 February 1975 to 29 September 1975, 65 per cent were conceded by the department without going before the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, that is the department changed its mind (admitted it was wrong?) in the majority of cases.

Recommendations emerged aimed at making access easier. The report placed stress on greater delegation to avoid delays and frustrations. It recommended a review of procedures for determining eligibility. It recommended appointment of "office ombudsmen". But it went no further than the boundaries set by the access survey and its findings. For instance, it recommended that steps might be taken to make the services of MPS more accessible, as "client advocates", through better staff support in constituencies and wider publicity of this aspect of an MPS role. This recommendation is odd, as the research found that of clients interviewed, less than one per cent had gone to an MP with any complaint or demand for assistance. Everything we know about the distribution across social classes of political knowledge and the propensity to use available channels of political influence firmly suggests that those most in need are those least likely to avail themselves of this kind of opportunity. Intervention by MPS is a form of brokerage, in the language of Schaffer and Lamb, and a good case can be made that this is not a "legitimate" form of administrative voice. This question needs careful consideration, particularly in the context of other perhaps more equitable forms of client advocacy, such as the
employment of welfare rights officers. Other alternatives for opening up opportunities for individual expressions of grievance were not canvassed. The commission did not pursue these problems beyond considering recommendations for improving the existing arrangements for access.

The questions excluded from the access research were important ones. No work was done on what went on “behind the counter”, nor what went on in the community prior to or instead of individual encounters with officials. Excluded were descriptions of the way eligibility rules and procedures were determined and reviewed, their justification as barriers to access, the characteristics of the decision-making process within departmental hierarchies, and other questions bearing on making and interpreting rules of eligibility and their review. The limitations of this study would not have mattered so much if RCAGA had been prepared to take into account other avenues of inquiry concurrently being undertaken that had a bearing on this question. But connections were not made, and inter-relationships of the various problems were not explored. Two questions come to mind in this regard. At what levels should decisions about rule-making and application be taken—at the centre, at a regional level or at a community level? Internal delegation, dealt with in the report, is one aspect of this, but another is the question of decentralization of power and authority. Additionally, what is or should be the role of consumer or client participation (or collective voice) in these processes of rule-making? These two issues—participation and decentralization—were touched on in the report, and it is to these that we now turn.

Participation

I am not concerned here with theories of participatory democracy, but with the phenomenon of participation, or the “participation movement”, in a liberal democracy. There is a degree of newness and distinctiveness in this phenomenon. Demands for participation have arisen from a dissatisfaction with traditional channels of influence. Participation is a demand arising from institutional encounters by groups which are to some extent “outsiders” in that they have found that the political system has in some way failed them. Bureaucracies have been impassive in the face of protest; parties have attempted to redefine demands in terms of conventional issues and cleavages, trying to incorporate the movement and the groups associated with it in order to counter the threat to their position in the political process; and the pressure group arena has
been found to be dominated by opposing interests with cosy relations with government institutions with whom they share certain basic interests. Groups that have been prominent in seeking participation have been residents, environmentalists, claimants and the poor (if and when organized).

As rhetoric and ideal, participation has roots in an alternative vision of society and polity, but as practice it is simply a demand for new forms of access to authority structures in the existing system. Groups demanding participation are expressing a grievance about politics, but this stems primarily from an unmet material need or a demand for policy change. Their dissatisfaction with politics is founded on a grievance about policy, and the demand for participation is secondary. This is not to underestimate the hold ideals about a participatory society, or a return to community and expressions of despair against the size and impersonality of authority structures, can have on people's minds. But in all cases, groups seeking participation are also seeking changes to policy to improve their private life-styles. It is patently untrue that in most cases people want to be active political animals constantly engaged in participatory ferment. For most, political activity is a nuisance tolerated because some improvement to private life-styles—not public life—is envisaged.

Institutional encounters arising from the outsider situation occur very frequently with the bureaucracy. Demands for participation have been particularly prominent when protesters have perceived government departments and agencies to have wielded power "irresponsibly", in the sense that conventional machinery for political control has not afforded a means of influencing outcomes. Participation in this setting is a demand for power-sharing at the point at which the bureaucracy interacts with the public, and in this way it is in direct contrast to conventional ways of asserting political influence through formal ministerial, parliamentary, or party channels, or insider pressure group relations with the executive. The institutional response to this demand for power sharing is co-optation. Just as outsiders seek to share power on their terms for their ends, institutions see advantages in embracing clients in their own organization, or in satellite organizations. Co-optation is a dirty word in the armoury of participatory rhetoric, because it is seen as embracing the enemy and being seduced. But it can signal success—"buying off" is also "buying in". While it may hamper the ability of organizers to maintain a participatory ferment, co-optation can bring material benefits through incorporating some client demands as institutional goals. But the danger is ever present that the "buying off" process can set in train a vicious
circle of quiescence, maintained by symbolic reassurance, leading to a complete loss of leverage by the co-opted group within the institution. The irony in this situation is that demands for participation are the most easily satisfied by token or symbolic responses. A few representatives on a consultative committee comes to be seen as an achievement in itself, rather than a step in the direction of changing policy. Many groups fall into this trap themselves and participation becomes a primary goal, displacing the grievances on which the group has initially been organized.

The commission's discussion of participation falls into this trap of treating participation as if it were a primary goal of outsider groups, and many of their suggestions could hence with some justification be considered as tokenism and symbolic reassurance. Discussion focuses on who should participate in what kinds of structures, and the problems that most worry RCAGA concern imbalance in representation or expertise. In discussing representation of client groups they are concerned to "keep the membership of the body under review" (RC 6.3.14). The report in other words concentrates on forms of participatory structures and on participation as an end, not a means to concrete goals. And even here, although they claim sympathies with participation as an alternative, their main allegiance is to tradition. The discussion of advisory groups in the policy process ends with the proviso that all their deliberations must be firmly locked into the central budgeting process and the normal procedures of accountability (RC 6.3.15).

We seem to be back to square one.

But we must give credit for the modest proposal to give financial aid to "associations which propose to make submissions to the government and which can show genuine hardship" (RC 6.3.22). This is the only recognition that the main problem facing outsider groups is not the lack of formal structures to give them a hearing, but rather a problem of political organization. Tenants' associations, claimant and welfare rights groups, etc. face their biggest problems in organizing their constituencies. However many structures we devise to give them a hearing, ultimately their influence in pursuing policy goals (again as distinct from pursuing participation) is going to depend on simple mundane things like numbers, possible threats of disorder, and even votes. There are a myriad of problems associated with officially-sponsored programmes which seek to assist in political organization among unorganized groups. The employment of community organizers (paid agitators) by government bodies causes problems of acute role strain and internal conflict, and naturally gives rise to fears of co-optation. But measures like this, and others such as providing facilities for disseminating
information and recruiting group members, should have been more seriously considered.

The reluctance of RCAGA to venture into such politically sensitive areas is understandable. But let us not ignore the implications. The commission is quite ready to improve channels for individual voices in ways we have already discussed, but these in themselves can be seen as a means of stifling collective voice. Indeed the whole basis of a government bureaucracy's treatment of categories of applicants is to deal with individuals as cases within categories prescribed from above, not individuals as members of political groups organized from below. The queue is the antithesis of the political organization. The administrative appeals tribunal and review processes aim to define agency-client relations in individual case-by-case terms. The commission did not acknowledge these contradictions and dilemmas that exist within the problem of access. Their tokenism, to be charitable, seems more a result of conceptual confusion than conscious design.

A common call from groups dissatisfied with existing channels for expressing grievances is that political structures should be decentralized, in the hope that "bringing them nearer to the people" makes them more open to influence. Although decentralization and participation are different things, their common association is not unnatural. It is to the concept of decentralization that we now turn.

**Decentralization**

Many of the demands for "participatory structures" can better be seen as demands for political decentralization. Expressions such as "client control" and "community control" belong in decentralization rhetoric rather than participatory rhetoric. Political decentralization entails devolving power and authority from the centre, either on an area or a functional basis, and usually both. Disquiet about over-centralization has a number of different bases: hostility to bureaucracy *per se*, local patriotism, ease of democratic control, demands for "fine tuning" in planning and policy making to take account of local and regional variations, and so on. Political decentralization is normally thought of in terms of local self government, that is elected assemblies at a sub-national level, with control over resources, their own bureaucracies, some of the paraphernalia of sovereignty, and all the territorial jealousies and constitutional paranoias that go along with those things.

This need not be the only model, of course. Given the concentration of power in the hands of government departments and agencies,
some decentralization on their part, mixed in with some new forms of local accountability as well as the old forms of central accountability, would be a step in the direction of political decentralization. This might entail regional or local advisory bodies with specified powers, or it could involve community involvement in particular services or institutions at the point of delivery, as in the community control of schools model. It is when thinking about these kinds of alternatives for political decentralization that we come up against the kinds of problems raised by RCAGA when it thought it was dealing with participation—what kinds of structures, what lines of accountability, what procedures for "representation" etc.?

The commission did not thoroughly pursue these questions in the context of decentralization. For them decentralization, when not simply internal delegation, entailed only a very weak and cautious form of regionalism, which hardly qualifies for the label of political decentralization. The proposal for a Commonwealth Government Representative (CGR) at the regional level is an uneasy compromise between the idea of regionalism and the reality of centrally controlled autonomous departmental hierarchies. The terms of reference for a CGR "would make clear that his role was not to determine matters which are the responsibility of individual departments in the region". He would be expected to communicate with local authorities and groups, advise the centre on regional needs, "to watch over, and as desirable coordinate", the activities of departments in the region (we have already been told that granting real authority to impose coordination would in fact not be desirable), and to exercise some delegated powers with regard to local departmental administrative matters (RC 7.3.11). So political decentralization to a regional level is effectively ruled out. Regions will not be making policy under RCAGA's proposal.

Devolution within departments was seen solely in terms of administrative delegation. Neither this, nor the weak form of regionalism favoured, would have much impact on collective as distinct from individual access. Neither do they have much relevance for regional policy-making. No concrete proposals are made for increasing the ability of local and regional departmental staff and clients to influence a process of setting priorities at a local or regional level. This would have been the point for RCAGA to have considered a role for regional or local advisory bodies and consultative committees, and ways of facilitating the organization of aggrieved groups of clients in order to exert influence on those bodies.

One of my main criticisms of RCAGA's treatment of the access problem has been its failure to integrate or inter-relate the various
aspects of the question. This failure is particularly regrettable given the opportunity to attempt this afforded by the experience of the “one-stop-shop”. A commission-sponsored experiment, this was where some of the problems of service delivery, delegation, participation and decentralization came together.

The one-stop-shop

The NOW centre (north west one stop welfare centre) was opened in Coburg in July 1975. It aimed to provide a single location for various commonwealth, state and local government departments and voluntary organizations to deliver services of various kinds to the community. A variety of expectations were at various times expressed about what the centre could or should achieve. Individual access to conventional government services such as pensions could be made easier; coordination between departments and levels of government could help with solving individual client problems on the spot; staff and volunteers at the centre could work as a team to develop ideas and policies in response to problems crossing departmental lines and emerging from community needs; the centre could engage in various kinds of “community work”, attempting to get in touch with individuals and groups in the community to identify needs, encourage participation, and inform people of their rights; the centre could be used as a resource for community groups, a meeting place, with facilities available for disseminating information, and so on; the centre could develop into an information and referral centre, concerned primarily with providing “access services” rather than “hard” welfare services.

Experience has indicated that the centre has succeeded generally in providing a more pleasant environment for “fronting up” to officialdom. It has afforded some benefits in coordination of a simple kind between departments and levels of government—for instance in facilitating transfer from family assistance (state) to supporting mothers benefit (commonwealth). The centre has generated involvement by some community groups, and this has helped its accessibility. It has provided additional resources for local community groups to pursue their activities.

The failings are a longer list, mostly because of the high and varied expectations. Rather than list them, I want to refer to some of the dilemmas I have been discussing throughout the paper as they were experienced in the NOW centre. In the first place, although access has been eased somewhat by providing a more gentle, convivial environment, the provision of “hard” services has been
greatly hampered by the small size of the centre. With regard to commonwealth benefits the centre does not have the files or the staff to determine eligibility or issue pension cheques. It can process applications and follow up complaints, but not make many decisions. The routine work required in fulfilling normal statutory duties placed strain on staff members who held alternative conceptions of the role of the centre, and who were expected by other participants to play a role in evolving objectives and interacting with the community. At one point the staff decided to close the centre as a service delivery unit for one day per week in order to pursue other objectives, but this created internal dissension and departmental ire, and the experiment was not continued.

This was just one of several problems which emerged from a conflict between the role of the centre as a service delivery point and as a community centre. Additional problems arose with regard to the duties of Social Security staff. Strong messages kept coming down the line that they should only do statutory work during office hours. This hampered some of the community-oriented programmes staff hoped to initiate in the area of "outreach", to inform, educate, and possibly mobilize members of the community concerning welfare matters, and to identify local needs and demands. Similar problems arose over community involvement in the management of the centre. A policy committee, with a significant involvement by outsiders from community groups, was formed to make decisions about the use of the centre. Departments expressed concern that such a committee might attempt to direct their staff, or that objectives formulated by that committee would interfere with the service delivery aspect of the centre. Indeed one particular decision highlighted that problem. The policy committee decided not to approve the establishment of a full unemployment benefits unit at the centre because it would take up too much space and hamper the work of voluntary groups using the centre.

The confusion surrounding objectives of the NOW centre mirror the confusions discussed earlier over the various problems raised by the access question. There are also additional problems peculiar to this area of government activity, in particular the different strategies of welfare policy embodied in the centre. These will not concern us here. What is clear is that participation and community control have to be separated from service delivery. A proposal circulated in the NOW centre for a new service model suggested the centre should concentrate on its community-oriented role, providing access services and encouraging a high level of community participation. Staff would be seconded to assist the centre in identifying local needs, providing resources, and undertaking a community
development function. A strong element of "self-help" would be embodied in the centre's operations. The centre's community constituency would thus be provided with resources to articulate their collective and individual demands to government bodies, and to the rest of society.

We have come a long way from the conception of access as a problem of individual encounters with specific bureaucracies. Clearly though this kind of model is what may be required to maximize opportunities for collective voice (participation), and to move towards community involvement by client groups in welfare services. Unfortunately RCAGA had nothing to say on this, in spite of the opportunities for pursuing these questions afforded them by the NOW experiment.

RCAGA's discussion of relations between the public and the public service raised a great number of issues which were ignored. No doubt this would be true of any attempt to arrive at recommendations on the issues entailed. Perhaps some would be outside RCAGA's terms of reference, and others would be ignored or forgotten in its determination of priorities in relation to the size and scope of the overall task they were given. Nevertheless it is disappointing that, having raised our hopes with a seemingly firm commitment to a participatory sentiment, they let us down badly, both by not following through the conceptual issues involved and by not coming up with more far-reaching recommendations. Even if we or they remain sceptical about the value of participation, regionalism or community control, it is still a failing on the part of RCAGA that their discussions of the issues in the report do not go nearly far enough towards resolving the basic issues, on one side or the other.

Notes

3. Ibid, 84-7
5. Ibid, 238.
6. Ibid, 217
10. It is odd that no mention was made of the department of Social Security's own pilot programme for financing "welfare rights officers". See John Lleonart, "Open Government in the Department of Social Security", RCAGA, Appendix 2, 188.

11. Trevor Matthews makes use of a distinction between "institutionalized groups" which are relatively stable, with secretariats, and which enjoy close links with government departments, and "single-issue groups" with none of these advantages. "Interest Group Access to the Australian Government Bureaucracy", RCAGA, Appendix 2, 333-7. John Dearlove's distinction between "favoured" and "unfavoured" groups can also be applied to this situation: John Dearlove, The Politics of Policy in Local Government, (Cambridge University Press, 1973), ch. 8. "Unfavoured", "non-institutionalized" groups are those most likely to subscribe to a participatory rhetoric in seeking new channels of access.

12. Matthews documents the "bias in favour of "institutionalized" groups" with regard to representation on departmental advisory committees. Trevor Matthews, "Interest Group Access", 339-43.


14. Victor A. Thompson makes an impassioned plea in defence of "the principle of administrative impersonality and objectivity" and sees the fashion of advocating more participative, decentralized and compassionate administration as a "subversion" of this central character of bureaucratic service delivery. Victor A. Thompson, Without Sympathy or Enthusiasm. (University of Alabama Press, 1975).
The RCAGA report has disappointed the expectations of each of the writers of the previous three chapters. Each chapter argues its gloomy conclusions persuasively. I suspect, however, that each writer has set his expectations far too high, for each expects the administrative system to do much more than it is capable of doing at any one time.

As I read them each of the chapters is very much concerned with the coordinating capacity of the Australian government. This must be so for the dominant theme of the report itself was the need to adopt effective coordinating techniques to achieve national objectives. At its highest level of generality, then, RCAGA has followed a long line of commentators who have seen coordinating as the essence of administration—within an organization or across the civil service system.

You will forgive me for reminding you of some very simple rubrics from the classical writings about administration. The need for coordination arises from the complexity of our objectives. This complexity demands that, in some way, we divide the objectives themselves, or their associated agencies, to make the problems manageable at all. Having divided, it is necessary to bind the various pieces together again to ensure conformity with the original set of objectives. Coordination is the way of doing this. Earlier writers and reformers, thus, saw a very intimate relationship between division and coordination. They advocated the selection of a principle of division in accordance with its impact on the available capacity to coordinate.

Irrespective of the prescriptions that followed, three notions were embedded in the folklore or proverbs of these earlier writers which seem to me to be of very great significance still. These are:

a) that coordination holds together planning and control in a very unstable relationship;

b) that there is a relationship between the way coordination works and the way the machinery of government is organized;
c) that in some way "coordinating capacity" is sensitive or delicate, that it must be used judiciously and conserved.

The report and, in reaction, the chapters by Weller and Cutt are almost exclusively concerned with (a). As has been noted elsewhere in the volume, the report pays very little attention to the machinery of government. It is as if RCAGA was persuaded to believe that the technology of coordination is now so sophisticated, by comparison with those earlier days of primitive human process, that the problem of division is more or less irrelevant. The coordinating techniques, now, are capable of binding together bits and pieces of administrative apparatus no matter how scattered by the accidents or designs of politics and history.

The report and again, the two chapters, stress effectiveness in resource allocation and utilization as the aim of the coordinating process. The report argues that its set of recommendations revolving around the forward estimates will do the trick. Given always, of course, that six major conditions are satisfied. The most important is that objectives be given and specified with great clarity. Only slightly less important are the requirements that the public servants, spread throughout the bureaucracy, responsible for translating these general but coherent purposes into programmes are: possessed of entrepreneurial spirit; adequately trained and informed; invested with as much power as is needed to take the decisions appropriate to their particular locations; and that they identify with the grand purposes.

Although they share the aim of maximizing effectiveness, Cutt and Weller are severally critical of the RCAGA proposals. Their emphases differ, although they do make common cause in regarding the decentralization proposals as being dysfunctional to effectiveness. Even accepting the scheme on its own terms (which he is prepared to do only for the sake of argument), Weller considers that bureaucratic obstacles and attitudes will upset the coordination balance, pushing it towards control and away from planning. This is especially likely if there is a disposition to economize in the public sector. To overcome these obstacles, coordinating mechanisms and procedures much stronger than those proposed would be required. Institutional innovations at the stage of establishing priorities would be needed also. But primarily Weller rejects the possibility of satisfying the major condition that national objectives be clearly articulated, and in a way capable of reduction to programme terms. This condition will fail and thus guarantee control rather than planning. Weller concludes that if the report's proposals were improved by the addition of a number of institutional innovations, then effective planning and coordination might be technically
possible, but this is *politically* unlikely in a pluralist democratic society.

Cutt does not seem to be worried about the primary condition of goal clarity for he has already expressed the view in his consultant’s report to the commission (Appendix 1C) that any attempt to utilize policy analysis techniques can only proceed if there is such a clear cut statement of goals. He is gloomy, though, because the report does not go as far as the current state of the art would allow. The commission’s proposals aim too low even though its consciousness might have been higher. He guesses that RAGA may have done a mental implementation analysis and concluded that there were only slight chances that Efficiency III recommendations would be accepted. The commission produced Efficiency II proposals instead; and this concerns Cutt not so much because they aim too low but because Efficiency II might in fact damage the ultimate goal of effectiveness. Consequently, Cutt goes on to suggest improvements to the scheme to raise the level of effectiveness accountability to Efficiency III (though if Weller is right, Cutt’s Efficiency III has no chance at all despite its superior technological potential). The two principal changes required are: 

a) the development of an effective analytical support system; and, 
b) a much higher degree of coordination at the *ex ante* stage of budgeting.

So both Weller and Cutt argue that if the scheme is to work at all, no matter what else is needed, increased coordination is essential. Cutt puts it in these words in an extraordinarily loose sentence in an otherwise very tightly argued chapter:

> We argue that a new body, of the sort envisaged by Caiden in his proposal for OPAAM should be set up, adequately funded and staffed with the necessary range of talents, and given the statutory authority to develop and implement a methodology for examining the pursuit of Efficiency III. [Emphasis added.]

> “A new body, of the sort...”? What kind of coordinating body? Certainly not the example cited. Weller has disposed of that.

Perhaps we can get some understanding of what is required by looking at what is supposed to happen at Level III, as drawn from Cutt’s present chapter and his earlier consultant’s report. Overall, the system must plan, coordinate and control; it must assess performance, efficiency and effectiveness across the public sector which means taking federalism into account as much as possible. In the budget stages clearly formulated statements of goals must be elicited and associated guidelines transmitted throughout the system; the right values must be present at each critical decision
point as general guidelines are translated into particular programmes; adequate knowledge and information must be generated and distributed in all directions throughout the system. As parameters are defined and specified and weights assigned in the analyses themselves, the coordinating system must provide for the appropriate political inputs to guard against the likelihood that by default, the analyst’s own value judgments will prevail. And all these things, or many of them, must be repeated in reverse in the implementation and *ex post* stages. Moreover, it is to be preferred that the system be a dynamic one.

Clearly it is possible to conceive of a system that might do all these things although I am not persuaded by some of the foundation assumptions upon which such a conception would rest. This is not the place to argue those questions, nor a proposition: “As many of these actions, decisions, value judgments are present in a messy way already would it not be better to see that it is all done systematically?” the important question for the present is, given such a conception (and its desirability measured on some acceptable value scale) does our political system have the capacity to embrace it?

In a way this is to repeat Weller’s conclusion about the impossibility of planning for effective resource utilization in a pluralist democratic system. It also questions the underlying assumption of those who advocate that more coordination will turn the trick, that coordinating capacity is abundantly available if only we had the sense to know what to do with it.

Most discussions of coordination are about the technology of various coordinating processes. Occasionally there is a discussion of the nature of coordination. From this point of view the RCAGA contribution is valuable though limited in view of the dominant emphasis on coordination in the report. But as far as I am aware there is no great discussion of the *capacity* to coordinate. The classicists came close to it when they implied “sensitivity” or “delicacy” as characteristics of coordination, and when they advocated techniques that would conserve or, at least, not impair coordinating capacity. Perhaps, too, in the political development literature there might be found means to track and measure coordinating capacity as it expands across those geographical or functional areas over which a political system seeks hegemony. In the absence of established means of identifying and measuring “the capacity to coordinate” I want to suggest some very speculative propositions that might in turn yield useful ways of looking at the problem we are considering. First, two axioms:

a) the power available to governments is scarce;
b) coordination is a function of power.

From these I would suggest the general hypothesis that the coordinating capacity of government is scarce, irrespective of the nature of the political system. And from this one might deduce corollaries. The more power that is required for performance and the pursuit of objectives, the less power is available for coordination. Conversely, the greater the number of coordinating processes adopted, or the more a particular process is extended, the less power is available for performance.

I would couple that set of hypotheses—and a number of others is possible—with conclusions which I believe can be drawn from discussions of the nature of coordinating. Coordination disseminates values, locates and protects values and secures compliance with values. But it does more than that. Often associated with the dissemination of values is the intention of squeezing out other unwanted, damaging or corrupt values. Hence, coordination disseminates values, squeezes out values, or simply because the space is already occupied, blocks access to other, newer, values that might be of greater relevance to contemporary society than those already in the system.

Consequently, it might be argued that the expanded and extended coordinating apparatus envisaged by Cutt and Weller as necessary for a planning and budget system more effective than the RCAGA proposals could do one or all of three things:

a) diminish operational performance;

b) force out other values presently occupying some of the coordinating space;

c) make it even more difficult than it is already for other social values to be introduced to, disseminated through and protected across the administrative system.

In this a priori way, I would argue that RCAGA was certainly right in aiming at Efficiency II. The commissioners may well have had a pretty shrewd idea, not so much of the low chance of acceptance of more advanced proposals as Cutt suggests, but of how limited the coordinating capacity of the Australian administrative system really is.

It is at this point that Painter’s chapter is most relevant for it crystallizes the issues. If there are competing values and the coordinating space is scarce, which value is to be sacrificed? Painter makes it clear that RCAGA’s vision of community interaction and participation was just as grand as its hopes about effectiveness. In the end, by concentrating on effectiveness, the commissioners left themselves too little space in the coordination band to do much more than offer, piecemeal, the tokens Painter finds so disappointing.
Again one might with profit return to classical administrative theory, not for the prescriptions (indeed to reverse them) but to search for ways of looking at the problem. The place to look is in the intimacy of the relationships between coordination and division. If expectations are disappointed at the “coordination” end, perhaps manipulating the “division” variable might help. The commission shied off the direct discussion of division, but it had a partial indirect look that led to its general conclusion that decision responsibilities be located as close to the sites of operations and community interaction as possible. Although Painter finds this set of proposals, even when added to more particular ones, to be disappointing, it is nevertheless valuable to have a partial endorsement of the virtues of fragmentation.

Fragmentation, and the associated notion of high levels of autonomy for distant decision centres, has not been popular. Indeed, it has been frowned upon not only by the classicists and a long line of practitioners, but also by Cutt and Weller. One reason is “administrative”, for fragmentation is seen to aggravate the problems of coordination. If, however, the technology of coordination has increased immeasurably, this objection should no longer hold.

A second set of objections is political. First, executives want to control, as much as they can, the political risks that are involved in decision-making. Thus only the most unimportant matters are delegated or decentralized. Next, fragmentation increases the scope and opportunities for pressure to be exerted on the decision centres. Fragmentation exposes decision centres, they become more easily identifiable, and provide targets for criticism or even points of access. Those over whom decisions are exercised can more easily see a common interest that might constitute the basis for organization. The most reprehensible principle of organization, aggravating both administrative and political problems, was seen to be organization by client groups.

I regret that RCAGA did not look more closely at this principle and some of the examples of it we have in our machinery of government. They may have found that the administrative disadvantage no longer holds and that what were once seen as political disadvantages can now be seen as positive political benefits. Organization by client group and other modes of fragmentation are ways of providing access for the expectations of those community groups and individuals at present denied knowledge and information, as well as understanding.
Implementation
The report of the Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration was presented to the government on 22 July 1976 and publicly released ten days later. The press gave it a warm reception: "sound and sensitive", "a welter of well-thought suggestions", "a formidable package of reforms" said the editorial writers. But many commentators had serious doubts as to whether anything much would come of the report's 337 recommendations. For it was common knowledge that RCAGA had made a number of powerful bureaucratic enemies during its career. Would their resistance seal the fate of the report? The commission recognized that as a real possibility. And it recognized the need to develop a strategy of implementation designed to counter bureaucratic resistance and inertia. For at least nine months before the publication of the report, commissioners and senior staff had been considering possible procedures for implementing the report. This paper begins by outlining those early proposals; it next describes how the government—at the ministerial and bureaucratic levels—has handled the report in the first eight months since it received the report; and it concludes with a brief assessment of the strategy of implementation that has been employed.

**Implementation: RCAGA's proposals**

The commission began the task of preparing the first drafts of its report in September 1975. It also, at that time, took up in some detail the question of how it hoped its report would be handled by the government. Five specific aspects of the implementation process were canvassed and discussed with RCAGA.1 These were:

a) that RCAGA's report contain a section dealing with implementation. In this section RCAGA would assign responsibility for the implementation of particular recommendations to particular departments, spell out a time-table for implementation, set down the proposals which required legislative action, and specify what
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it called the "dynamics" for generating continuous and autonomous adaptation to social change within the administration;

b) that RCAGA hold informal discussions before the release of its report with key permanent heads, members of parliament, and trade union officials. These discussions were seen as having a number of advantages: they would enable RCAGA to explain to the main governmental agencies of implementation the steps that it saw as necessary for putting the recommendations into effect; they would help to stifle the charge that RCAGA's proposals were uninformed; and they would make it possible for RCAGA to hear and perhaps take account of the likely reactions of the major interests. The commission believed these advantages would, on balance, outweigh the one major risk the discussions entailed namely, that powerful bureaucratic critics of the report might use their foreknowledge of the report's proposals to organize opposition. Doubtless RCAGA also saw the discussions as a tactic in winning bureaucratic support for its recommendations;

c) that the prime minister endorse the report in principle on receiving it;

d) that a special unit be set up within the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM & c) which would have the responsibility for overseeing the process of implementation. The commission favoured the immediate establishment of this unit, on a skeleton basis, so that its members could sit in on the final shaping of the report and familiarize themselves with the research and background material which supported RCAGA's various recommendations. The unit would consist not only of career public servants but also of outsiders, including some of RCAGA's own staff. Indeed, it was RCAGA's belief that the opening up of the administration, which it was to recommend in its report, should ideally begin with the implementation unit itself;

e) that the special unit within PM & c have the responsibility for ensuring that RCAGA's recommendations were made widely known at all levels of the public service and among the community at large. To some of RCAGA's staff this was a priority task. According to one proposal that circulated within RCAGA, this job could best be done by commissioners, senior staff and project leaders talking to target groups in the few months following the publication of the report. The coordination of this effort would be the responsibility of a full-time officer in the implementation unit. And, once implementation was under way, it would be a further responsibility of the unit to issue public progress reports every six months.
Implementation: the PM & C response

The prime minister, Mr Whitlam, agreed in early October to the suggestion put to him by the chairman of the commission that a unit or secretariat be established within his own department to coordinate the government's consideration of the report. The department, however, had already been giving thought to that question. It was aware that if the report were to be considered in the first instance by the normal device for securing bureaucratic coordination—the interdepartmental committee—it was likely that important initiatives would be lost in debates over details or else simply resisted. Instead it favoured having a small cabinet committee, headed by the prime minister, which would give ministerial guidance to the implementation process. That committee of ministers would be supported by a group of senior officials. This group would be based in the policy coordination unit (PCU) of PM & C, whose director (John Enfield) had been a member of the commission's health-welfare task force. Instead of being (and being seen to be) an advocate of RCAGA's report, the main task of the group would be to facilitate ministerial consideration of the report.

Following a reorganization of PM & C in February 1976 (which saw the PCU absorbed into a newly created projects division) the responsibility for handling RCAGA matters was given to the government division. Unlike the PCU, the government division was a central functional division within the department and dealt, inter alia, with many of the topics RCAGA was expected to report on; for example, machinery of government, the administrative arrangements order, the organization and staffing of the Australian public service, conditions of service, statutory corporations, freedom of information, and higher appointments. In addition, the first assistant secretary in charge of the government division was expected to be involved in servicing the permanent heads' committee supporting the recently announced machinery of government (MOG) committee of cabinet. The terms of reference of the MOG committee authorized it to examine proposals arising from current inquiries into government administration and to look at procedures for the appointment of permanent heads and statutory office holders. (The role the MOG committee played in the government's consideration of the RCAGA report will be discussed below).

For the next four months an ad hoc RCAGA group of three existed within the government division: the first assistant secretary (B.F. Cox); the assistant secretary, government branch
The group's first task was to obtain advance information on the recommendations RCAGA would be making and to become familiar with all the material RCAGA was likely to use in supporting its recommendations. A formal link was established with the commission in March when RCAGA's secretary and its research director outlined to the PM & C group the probable shape of the report and their views on how some of the major recommendations might be handled. It was agreed that the group would be sent drafts of each chapter as they were completed. Summaries of these drafts were prepared and given a limited and confidential circulation within the department. They were circulated, for instance, to the projects division which coordinated the government's consideration of the reports of the administrative review committee (ARC). Coordination of the ARC and RCAGA exercises was crucial. The fact that ARC was expected to report by May raised the possibility that any early decision by the government to accept major changes to the administrative arrangements order (AAO) that ARC might recommend could effectively preclude the implementation of RCAGA proposals should the latter be predicated on an AAO status quo. In the event there were no major inconsistencies between the ARC and RCAGA proposals.

The liaison between the RCAGA group within PM & C and the commission enabled RCAGA thinking to be injected into the process of policy development some months before the government actually received the commission's report. This occurred with issues such as the procedures for appointing permanent heads, training for senior management, compulsory early retirement, the role of the public accounts committee and the duties of public servants. On a number of such issues the government division was able to advise the prime minister to delay a final decision until after RCAGA had reported.

During this period the one member of the group able to work fulltime on RCAGA matters (Matthews) spent considerable time assembling background data on the major recommendations the commission's final report was likely to contain. This involved, for example, going through RCAGA's own working files, examining in detail all submissions sent to and research done for the commission, as well as checking relevant PM & C files which bore on issues RCAGA would be reporting on.

A further task facing the group was to get departmental approval for the early creation of a full-time RCAGA unit. There
were two clear constraints on what could be proposed. These were the department's earlier thinking on the role of such a unit and the department's own staff ceiling. What emerged was a unit to consist of four or five relatively senior officers. To give it muscle it would be led by a second division officer. In this context Canadian experience was referred to, especially the appointment there of the head of the department of Citizenship and Immigration to be director of the Bureau of Government Organization to facilitate the Diefenbaker government's consideration of the Glassco reports. The leader of the unit would work through the head of the government division and would be assisted by three or four officers of class eleven level. One would be seconded from the Treasury to bring expertise into the unit on forward estimates and financial control; another officer (perhaps two) would be seconded from the Public Service Board to advise on the recommendations dealing with staffing, conditions of employment, industrial relations, and efficiency review. Letters were sent to the chairman of the Public Service Board and the secretary to the Treasury seeking the release of suitable officers.

In June Tony Ayers was appointed to lead the unit. He was a level three officer in PM & C who until recently had been chairman of the interim council of the children’s commission. With previous experience in the Victorian public service, PM & C, the department of the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts, and the department of Environment and Conservation, Ayers brought to the unit an extensive knowledge of the public service and a wide range of contacts. His appointment, incidentally, had the effect of making quite academic RCAGA's own recommendation—seen for the first time a few weeks later in the very last draft of the report—“that the Prime Minister nominate a senior official of departmental head status to act full-time as executive officer of the ministerial committee” and to head the RCAGA unit within PM & C (RC 12.2.10).

**Developing a strategy for handling the report**

Ayers was appointed in the middle of June; RCAGA was expected to have its report ready for handing to the government in mid-July. That gave him barely a month to decide on and get departmental clearance for a provisional strategy for the government's handling of the report. Among the pressing questions were: (a) should the report be released by the
government immediately on receiving it; (b) what sort of public statement should the prime minister make at the time of receipt; (c) what procedures should the unit adopt to facilitate the government's consideration of the recommendations; (d) should decisions on implementation be taken early or should there be a period to allow the bureaucracy, the staff associations and unions and the public to digest the report and respond to it.

In chapter twelve of its report RCAGA set down its views on a general strategy for implementation. Recognizing the twin dangers of too much enthusiasm and haste in putting its recommendations into effect and bureaucratic inertia and passive resistance, it suggested (RC 12.2.8) an implementation procedure designed:

(a) to obtain cabinet approval for the principles which underlay the commission's main proposals;
(b) to involve both ministers and officials in action to give effect to those principles, using the specific recommendations as a guiding framework;
(c) to establish at both ministerial and senior officer level an authoritative group which would monitor the implementation of the reforms proposed; ensure that ministerial decisions were sought where necessary, that legislative action required was initiated where required, and that departmental action was taken with deliberate speed; and report progress at appropriate intervals to cabinet.

To achieve this, RCAGA recommended (R. 337) the following specific procedures:

(a) that cabinet approve in principle the main recommendations of the report and direct that action be taken to give effect to the principles which underlie them, taking the commission's recommendations (including the subsidiary recommendations in each chapter of the report) as a guiding framework for appropriate action;

(b) that the attention of ministers and departments be drawn to this direction with a request that they proceed expeditiously to prepare, and where appropriate give effect to, specific proposals for reform. To this end departments should set up internal groups representative of staff and management to study the relevant recommendations from the commission;

(c) that the prime minister nominate a committee of ministers, presided over by a member of cabinet, to expedite these reforms and to act as a point of reference to ministers and departments in matters concerning more than one minister and department;

(d) that the prime minister nominate a senior official of departmental head status to act full-time as executive officer of the ministerial
committee, and that this officer be supported by a small secretariat in PM & C;

(e) that the ministerial committee and its executive officer be authorized to establish working groups or task forces (not interdepartmental committees) to help the ministerial committee in matters involving a number of ministers and departments, and to call together groups of departmental heads where joint or related action is called for.

From discussions in PM & C the following aspects of a strategy emerged:

the committee of ministers to consider the report would be the machinery of government committee of cabinet, chaired by the prime minister;

senior officials would be involved through the officials’ committee (or as it came to be known later in 1976, the permanent heads’ committee) supporting the MOG committee;

the unit within PM & C would service the officials’ committee;

the report would be released publicly by the prime minister as soon as it was received;

implementation should be tackled as speedily as possible; and

the method used to handle the ARC report to be also used to handle the RCAGA report.

The last two points need further comment. A tight time-table was an important element in the unit’s strategy for putting the report before ministers. There were advantages in moving quickly, not least the risk that delay might see the pressure of more urgent business crowding the RCAGA report off the political agenda. Delay, moreover, involved another risk: it could lay the government open to the accusation that it had in effect shelved the report. It was for these reasons that the department argued against the suggestion that a period of two or three months be set aside to enable interested parties—for example, the public service unions—to make known their attitudes to the report. It believed that RCAGA’s careful liaison with the unions and the generally favourable union response to the report meant that the number of industrially controversial recommendations would be few. In any case, cabinet could always authorise the PSB to consult and negotiate with the unions on any issues which were contentious.

The appointment of the unit’s leader only a month before the RCAGA report’s publication meant that time—or rather the lack of it—was important in determining how the report’s 337 recommendations would be classified and grouped for ministerial deliberation. Not surprisingly, a ready solution was turned to—namely, the
method that had been used to handle the ARC recommendations. According to the ARC approach, the RCAGA recommendations could be divided into five categories, each to be handled in a particular way:

a) recommendations which would need to go to cabinet because of their policy or legislative significance;

b) recommendations which would be decided by the prime minister because they involved the administrative arrangements order;

c) recommendations which could be referred to current inquiries (whose terms of reference covered the same topics) and considered when the reports of those inquiries were to hand;

d) matters which concerned only one or a few departments and that could be referred to the relevant minister(s) for action;

e) recommendations which related to departmental procedures and that could be referred to all departments and/or the Public Service Board to follow up.

This, of course, was a different approach to what RCAGA had proposed in recommendation 337; namely:

that Cabinet approve in principle the main recommendations of the Report [fully 300 recommendations were listed in chapter twelve of the report as “main recommendations”] and direct that action be taken to give effect to the principles which underlay them, taking the Commission’s recommendations as a guiding framework for appropriate action.

This approach was politically impracticable. It was unrealistic to expect a government to approve in principle 300 separate and widely differing recommendations, many of which ran counter to its policy of pruning the size of the public service. Moreover, the “approve in principle” approach had another drawback: it provided an inadequate mechanism for dealing with the unresolved inconsistencies between sets of recommendations (e.g., those relating to efficiency and those relating to participation).

On the other hand, one advantage of the ARC approach was that it permitted ministers to differentiate and discriminate between and within groups of related recommendations: they could, for example, fully endorse some bundles, modify and amend others and reject still others. Working to deadlines, the unit’s analysis of the report and its classification of the recommendations was rushed. Ideally more time and resources should have been spent in analyzing the principles of the report, establishing a network of interrelations between the 337 recommendations, determining the objectives and policies to be pursued at short, medium and long term according to the logic of the report rather than political and administrative
expediency; and, when that had been done, developing a set of contingency plans to enable the implementation process to cope in a more or less calculated way with the more probable obstacles.

At the end of August the machinery of government officials' committee accepted a division of the 337 RCAGA recommendations into the five ARC categories. But note how the timetable kept slipping. The simple problem of finding a mutually convenient time for meetings of senior officials needs to be added to any list (e.g. that of Pressman and Wildavsky) of why administrative implementation is often a slow grind. In August the officials' committee also accepted the framework for handling the RCAGA report that was put to it by PM & C. The main features of that scheme were:

that ministerial consideration of the report would be a matter for the machinery of government committee of cabinet. This committee had eight members. They were:

Prime Minister (Chairman)
Minister for Administrative Services
Minister for Industry and Commerce
Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations
Minister for Transport
Minister for Social Security
Attorney-General
Minister for Post and Telecommunications and
Minister Assisting the Treasurer;

the MOG committee would be assisted by its associated officials' committee;
the RCAGA unit within PM & C would serve as a secretariat to the officials' committee and would prepare draft submissions to the MOG committee for prior consideration by the officials' committee; any differences of opinion among heads of the officials' committee would be transmitted to the MOG committee;
the 337 recommendations of the RCAGA report would be handled according to the five procedures that had been used to process the ARC proposals;
the RCAGA unit would monitor the progress of recommendations that were put to further study;
the monitoring role would be taken over by PM & C when the unit was disbanded (the unit was seen as having only a brief life, coming to an end when the recommendations that needed cabinet approval had been dealt with by cabinet).

Cabinet endorsed this general plan in September. The RCAGA unit had now been given the political "steer" that it needed and it began to meet regularly in its full form. It consisted of: A.J. Ayers, first
assistant secretary, PM & c; R. J. Minns, assistant commissioner, PSB who had been the board's liaison officer with RCAGA; E. L. Knaus, assistant secretary, royal commissions branch, department of Services and Property; K. Searson, Class eleven officer, employment conditions branch, the Treasury who had been involved in much of the Treasury work done for the commission; and T. V. Matthews, Class eleven officer, PM & C. Ayers, Minns and Matthews worked on the exercise full-time. So also did Bruce MacDonald, secretary of the PSB, who was seconded from that position to coordinate and oversee the board's response to the RCAGA report, including the preparation of papers by the board for the RCAGA unit. Although not originally planned, the addition was thought desirable to facilitate the clearing of papers between the unit and the secretary of that department in his role as a member of the MOG officials' committee.

Ministerial and departmental consideration

The foundations had now been laid for ministerial and departmental consideration of the report and its recommendations. The five categories into which the RCAGA unit divided the recommendations is a useful device for discussing what has been considered by the government and what was decided in the first seven months.

The largest group—"category A"—contained the recommendations that required cabinet endorsement because of their policy significance or because they required legislation. Almost half of the 337 recommendations were in this category. The unit's next job was to choose from among these 160 recommendations those which should go into the first batch of cabinet submissions. A number of the recommendations for the first package were selected largely because they were ready to run. For example, the Public Service Board by mid-September had prepared 16 papers (covering more than 40 separate recommendations) on topics that it had had in train for some time. These included widening the jurisdiction of joint council (R 260–261), the abolition of the ten per cent restriction on the annual non-specialist intake of graduate recruits (R 123), amending the disciplinary procedures as proposed by joint council (R 177, 186), and making relative efficiency the sole criterion for promotion (R 161, 163, 167). Likewise, the recommendation proposing that the leader of the opposition be permitted to consult the Public Service Board and the secretary of PM & C in the period immediately preceding the election was included in the first package, for PM & C had already prepared draft guidelines for such
consultations. Important as these topics were, they were peripheral to the central recommendations of the RCAGA report. The package going to cabinet needed to contain some of these key recommendations. It was for this reason that the recommendations on forward estimates (R 2, 87, 201, 310 and 311(b)) and efficiency audits (R 4–8, 39–40, 96(b) and (c), 312–318 and 320(c)) were put into the first package.

The papers prepared for the officials' committee by the unit were normally brief (four or five pages) and consisted of three parts: (i) a summary—or if that was not possible (as was often the case) a direct quotation—of the commission's actual recommendation(s); (ii) background data to the recommendation(s)—this usually included the commission's own arguments for the proposal and the attitudes of the key interests involved (e.g. staff associations) and it might also refer to other developments of relevance (e.g. reports of committees of inquiry) which might have occurred since the publication of the RCAGA report; and (iii) possible action—options were given in cases where there was inter-departmental disagreement.

The process of clearing the papers—both within the unit and at the officials' committee level—was completed at the end of November. The agreed papers then went to cabinet as submissions in the name of A.A. Street, the minister assisting the prime minister in public service matters. They were considered by cabinet in early December. Only one submission was not taken up. It proposed the dropping of the special statutory provisions for the preferential appointment of ex-servicemen. The decisions were announced by the prime minister in the house on 9 December. According to the prime minister's statement, the government had agreed:

to approve in principle the commission's recommendations for the introduction of a system of efficiency audits; it appointed an inter-departmental working party (chaired by PM & c) to report on how the system might be implemented;

to note the particular significance which RCAGA attached to integrated forward estimates of both financial and manpower requirements; it established a task force (chaired by PM & c) to report on the commission's recommendations;

to authorize the drafting of legislation to give effect to changes in the disciplinary provisions of the Public Service Act as proposed by RCAGA;

to amend the Public Service Act to abolish the ten per cent restriction on graduate recruits;

to accept the commission's recommendation that a practice should be established of permitting the leader of the opposition before an election to consult with the PSB and the secretary of the department of PM & c:
to accept the royal commission’s recommendations that there should be guidelines governing the briefing of members and party committees by public servants and the handling of requests from members of parliament seeking information from departments and authorities; it adopted a set of guidelines drafted in the unit and endorsed by the officials’ committee;

to authorize the Public Service Board to consult with staff organizations and to report to the government on:

- possible changes in the divisional structure of the public service,
- the possible elimination of inappropriate distinctions between permanent officers and temporary employees,
- RCAGA recommendations relating to the promotion procedures in the Australian public service,
- the way in which the commission’s proposals for expanding the jurisdiction of joint council and for meeting consultative councils within departments and authorities might be implemented;

to ask the Public Service Board to continue its detailed examination of the desirability of developing arrangements for a unified civilian public service;

to endorse the commission’s conclusion in favour of adopting the departmental form of organization for government agencies except in those cases where there was a demonstrable necessity for the functions concerned being carried out by a body which was wholly or in some desired way separate from ministerial and departmental administration; it agreed to establish a working party of officials to formulate guidelines for the creation and continued existence of statutory authorities;

to authorize consultations with peak councils on a number of the commission’s recommendations relating to industrial issues (for example, R 244-51, 253-4, 257-8); and

to ask all departments to renew their existing arrangements for staff training and development and to report to the board by April 1977; in the light of those reviews, the board to report to the government by June 1977 on the desirable nature of its role in matters of training and personnel development.

Two other decisions by the MOG committee should also be mentioned. They concerned early retirement from the public service and the procedures for the appointment of permanent heads. Both were embodied in legislation introduced late in 1976. But unlike the decisions listed above they were not handled by the RCAGA unit. Yet in both, the relevant RCAGA recommendations played an important part in shaping the final outcome.

Three observations can be made about the “category A” ministerial decisions. First, they do not have much direct bearing on the topic that the editors of this volume gave to me to discuss, namely the implementation of the RCAGA report. Even if we
distinguish the *adoption* of a recommendation from the subsequent *implementation* of the policy embodying that recommendation, the fact remains that most of the above decisions precede even the adoption stage. They are at best prerequisites for the subsequent adoption of RCAGA recommendations. That is, they provide for further investigation and examination, for preliminary consultation with staff organizations, and for approval in principle. This is not to belittle the importance of such decisions; nor is it to say that adoption and implementation will not take place.

Second, the decisions demonstrate that the government and the administration took the report seriously. It was not simply pigeonholed.

Third, while a good proportion of "category A" recommendations have now been discussed by the MOG committee (and its associated permanent heads' committee), many very significant recommendations have yet to be considered. In December and January the unit worked on the next "package" of papers covering items such as regional administration, information programmes, one-stop-shops, and existing character and nationality restrictions on eligibility for permanent appointment to the public service. These papers are currently (April 1977) awaiting consideration by the MOG committee. But it will not be until some time into 1977 before draft papers will be ready on the recommendation dealing, for example, with the powers and responsibilities of permanent heads, departmental annual reports, administrative appeals, equal employment opportunity and the role and charter of the PSB. As the board would be preparing the first drafts of most of these papers (as well as papers incorporating some of the "category E" recommendations), it was decided in February 1977 to change the nature of the RCAGA unit. Henceforth all its members would be involved in RCAGA matters only on a part-time basis. The announcement in January 1977 that K.C.O. Shann would be replacing Sir Alan Cooley as chairman of the Public Service Board also influenced this decision, for the changeover at the board would no doubt delay the board's clearance of RCAGA papers.

"Category B" consists of the recommendations referred to other current inquiries for consideration and report. The IDC on freedom of information was given recommendation R.68; the health welfare coordination task force, R.83–5; the ASTEC inquiry, R.278, 282, 283, 284; the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee inquiry R.289–91; and the CSIRO inquiry, R.280.

"Category C" are the AAO matters. They include recommendations on the bureau of statistics (R.273), CSIRO (R.281), the Compensation (Australian Government Employees) Act and the
Superannuation Act (R.333), DINDEC (R. 264), and department for Social Welfare (R.285).

"Category D" are the recommendations that have implications for particular portfolios. The prime minister on 12 October 1976 wrote to the relevant ministers inviting their comments. Nearly 50 recommendations were raised with ministers in this way. To illustrate, the minister for Health was asked to comment on R.50; the minister for Aboriginal Affairs on R.292–7; the minister for Overseas Trade on R.224, the treasurer on R.59, 266–9, 271, 276; and the minister for Foreign Affairs on R.223, 225–7, 233–4, 235, 286, and 288. Recommendation 75—a social welfare advisory board with local outposts—was referred to five ministers (Aboriginal Affairs, Employment and Industrial Relations, Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Social Security and Veterans' Affairs).

The prime minister also asked ministers for their views on action which their departments might take in relation to 23 "category E" recommendations which have implications for most or all ministers and departments; the topics included staff rotation, delegation, procedures for selecting staff for promotion, registries, collective decision-making, counter staff, decision-making at the point of contact with the public and interest representation on advisory committees. The replies to those letters are currently being considered by the RCAGA unit for appropriate follow-up action.

The rest of the "category E" recommendations (78 in all) were referred to the Public Service Board for comment. Many are recommendations that require action by the board; for example, that the board "monitor", "administer", "be responsible for", "delegate", "consider taking into account", "review", "pursue the initiative it has taken in", "give consideration to", or "prescribe guidelines for" certain programmes, procedures or policies. The board reported to the prime minister on these recommendations in November 1976. It also released a summary of its views to the press. This summary unfortunately gave the impression that the board was merely "reviewing", "examining", and "considering" the recommendations. It did not bring out the board's positive attitude to most of the recommendations referred to it; or to the number of recommendations which in fact endorsed new approaches that the board had taken in recent years; or to the recommendations which could not be effectively implemented until further research had been completed or until consultation and negotiation with staff associations had taken place. What the summary did make clear, however, was the constraint that current restrictions on the size of the board's staff were imposing on speedy action. This constraint in turn raised the question of the priority which should be given
to the RCAGA work in relation to the board's other commitments. The board was not alone in feeling the effects of staff ceilings. Departments which might otherwise have experimented with RCAGA recommendations were also deterred by staff shortages.

**Assessment**

After examining the outcomes of the major investigations into the organization of the British civil service which have been held since 1850, Brian Smith concludes that implementation of reform has never followed automatically from the recommendations of a public inquiry or a Royal Commission. Reform seems to be much more a function of Government policy decisions which themselves are motivated by other factors.

The reports of reform commissions "are in fact no substitutes for political decisions". The literature on the implementation of programmes of administrative reform—in Westminster-type systems and elsewhere—makes the same point. A precondition of effective implementation is political will and commitment.

Take Britain. On the day the Fulton report was published, prime minister Wilson announced that his government had accepted two crucial recommendations: the creation of a civil service department (CSD) and the appointment of a member of cabinet to be responsible for the day to day ministerial control of the department. He also let it be known that the government wanted action on implementation. According to R.W.L. Wilding—the secretary to the Fulton committee and later a senior official in the CSD—the political commitment gave the civil service department "an essential impetus" and an "inestimable" advantage in its task of putting Fulton into effect. Similarly, ministerial support for the Ontario and South Australian inquiries has been invaluable at the implementation stage.

By contrast, RCAGA reported to a government that was wary of what the report might contain, and not identified with its work or thinking. Ministerial interest, then, had to be created. This lack of a clear and definite political interest in the report, its diagnosis and its recommendations, among both government and opposition members, has been a major constraint on implementation. Moreover, the political impetus is unlikely to emerge. Reform of the public service is just not a political issue in Australia at present. There is little electoral mileage in it. The second major constraint on implementation has been re-
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sources. Public service reform requires finance, staff and time. Under the present government's policy of restricting the growth and reducing the size of the public sector, those resources have been in short supply.

It would be difficult to imagine an economic and political climate less suitable for any bureaucratic experiment that might require increased expenditure than the one that exists at the moment.10

This constraint affects not only actual implementation but the development of programmes for implementation at a later stage. It also affects efficiency—a key objective of the RCAGA report and of the government. Therein lies a problem. To quote Wilding again:

Politicians certainly want a better civil service, but they want it free. So do the public: the idea of paying more—and especially of employing more civil servants—to improve the civil service strikes as a ludicrous paradox those whose idea of a better civil service is a smaller one.11

The sheer comprehensiveness of the RCAGA report is—or will be—a further constraint on implementation. All Wildavsky's ingredients for delay, compromise and failure are present—ever changing participants; the sheer number of actors, clearances and decisions required; the growth of interdependencies; and the diversity of perspectives and priorities.12

A fourth constraint on substantial implementation is the closed nature of the procedure for handling the report. The "staff" work to facilitate cabinet's consideration of the report has all been done within the bureaucracy. Outsiders—e.g. businessmen, academics, leaders of client groups—and members and senior staff of the commission have been excluded. In their absence, the job of assessing the report has been performed by those who were the very subjects of the inquiry.13 This can be contrasted with Ottawa's method of handling the Glassco reports. The Canadian implementation unit—the Bureau of Government Organization—had among its four senior operational staff two who had been on the commission's central research staff. That was by design. It was to give the bureau and the numerous committees of officials set up to examine the reports a detailed and close knowledge of the commission's thinking.14 In a report as comprehensive as the RCAGA report, links between the commission and the planning of implementation could have added a vital dimension—the synoptic. I will return to this point below when I comment on the risks in piecemeal implementation.

Despite these constraints of the sort of implementation the commission itself had hoped for, the RCAGA unit was aided by a
number of assets. The favourable press treatment of the report was one. The location of the unit within PM & C was another, particularly in its dealing with other departments. It gave the leader of the unit access to the department's network of bureaucratic and political intelligence which could be put to tactical advantage, and it gave the leader of the unit access to the prime minister by way of briefing notes. The nature of the report helped the unit secure quick action. Unlike the Fulton report, the RCAGA report is more a set of detailed and specific recommendations for the here and now than a blueprint for the future. That makes it relatively easy to put together a package of recommendations which will be bureaucratically and politically acceptable. After all, there are over 300 recommendations to choose from. Lastly, the size and composition of the MOG permanent heads' committee helped the unit. Its size—because it limited to four the number of actors from whom clearances had to be obtained (this lessened the risks of delay); and its composition—because agreement from the permanent heads of Canberra's three key central coordinating agencies increased the probability that cabinet would accept their verdict.

By way of conclusion, I will list some critical observations of the strategy used in dealing with the RCAGA report.

1. I have mentioned that the planning of an implementation strategy suffered through having to get a scheme devised and endorsed quickly. No overall set (or series of sets) of means-ends priorities among the recommendations was drawn up as a guide to immediate, medium-term and long-term implementation. Nor was much analytical thought put into examining critically the principles of the report. The result has been the consideration of the RCAGA report—at the bureaucratic and political level—without any clear sense of goals or priorities. The danger in this is that action on the recommendations will be not only piecemeal and directionless but that the outcome could easily be a set of decisions that will be—to quote Dror on the risks in not having a systematic reform strategy—"ill-considered, inconsistent, over-atomized and too short-range".15

2. The striving by the RCAGA unit in 1976 for rapid results in getting recommendations placed before ministers ran the risk of elevating speed and the mere number of recommendations "dealt with" into the chief goals of the exercise. This exacerbated the likelihood that decisions will be short-sighted and inconsistent.

3. Publicity was an important element in the Fulton, Ontario and South Australian strategies of implementation. Publicity, that is, within the public service on the decisions made and their implications; and, in the British case, publicity concerning the proposals
for change agreed to by the joint Fulton committee (which consisted of officials representing the civil service as employer and representatives of the staff associations) or concerning the proposals for further development the official side had put to the staff side. Thought needs to be given to how the changes to the public service stimulated by the RCAGA report will be publicized within the service. (Cabinet has authorized consultation with the unions on a range of recommendations; joint council will be considering other proposals).

4. Securing cabinet endorsement for reform proposals (particularly "in principle" endorsements) and asking departments to take appropriate action to implement the recommendations of reform commissions is but the first step in implementation. The "hardest task has only just begun—that is, to keep at the operational units until the reforms are successfully implemented". That requires that the implementation agency has the authority to monitor implementation and that there is adequate feedback to enable that agency to keep track of and assess what is happening. Feedback is essential if reform policies are to be adjusted to take account of unforeseen difficulties, if original intentions are to be followed, and if departures are to be corrected. In the absence of feedback and monitoring, as Caiden points out,

operating units may mistake or misinterpret reform intentions. They may misunderstand reform requirements. They may change reform directions. They may go through the motions without effect. Worse still, lower levels in the operating units may deliberately sabotage reforms, or passively resist any change.

To avoid receiving feedback which is misleading, it is necessary for the implementation agency to have a close working relationship with departments. A common device for this is to have an implementation cell within each department and agency. The commission was unsuccessful in getting this idea adopted. To be effective feedback and monitoring require time, staff and expertise as well as a continuing organizational basis. PM & C does not have these resources necessary to oversee effectively the monitoring of implementation. Nor is it likely to be given them. For that reason, and heeding the RCAGA exhortation that new structures should not be created to perform new functions, I believe the PSB is the obvious location for an implementation group with the follow-up responsibilities outlined.

5. That raises once again the argument whether implementation should be a more open, less exclusively intra-bureaucratic exercise. A daring solution would be for the government to establish an
equivalent of the Irish public service advisory council to evaluate implementation. Such a group could well have on it one or two members of RCAGA or its staff. And to ensure that its reports would not be used as electoral ammunition—and to give time for implementation to get under way—it could be appointed immediately after the next election.

Notes

2. I joined the PCU in January 1976 on a two year secondment from the University of Sydney. The understanding at the time of my appointment was that I would concentrate on RCAGA matters. I had been a consultant to the Commission in 1975.
3. The Administrative Review Committee was appointed in December 1975. Its chairman was Sir Henry Bland. Its other two members were J.B. Reid, Chairman of James Hardie Asbestos Ltd., and J.C. Taylor, a Public Service Board commissioner. The committee was asked to report progressively to the prime minister on, inter alia, (1) possible means of avoiding duplication in commonwealth/state activities; (2) commonwealth programmes that might be curtailed or eliminated in the interests of economy; and (3) cases where departmental or agency practices appeared to be ineffective, inefficient or uneconomical or where there appeared to be policy anomalies or conflicts.
5. The economic, foreign affairs and defence, and planning and coordination committees of cabinet each has its own officials' committee. The economic officials' committee in 1976 consisted of the secretary to PM (chairman), the secretary to the Treasury, the secretary of the department of Administrative Services and the chairman of the Public Service Board. The secretary of the department of Finance (established in November 1976) joined the committee in 1977.
12. See Pressman and Wildavsky, Implementation.
13. This point has been made by Geoffrey Hawker, "The Implementation of


16. The importance of staff consultation in implementing Fulton has been stressed by Sir William Armstrong, “Fulton and Devlin”, *Administration*, 17(4), 1969, and also by Wilding, “The Post-Fulton Programme”.

17. The role of joint council and the character of the Australian staff unions makes the joint Fulton Committee an inappropriate model for adoption here in relation to the RCAGA report.


19. Ibid, 159.
Royal commissions and committees of inquiry have formed part of the traditional institutions of Westminster government for a considerable period of time. Their appointment by virtue of crown prerogative or by the crown under authority of an act of parliament ensures them of a prestige which few other bodies possess. They have even been thought of by some critics as a potential threat to parliamentary scrutiny of executive action, because they provide a less partisan and expedient alternative. Their flexibility has, however, ensured their survival. They have been used for investigations into a wide range of matters since royal commissioners were first appointed by William I to complete the Domesday Book.¹

The heyday of commissions in Britain was the 70 years between 1830 and 1900, during which time some 388 commissions were created. There was a revival of the use of commissions in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s when 70 enquiries were set up between 1955 and 1960.² These periods coincided with considerable social, economic and political upheaval in Britain. Commissions were used to investigate legislative, policy and social conditions in ways which parliament itself could not do. They were used as an adjunct to the parliamentary process in order to find specially acceptable compromises. In addition, the public services received considerable attention from commissions of inquiry during the 1960s in most developed parliamentary systems; particularly notable were India, Canada, New Zealand and Eire. These periods of activity had no counterparts in Australia until the recent investigations into government administration.³

Writing in 1937, Clokie and Robinson were uncertain about the value of royal commissions and committees of inquiry for investigating the conduct of executive departments. They favoured legislative and parliamentary processes to control the executive. However, when discussing investigations into the administration of the law by the executive, they noted

the Royal Commission procedure is so flexible and convenient, that occasionally, in the face of insistent demand, the government finds itself
forced to provide, in addition to the usual parliamentary controls, a further method or inquiry into its own conduct or into that of its subordinate officials.

The major inquiries into the activities and personnel of executive departments up to the period of the 1960s are represented by Haldane in the UK in 1918; Boyer in Australia in 1959; Hunt in New Zealand in 1912; and by the 1907 commission and the 1946 classification commission in Canada. Their influence on the respective government organizations does not appear to have been as great as may have been thought when they were created. Writing of the Hunt commission in New Zealand, Cornwall said,

We believe that commissions of inquiry have done little to promote the improvement of Public Administration in this country... it seems that the Hunt Commission and the 1912 Act, which are commonly regarded as proof of the important part Commissions play in Public Service reform, may really have been a 'political accident' arising from the rather unusual combination of a strong movement in the Service, support for the public, a favourable report from a Royal Commission, a new enthusiastic reform government, and an important Minister with a fetish for Public Service Reform, all coinciding at the one time.

Even the much lauded Haldane report was received with little enthusiasm and its major recommendations were not implemented. Hodgetts, on the other hand, referring to the 1912 report on the public service prepared by Sir George Murray at the invitation of the Canadian prime minister, noted with approval the flurry of activity which occurred to give effect to the report.

**Reasons for Formation**

Machinery of government inquiries seem to arise when, quite suddenly, a number of factors act in a catalytic way, dramatically causing public recognition of dissatisfaction with the performance of executive departments. One of the important, and perhaps primary, factors is a sympathetic "political" climate. This was the case with the Fulton Committee in the UK. Richard Chapman suggests several factors which contributed to the creation of that committee:

a) a consistent call for modernization from academic circles; citing such writers as Thomas Balogh and Brian Chapman, and noting the importance of the Fabian tract *The Administrators*;

b) The Labor Party Manifesto for the 1964 general election, which promised to rectify the "philosophy of the past" by which
government affairs had been conducted and; most important
c) the Report of the Select Committee on the Estimates "Re-
cruitment to the Civil Service" which was published in 1965, in which there was a proposal for such an inquiry.

Chapman goes on to note

the climate of self examination in the country at large was reflected in the political system, where, in some instances, it overrode party political considerations . . .

In Eire a sense of missed opportunities, following the limited benefits derived from the economic development of the early 1960s, led to dissatisfaction with the public service. The foundation of the Irish Public Service as it existed in the 1960s was the Ministers' and Secretaries' Act, 1924 and apart from one major inquiry, the Brennan commission 1932–1935, there had been no attempt to adapt its original structure. Writing of the period prior to the formation of the Devlin Group, Whelan said

experience up to the mid 1960s then indicated that it was difficult to generate authoritative proposals for public service reform, let alone to effect such reform. In short, we have had no reform.

A similar situation existed in New Zealand prior to the formation of the McCarthy commission. Problems of recruitment and loss of prestige accompanied by unsatisfactory performance of executive departments triggered demands for reforms. Attempts at indicative planning and creation of national advisory planning councils had been relatively unsuccessful.

Robertson identifies the following five forces operating in New Zealand prior to the creation of the McCarthy commission.
a) The New Zealand Institute of Public Administration argued that the last major inquiry into the public service had been undertaken in 1912, that the functions of government had changed beyond recognition since then, that organizational changes which had been made to meet different functions were piecemeal, resulting in a lack of overall design to meet the current needs, and that this had resulted in a lack of comprehensive planning.

The Institute suggested that "a fair and impartial inquiry into the public service would help to restore prestige and morale, by making clear to the public the true position regarding government employment".

b) The Public Service Commission disagreed with the Institute's proposal for an inquiry because it would be costly and would interrupt departmental activities. While the Institute's proposal
was theoretically valuable, instructive and interesting, it was unjustified since the Institute had not been able to pinpoint matters which might require investigation.

c) R.J. Polaschek, a senior public servant, who was also a member of the New Zealand Institute of Public Administration, published a book on the New Zealand service. He suggested that changes were essential and that as a first step the government should appoint a committee of inquiry, composed in part of private citizens, to report to it at five yearly intervals on the desirability of reorganizing the machinery of government.

d) Another written commentary, this time from the private sector, supported the Institute's proposals. A paper was delivered by a member of the Chamber of Commerce, D.J. Riddiford, to the Institute's annual convention in 1957.

e) The political will to reform was present in the promise of a Royal Commission included in the National party's election platform in 1957 and again in 1960.12

Such factors, however, only partially explain the concurrence of events which provide stimulus for the creation of a commission. More is required in order for the commission to function effectively. The climate of opinion in which it is created may well produce a sympathetic forum for debate. The reformist character of the governing political party will have its effect on the way the commission approaches its task. Other factors such as terms of reference, membership, methods of investigation and form of report will also be important.

**Effectiveness**

The question of effectiveness, the achievement of objectives, may depend upon any one or any combination of these factors since the definition of objectives will derive from any or all of these sources. It may be argued that where commissions in the past have been used for areas such as legislative policy or social conditions, the report itself has been the objective. The report, combining new sources of information, outside expertise and the non-partisan weighing of evidence, becomes public property and, it is hoped, raises the level of debate and awareness. It is a means by which a hard-pressed government can take pressure off, or, less cynically, an authoritative source on which reliance can be placed.

However Chapman does not think that the current situation, where royal commissions are being created as only one of a multitude of working committees, interdepartmental committees
and other such bodies, warrants the distinction now being made. He suggests reversing Clokie and Robinson's usage:

it might be helpful to reserve Royal Commissions for dealing with matters of constitutional significance (i.e. matters affecting the structures and functions of the organs of central and local government), and to use the term "Commission" for all other advisory or inquiring bodies intending to contribute to the policy-making process. They would then still be types of committee within K.C. Wheare's scheme and definition, different from other types of committee, but they would have in common their role as potentially contributing to the policy making process.\(^{13}\)

The effectiveness of royal commissions may, however, not be in their report, but rather in the process by which they address their terms of reference. Vickers feels that royal commissions are appointed

not merely or even primarily to recommend action but to appreciate a situation.

The activities of participants providing evidence to the commission, the rising public consciousness of problems previously hidden, and the introspection demanded of all concerned, contribute to that learning process, which it is suggested, is the benefit derived from the commission's investigatory processes. Vickers underlines this, by exposing what they [royal commissions] regard as the relevant facts and their own value judgments thereon and the processes whereby they have reached their conclusions, they provide the authority which appointed them and also all who read their report with a common basis for forming their own appreciation and it is to be hoped, with a model of what an appreciation should be. They are thus not only analytic but catalytic; and the knowledge that they are expected to be so leads them to expose their mental processes with a fullness which other public bodies seldom equal and are often at pains to conceal.\(^{14}\)

The very nature of commissions is that they are \textit{ad hoc} and transient bodies which are rarely involved in processes of implementation. When the report is written the members of the commission disperse. It is therefore inappropriate to regard the activities of royal commissions in the same way as those of an organization with objectives and means by which to achieve them. Complaints about poor implementation should not assume that this is the fault of the commission. It is more likely to be a defect of will on the part of those upon whose shoulders the responsibility for the policy-making process lies.

While this argument has an initial appeal, it is unlikely that commissions would have been used as much and for as long as they
have solely because they provide a useful way of raising the appreciation of the public. At least this seems so for investigations into the machinery of government. There must have been the hope, at least on the part of the commission members, that they could have a significant influence on the executive policy-making processes.

There is evidence to suggest that the most significant reforms have been initiated by such outside bodies, rather than derived from internally generated change. Administrative reform by definition is, as Smith suggests

political rather than organizational. It has a moral content, in that it seeks to remedy an abuse or a wrong, to create a better “system” by removing faults and imperfections.15

The objective of machinery of government investigations is more likely to be with better systems, and to this extent they have to provide solutions. Investigations debating social values or economic conditions do not need to go beyond diagnosis.

Machinery of government reviews

Relating this argument to royal commissions into the machinery of government indicates that where the context of their creation is of a reformist nature, the solution may be seen as administrative reform of the kind described, and some “better system” will be articulated. Where the organizational context is related to maladministration of a specific kind such as corruption, or detailed matters such as salaries or classification, no wide ranging recommendations would be countenanced, only narrowly defined solutions. If this is the case then commissioners, who must be aware of the expectations their audiences have of them, may bear in mind in formulating their recommendations the possibility of them being implemented. This alternative view is supported by Sheriff, who suggests that

the achievement of a Royal Commission or Committee cannot be judged only on the basis of the intrinsic or “absolute” value of their recommendations, but also on the extent to which the changes they propose are implemented.16

The interesting problem then is to look at what commissioners have in mind as they conduct inquiries. Three points demand attention:

1. the factors that lead commissioners to a particular understanding of their task:
2. the way in which they phrase their recommendations and in particular the extent to which those recommendations derive directly from the evidence before the commission; and
3. the extent to which the commission recommends mechanisms for implementation.

The remainder of this paper deals with these three topics in relation to the Glassco commission in Canada, the McCarthy commission in New Zealand, and the Devlin committee in Eire. In doing so it uses the seven factors identified by Sheriff as being directly under the commissions’ control and capable of influencing the implementation of their recommendations. These factors she listed as

(a) the degree of consensus among commissioners;
(b) the degree to which the recommendations reflect widely held opinions about desirable change;
(c) the degree of specificity of a recommendation;
(d) the extent to which information is available to the commission on particular topics, a matter related significantly to the research capacity of commissions;
(e) the degree to which a recommendation is awkward, in that while the recommendation might be highly desirable it may have repercussions which may diminish its desirability and increase the possibility of it being ignored;
(f) the extent to which the set of recommendations taken together appear to be ambiguous, which may in itself result from a lack of consensus or a desire to avoid minority reports; and
(g) the degree to which political considerations result in recommendations that provide the appearance of doing something. Sheriff suggests “one or two recommendations which require tremendous superficial upheaval but which do not run the risk of similar revolutionary effects are bound to be successful”.

Under the first main heading (1 above) tasks or objectives it is proposed to discuss the factors affecting

(a) the commissioners’ perception of their tasks derived from a degree of consensus amongst them, and
(b) the extent to which they and the community at large hold similar opinions about desired changes.

In relation to the second main heading (2 above) formulation of recommendations by the commissioners, the items

(c) degree of specificity,
(d) the research capacity of the commission, and
(e) & (f) the ability of the commission to frame recommendations that are neither awkward nor ambiguous will be relevant factors.
Finally, the question of a *mechanism* (3 above), by which recommendations can be implemented will be significantly affected by item (g) a desire to appear to make a change rather than providing recommendations for a more lasting and solid effect.

**Objectives**

Of the three commissions under scrutiny, Glassco in Canada was by far the most successful in defining its tasks, if implementation of its recommendations is regarded as the major criterion of success. Within weeks of the first two volumes of the five volume report being published the prime minister had delegated a minister without portfolio to be “responsible for the appraisal and implementation of the Royal Commission Report.” He also had the assistance of a special cabinet committee and Treasury Board. Early in the following year 1963, a task force of senior officials was designated to work full time on implementation. Why was it that “the largest management consultant organization job, albeit an *ad hoc* one, that Canada had even seen . . .” was apparently so acceptable? Its productivity, one may suspect, was one of the reasons:

To compile the 24 separate reports on the 106 government departments and agencies surveyed, 40,847 man-days were required, about 55% of which were spent on research projects. The findings of the commission comprised 1,998 pages containing about 300 recommendations. The subject matter of the recommendations is diverse ranging from the incidental [transfer of activities between divisions in one department] to the fundamental as in the case of the General Plan of Central Authority: . . .

At least some of the multitude of recommendations were bound to be implemented. Yet a major factor must have been related to the understanding the commissioners had of their task derived from the terms of reference, membership and the way the commission operated.

In comparison, although the Devlin group in Eire proposed more fundamental structural and institutional changes, striking at basic assumptions underlying the parliamentary system, its recommendations were not less detailed than the Glassco report, particularly in respect of departmental reorganization. Its management approach hardly differed, being concerned with similar management principles of efficiency, economy, and effectiveness. Yet it was not until five years after the publication of the Devlin report that any
progress was noticeable in implementation of its recommendations. Both Glassco and Devlin operated in a similar manner. The minister of Finance in setting up the review group said:

it is a long time since any general look was taken at the Civil Service as functioning in a changing world. Every organization can benefit from periodic review. If a review of this kind is to be done well it will take time. Its procedure must be flexible. Close contact must be maintained with both management and staff concerned. A blend of experience of high quality of the working of both the public service and of business will help make it apt and effective. It would to my mind be best conducted by a special group combining representatives of the business and professional world and persons no longer serving who have had a broad experience in the civil service and in state enterprises.30

Ritchie’s description of the way the Glassco commission operated is equally appropriate to the Devlin group:

this Royal Commission did not “rumble about the country listening to briefs from special interests and subjecting them to some judicial process of analysis”. This royal commission had a task which it felt was not particularly suited to that form of proceeding. This job was not what is so often the job of royal commissions, to get public debate on something which private debate in the government has not somehow settled. The job was much more analogous to the job of a management consultant firm called in to look at the operations of an organization, public or private.31

The difference between Canada and Eire regarding their terms of reference or membership was insignificant when compared with the McCarthy commission in New Zealand. New Zealand followed the more conventional procedures in appointing a judge to be chairman of its commission, although in the remaining membership they combined the public/private representation in a similar manner to the Devlin group. The appointment of academics to the McCarthy commission was somewhat unusual but significant, in that it allowed their direct contribution to the discussions of the commission, rather than relying on academic research teams employed especially for specific tasks as was the case with Glassco.32

The procedures in New Zealand were also more directly concerned with increasing public debate. The commission performed a workmanlike task stimulating such debate in the short period of nine months during which it heard evidence and prepared its report.33 The commission saw as its task providing practical recommendations for dealing with practical difficulties. . . . it is our aim, under imaginative leadership, the State Services may not merely keep up to date, but may foresee the problems
that lie ahead and prepare to meet them... We have... concerned ourselves both with starting and with organization, [and] try always to bear in mind their interrelationships. 

However there was less formal recognition of the "management ethos" in New Zealand than in either Canada or Eire. At the same time although apparently somewhat at odds with the perspective previously noted McCarthy recognized the particular role of royal commissions:

We believe... that it is generally not for a Royal Commission such as this, to concern itself with details. It should rather indicate broad trends and deficiencies, state principles then recommend basic changes in machinery.

The Glassco commission was not as ambivalent and produced four volumes of a five volume report specifically dealing

piecemeal with the machinery of government—the organization of the major administrative functions relating to finances, personnel and paperwork; the organization of the various supporting services for which departments and agencies have common needs, or of particular services rendered to the public; and the organization of special areas of administration.

The final volume of the Glassco report was intended to consider the organizations of federal government as an entity and was more in line with the second stated task of the McCarthy report.

The Devlin group perhaps shared the "principle" approach initially, but subsequently found it to be inadequate:

Initially... we were being diverted by the shadow of what was said to be the obvious problem areas, from the substance of the fundamental machinery of government, the dual structure, the professional and the administrator, the anonymity, the indeterminate concept of a department called a "development corporation": all these were decoys.

During the course of the three years in which the Devlin group heard evidence in private, had discussions with the permanent heads of each department and read the written evidence, they had the benefit of direct and continuous discussion with their employed management consultant. These discussions helped formulate in the minds of the committee the parameters of their investigation:

... as we saw it our report would consist of:

a) a comprehensive description of the role and structure of the three parts of the public service;

b) a description of the organization, management and operation of the civil service;
c) an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the public service; and

d) the organizational and other changes which were necessary to equip
the public services to administer the responsibilities of government.\textsuperscript{a}

These parameters forced the committee members to take a larger
view than either that taken by the Glassco or McCarthy com­
misions, even though the latter disclaimed any narrowness. For
example, it claimed

Our minds were released from the consideration of detail and we became
more and more concerned with the wider aspects of organization,
communication control and development. This was the process which
forced us to view the total public service, a concept which is fundamental
to all that we recommend.\textsuperscript{b}

A clearer example of how such inquiries change or reinforce
commissioners' appreciation of the situation could not be found.
Yet, as Sheriff suggests, it is not sufficient for those conducting
the inquiry to have only their own appreciative systems enlarged.
Others must be involved if the report is to have any lasting effect.
There must be both a degree of consensus among the commission
itself and also a reflection of a "feeling in the air" amongst the
wider public. Those recommendations which are most likely to be
accepted are often derived from tentative reform steps already taken
either prior to the investigation or as a reaction to the inquiry. These
charges are given legitimacy or extended to represent a broader
trend which is recognized by the commission and adopted as the
basis for its report.

The success of Glassco was certainly evidence of the extent to
which the report reflected current thinking. Hodgetts discusses the
increasing momentum of the business management movement in
relation to the Canadian public service from the early 1900s and
implies that Glassco is the logical outcome. Indeed Hodgetts goes
further by directly relating the Glassco recommendations to those
of 1912 and 1946.\textsuperscript{c} There was, therefore, a climate of public
opinion, an environment in which people's "readinesses" were open
to changes of this kind. This is particularly important if these
readinesses also occur within the public service, as was the case
in Canada.

However, the Irish context was totally different, there had been
no tradition of management in the public service. They were solidly
grounded in the British experience of the administrative class,
providing for clearly distinguishable roles and promotional op­
opportunities for generalists and specialists. It was not surprising that
Devlin should see his committee as striking out to new ground
through their “elevated discussions”. The Irish public service lay in the foothills, unable to rise out of the very real problems which confronted them daily and unwilling to face the enormous disruption to their relatively stable existence. Inevitably the implementation of the Devlin group recommendations was delayed.32

Critics of the prevailing ethic of the New Zealand public service did exist, as previously mentioned, but they were not taken too seriously, as the evidence provided by the public service commission showed:

the present machinery for the control and coordination of government departments is structurally sound and ... no major organizational changes are required. However the extreme complexity of the present system would be reduced to some extent by a more logical grouping of functions in departments and by a reduction in the number of departments.17

Initially, the creation of the McCarthy inquiry was opposed by the public service commission on the grounds that it was unnecessary. Another commentator noted:

With a few exceptions, the evidence given tended to support one or another of these views [the views that the business of government should be more related to private business or that the business of government was more suitably rewarded by the promotion of a universal public service salary scale]; most proposed changes were relatively minor; and concerned ancillary functions, or long term objectives rather than immediate changes. In the Royal Commission’s report, much was left for subsequent investigation by the State Services Commission; perhaps for the reason that in almost every case a suggested amalgamation or redistribution was discredited by another interested party in other evidence submitted.14

Indeed, it might be said that the main contribution of the inquiry was the setting up of the state services commission to replace the public service commission. Many of the recommendations contained in the report were subject to their implementation by the newly created body. The Devlin group also recommended the creation of a public service department to replace the activities which were carried out by a number of different departments. It is worth noting here the uncertain nature of this device by which recommendations of the commission are left for implementation. The appropriateness of this method will be questioned later in this chapter.15

This discussion of the objectives of commissions, the acceptability of such objectives within the wider public and more particularly within the public service itself, as well as a commission’s own definition of its task, emphasizes the relevance of these factors to
whether or not a commission's recommendations will be implemented. It will be seen in later discussion of the mechanisms by which a commission's report are implemented that there is a direct and significant relationship which is most clearly exemplified in the case of Glassco. In Canada a mechanism in tune with the proposals for change made by the commission already existed. Many of those recommendations had already been initiated in one form or another in the public service. The existence of the Treasury Board and the Privy Council Office provided a forum within which many of the matters bought before the commission had already been discussed. There was therefore a degree of consensus within the commission, within the public service and between the commission and a wider public on the fundamental approach that should be taken to any changes within the service. This was not the case in either Eire or New Zealand.

**Recommendations**

Less discussion is possible of the other two headings, "Recommendations" and "Mechanisms", not because they are not as important, but because of limitations of space. There are as many ways in which recommendations can be framed as there are reports. It is possible, however, to simplify those relating to investigations into the public service into three categories:

a) those where the recommendations are restricted to matters of principle, leaving all details to be worked out by some other designated body or group, or to be politically evolved;
b) those whose recommendations ignore principles and rely on prescription of specific solutions for defined problems; and
c) those where a wholly integrated, institutional and organizational restructuring is provided, including prescriptions for specifics derived from some overarching principles.

No single set of recommendations will fall in its entirety into any one of these categories, but most reports make some play of their intentions and few can resist expounding their perception of the warrant given.

No attempt will be made to delve into the details of the reports discussed here; it is possible however to make one or two comments about the consequences for implementation of the form recommendations take. The more specific the recommendations the more likely that they will be awkward or ambiguous. Their very specificity implies that a particular problem has been identified, quite often by those who are directly involved in administration, and that the
solution is preferred by one of the parties concerned. It may well be that the commission concurs with the solution on grounds of its general approach, be it management oriented, as in Glassco, or pragmatic as in McCarthy. Facilities for research will also have a direct effect on which problems are brought to the notice of the commission for solution. Clearly, a large research potential such as Glassco had will present a totally different picture of administrative activity than one derived through reliance on administrators themselves.

In their concluding chapter the McCarthy commission stated:

It is true that by means of a widely publicized invitation we sought evidence (to be taken, if need be, in private) of specific cases of inefficiency in the State Services. Our purpose in doing so was not, however, to enable us to pass overall judgment, nor yet to redress individual grievances . . . Instead we were concerned to identify points of weakness, the better to propose remedies. Unfortunately the response was small.

Undoubtedly this is one of the basic reasons why the McCarthy report relied so heavily on the papers provided by the public service commission. To quote their conclusions once more:

the central theme of this report has been the need for a State Services Commission—to review on behalf of government, in detail and in a continuing way, those matters which we have been reviewing in general and in a brief space of time.”

The majority of the detailed recommendations of the McCarthy report, which fall generally into category b) above, begin “the State Services Commission should . . .” or, “. . . it should be the responsibility of the State Services Commission to . . .”.

The danger of producing specific proposals is artificially to isolate problem areas of administrative difficulty which can only result in recommendations causing multiplication of agencies, duplication and overlap, or reduction of service through streamlining and economy. Leaving the implementation of specific recommendations to a new agency, which is supposed to accommodate the work previously inadequately carried out by the body it supersedes as well as to coerce the other departments into accepting the proposals of the report, seems slightly optimistic.

Glassco was less random in that it derived most of its problem definition from research teams in consultation with the administration being investigated. In this way there was some dialogue about the problem at the level of specifics and also at an integrative level outside the confines of the organization within which the problem arose. The Canadian report was in many ways much more
detailed than the New Zealand, dealing with a wide range of matters, including scientific research needs, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, purchase and supply of goods, agricultural research and payroll audits of the department of National Revenue. Yet there was a significant difference in that the organizational context provided already the basis for identification of the problems and their solution in the broader context of government activities as a whole.

While it is possible to admire and respect the Glassco report for its fluent expression and its total and comprehensive understanding of the role of government in a modern democracy, it must be pointed out that it did not escape difficulties similar to those met by McCarthy. Its recommendations related to detailed matters which had to leave so much unsaid and were likely to result in awkward or ambiguous situations, derived as McLeod suggests from the elaborate "game of musical chairs" in which the commission indulged. Two examples must suffice:

a) It recommended that the department of Transport should take over from the minister of public works the responsibilities for marine works, other than those relating to the acquisition, construction, maintenance and disposal of real property involved. One can imagine the bargaining that went on prior to the limitation expressed in the words "other than ..." and the consequent struggle to maintain the status quo thereafter.

b) In relation to national defence, it proposed to limit the minister's authority by proposing that the deputy minister (permanent head) be given greater responsibility for keeping under review the organization and administrative methods of the department, and that the chairman and chiefs of staff should exercise ministerial power of direction over the armed forces as well as having control and administration of elements common to two or more services. Obviously here the commission had listened to the one side likely to give them any information on the subject.

Despite these undeniably difficult problems, it would be extremely unusual for any commission charged with investigating the efficiency and economy of the public services of any country to deal wholly in principle and avoid any attempt to provide specific solutions. The formula adopted by both Glassco and McCarthy, simplified above, ignores principles and prescribes specific solutions underpinned by a set of principles which the recommendations are supposed to exemplify. Devlin opted for the much more definitive approach by offering a wholly integrated system for the restructuring of the Irish service. The report of the review group provides
perhaps the most comprehensive attempt yet made to create a blueprint for a twentieth century public service in the Westminster system. The reasoning which led to this kind of report has been discussed earlier, but it was always accepted by the review group that they were not producing a blueprint that would be immutable. Their concern was to maintain an impetus for change which they referred to as a “dynamic for adaptation from outside”. This aspect will be dealt with in more detail under “Mechanisms for implementation”.

Two major considerations led the review group to the conclusion that only a major restructuring would be appropriate. One was the growth of the services provided by government and the consequent increase in the number of state servants:

The public service has approximately doubled during the lifetime of the State and now represents a significant proportion of the total employees in the State and we can safely assume that the public sector will continue to dispose of a major proportion of the national product.40

The second was the fragmentation of structures that arose from ad hoc methods of meeting the demands, especially the growth of the state-sponsored bodies which employed almost 60 per cent of government employees. These bodies were created from a suspicion that departments could not cope with the activities they undertook and the hope that a “business-like” corporation would deal more effectively.

Both of these considerations led Devlin to regard the creation of a unified service as of primary importance, and since there was no existing structure capable of accommodating such a service one had to be created:

Devlin’s solution is primarily designed as a structural exercise, but it recognizes that it must be accompanied by technological change to facilitate the identification and performance of the task and by increased attention to the human components of the organization . . . Essentially, Devlin is about efficient management of the public service and the structure he has built provides appropriate roles for the various participants in the organization.41

For commissions such as those mentioned there is no simple solution to formulating their recommendations. Even where it becomes clear at the outset that certain kinds of recommendations are inevitable, tensions must mount during the process of investigation which place a heavy strain on early resolve. Perhaps it is only where the chairman is as strong as Devlin clearly was and has his mind made up early about his basic framework that such a report can be written.42
Mechanisms for implementation

I deal briefly with this heading since there is almost unanimous agreement between the three committees that the best mechanism is to leave implementation to a newly created body. By the very nature of commissions they cannot propose that they be made a permanent group to implement their proposals. They have a choice, therefore, between making recommendations and hoping someone will take them up under political direction, or alternatively to include in their recommendations that the responsibility of implementing should be with a particular existing agency, or one newly created.

When commissions investigate the public service it is usually reasonable to assume that it is a response to dissatisfaction with current methods and practice. Often this situation is the result of lack of proper control and leadership within the service by the body whose task it is—the public service commission or some similar body. It is fairly certain that one of the major recommendations will be to set up a new or restructured body to perform the tasks so poorly performed by the body superseded, and in addition to implement the commission’s recommendations. This pattern emerged most clearly in McCarthy, as previously mentioned. The creation of the new state services commission to replace the public service commission was regarded as its major contribution. Despite the integrated nature of his proposals, Devlin also saw their future implementation as depending on the creation of a public service department and made this a first priority in proposals for implementation. For Glassco, however, the same urgency did not seem evident. In Canada there was already a very strong group whose tasks included implementing the kind of proposals contained in Glassco. Indeed there is some evidence that a large number of the detailed recommendations made by Glassco were being considered by the Treasury Board or the Privy Council Office prior to the creation of the commission. One major prerequisite of the commission was, however, recognized and acted upon, that the necessary political will would only be present if there was a minister with responsibility for the task:

Central direction of the Executive Branch is ultimately the responsibility of the Cabinet... It is recommended that the [Treasury] Board be given a presiding minister who would be free of the responsibility for the direction of a department.

Devlin however went a step further:
The reorganization of the public service and its subsequent maintenance at the highest possible level of efficiency is a matter of such great public interest that it must be subject to a dynamic for adaptation for outside and must be seen to be continuously adapting itself. We, therefore, recommend the establishment of a Public Service Advisory Council of eight persons—four from the private sector, three from the public sector and the Secretary of the Public Services Department,—to survey the progress of the reorganization of the public service.45

Whether these attempts by commissions to ensure that proposals are not lost in the limbo of political euphoria have been successful is the question yet to be answered.

Some lessons

The foregoing discussion has dealt very superficially with three important commissions in New Zealand, Canada and Eire. The shape of the public services in these three countries has been or will be affected to a large degree by the reports. It is unlikely that every recommendation will be slavishly implemented and conditions are changing and demand other solutions. Sometimes the changes occur even while the commissions are in session, perhaps as a result of preparing evidence to be given.46

Nonetheless it becomes quite evident that all the reports stress the necessity of a body for continuous review of the administration of government. For New Zealand, McCarthy suggested that such a review should be the task of the state services commission. In Canada, that role was not left to any one body, although Privy Council Office was given a primary responsibility in that area, it was spread between the cabinet, the civil service commission and the senior public servants. In Eire, Devlin made his priority the setting up of a public service department, followed by a public service advisory council. It is doubtful whether these bodies can adequately perform the tasks they have been given. As previously mentioned a newly-formed state services commission (or whatever name it is given) must continue the functions already performed by the body it supersedes. Too often this is a limiting factor—it cannot extend its activities beyond those previously performed, either because the officers are transferred and remain committed to their previous roles, or because insufficient staff of the right calibre are allowed to be appointed by the political masters.

Eire experienced both these factors. The staff initially employed in the new department were those previously employed in the personnel division of the department of Finance and they brought
with them the limited functional perspective. New appointments were limited to already entrenched senior officers with the exception of one man on whose shoulders the whole burden of implementing Devlin now falls. The situation in New Zealand was little different. Immediately after the creation of the state services commission its first major task was an occupational classification of all officers, which was undertaken to the detriment of following up many recommendations in the report.

One ray of hope in this regard is the public service advisory council set up in Eire. Under the chairmanship of Patrick Lynch, professor of political economy in University College, Dublin, the council appears to be making a sincere attempt to perform its stimulatory role. No better statement of the situation can be found than their own:

Our task is the continuing one of reviewing and commenting on the process of structural and organizational change. But our task is not limited to structural change; it is also concerned with personnel, the development of personnel and how people interact within organizations. Structural reform in large hierarchical organizations cannot be carried through successfully unless there is a clear understanding down the executive line of the need to manage change. . . . There must be an absolute commitment from the top of the hierarchy to the task and recognition that past precedent may no longer be a valid guide for decision.

This statement leads to the next lesson which really needs no labouring, but which is often ignored amid rising hopes based on a commission’s nostrums. No amount of tinkering with organizational structures can reduce the essential need for properly qualified, competent officers. Without good staff, without dedicated, well trained personnel, without a commitment to the public service, no government administration will ever perform its tasks satisfactorily. Some would argue that given all these factors, there would always be some complaint, someone would be dissatisfied, and that is probably true. But these commissions were not created to investigate minor complaints. They arose from a recognition that the activities of government were not being adequately serviced. The emphasis in all reports is on two vital elements in this regard: to provide public servants with responsibility congruent with authority, so that the capabilities already within the service are properly developed, recognized and rewarded; and to increase the potential of those in the service through appropriate training with its corollary of better methods of recruitment and promotion.

One final lesson, which may well be the most important to recognize, is that commissions of investigation into the public
service may not be a very adequate way of obtaining administrative reform. As McLeod rightly says when discussing the Glassco report:

To my mind, the Royal Commission, as a device for mounting a successful attack on the problems of administrative change and improvement suffers from inherent limitations, which in the light of the purposes sought are unduly restrictive and possibly even debilitating. . . . From the beginning . . . the Commission must face a difficult, if not insurmountable barrier, in the problem of determining with some degree of precision the audience to which its ultimate words of wisdom are directed. There are at least three such audiences, the administrative organization which is the subject of the inquiry, the government which is ultimately responsible for the behaviour of that organization, and that amorphous thing called the public.  

By what stretch of imagination can commissions be expected to satisfy any, never mind all, of such audiences?

Perhaps the real lesson to be learned from these examples is that change occurs in organizational contexts through the increasing understanding of one’s own organization as a consequence of being forced to think about it by outside demands. The critical faculties stimulated by such demands provide both definitions and solutions for problems only previously vaguely understood. Expectations must not therefore be too high, commissions must not be thought of as providing all the answers, nor even some of the right ones. Royal commissions must be recognized as being a useful means of allowing conflict and expressions of dissatisfaction in a situation where such matters are usually regarded as taboo. They may also provide a means by which new ideas and methods may permeate the public service, but that will rarely be a way of promoting administrative reform.

Appendix: Membership and terms of reference

New Zealand


Members: Mr. Justice McCarthy
Mr. M.O. Barnett (businessmen)
Mr. C.B. Plummer
Mr. J. Turnbull (retired general Secretary of New Zealand Public Service Association.)
Professor J.K. Scott (Victoria University, Wellington)
Professor R.H. Brookes
Terms of reference: to receive representations upon, inquire into, investigate, and report upon the organization, staffing and methods of control and operation of Departments of State and, to the extent that you may consider necessary or desirable, of agencies of the Executive Government of New Zealand, and to recommend such changes therein as will best promote efficiency, economy and improved service in the discharge of public business, having regard to the desirability of ensuring that the Government service is adequately staffed, trained, and equipped to carry out its functions; and in particular to receive representa­tions upon, inquire into, investigate, and report upon the following matters:

I. Any improvements that should be made in the machinery of Government, in relation to the organization, coordination and control of Departments of State and Government agencies.

II. Any major functions that should be redistributed among Departments and Government agencies, or that should be transferred to or from any new or existing agency or body.

III. Any methods by which efficiency is ensured, and any methods by which the quality or quantity of work might be improved.

IV. Any changes in policies relating to personnel that would promote an improved standard of public administration, especially in relation to—

(a) The recruitment of staff:
(b) The retention of staff:
(c) The promotion of staff:
(d) Rights of appeal:
(e) The retirement of staff:
(f) Classification and grading:
(g) Training:
(h) Discipline:
(i) Relations between employer and employee:
(j) Superannuation, so far as it affects the recruitment, retention and retirement of staff:
(k) Physical working conditions.

V. The machinery for wage and salary determination, and the principles on which wages and salaries should be based.

VI. Any amendments that should be made in existing legislation to promote improvements in any of the aforesaid matters.

VII. Any associated matters that may be deemed by you to be relevant to the general objects of the inquiry.
Canada


Members: Mr. J. Grant Glassco
           Mr. R.W. Seller
           Mr. F.E. Therrier

Terms of Reference: to inquire into and report upon the organization and methods of operation of the departments and agencies of the Government of Canada and to recommend the changes therein which they consider would best promote efficiency, economy and improved service in the despatch of public business, and in particular but without restricting the generality of the foregoing, to report upon steps that may be taken for the purpose of
—eliminating duplication and overlapping of services;
—eliminating unnecessary or uneconomic operations;
—achieving efficiency or economy through further decentralization of operations and administration;
—achieving improved management of departments and agencies, or portions thereof, with consideration to organization, methods of work, defined authorities and responsibilities, and provision for training;
—making more effective use of budgeting, accounting and other financial measures as means of achieving more efficient and economical management of departments and agencies;
—improving efficiency and economy by alterations in the relations between government departments and agencies, on the one hand, and the Treasury Board and other central control or service agencies of the government on the other; and
—achieving efficiency or economy through reallocation or re-grouping of units of the public service.

Eire


Members: Mr. Liam St. J. Devlin
           Lt Gen. Sir Geoffrey Thompson
           Professor P. Leahy (Professor of Mechanical Engineering, University of Dublin)
           Mr. T.J. Barrington, (Director, Institute of Public Administration)
           Dr. J.F. Dempsey
           Dr. Thekla J. Beere (retired public servants)
           Mr. L.M. Fitzgerald (businessmen)
Terms of Reference: Having regard to the growing responsibilities of Government, to examine and report on the organization of the Departments of State at the higher levels, including the appropriate distribution of functions as between both Departments themselves and Departments and other bodies.

The expression “higher levels” is meant to refer to grades, administrative and professional, not covered by conciliation and arbitration machinery (in effect, above Higher Executive Officer).

Notes

1. H Clokie and J.W Robinson, Royal Commissions of Inquiry, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1937), 28. These writers suggest three major purposes for which commissions are created: consideration of legislative policy; inquiries into the activities of administrative departments; and inquiries into social conditions.


6. J.P.N. Cornwall et al., “Another Hunt Commission?”, New Zealand Journal of Public Administration 23(2), March 1961, 14. There is a very useful appendix with summaries of commissions in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and United States of America since 1912.


10. J.P.N. Cornwall et al., “Another Hunt Commission?”, New Zealand Journal of Public Administration 23(2), March 1961, 14. There is a very useful appendix with summaries of commissions in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and United States of America since 1912.


14. J.P.N. Cornwall et al., “Another Hunt Commission?”, New Zealand Journal of Public Administration 23(2), March 1961, 14. There is a very useful appendix with summaries of commissions in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and United States of America since 1912.
8. This was one of the vital elements noted in the author's discussion of the Devlin group's recommendations in Eire. R.J.K. Chapman, "The Irish Public Service: Change or Reform?" *Administration*, 23(2), Summer 1975, 126-41.


15. B.C. Smith, "Reform and Change in British Central Administration", *Political Studies*, 19(2), 1971, 216; G. Caiden *Administrative Reform*, (Chicago; Aldine, 1969), has an even more significant definition of administrative reform as "artificial inducement of administrative transformation against resistance".


22. The Devlin group preferred to rely on private management consultants for their research work, although they heard evidence from academics and others.

23. In contrast to the two and a half to three years taken by the Devlin and Glassco commissions, McCarthy took nine months, hearing evidence for a period of 62 days. For a discussion of the procedures and other aspects of the McCarthy report see R.S. Parker, "Public Service management in the Welfare State", *Public Administration* (Sydney), 22(3), September 1963, 248-54.


25. It is implicit in some of the comments in the report, for example in the discussion of "The location of responsibility for efficiency and economy" on 28-35, and also in some parts of chapter 6, "Personnel Policies", 193-341.

26. McCarthy *Report* 11. The ambivalence was called the "Janus-faced nature of such commissions" by Subramaniam, "Machinery of Government Investigations", 272n.


29. This was during the initial period of their activities between June 1967 and
July 1968. These discussions also included the secretary to the group, P. Gaffney, a public servant seconded to the group who, like all such officers attached to commission staff, played a vital role in the direction taken by the written report. Devlin Report, 341.

31. J.E. Hodgetts, *The Canadian Public Service*, 24-5. Professor Hodgetts was also the director of research for Glassco and his book is full of valuable insights into that and other commissions’ work. Hodgetts, *The Canadian Public Service*, 257. In 1912, Sir George Murray, a single commissioner brought out by the Canadian government from Britain to investigate the public service, reported: Sessional Papers, No. 57a 1913. Previous reference has been made to the 1946 commission (the Gordon commission), see footnote 5.
32. One very trenchant critic, Charles McCarthy (not a relation of the commissioner) has said of the service, “many of those who moved into positions of importance in this static society Ireland are themselves cast in the same mould, good people, pious in their religion, paternalistic in their administration, sentimental and naive in their self regard and strangely intolerant of change” The Distasteful Challenge, (Dublin: IPA, 1968), 10.
35. See also R.J.K. Chapman “The Irish Public Service”, 137.
36. Exactly what the difference between these two approaches would be requires a separate paper to discuss. McCarthy’s “Janus face” may explain the use of the term “practical” (see footnote 26) and the reason for leaving so much to the state services commission.
42. Mr. Devlin told me in an interview, subsequently confirmed by Mr. Gaffney, that he had drawn up the overall plan of attack, chapter headings and general framework of recommendations before the first meeting of his committee and his final draft followed this initial statement with very few alterations.
43. As early as mid-1961, before the first volume of the Glassco report had been published, senior officers in the employ of the commission had inaugurated ad hoc meetings with the Privy Council Office and by the time of publication the commission’s director of organizational research and his coordinator were appointed to positions with the Privy Council Office. M. C. d’Avignon, “The Royal Commission on Government Organization: a Study in Bureaucracy and Innovation.” (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1972, Unpublished M.P.A thesis), 92. Somewhat similar arrangements were made in relation to the RCAGA, see Trevor Matthews, chapter 18.
45. Devlin Report, 166.
46. It was suggested in the course of discussion on this paper that habits of
acquiescence in the public service would ensure some acceptance of the changes proposed to the commission in evidence, even before the recommendations are published. There is some evidence to support this, but the extent of the changes appears to be very limited.

47. The man referred to is Dr. N. Whelan, whose general approach is set out in the article mentioned in footnote 11 above.

48. Discussion, in January, 1975 with the acting chairman of the state services commission and other members of the commission, although they pointed out that their role was rapidly expanding, despite the lack of staff to perform it.

Implementation is a clumsy, almost pretentious, word for a simple concept. But it is established and unambiguous. Aaron Wildavsky and Jeffrey Pressman must take much of the blame for its vogue, though they are redeemed by the delicious sub-title of their book, *Implementation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973):

How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland;
Or,
Why it's Amazing That Federal Programs Work at All
This Being a Saga of the
Economic Development Administration
as told by
Two Sympathetic Observers Who Seek to Build Morals
On a Foundation of Ruined Hopes

We know what implementation means. It is not the kind of word which envelopes multiple ambiguities. It will not, like "responsible government" or "the Westminster system" explode in our hands or trickle discomfitingly through our fingers if we try to unwrap layers of meaning.

In the chapters discussed here Matthews and Chapman have been consistent in their usage. But it is important to note that much of what Matthews especially recounts might more properly be described as belonging to a phase of "pre-implementation". The so-called implementation unit in the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, charged with planning and coordinating a variety of public service responses to the RCAGA, has spent a great deal of its time on preparing the way for implementation. Many (though not all) of the RCAGA recommendations require political endorsement before they can be pursued. Accordingly, the implementation unit's primary task has been to find ways of presenting the recommendations in a way that makes political decision possible—not always an easy assignment. They have been in the business
of eliciting commitments to implementation more than the business of implementation itself.

Chapman's account of experience in New Zealand, Canada and Eire emphasises important similarities and contrasts. Matthews' revelations of the work in which he has participated in Canberra underline some of Chapman's conclusions. And, despite his excusable discretion, Matthews is sufficiently candid to deepen any student's understanding of what actually happens when a large, ill-digested and unsubtly presented package of administrative proposals is delivered to a relatively unsympathetic government.

The main impression left with me by both chapters is their dispirited, or perhaps just dispiriting, tone. They are steeped in gloom and despondency, which is evident despite Matthews' stiff upper lip and Chapman's manly effort to salvage something hopeful from the foreign inquiries he surveyed.

Chapman suggests, with perhaps excessive understatement, that the most important lesson about commissions of investigation into the public service is that they "may not be a very adequate way of obtaining administrative reform". He tells us that our expectations should not be too high. Commissions cannot be expected to produce all the answers. He might have added that they probably will not ask all the right questions either. But he does invite us to recognize that they may be useful means of allowing conflict and expressions of dissatisfaction and that they may also help the spread of new ideas and methods.

With all of this I agree, provided that there is enough emphasis on the conditional words "may" or "might", and providing also it is recognized that there are some occasions when the fostering of expressions of discontent and the precipitation of public conflict can lead to reaction rather than reform or improvement.

To take only one example, it could certainly be argued that the debate over the provision of economic advice to government—a debate which admittedly was not begun by RCAGA but was given a good stir by it—has, so far at any rate, not led to the sort of structural changes recommended by the commission but has been followed by a change of a quite different sort. Instead of the creation of a department of Industries and the Economy (DINDEC) as recommended by Dr. Coombs and his fellow commissioners, we have a bifurcated Treasury, and administrative arrangements and procedures of a kind which are likely to further entrench rather than remedy some of the defects RCAGA sought to eradicate. Yet, ironically, the fact that the old Treasury has been split into a new Treasury and a new department of Finance, is being employed as an argument for ignoring the DINDEC recommendations.
What can so very easily happen in an artificially-heated environment of questioning and dissatisfaction is the emergence of a variety of plausible but essentially gimerack, if not utterly bogus, solutions. Increasing the currency of discontent leads to inflation of expectations. The likelihood of change is increased, but the ability of politicians to discriminate between reaction and reform is not.

What resounds through both Matthews' and Chapman's chapters is the perfectly obvious, perfectly predictable, often repeated, but astonishingly neglected truth that transient groups of advisers cannot ensure the implementation of their recommendations. Even more important perhaps, is the fact that when a government sets up an inquiry—certainly one whose members are selected according to criteria of representativeness, prestige, legitimacy and so on—one cannot guarantee that it will not lose sight of those understandings about the nature of the task and the desired outcomes which led one to have an inquiry in the first place.

If one is interested in the public policy implications of administrative inquiry and change, it follows that much of Chapman's analysis of overseas history and his attempt to list the circumstances in which a commission might succeed in getting its recommendations adopted, is really a second order exercise.

A concern with public policy should lead us to focus not on a particular instrument, the inquiry, but on the objectives it may be meant to serve. It seems to me to be a more urgent question, more urgently political if not more urgently academic, to ask in what circumstances should governments employ the commission technique? Why, where, and how should it be used?

We should be asking, have governments discarded the admittedly cynical, but nevertheless sensible precept, that you do not set up an inquiry until you can be sure in advance what its findings will be? And if this cynicism is at a discount, we should want to know why.

Now I can understand that some people might still want to recoil with horror, genuine or simulated, at the suggestion that an inquiry should really be, in part at any rate, a sham exercise designed to justify, or at best work out the details of, a predetermined course of action. But why recoil? There are, of course, occasions and subjects which require research to establish the facts. There are cases, in other words, where it makes sense to have an inquiry. There are other cases where the nature of the subject matter makes it essential that there be a wide canvassing of views, sounding of opinion, and debate—circumstances which may permit but not entail an inquiry. There are cases where the government of the day, any government, might be genuinely indifferent as between a
number of possible solutions to perceived problems—and in those cases it makes sense to operate with the paraphernalia of a public inquiry.

But when we know that the themes of devolution of power and authority, of more participatory styles of government, and of less emphasis on hierarchy in administrative structures—three significant and salient themes of the RCAGA report—when we are told that these themes already enjoyed considerable political support before the commission was appointed, then I believe that we are obliged to ask: was there not some other way, a way other than the appointment of a group of eminent people to "inquire", by which the government might have more successfully advanced its desire for change?

The kind of answer which RCAGA's commissioners might have given to that question is along the lines that change requires acceptance, that acceptance requires education, that education presupposes inquiry and presentation of a case, and so on.

Thus the inquiry instrument tends to be justified on what one might call intellectual grounds and on grounds of its role in leading or moulding relevant opinions. A lot has also been said by Bailey, Hawker and others in various places, in support of the idea that the very fact of the commission's existence and the style of its task forces, public hearings and group discussions, and the commissioning of academic and consultant reports—that all of these may contribute to the development of an atmosphere conducive to change. But here I would want to repeat the caution that while that is true, it is also true, though rather less frequently said, that the activities of the critics and would-be reformers may be paralleled by the much less publicized activities, and the less easily perceived hardening of attitude, of the sceptics, the doubters, the complacent, those who do not believe in the new nostrums and who may be, in some cases, determined to resist them.

Chapman concedes what he calls an initial appeal in the argument that it is not appropriate to judge the activities of royal commissions in the same way as one might legitimately judge "an organization with objectives and means by which to achieve them". He goes on to counsel: "Complaints about poor implementation should not assume that this is the fault of commissions. It is more likely to be a defect of will on the part of those upon whose shoulders the responsibility for the policymaking process lies".

This suggests three lines of discussion. One flows naturally from Matthews' chapter—what can a commission itself do to try to ensure implementation of its suggestions? Matthews has managed to be judiciously informative about the inner history of the last
eighteen months or so. He explains well what Coombs and his colleagues tried to achieve and why they failed. What he does not say is whether he thinks some other strategy might have been more successful with the present government. Nor does he speculate on how different the response of the administration might have been had there been no change of government. It would be ironical if the present government were to take all the blame for outcomes which the more powerful individuals and institutions in the public service might, in any case, have succeeded in achieving.

A second line of investigation involves asking questions not just about the implementation of a report but about the consequences of an inquiry. One would be less concerned here with what the commissioners, or even the government, intend or strive for, and more concerned in detecting impacts and responses, whether intended or not. Almost all the academic discussion of implementation, both in the papers presented here and elsewhere, seems to take for granted that implementation is a "good thing". It is a curious insight into the stance of students of public administration that this should be so. Why there should be an implicit presumption in favour of implementation is not at all clear, whether we think about it from the viewpoint of a scholar or an administrator. There is certainly no excuse for scholars ignoring the study of how unwelcome reports are shelved, stymied or opposed. Nor should this sort of obstructionist behaviour be treated pejoratively as though it is necessarily evidence of "bureaucratic resistance" or "inertia". If all change is not reform, then all opposition to change is not reaction. Blocking strategies deserve more attention than they have received. F.M. Cornford's *Microcosmographia Academica: being a guide for the young academic politician*, (Cambridge, 1908) covered most of the ground long ago.

The third line of discussion derives from the familiar lament about the need for political will and it may be distilled for simplicity into the question: how should we do it?

"It", of course, is some presumably already identified kind of change—not necessarily a highly articulated, detailed and coherently constructed set of proposals, but a notion or notions sufficiently firm for someone to be able to explain successfully to others what he means, and for those others, assuming that they have both capacity and intent, to be able to translate the notions into new structures and new procedures.

By putting the question in this way I am perhaps beginning to indicate the lines of the answer I have in mind. What we are looking for is a process which might be more likely to give opportunities for the discovery of those political inventors, the Edwin Chadwicks
Implementation: Is that the name of the game?

if not the Jeremy Benthams, for whom Spann tells us he has been seeking without success. It is a process which would build, not on the discredited psychological postulates of a hypothetical administrative man—the fearless, forthright guardian of the public interest—but on a more realistic understanding of public servants’ motivations. It is a process by which one would avoid the urge for high theoretical mastery and universal prescription which Parker is convinced, I believe rightly, will doom to impotence any body of reformers seduced by it. And it is a process which will rest firmly on the kind of knowledge of where the skeletons are hidden which impels Pat Troy and others to despair that no one has yet “told it like it is”.

As Chapman has told us what is wrong with commissions and other kinds of inquiries, and Matthews has given us a very credible and discretely circumstantial account of the fate of the RCAGA report, I would like to put forward some bold provisional propositions for the next reforming government’s handbook. It will scarcely need saying that this is not a blueprint but merely the first draft of a preamble.

First, I would submit to government, be clear in your mind on the difference between those things you know you want to do, those on which you have an open mind, those on which you are willing to accept any one or more of several alternative courses, those things you want to start and those you want to stop, those you want to encourage or discourage.

Second, remember that the media and the public can be made to believe that almost any change is a reform. The public has little sympathy with public servants and will respond positively to anything that can be presented plausibly as an improvement (and improvement does not have to mean the clichés of economy or elimination of waste and duplication).

Third, do not be misled by those who tell you that reforms only work if you wait until those on whom the changes will impinge are ready to welcome them. What we know of human behaviour tells us that habits of acquiescence will do for a start and, if the changes in practice do not elicit constructive responses, then you will at least have evidence, rather than hypothesis, upon which to base alternative courses.

Fourth, put no faith in those who promise to discover and promulgate hidden truths if only you give them $1,700,000—a little more or a little less—to spend on the search. Rather use your own judgment to identify in the existing administrative environment those practices which you wish to see more widely adopted and those people whose performance leads you to suppose them capable
of fostering those practices. Look for people whom you believe capable of practical administrative experimentation. Give them the resources. Give them the authority. And let them try to create new instruments and think through new philosophies in the front line of administrative action. Even major problems of interdepartmental coordination or efficiency auditing may prove more amenable to solution by encouraging experimentation than by trying to devise all-embracing schemes on paper.

Fifth, to be more precise—if you thought for example, the DURD experiments worthwhile, then do not try merely to encourage emulation. Ensure it by transplanting DURD people into new environments—the department of Social Security for example—and let them test and develop their faith, their plans, their experience in new fields. The key is always the entrepreneurs and managers. And if you as a government demonstrate a commitment to a particular style of administrative initiative you will not only directly advance your schemes by optimal deployment of the first cohort of reformers, you will very quickly create an atmosphere which breeds and displays the kinds of talents you want.

Sixth, as the maximum life of a parliament is three years; you cannot wait for conversions—you must, if necessary, command. It is easy to get carried away with a prescriptive pen—but the point need not be laboured. There is a lot you can do without inquiries. If you are not sure what to do then it makes sense, by all means, to get Professor Wilenski or even Sir Henry Bland to tell you what you ought to be doing. It makes even more sense to involve them directly in making their suggestions work. Inquiry, publication and public debate to promote understanding or to change attitudes may all be valuable. They may even be necessary as means to generate or augment political will. But if that is their purpose then reports and recommendations must be directly assimilable by appropriate politicians, not buried in hundreds of pages of cautiously qualified exposition and analysis.

The would-be administrative reformer must never forget that his most profound ideas will vanish into the archives or the textbooks if he does not learn how, when and whom to persuade.
General Perspectives
The Coombs Commission: An Overview

Peter Self

This is a contribution by an outside observer who spent a few months in Canberra shortly before the Coombs commission reported. While I have learned a good deal from the other chapters in this book, and from those in a companion volume, I have made only minor changes in the original draft. Others are better placed to comment on later developments, and there seems no reason to change my general conclusions.

The RCAGA report has already ceased to be a subject of urgent interest and debate and has become a part of administrative history. As such it will be quarried by both historians and policy-makers for a long time to come. My own interest is to relate the themes of this Australian report to wider issues of administrative reform, and this of course is a subject that might be taken a great deal further than in one article.

Most problems of modern bureaucracy are universal, not particular. They are associated with size, complexity, centralization, empire-building, inadequate tests of accountability or efficiency, imperviousness or unresponsiveness to social change, inaccessibility from citizens but (often) too much accessibility from powerful interests and slow and sometimes discriminatory methods of service delivery. To these are added the special problems of political-administrative relations in democracies following the Westminster model.

These issues were mostly taken up in the RCAGA report, although some more than others. There was much attention to the needs for decentralization, better service delivery and social adaptation of both the structure and methods of the public services; but less attention to the influence of economic interests, or to causes of bureaucratic expansion or ineffectiveness.

All administrative reform committees tend to combine radical and critical diagnoses with relatively moderate prescriptions. Brave words are not followed by equally brave deeds, because while such committees must show a proper sense of urgency and indignation about the shortcomings of bureaucracy, their conclusions must in
practice be implemented by and within that same bureaucracy. Modern bureaucracies are to a very large extent self-regulating, partly by virtue of their size and complexity, partly because politicians (especially those with a short tenure of office) cannot afford much bureaucratic upheaval or opposition. Also ministers genuinely able and willing to cope with administrative issues are rarely found anywhere, not just in Australia; they should be found and cultivated by reformers.

The Coombs commission has succumbed even more than comparable bodies elsewhere to this mismatch between diagnosis and prescription. One explanation is that, working in a period of political turbulence and change, it could perceive or thought it could perceive only an uncertain and slippery support for administrative changes that were more than small and incremental.

Nonetheless I find it a matter for regret that RCAGA did not set its sights higher. This is where the perspective of administrative history becomes significant. A comprehensive inquiry such as this tends to be a rare event indeed, and whatever quick action does or does not result, analysts and reformers might hope for many years to find a good statement of the possible goals and alternative patterns of development that are open to Australian administration.

Here also the report seems parochial. It adopts some fashionable managerial nostrums that have been tried elsewhere, without having spent any of its research funds upon investigating how they actually worked out (so powerful are fashions in management). And it seems that one capable letter from Sir Arthur Tange was enough to disabuse the commissioners of any idea of taking at all seriously the Swedish or Irish (Devlin) models of policy and administration, which should have (but did not) cause them to realize that they had found no recipe for their perceived problem of the accountability of officials.

Still, with the report, the Australian study of public administration has come of age, and has begun to take on new dimensions. While a fair amount has been and is being written in Australia about political-administrative relations at the top of government, study of this report can be expected to open up the deeper issues of modern bureaucracy.

What is administrative reform?

This paper will examine the report in a general context of administrative reform or change. Given such a voluminous report, with over 300 recommendations, and given the very eclectic
literature at present available on administrative reform, a short chapter can only nibble at a large subject. My aim is to show up some of the distinctive features of RCAGA (and perhaps of Australian administration) as these strike a disinterested observer.

In seeking a framework for analysis, one looks in vain at much of the limited literature on administrative reform. This, I think, is because its elements do not cohere. One element is reformist literature which enunciates principles and techniques for improving administrative “efficiency”. The reformist brew is a curious compound of traditional “scientific” management theories, as modified by flexible practices of modern multinational corporations and by human relations doctrines, combined with modern welfare economics. This brew tastes much the same around the world, at any rate in “western” societies, and the Australian royal commissioners have naturally swallowed some of it, although less than I personally expected. Managerial reformism is useless for analytic purposes, because of its simplifications and dogmatism—but I shall return to the way that it is used by RCAGA.3

The obverse element is literature which analyzes from every conceivable standpoint all the “obstacles” to administrative change. This literature quickly proves too much, because organizations do change and the interesting questions are when, where and how fast.5 More useful elements are psychological writings about the inducement of change, and political writings about the scope for (but more usually the limits of) change. Psychologists can act as auxiliaries to reformers, explaining how disagreeable features of change may be softened. Political scientists alert reformers to the interests which will be adversely affected, and to political behaviour patterns which are hard to break, either pragmatically or through references to some idea of the intrinsic essence of a polity or political culture.4

The contributions of social science to administrative change thus tend to polarise between reformers and sceptics. Economists, for example, are often reformist and political scientists sceptical, although one of the latter may take up a strongly reformist position and run the barbs of his colleagues for naivety.3 Politicians themselves often remain sceptical or indifferent, although some are enthusiastically managerial.6 Public officials tend to see reform issues in narrower and more incremental terms than do reformers or “outsiders”, as of course one would expect. All of these viewpoints need consideration, and many will creep into this chapter, but severally or in sum they do not offer much of a framework for the analysis of reform.

An alternative and tentative approach, to be adopted here, is to see administrative change as the product of interaction between
three overlapping arenas of behaviour and beliefs: the social, political and bureaucratic. The social arena is the widest, and refers to the accumulated sets of beliefs, expectations and grievances which the members of a society hold about its government and bureaucracy. The political and bureaucratic arenas refer in the first place to the attitude sets held by politicians about public servants, and to public servants about themselves.

Bureaucracy is thus the focus of administrative reform. It is the target for social and political demands about its performance. How far can these two types of demands be separated? Traditional democratic theory would see elective politics as the appropriate and sufficient transmission belt for social demands, just as bureaucracy itself should be a transmission belt for political demands. So the whole problem will be solved if bureaucracy is sufficiently responsive to "political will". One has only to state this proposition to know that it is no longer credible, even though still frequently asserted, especially in relation to bureaucracy's role.

The bureaucratic arena is not of course the passive recipient of these pressures. It not only exerts a "feedback" effect upon its political and social arenas; it also replicates within itself many of the changes occurring within society (as well as contributing to those changes by precept and example), and it preserves its own complex schema of internal politics which revolves around the successive adjustments of diverse interests. These are of two basic types—the interests of occupational groups and of departments or agencies—which frequently overlap. Sometimes bureaucratic politics surfaces indirectly in public policy debates, but normally it is a slow, gradualist and secretive battle of positions. One feature of any reform commission is that it activates bureaucratic politics.

I will now briefly refine my crude and unsatisfactory description of "arenas" into a typology of possible agendas of administrative reform. The social agenda concerns the interaction between bureaucracy and society. This covers not only service delivery, and the "responsiveness" and "openness" of government to the wants, complaints and grievances of clientele groups and of the public generally; but also the adaptations of the rules, practices and norms of bureaucracy to social pressures and changes. It includes such questions as: should bureaucracy mirror general social change, should it head change or follow change—and in what respects? This agenda is concerned also with latent politics—the politics of weakly-organized groups and weakly-voiced complaints, as well as of latent stirrings and grievances within the bureaucracy itself. The extent to which such a latent politics exists to be discovered, is itself a reflection or criticism upon the workings of traditional political and
governmental institutions—or, at the very least, a witness to the inadequacies of traditional democratic theory. But if such a latent politics exists, a reform commission may be uniquely well placed to discover and indeed to activate it.

The political agenda concerns relationships between bureaucracy and political institutions, between ministers and their chief officials, and between major elements within the bureaucracy itself. It covers such issues as the responsiveness of the bureaucracy to the will of political leaders, and by implication the adequacy of political decision-making itself, as well as the role of top officials as advisers, managers and discretionary decision-makers, and the nature of their accountability to ministers and to parliament.

The managerial agenda concerns the effective and efficient organization of the machinery of government, techniques of decision-making and execution and the structure and competence of the public service.

The distinctiveness of these agendas lies in the adoption of separate perspectives (social, political and managerial), and not of course in the isolation or self-containment of the various issues, which impinge upon each other in a variety of ways. Nonetheless reform movements tend to deal with each of these agendas separately, sometimes without recognizing incompatibilities in the solutions being advocated. This lack of recognition can of course be deliberate.

The Coombs commission in a reform context

An unusual feature of RCAGA, viewed in an international context, was the extreme comprehensiveness of its terms of reference—so broad, as Schaeffer and Hawker say, as to make their detailed wording of little significance. Practically any issue under the three agendas listed above could have been discussed, and most were. Yet it is also familiar that the genesis of the commission lay in the particular fact that a victorious Labor party viewed the Canberra bureaucracy with even more than its usual doubts and suspicion, as a result of a long sojourn in the wilderness. A political inquisition into the bureaucracy, however, would have seemed and probably have been fatal to a government which needed (like it or not) maximum bureaucratic cooperation for achieving rapidly such policy changes as lay within its power and tenure of office. It is a dilemma familiar everywhere to radical ministers. In the upshot RCAGA was rendered more acceptable to the bureaucracy by virtue of its competent and informed membership and its broad
terms of reference, while its existence did something (if not a lot) to placate the Labor rank-and-file. Admittedly many in the bureaucracy still saw RCAGA as a type of political inquisition—which is only to illustrate the enormous gulf between bureaucratic and political (especially Labor) attitudes in Australia.

If the vicissitudes of Labor party politics had not produced this commission, would something like it still have occurred? Rationally one would suppose yes. Not only had the commonwealth government continued for long without a major inquiry, but its functions and still more the character of the Australian society and economy had changed greatly during the Liberal years. Moreover a kind of administrative reform doctrine was already spreading, with variations, throughout the English-speaking world and other Western countries, associated with such well-known reports as Fulton and Glassco. Australia was unlikely to escape this virus, and one of the interesting points about the Coombs report is its reaction to what might be called the current conventions of administrative wisdom.

The RCAGA report is lengthy, diverse and well-written, with four quite substantial volumes of appendices. It is generally interesting and sometimes subtle. Given the wide scope of the report (which mirrors, although by no means completely, the breadth of the terms of reference), and given the enormous number and heterogeneity of its formal recommendations, it must be an easy matter for an observer to miss the wood for the trees. Perhaps indeed the report is all trees—a great variety of little changes, many of them already incipient or proceeding and receiving from RCAGA a friendly shove. This is the kind of result one might expect from a commission of distinguished men and one woman who, for the most part, had ample experience of government and none of the critical hostility towards its operations to be found among many backbench MPs and at best some academics and social critics. Moreover this commission believed in the slogan "the process is the product", received much of its evidence from the bureaucracy, and viewed reporting and implementation as a smooth continuum. The approach was to be realistic, pragmatic.

It must be tempting then to view RCAGA as a classic case of Lindblomian incrementalism, essentially an "insiders" report that can shock or surprise few, a document whose lack of public impact can be attributed to the relative invisibility of the many little changes thereby accelerated (but whose cumulative effect might of course be considerable). Such a verdict may well be partly true, but it is not the whole truth. What follows is an attempt to understand some of the directions taken by RCAGA, which will then
be illustrated in more detail. In conclusion I shall glance at the unsolved agenda of administrative reform as RCAGA has left it in Australia.

Somewhat rashly I would summarize the course of the RCAGA inquiry as follows. By virtue of its origins, the commission might have been expected to pay particular attention to political-administrative relationships and to the discretionary powers of the top bureaucracy. The terms of reference directed the commissioners to give particular attention, *inter alia*, to

relationship of the Australian Public Service and statutory corporations and other authorities with the Parliament, Ministers and the community;

parliamentary scrutiny and control of administration;

responsibility and accountability of public servants, and their participation in forming policy and making decisions.

It is rare indeed although quite logical for a commission investigating administration to receive such an open invitation into political territory, even if the invitation was largely declined in the event. But for fairly obvious reasons, including the membership of the commission itself, this line of approach seemed unwise and unprofitable. By contrast RCAGA found a rich vein of investigation, and of latent politics, in the relationship between bureaucracy and social change. It is in fact under the "social agenda" that the commission may be expected to have its greatest impact.

Additionally, and quite naturally, RCAGA encountered the now-familiar managerial wisdom packaged as resource planning techniques (PPBS, PESC, PAR, etc.) and theories of accountable management. This discovery conjoined with criticism of the Treasury and with a desire to strengthen the role of Cabinet in such a way as to produce the most specific and most vaunted of the commission's nostrums—the planning of forward estimates. Accountable management doctrines supported the proposed reduction of detailed controls by central agencies (Treasury and the Public Service Board), and the conferring of more managerial discretion upon departments and particularly their permanent heads—at the price of their greater involvement in the disciplines and constraints of collective decision-making. But as a necessary check upon incompetence or extravagance, and given the inability of the PSB to perform its alleged statutory job of efficiency watchdog, the Auditor-General was advanced as a suitable independent agent for the conduct of efficiency reviews.

At the top of government, managerial and political issues are entwined. (By contrast what I have termed the social agenda can be kept somewhat more separate.) Thus the managerial proposals
of RCAGA had to have regard to political feasibility, although the attention paid to this factor was to my mind curiously uneven—although perhaps intelligible in terms of the interests of the commissioners and of their need for an agreed and coherent report. At the same time, since the political problems of reform could not be tackled head on, such specifically political proposals as the report contains seem mainly intended to support, though perhaps quite inadequately, the report’s managerial doctrines.

This of course is a familiar approach of administrative reformers. The hegemony of politicians is clearly recognized, but they are then in effect told to behave much more systematically, carefully and consistently if they wish government to be more competent and effective. Or perhaps it is tactfully assumed that they wish to behave in this way, and that it is only institutional peculiarities which inhibit them. The incompatibilities between political and bureaucratic styles of decision-making rarely surface specifically in such discussions, although these are really quite well understood. The latent issue is how far it is possible or indeed desirable to reduce these incompatibilities, an issue which can be crucial for the effects of managerial innovations.

It is my suggestion then that the main thrust of RCAGA lies in certain social and selective managerial directions, subject (in the latter case) to political assumptions which have not been, and of course may never be, tested. Of course this description excludes many important influences upon the RCAGA report. One such was the division of work among the commissioners themselves, another was the special interest of the chairman in economic policy-making. Then there are curious examples of unevenness in the attention paid to various subjects. For example, the lack of depth or bite in the sections on statutory boards perhaps reflects no more than the limits of available time and interest.

At all events the crude generalizations given above need to be developed and amplified. This will be done through considering in turn aspects of the social, political and managerial agendas.

**Bureaucracy and social change**

The themes on RCAGA’s social agenda are so familiar to Australians, and so easily intelligible in other English-speaking countries, that they require little description. They posit that bureaucracy should be more responsive, more sensitive and more accessible to members of the public and to client groups; more “representative” in structure and personnel of the society which it is supposed to serve;
more open and in a sense less hierarchical in its methods of working. These themes lead to a host of specific proposals. On many points these are intended to make bureaucracy “catch up” with the social norms of the age, on others bureaucracy is intended to be the pacemaker for further social change.

What is less clear is the longer-term administrative and political implications of some of these proposals, if they are adopted. Here one can spot certain unresolved problems to which I return later. In this section I will summarize and discuss briefly the main elements in this social agenda.

1. The proposals for improved service delivery include the fixing of definite decision-making powers on counter staff, to be supported by higher status, more training, and better working conditions (R 73–6); more delegation to field officers (R 95–6); various measures of inter-departmental coordination at the regional level (R 99–106); and the continuation of the one-stop shop experiment (R 115–6).

The improvement of across-the-counter service delivery, already exemplified by the commission’s experimental “one-stop shop” at Coburg, Victoria, could represent RCAGA’s largest single contribution to better administration. This is one of those rare occasions where a commission has done research in action as a basis for its proposals. The difficulties include not only the familiar problems of changing bureaucratic attitudes, but the considerable cost likely to be entailed by full implementation.

Further of course the theme of more integrated service delivery and access runs into the familiar prickly issue of cooperation between commonwealth and states. It is partly this factor which makes the proposals for regional coordination look such a ragbag of little, tentative ideas. No doubt better service delivery by commonwealth departments may encourage emulation by states, yet the problem remains that the more the commonwealth government develops its local organs of administration and participation, in American fashion, the more complicated (and expensive) becomes the administrative maze.

2. The proposals for “opening up” bureaucracy to the public include broader representation on advisory bodies (R 86, R 88–9), government assistance (possibly) for the smaller pressure groups (R 90), more use of voluntary bodies as agents (R 83–5), closer personal contacts (R 91–3), better and fuller information services (R 301–7).

Some of these proposals are little more than exhortations, although they accord closely with the pressure in all democracies for more “public participation”. As RCAGA recognizes, this pressure is directed not only against government itself, but against the “big
interests” which have got increasingly entangled in government decision-making. In the report this issue is associated with the somewhat different one of their dismissal of the traditional “Westminster model” as a description of minister-public service relationships (see next section). Their assumption seems to be that if public servants have and feel greater freedom in their consultations with the public, they will take more pains to listen to smaller, weaker or radical groups than is accepted in present practice.

But the argument is quite unproven or substantiated. Its middle premise seems to be that if (as well) bureaucracy is more “socially representative”, its officials will feel more sympathy with all sections of society. However, the main discretion will still lie with the higher officials who are not (in any society) socially representative, while the upward mobility and acculturation of those who rise from a humble start does not seem to produce the posited attitudes. One could even hypothesize that a more “representative” bureaucracy would be less open to minority groups, in so far as it would reflect more the conservatism of society generally.

3. The proposals for making bureaucracy more socially representative include the abolition of the present nationality rule (R 117-9), the cessation of special protection for ex-servicemen and non-graduates (R 123-4), its replacement by special protection for women and aboriginals (R 135-6, R 296-300), and the creation of an office of equality in employment (R 140).

Partly these represent obvious adjustments of bureaucratic recruitment to the changed structure of Australian society. Rights for aboriginals is one obvious case where RCAGA seeks not to reflect social change but to lead it. The respect for women’s rights may be viewed partly in the same light. (Certainly women are weakly represented in the upper echelons of the public service, although comparisons with society generally are hard to make.) Partly of course it may be seen by male chauvinists as an inevitable gesture in a country which produced Germaine Greer.

4. Proposals for “liberalizing” bureaucracy itself include the formulation of a clearer code of public servants’ rights and duties (R 191-7), provision for open reporting on staff (R 156-9), and counselling on ethics (R 1)—although this is primarily directed towards the special problems sometimes encountered by top officials in their dealings with ministers.

5. Overlapping with the last two categories are the proposals for establishing greater mobility between Commonwealth public service and other occupations via exchange schemes (R 94), and more mobility within the public service (R 329-31). Special attention is paid to the renaming and reorganization of the present second
division officers which would increase their mobility (R 238–40), and to breaking down what is regarded as the inbred character of Foreign Affairs (R 223–7) and Treasury (R 311).

To some extent these proposals for greater internal mobility in the public service are at variance with the later “managerial” proposals for increasing the discretion of departments in respect of recruitment, classification and promotion. American experience suggests that greater agency autonomy and more internal promotion of this kind leads also to greater inbreeding. This tendency then has to be offset by special schemes for inter-departmental mobility, such as RCAGA urges the Public Service Board to develop. The impact of such schemes will be greatest at the highest levels.

The wish to “democratize” Treasury and, to a lesser extent, Foreign Affairs accords with the more populist element in the report. It ties in with other major criticisms that RCAGA has of Treasury, and helps to provide political and radical critics with a useful substitute villain for the bureaucracy generally. Every reform document must have its villain.

**Political control and accountability**

Latently if not overtly, the commission had to face the basic problem of incompatibilities between political and bureaucratic styles of working and decision-making. This is of course a problem for all democracies. But it is a special problem for a reform commission whose administrative proposals cannot be expected to work without effective political back-up. It is in this sense, as already noted, that the political and managerial agendas are closely inter-related.

The commission made great play with the deficiencies of the traditional “Westminster model” of ministerial-public service relations, which was the subject of a consultant’s paper by Professor Emy. Actually these “deficiencies” are of two rather different kinds. First there is a weaker relationship in Canberra than there is in Whitehall between ministers and parliament on the one hand, and the public service on the other. Secondly there are the intrinsic limitations upon the notion of “ministerial responsibility” in an age of big government.

The first problem is more peculiarly Australian, although it is also related to the circumstances of federation. Ministers are not sufficiently permanent in Canberra itself or in their departmental offices to take (as a rule) effective control of their departments. The conduct of most of their business within parliament house,
whatever its symbolic value in stressing political supremacy over the bureaucracy, expresses also a great deal of discontinuity between the conduct of political and administrative business. Further the Australian cabinet is not so effective a collective policy-making body as the British cabinet, great indeed as is the latter's limitations. This is due partly to the same political causes as produce ministerial weakness, but also to the special factors of caucus election of ministers in the case of a Labor government and of coalition problems and tactics in the case of a Liberal-Country party one.  

Of course the spatial and temporal restrictions upon Australian ministers may be mere epiphenomena. The truth may be that Australian politicians would hold themselves aloof from mere "administration", whatever their circumstances, inasmuch as they do not share the traditional British subject respect for government as opposed to party. If this hypothesis is true, then Australia may combine an American concept of politics with a British one of administration. Something in the end may have to give—either bureaucratic power will become entrenched, or the top bureaucracy will be politicized. Such speculations were alien to the commissioners, who floated happily in the special Australian brew of partisan politics and self-confident (or arrogant, according to taste) professionalism, and exorcised the conflicts with hearty injunctions.

Moreover, it is a familiar truth that even an attentive and effective minister could today only consider and decide a fraction of the acts done formally in his name. To some extent this always has been and should be the case. There is no need for a minister to decide many matters, so long as he can intervene effectively for sufficient political reasons. However it may be that public business has grown to a point where this sanction has become inadequate; and that in consequence government procedures need to be revised to distinguish more clearly between political and bureaucratic duties, and to link these duties with changed systems of accountability.

How was the commission to tackle these problems? It might possibly have ignored them, but that (as I shall illustrate) would have been inconsistent with its managerial aims. Its attempted answers can be conveniently considered under the headings of ministers, cabinet and parliament.

Ministers and their departments. Three lines of approach were (and are) open on this subject. The first approach accepts the inevitability of some conflict between political will and bureaucratic response, and concentrates upon strengthening the former through the recruitment of partisan policy aides who will help a minister to
formulate and impose his policies upon his department. This was the rationale for the appointment of ministerial advisers by the Whitlam government, precisely as happened under the Wilson government in the UK between 1964 and 1970; and the views of the British Labour party, which urged upon the Fulton committee the desirability of arming ministers with politically sympathetic "brains’ trusts", are closely paralleled or exceeded by opinion within the Australian Labor party.

Clearly this approach was likely to be difficult for RCAGA given its composition, just as it is anathema to the senior bureaucracy and to some sections of political opinion. Its ideas are as incompatible with constitutional and administrative traditions in Australia as they are in the UK. But in any event the issue was defused by the removal of the Whitlam government, and by growing acceptance (as in the UK) of the concept of enlarged ministerial private offices, so long as these remain pretty modest in size and do not seriously threaten the role of bureaucracy. So RCAGA could content itself with clarifying the temporary status and salary scales of ministerial advisers. Still the issue may have been shelved rather than resolved, and it could explode again. The commission’s bland suggestion that a minister should work out with his permanent head the jobs of his personal advisers disguises, if recent British experience is any guide, some very awkward and soul-searching individual problems.

A second line of approach for RCAGA—more feasible and surely in principle most attractive—would have been to espouse something like the Swedish model. Ministries would be slimmed drastically to concentrate on policy issues and critical decisions, while policy execution and routine administration would be done by statutory boards. The advantages would be a real clarification of political-administrative relations, including the role of the minister himself. Moreover, inasmuch as Australian government has already spawned a great number of statutory boards and hybrid commissions which mix advisory, policy and executive functions, the Swedish example would fall on fertile ground and would provide an excellent opportunity for some administrative spring-cleaning of some most untidy cupboards.

Why did the commission not take the Swedish model more seriously then? One answer may be that the commissioners, like most Australians, are more dedicated than they realize to some of the muddled but pragmatic conventions of the despised "Westminster model", such as that policy and administration ought not to be sharply separated, that relations between ministers and departments should be flexible, that governments should be free to establish many kinds of agencies and procedures to meet diverse
circumstances, and then cope subsequently with the awkward problems of "accountability", and so on. If there is a more specific objection to the Swedish system, it is that it would both reduce and transform the authority of permanent heads, as well as the potential reserves of authority held by a minister.

The third approach, which the commission did adopt, is to try and strengthen the minister's overall capacity for direction, while simultaneously strengthening the "managerial" freedom and accountability of his permanent head. The first point is tackled through clarifying the formal authority of the minister over his permanent head, stressing the minister's right to advice from any staff in his department, and respectfully suggesting that parliament organize its divisions so as to be less disruptive of the timetable of ministers. These proposals are rather minor and limited, from the standpoint of changing Canberra behaviour.

The changed status (and renamed title) of the permanent head is another matter, as it is a crucial element in RCAGA's ideas of "accountable management" as well as an attempted answer to deficiencies of the Westminster model. Australian writings by permanent heads about their roles and relations with ministers are wholly familiar to an Englishman, because they embody the same polyvalent roles, the same flexible conventions, the same expressions of the necessity for mutual trust (although perhaps in Australia the trust is sometimes more strained). If there is a difference, it lies in the greater emphasis in Australia upon a degree of managerial independence for the permanent head, in respect of the actual organization and running of the department, which derives from constitutional history and from the greater administrative remoteness of ministers. This authority is based upon convention rather than law, even though supported ambiguously by a clause in the Public Service Act which RCAGA proposes to change. But the Australian permanent head, powerful though he is, has also had to move with the times. His control of communications is being modified, as in Britain, and his ability to treat political issues as if they were administrative ones (a considerable source of strength) is less workable than it used to be.

Thus in stressing the managerial accountability of the permanent head, RCAGA is building on a firm tradition. But the doubt is how far this managerial role can be separately defined and monitored. It overlaps with policy advice—indeed the commission insists that it be related to clear and defined policy objectives. If such a process proves elusive, as is to be expected (especially in Australia), then it may be doubted how far the respective duties of minister and
permanent head will in fact be clarified. The commission is too wise to attempt to codify so elusive a relationship, and the suggestion that the Public Service Board might do more work on conventions and cases cannot amount to much. Perhaps, after all, Australia will have to go on living with the Westminster model.

Cabinet. The need to strengthen cabinet can be stated on both political and administrative grounds. Politically, cabinet is the obvious vehicle for establishing a coherent party policy under conditions of office. Administratively cabinet alone can provide the basic priorities and disciplines which keep the departments in line. Virtually all the reform literature in countries with a cabinet form of government endorses these aims. This is the point where democratic political theory coincides with the doctrine of "corporate management". And this modern fusion of thought has over the last decade born fruit in the creation of special policy units attached to cabinet (in UK, Canada and Australia, for example), and in the concentration of basic decisions about public expenditure at cabinet level (notably in Canada).

Naturally enough RCAGA endorses these aims. It proposes the reorganization of the department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to differentiate and strengthen administrative support for cabinet (R 319), and the maintenance (or revival) of the central policy unit introduced by Whitlam (R 320). It also sees PM & C, under the supervision of both prime minister and cabinet, playing a more positive role over machinery of government issues (R 323) including clarifying and restricting the use of interdepartmental committees (IDCs) (R 321), establishing task forces—sometimes as an alternative to IDCs (R 322), and watching experiments with coordinating ministers (R 285). But none of these proposals would necessarily represent a major change in existing practice; they are gestures to the desirability of cabinet coordination, if ministers will but respond to them. For a major change in the methods of collective decision-making, the commission looks above all to its proposals for forward estimates, which will be treated in the next section.

Parliament. No major changes are proposed in parliament's role, which is hardly surprising, except for the important innovation of a committee on administrative efficiency whose chairman would be paid a ministerial salary and which would be able to demand a direct reply to its criticisms from any department (R 59–60). This committee would be a vital support for the efficiency reviews to be conducted by the Auditor-General. Only parliament can hope to provide an independent basis for such reviews, which are crucial for other RCAGA proposals.

Otherwise RCAGA contents itself with clarifying the rights of MPS
to information, and the rules applying to the appearance of officials before parliamentary committees. There is little novelty here, although (as would be expected) RCAGA’s bias is towards more freedom of speech for officials before parliament (R 67, R 68, R 64), but more protection for them vis-à-vis party committees (R 70–1).

Resource planning and accountable management

It was to be expected, as noted earlier, that the commission would utilize current doctrines about these subjects. After all, they provide the planks for much recent administrative reform in Canada, USA, UK and elsewhere. What is most interesting, however, is the way that these doctrines have been selectively applied or harnessed to RCAGA’s perception of Australian problems both administrative and political.

It is fascinating to see how much mileage RCAGA hopes to get out of its forward estimate proposals. Basically it is a familiar and generally accepted idea that governments should plan their expenditure (at least tentatively) several years in advance, to determine their own priorities more comprehensively and realistically, and to help stabilize the balance between public and private sectors. But RCAGA utilizes this fairly simple notion to pursue a whole range of objectives (not listed here in order of importance):

(a) To reduce the Treasury’s influence on the policy content of financial decisions
(b) To coordinate financial planning by the Treasury with manpower planning by the PSB (both of which would be embodied in the forward estimates)
(c) To have resource priorities settled by a cabinet committee and ultimately by cabinet itself, thus committing ministers to a coherent framework of policies
(d) To have departments and their permanent heads cooperate in the financial and policy disciplines of collective decision-making
(e) To lay a basis of government priorities and objectives which can underpin the practice of accountable management in departments

Unfortunately forward estimates are a weak prop on which to build such great hopes.

One wonders why RCAGA did not take a much closer look at resource planning in other countries. The introduction of PPBS in the USA was also expected (by its advocates) to make the policy process there more coherent and more “rational” and to support
accountable management. It can hardly be said to have succeeded. Interestingly the RCAGA approach is much more modest and limited than the PPBS package, yet the forward estimates part of PPBS is one element which has not made much headway against the reluctance of congress to accept or even to examine advance budgetary commitments. But then the USA does not have cabinet government, which makes this problem especially intractable.^[18]

More relevant without doubt is the British experience with PESC (Public Expenditure Survey Committee). Here even a friendly critic would concede that PESC has not been too successful in disciplining expenditure decisions. Departments have used the machinery to get stronger commitments to their future expenditure than would otherwise be forthcoming, and Treasury control seems to have been weakened by joint decision-making instead of its traditional method of dealing severally with each department. There have also been some gains in foresight and realism, at both political and administrative levels.^[19]

But in any event the broader hopes pinned on PESC and (still more) its accompaniment PAR (Program Analysis Review) have so far proved rather illusory. Cabinet has not proved so willing to immerse itself in forward resource planning as the basis of policy-making as the reform’s sponsors had hoped.^[20] Equally, the parliamentary expenditure committee has not managed to function as an effective critic of resource planning. The reasons are anything but mysterious. Politicians’ tendencies are to argue about policies first, and to treat the availability of resources as a necessary constraint. It is difficult to follow the reverse process—to start with a block of money and consider how it is best allocated. A comprehensive financial plan is the product of institutional necessity which must eventually bind the executive but which is not compulsive for parliament in the same way. Even in the case of cabinet, ministers do not foresee or accept all the implications of such a plan but tacitly reserve their right to reopen issues as occasion offers.

No doubt this picture is too gloomy. It applies up to a point to any form of collective policy-making. Australian cabinets may be capable of some of the disciplines of forward resource planning. But the extent to which they will use the occasion to establish firm and consistent policies must remain doubtful.

More basically still, transformations from basic resource priorities to operational programmes to accountable management, as sketched in the RCAGA report, would be at best partial and somewhat tendentious. This is the language of idealistic economists and technicians, but government does not work this way. The idea that a permanent head should be judged for his management of
a block of resources, allocated to his department for the pursuit of agreed policy objectives, sounds fine in theory. But the permanent head cannot just take his objectives from cabinet; he must respond also (and primarily) to his minister and to other persons as well; he will be lucky if he has consistent objectives at all.

Possibly these doubts are too negative. But at all events it must be recognized that “accountable management” covers only one slice of a permanent head’s and a department’s multiple tasks. Professor Emy’s report, which accords closely with the commission’s own thinking, quotes Keeling (without acknowledgment) to the effect that “management means the search for the best use of resources in pursuit of objectives subject to change”. But Keeling also pointed out that management was one of three modes of activity practised by civil servants, the other two activities being “diplomatic” and “administrative”. In diplomatic activity the aim is to get agreement or to achieve consent to or acquiescence in a decision, while administrative activity is concerned with rule making and adjudication in which considerations of justice, fair play and acceptability are important and often dominant considerations. Thus while Keeling certainly argues that effective resources use, according to some kind of cost-benefit tests, should receive much more administrative attention, he does not assume that resource efficiency can or should always be the dominant consideration.

Further, the meaning of resource efficiency is often very arguable. Market tests of profit and loss play a limited part in government. They could of course be extended if government charged users for more of its services, but this is a wider issue. Quasi-business methods can sometimes be introduced, as for example under the commission’s suggestion that departments should be free whenever possible to purchase common services from public agencies or other sources. There are zones of routine work where quantitative performance tests can be applied, although there are also problems and “dysfunctions”. But these zones do not occur at the top of departments.

The commission’s doctrine of “accountable management” should be assessed from two standpoints. For one thing it is an essential corollary to its proposal to give to departments (and specifically to their permanent heads) greater financial freedom within the framework of forward estimates and general Treasury allocations; as well as greater freedom to recruit and promote staff, to determine individual work plans and to reward individual initiative, within the framework of general standards set by the PSB. If departments are to have these freedoms, there must be checks upon their use and abuse. These are to be provided through periodic reports on the
organizational efficiency of departments to be provided by the Auditor-General (R 312-4) and through strengthened consultancy work and reviews of standards by the PSB (R 325-8).

In principle this decentralization and increased flexibility of managerial responsibility accords with the best modern practice—certainly as practised in business. Probably it is right for government too, but there must be doubts about the adequacy of the efficiency reviews. Probably RCAGA shared these doubts—at any rate there are signs that it had second thoughts about removing too many control powers from the PSB. It might have had the same doubts about Treasury-control relaxation, had it not been doctrinally critical of Treasury. Cynics might say that tough financial control, exercised by a prestigious but heartily disliked controlling agency, is the only way to get restraint in public expenditure. Lord Bridges may have been thinking of the same point when he said that he had always wanted to reduce Treasury control but never found a satisfactory way to do it.

From the standpoint of establishing the accountability of top officials (and thus correcting the "Westminster model"), the commission's proposals seem less than adequate. This point has already in effect been made. It will be hard to establish a clear distinction between the "policy" responsibilities of the minister and the "managerial" ones of the permanent head. It might be possible to assess the competence of a department in respect of economical and prompt administration, although the minister would share some responsibility for the result. It would be impossible to fix responsibility for policy advice among public servants, without politicizing the top bureaucracy.

The arguments about how to provide more open information about policy-making in government—which led to one of the few interesting splits of opinion within the commission—will not, however they be resolved, establish any clear connection between "more information" and "more accountability". That of course is one of the reasons why open government on the Swedish model is often resisted in other countries. It is not without significance that responsibilities are more clearly fixed in Sweden in terms of machinery of government and of administrative law. As long as Australia practises a highly fluid, flexible and pragmatic system of administration, so long will rules of accountability prove elusive or illusory.
Coombs: The unfinished agenda.

Let me briefly summarize some selective conclusions about the RCAGA report.

On machinery of government it is disappointing. It puts too much faith in resource planning techniques, as was done earlier in USA and UK, but without enough research into the actual results. Its proposals for reducing the role of Treasury, in respect of forward estimates and through the creation of a counterweight Department of Industry and the Economy, already have a passé look. The Fraser government has instead chosen to divide Treasury, more with the idea of strengthening Treasury’s financial control than sharing financial decisions with other departments. However the logical Canadian device of combining financial and manpower planning, which might have accorded with the RCAGA approach although not their actual proposals, has not been adopted—no doubt because it would demolish the PSB, a distinctive Australian institution.

It is also curious that its approach to the regrouping of departments and their many satellite bodies should be so cautious. Once again it puts its faith, as did Sir Richard Clarke and other economic reformers in the UK, in a selective grouping of agencies according to sectors of public expenditure. But policy coordination considerations are often different from the tidier notions of systematic resource allocation, as experience with UK “giant” departments has shown.

The commission set its face against “bureau shuffling”, though it was prepared for a coordinating minister for social welfare with a small department, a research bureau and a consultative council (R 285). The Australian need for more policy coordination in this field was too great to be gainsaid but coordinating ministers of this kind have not usually proved very effective except where (as has happened with defence in many countries) they paved the way to fuller integration. Again there are the predictable injunctions to government to create statutory boards only for good and clear reasons, but if created to allow them more independence (R 32, R 34-5). But these injunctions do not take the analysis very far. Australian government has a particularly luxuriant growth of satellite bodies in relation to the total scale of its operations, but no fundamental review of their rationale and future was attempted.

For related reasons, the attempted introduction of a more open and accountable style of government, which will establish more directly the responsibilities of public servants as opposed to those of ministers, will (I believe) fall far short of the RCAGA expectations. I doubt, for example, whether the proposals (even if implemented)
would change very greatly the relations between ministers and
permanent heads, or would expose the latter to effective public
praise or censure; and the proposals here concentrate very much
upon "men at the top". Fundamental changes in these matters
would depend upon basic alterations in departmental structure and
in administrative law.

These limitations may represent political realism. As with most
reform commissions there is a considerable gap between rhetoric
and achievement. As Fulton fulminated against the generalist
administrators but left them essentially intact and indeed in charge
of implementation, so does RCAGA denigrate the conventions of the
"Westminster model" without (probably) really altering them. The
more serious point is to ask what one wants of such a commission:
is it a set of minor changes that may be immediately practical,
or a blueprint for reformers for the next 20 years? Bearing in mind
the rarity of such bodies, it is perhaps a pity that the latter approach
did not get more attention.

On public service structure and relations with the community,
the report is more positive and potentially beneficial. Its proposals
for a changed management structure for the service, embodying
greater departmental freedoms and flexibility within a more inte­
grated but looser general framework, deserves full analysis. It has
its problems, but in many ways looks "the pattern for the future".
The suggested changes in bureaucratic relations with the public,
particularly at points of direct contact, could if allowed have
appreciable effect.

But there are also items on the reform agenda which RCAGA hardly
mentioned. One such is federalism. The omission is hardly surpris­
ing, yet the future organization of the federal government, whether
at its top or bottom, ought to be related to the system of function­
sharing with the states. The fact that the Australian government's
influence in many fields is primarily a financial one creates the
temptation for the growth of a "grant-in-aid" polity, with specific
(though often minor) types of policy influence being bought through
specific grants. Only in recent years has Australian government
moved in this direction, when compared for example with the
American system.

Yet the writing may well be on the wall, and a price have to
be paid in the form of increasingly fragmented forms of government
at all levels. This is serious in as much as state governments are
often already too fragmented, which impedes (to take one major
example) the planning of their large metropolitan areas which
(given the weakness of local government) depend largely upon the
interventions of many state departments and boards. Federal
government interventions seem more likely to reduce than to stimulate effective planning and coordination at the state level, without being able to introduce a viable alternative framework. A consideration of the growth of government machinery in Canberra ought to consider how far the development of "cooperative federalism", Australian-style, will weaken the ability of states to plan effectively.

Another missing item is consideration, save perhaps in the context of scientific research, of long-term planning and policy making. RCAGA thinks of planning primarily as medium-term economic management, looking three years ahead. In European countries, by contrast, there is increasing attention to much longer-run issues about population, natural resources, work satisfaction, physical development and democracy. The Netherlands has its council for scientific policy and Sweden its "future studies" secretariat.

Australia might be thought, by virtue of its enormous territory, small population, and international vulnerability to be a suitable place for long-term planning. In the field of physical planning and development, for example, one would have thought that the initiative of the Whitlam government would represent only a beginning. Is it that Australian society is too prosperous (despite the current recession), too phlegmatic, and too introverted to want to look ahead, and the RCAGA simply reflects these attitudes?

Notes

5. G. Caiden, Administrative Reform (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), is one evangelical treatment by a political scientist.
6. The accident that in the UK two successive prime ministers, Harold Wilson and Edward Heath, were managerial-minded contributed to the flurry of administrative change between 1964 and 1974. But many of these changes look like being somewhat superficial.


9. All reform committees must strike a balance between securing the cooperation of the bureaucracy on the one hand, and succumbing to bureaucratic interests and caution on the other. On the whole RCAGA may have been too biased in the former direction.

10. Fully reported in the *Appendix 2*. It was unfortunate, though, that the action research got off the ground so late in RCAGA's life.

11. Particularly of course if the pay of counter staff is raised. But bureaucracy's support is bought by higher pay all round, instead of radical changes in the rotation and duties of staff.

12. RCAGA. *Appendix 1*, "The Public service and political control"

13. The statement by David Butler in *The Canberra Model*, (London: Macmillan, 1974), of the deficiencies of ministerial control in Australia has not gone unchallenged, but I think the points here will stand up.

14. A pertinent point, however, is that the volume of central government business is substantially less in Australia than in Britain. The traditional concept of ministerial responsibility would therefore still be *more* workable in Australia if ministers faced up to their tasks. I am not referring to the question of parliamentary sanctions against incompetent ministers, which is a separate issue, but to their ability to run a department effectively—which must allow, of course, for a good deal of "acceptable" administrative discretion.

15. The head of a department would become a chief policy adviser, and executive tasks would be spread among the chief officers of boards. The unique fusion of tasks entailed in administrative work, as understood in Britain and Australia, would be dismantled. This conclusion is not affected by the different method of recruiting senior administrators in Australia from Britain. The forceful letter to the commission from a distinguished public servant, Sir Arthur Tange, doubtless reminded them of the indigenous Australian tradition of fusing policy and administration; and the same letter showed quite clearly how the accepted role and importance of the permanent head would be undermined by any flirtation with the Swedish ideas or those in the Devlin (Eire) report. But this evidence only underlined the commissioners' dedication to the "Westminster model" for all their grumblings about it, and their inability even to consider any appreciable change in the role of the permanent head.

16. The paper by Professor Spann and responses to it (*Appendix 1*), as with other Australian writing on this subject, has considerable affinity with the writings by British permanent secretaries and ministers about their relationships. For a summary and sources see Peter Self, *Administrative Theories and Politics*, (London: Allen & Unwin 1972), 162 *et seq*.

17. Of course cabinet pivots around the prime minister as its chairman and coordinator, and cannot function effectively without his dedication to its effectiveness. Countries vary somewhat in the degree of preeminence accorded the prime minister, but the fact remains that a strong PM is no substitute for a strong cabinet. Unfortunately though, a wilful PM can undermine cabinet government.


22. For example it is left the power to reclassify any position in an agency which it judges to be necessary (R 325).


24. There is as yet no adequate study of the evolution of the British giant departments, but by 1977 the department of Trade and Industry had been broken down into four ministries, and the department of Environment into two although in this case with special cooperative arrangements between them.

25. This is not to deny the possibility of significant minor changes, such as adopting the UK practice of making a permanent head the accounting officer for the department, and giving him the right and duty to register a formal protest over ministerial orders involving improper expenditure. (R 47, R 48).
The Public Service Inquiries and Responsible Government

R. S. Parker

The following remarks are not peculiarly directed to Australia, as I think they are applicable generally to governments working under any of the variations of the Westminster principles. What may be said about Australia is that in most of the states, and certainly at the federal level, any difficulties in maintaining responsible government are increased by the tyranny of distance, and they are exacerbated in all the governments by the effects of federalism. But Canada shares these features. Here I shall begin by reviewing the orthodox conceptions of “responsible government” which I discussed in a recent article, and then ask what relevance the reports of recent public service inquiries may have for an expanded view of “responsibility”.

Difficulties of the conventional formation

As presented in the article mentioned, responsibility in Westminster-style governments meant the answerability of ministers to the legislature for the administrative acts done in government agencies under ministerial control, as enforced by the obligation of ministers to answer questions, explain their administration in parliament and resign if censured by a majority of the parliament. The principle (or doctrine, or norm) was supposed to be central to democratic government in such regimes because in theory the operation of these mechanisms could lead to a general election, and the result could turn in part on the account of their stewardship that the mechanisms had elicited from ministers during their incumbency. I suggested in the article that the effectiveness of the doctrine as an instrument of democracy depended on the availability of adequate information for parliament and public about what the administration was doing, on the actual control ministers were able to exert over the administration and on the viability of the sanctions that in theory bound the ministers.

The article went on to record the general opinion that neither
information, ministerial control nor the conventional sanctions were adequate at the present time to make ministerial responsibility a satisfactory guarantee—or even index—of democracy in a modern community. Indeed, the weakness of these three mechanisms in practice has tempted some observers to fall back upon a less exacting meaning for “ministerial responsibility” than the mechanical actuation of specific sanctions in certain designated circumstances. D.E. Butler, for example, concludes from his observations that British and Australian politics work in the social context of a generally-held belief, shared by politicians including ministers, that government should be answerable at least to the electors; that opposition, even in parliament, should be tolerated up to a point; that free criticism is legitimate and ministries should not use the coercive powers they certainly possess to suppress every challenge. Accepting this much, ministers are prepared to face the consequences; measure the tactical imprudence of excessive reticence; compete for popular approval. . . At election time:

every minister, indeed every government candidate is being held collectively responsible for the cabinet decisions of the past few years. When the time comes to vote, there is no ambiguity about whom to reward or to punish.¹

Such formulations express, perhaps, a kind of truth but they cannot be a great consolation to the many victims of the arbitrary acts of ministers and bureaucrats that occur between elections, even in a polity that can be so described. “Ministerial responsibility” ought to mean something narrower and more precise than this, and “responsible government”, as I shall argue, ought to mean something much broader—but also more precise.

The earlier paper made a less familiar point: that “ministerial responsibility” in its more precise sense has never, even in theory, been supposed to extend throughout the whole of the governmental system in the Westminster countries; it did not apply, for example, to judicial agencies, to elective local government and to many other quasi-autonomous statutory agencies. So if these were not outside the democratic system, they must (or should) be subject to some other forms of accountability.

The argument that follows is intended to apply both to these “extra-ministerial” parts of the governmental system, and also to the parts which were nominally supposed to be covered by the conventions of ministerial responsibility. It is easy to summarize its essentials. If democratic government—perhaps “responsible government”—means anything practical it must mean more than ministerial responsibility. It surely depends also on a number of
other institutions, which have evolved as painfully and are still not fully developed. Furthermore, "government" today cannot be discussed sensibly in terms of ministers alone: we must take into account the whole apparatus of government, especially the administration, and the bureaucracies which run it. The effectiveness of information, control and sanctions needs to be reassessed in this wider context—and so do the other relevant institutions. What does this wider picture look like?

**A broader concept of responsible government**

First, for a fully responsible government, *information* needs to be seen as a two-way process. Both ministers and other parts of the administration give out information, but they also receive and use it. And in each direction some information is volunteered and some is requisitioned. Government agencies voluntarily make their annual reports, issue their green and white papers, make their ministerial statements, issue their PR handouts and arrange their unofficial "leaks"—and individual politicians and officials may make their critical or revealing "public comment". In addition, parliamentarians, members of the public and media people demand information—through questions, interviews, correspondence, legal actions, summoning officials to parliamentary committees or even to the bar of a legislative chamber. They want access to what ministers and officials know and think, and access to their records. And ministers resist some of these demands in the name of crown privilege or of "ministerial responsibility" itself. In the other direction, government seeks information through ministerial advisers, commissions of inquiry, consultations with interest groups and research. And it receives unsolicited feedback through pressure groups, the media and opinion polls.

Second, *ministerial* responsibility conventionally implies ministerial *control* and knowledge of what all parts of the administration are doing. Once we accept that this is no longer possible (if it ever was), and that large parts of the government apparatus are formally outside ministerial responsibility anyway, new questions are raised about the meaning of responsible government. Ministers need control of the apparatus to be realistically answerable to parliament for its doing; who is answerable—and in what way—for those parts of the apparatus which ministers cannot, or are not supposed to, control? How far does responsible government require central control and coordination of the administrative
apparatus as a whole? How far is that compatible with devolution, decentralization and delegation?

Third, we have recognized that the conventional parliamentary sanctions once supposed to enforce ministerial responsibility have been made ineffective by the stability and solidarity of political party majorities. They have also been partly replaced by such restraints as political parties exercise over their own leaders. But clearly there are other kinds of sanctions available to keep various parts of the administration responsible—some of them old and weak, others still new and scarcely tried. There are parliamentary standing and select committees of varying effectiveness, and the intercession of members with the administration on behalf of constituents and interest groups. There are financial, efficiency and effectiveness audits. There are administrative and judicial tribunals and ombudsmen.

Thus ministerial answerability to parliament is one among many forms of responsibility enforced upon the various parts of the whole administration. Still other institutions are relevant to a complete picture. At one end, for example, there is the system of parliamentary representation and all that goes with it—the fairness of the electoral system, the free choice of political parties, the degree of oligarchy and democracy in the parties themselves. At the other end there is the character of the administration—particularly of the government bureaucracy. If ministers cannot be effectively responsible for the whole of it, then in some sense we may expect responsibility directly from the bureaucracy itself. Whether we find it depends upon a number of factors not yet fully understood. Is the responsibility of a bureaucracy affected by its composition—in terms of class, colour and creed; does a bureaucracy, in other words, need to be representative in order to be responsible? Can responsiveness be inculcated, or promoted by mobility of staff, non-hierarchical organization or systematic training? Can the bureaucracy be made more accessible, and—yes—responsive again, to its clients and beneficiaries, by taking thought? In short, is responsiveness—a pervasive set of attitudes and expectations—a vital and manageable aspect of responsibility?

With such broader concepts of responsible government in mind, let us see what the public service inquiries have to say on the subject. After a rapid survey of the inquiries headed by McCarthy (New Zealand 1962), Fulton (United Kingdom 1967), Corbett (South Australia 1973), Lewis (NSW 1974), Bland (Victoria 1974) and Coombs (commonwealth 1976), it emerges that only Coombs (RCAGA) was asked explicitly in its terms of reference to consider aspects of responsible government. They included:
(b) relationship of the Australian Public Service and statutory corporations and other authorities with the Parliament, Ministers and the community;
(c) parliamentary scrutiny and control of administration;
(d) responsibility and accountability of public servants, and their participation in forming policy and making decisions

But the Bland, Coombs, Corbett and McCarthy inquiries were also asked—all in precisely the same words—to report on at least one other relevant subject: “the organization, coordination and control of departments”. Aspects of responsibility touched on in some of these inquiry reports will be discussed under the headings used in the preceding paragraphs: information, control, sanctions and responsiveness.

**Information**

The Coombs and Corbett reports take somewhat different views of the more orthodox forms of information volunteered by governments. Corbett recommends, for example, that all public service staffs should have courses in communication, that there should be a government information department and that it should be government policy to change the attitudes of public service management toward a more favourable view of information services. The RCAGA section on information devotes more space and care to information for government and the administration than to information for the public. It is distinctly sceptical about the existing departmental information services and suggests they should be pruned. But it plumps for more annual reports from departments, frankly discussing real problems.

On the need to improve the parliament’s and the public’s chances to requisition relevant information in official hands, most of the reports are silent, while the series of observations in RCAGA are more disappointing than silence. In effect, this report accepts the prevailing orthodoxy that the disposition of official information should remain ultimately within the discretion of ministers, subject to the limited encroachments already made by the courts. The procedures proposed for officials appearing before parliament or its committees go no further than current practice at its best. The report recognizes the growing custom of officials assisting party caucus committees and suggests that they protect their neutrality in that dangerous situation by bringing a colleague if the minister is not present. When members of parliament or the public approach departments for information, the minister again, says RCAGA, should retain the final say upon what is to be released.
It is ironical that E.G. Whitlam, whose party came to power in 1972 with fanfare about “open government”, was the prime minister who should state the doctrine of official reticence in its most extreme form. When the senate proposed (ineptly enough) to question senior officials about government activities relevant to the executive council’s authorization of a petrodollar loan, Whitlam’s ministers forbade their officials to answer any questions or produce any documents or papers whatever on the subject. Whitlam told the president of the senate that the opposition was plainly seeking to inquire into government policy and should seek this information only from ministers themselves through the “normal and proper parliamentary procedures” (which we have already noted are notoriously ineffective). He added that seeking to question the officials was challenging “the fundamental character of ministerial responsibility”, which “is, and must remain, the keystone of our parliamentary system”.

It is interesting to compare with this what a former British permanent secretary said in the course of some comments on the Fulton report. On the question of accountability of a modern administration, Sir Maurice Dean was not impressed by the argument that accountability for policy was achieved through debates, questions in parliament and public discussion in the media. These activities were usually conducted on party lines and were neither well informed nor well suited to creative or analytical debate. He noted the stock arguments that policy involves party politics and is a matter for ministers alone, and that attempts to apportion praise or blame between ministers and officials might compromise the confidential relations which should exist between ministers and their advisers. To these arguments he replied with a useful parable: if a liner hits the rocks, everyone agrees that the captain is “responsible”, but this does not mean that his subordinates will be exempt from interrogation—and the inquiry will also examine the navigational equipment and the skills of the crew. Sir Maurice added: “The confidential character of the relations between ministers and civil servants is not an end in itself. If we can do better by breaching it we should do so”.

In a paper delivered to a law conference Professor Enid Campbell, a former member of the Coombs commission, was rather more provocative than the RCAGA report. While recognizing the familiar “dangers”, she thought it could be argued that “rather than undermining ministerial responsibility, the revelation of departmental advisings reinforces it by providing an essential basis for the parliament to make a judgment on the minister’s culpability and liability to censure”. She remarked further that the Whitlam
government's proposed ombudsman review system, while not encroaching upon the domain of policy making, would interpose between officials and ministers an outside source of influence and control—and "to the extent that it involves judgments being made about the acts and omissions of officials, it provides impetus to the idea that officials should be held individually and publicly accountable for their actions". And she concluded:

It is doubtful whether the fostering of direct and public accountability on the part of officials does any great violence to the principles underlying the Westminster system. After all, the precepts of ministerial responsibility represent just one of a variety of possible expedients for subjecting the exercise of public power to the superintendence and judgment of the people for whose benefit that power is meant to be employed.¹

Henry Parris gives a number of examples of the freedom with which nineteenth century British officials publicized views and information and commented on the administration of government. I have used one of these examples before because it seems to epitomize the psychology underlying the present conventional relations of ministers and officials. It was none other than Charles Trevelyan, founder of the modern British civil service, who after visiting Ireland in 1843 reported to senior ministers on the turbulent political situation there, and then wrote a long letter to the *Morning Chronicle* about it. Said the secretary of state for home affairs to the prime minister: "Surely it is highly improper that a Secretary of the Treasury should thus communicate to an Opposition paper intelligence which he made known to the government as of official importance?" The prime minister agreed: "How a man after his confidential interview with us could think it consistent with common decency to reveal to the . . . world all he told us is passing strange. He must be a consummate fool". Upon which Parris asks, perceptively in the present context:

*Was* Trevelyan’s action "highly improper" or was it a "public service"? If he disagreed with his political superiors it was clearly not because he was a "blockhead" or a "consummate fool". The incident was not a breach of a settled rule, but a conflict of views as to the proper behaviour for a civil servant prior to the establishment of the modern convention.¹

While there must obviously be some limits to the freedom of action of the parties to the relationship between a minister and his official advisers under responsible government, it is clear that these limits are connected with such subtle matters as personal maturity, flexibility and tolerance of mind, trust and confidence, or the
reverse: party-based fears and pressures, mistrust and the instinct for concealment. The very phrase “open government”, so closely related to democratic government, is suggestive of the rare qualities of character that would be necessary to make it workable. Sir Robert Peel thought Trevelyan was a fool for not realizing that the government would want to hug his report to its breast (however important that it should become public knowledge) in the hope of getting some political advantage from it. The majority of the Coombs commission realised that Peel’s idea of politics was still the realpolitik of today, and while recognizing the abstract virtues of openness, were unwilling to explore the possibility of more mature psychological attitudes toward open discussion by officials as well as ministers, and toward the public revelation of unpleasant facts. They were content to admit that there was “a need to reassess the proper ambit of that relationship (RC 5.1.37).”

**Control**

Not unnaturally, the inquiries discussed the need for control and coordination mainly in terms of increasing the mutual consistency of programmes, making them more manageable and minimizing the waste of resources, rather than as means of making the answerability of ministers to parliament more realistic. McCarthy did pin the responsibility squarely on ministers for the economical and efficient management of their departments, and on the prime minister for the coordination of administrative effort as a whole, and considered the central administrative organs in this light, as will be seen. Fulton and Bland were concerned mainly with the central personnel agencies and their potential contributions to better staffing and internal management. Because of the circumstances in their respective civil services they did not see those agencies as important contributors to the framing, coordination or control of policy in action. The other inquiries did see them in this role to varying degrees, along with other central agencies such as the chief minister’s and financial departments. They all had proposals for strengthening the central machinery of government by modifying, extending or redistributing the functions and powers of these agencies—and in the case of Coombs by adding another one, the proposed department of Industry and the Economy. Whether the adoption of such proposals would strengthen responsible government by making ministers more effectively answerable for administrative doings was a question most of the inquiries did not explore.

In the RCAGA report, however, the whole complex of arrangements
summed up by the term “forward estimates” could be seen as an effort in this direction. As suggested by one subsequent commentator, RCAGA wanted by these means to de-bureaucratize the budgeting process in order to ensure that ministers and parliament had more of the responsibility for budgeting. (RCAGA also noted how parliament had deprived itself of much of the potentiality of coordination and control through the budget by allowing over half the commonwealth’s annual expenditure to get into permanent appropriations and therefore beyond the reach of effective annual review.) The practical prospects of “forward estimates” involving politicians in more responsible control have been amply discussed by others.

Both Coombs and Corbett proposed to broaden and strengthen ministerial control through more specific reforms: collecting related functions into fewer and bigger departments, promoting inter-departmental collaboration by “sectional groupings” of departments and by staff mobility, pruning the rank growth of statutory corporations and bringing surviving corporations with related functions under one minister. McCarthy proposed to begin higher up with the same kinds of measures: a rationalization of the cabinet committee system, strengthening of the cabinet secretariat, a more careful grouping of portfolios and departments under ministers—as well as the amalgamation of departments and the bringing of the big state corporations under the “efficiency and economy” surveillance of a much more influential state services commission.

The McCarthy commission revived an important question that had been overlooked and forgotten in all the original white dominion offshoots of the Westminster system. It recommended (successfully) that the state services commission, hitherto an “independent” statutory body, be constituted a department of state directly responsible to the prime minister, its principal commissioner being the “chief adviser to the Government on all matters bearing on the overall efficiency and economy of the State Services” and on the allocation of functions and coordination among departments. McCarthy added that the commission should, however, as the employing authority for the public service, be given statutory independence in matters relating to individual officers, such as appointments, promotions (except to permanent head), transfers, grading, classification and discipline. McCarthy set out the logic of its approach in a passage which deserves quotation. The original Public Service Commission

was set up to do two main things: to build a unified career service, and to promote efficiency and economy. The obvious interrelation of
these functions has obscured their essential separateness. To be successful [in eliminating political patronage in staff appointments etc.] the Commission had to be made completely independent of political control in matters affecting individual public servants ... But in ensuring efficiency and economy in wider matters of general organization and conditions of employment, it must act always as the agent of the Government, which has ultimate responsibility for these things. It has never been and could never be politically independent in performing this function. Thus, these two distinct functions—one requiring independence from and the other requiring submission to Government (that is, 'political') control—must be kept separate ...'

Curiously, McCarthy did not carry this irrefutable logic to the point of recommending separate bodies for the two functions. Yet both the distinction between the functions and their allocation to different bodies had always been taken for granted in Britain itself and in nearly all Britain's other colonial administrations both before and after their independence. Britain organized to end patronage in appointments after 1855 by setting up the politically independent Civil Service Commission. The other "establishments" and machinery of government functions remained where they had been already concentrated (with undeniable historical logic) in the Treasury. Fulton had them removed from the Treasury but there was no doubt that they would remain in a responsible ministerial department retaining close connections with the prime minister. In the ex-colonial states, establishments functions were generally kept under ministerial responsibility and close to the chief minister or president; their civil service commissions added the other quasi-judicial functions affecting individual officers—promotions, classification and discipline—to the control of appointments, and no more.

The rationality of these arrangements is so clear that it helps to explain, by contrast, some of the failures of Australian (and New Zealand) public service commissions, and some of the shambling disarray of administrative structures and methods in these parts. By uniting the responsibility for detailed personnel functions and for "oversight of efficiency and economy" in statutory agencies nominally outside political control, we have produced certain inevitable results. In most cases the commissions have bogged down in the inescapable routine of personnel administration. Partly for this reason, partly hampered by equivocal statutory powers and partly because their "independence" has deprived them of the indispensable political support of a responsible minister, the public service commissions have largely neglected or shirked what McCarthy rightly calls the "even more important function" of supervising and updating departmental organization and management in
line with changing governmental needs. In some cases, as McCarthy said of the New Zealand body, the commission has been independent only as to individual personnel dealings, and has simply bowed to the government’s wishes on such matters as recruitment standards and wage policies as well as departmental organization. In some cases, governments have decided these matters for themselves in hand-to-mouth fashion with scant regard to the public service commission. The NSW Public Service Board has been more influential than most in organization and coordination as well as in staffing policy and administration, partly because of its exceptionally strong statutory powers, but also because it has taken care to cultivate the political support of governments—especially premiers—and to work in close collaboration with them.

As we have seen, McCarthy went furthest toward unravelling the confusion, though not the whole way. Corbett and Bland were at least vaguely aware of the problem. Without proposing to alter the formal status of South Australia’s Public Service Board, and reasoning only by analogy with “any other board or authority”, Corbett recommended that the government of the day should be able to give written “general policy directives imposing broad guidelines on public service policy”, and (in a manner not explained) “to require the Board to adhere to such directives” (C 2.00). Bland approached the problem still more obliquely. He agreed with the others that the Victorian Public Service Board “must be concerned with the structuring, organization and efficiency of the Service as a whole”, and should advise government [in disorderly metaphors] on “the most suitable vehicle for handling a new function”, and so on. But, in whatever functions it is exercising,

10.34 ... a Public Service Board ... should have the maximum of independence ... Yet there can be no quality of absoluteness about a Board’s independence. Nor, on the other hand, any untoward compromise of that independence ...

10.36 No Government or Minister may instruct or attempt to influence the P.S.B in the exercise of its mandatory statutory powers and functions

10.38 ... the P.S.B should, in the exercise of its discretionary powers and functions, take heed of announcements of policy made by the Government of the day to the Parliament ...

Bland expected that “a Government would take this course only very occasionally and in respect of policy issues of great public moment” (Bl 10.40). This is far from the McCarthy concept of ministerial responsibility for the ongoing organization, coordination and efficiency of the administration.
RCAGA acknowledged in one sentence and without emphasis the basic functional distinction drawn by McCarthy, but saw in it no cause to hive off quasi-judicial functions from the commonwealth PSB, and explicitly rejected the idea of direct ministerial responsibility for staffing policy, organizational coordination, and efficiency of management. Coombs thought that only the prime minister should have such a responsibility, and he was too busy. Then, in a sentence as contradictory as Bland’s, RCAGA declared:

We consider that the statutory independence of the Board should be maintained and that the Prime Minister should continue to be the minister responsible for the general working of the Public Service (RC 11.6.5; my emphasis).

RCAGA went on to propose a great increase in the managerial (as distinct from personnel) functions of the board, as “the prime instrument of coordination”, through management consultancy, promotion of organizational efficiency, control of staff numbers, its input to forward estimates, control of salary and related costs and machinery of government reviews (the last in collaboration with PM & C). And the RCAGA majority (with commissioner Bailey dissenting) did not even favour the government being able to implement a wages policy for its own employees; it would leave this to the board and arbitration (RC 11.6.25–8). The whole approach tends to confirm the sense of the board’s isolation from government policy and therefore from political responsibility that is conveyed (perhaps too partially) in the evidence of Dr McMichael, then secretary to the former department of Environment, to the inquiry:

... when one gets down to particular problems of staffing at the Third Division level and starts dealing with particular Board inspectors ... there is no way in which the Board can really assess ... relative priorities that the Government might attach to particular departments ... I do not find any machinery within the present set up which allows these matters to be reviewed.4

There is another aspect of most of the reports whose implications for responsible government—or even for control and coordination, responsible or not—are hard to estimate. While proposing to strengthen the hand of the central coordinating agencies in the kinds of ways mentioned above, Bland, Coombs, Corbett and McCarthy quite explicitly recommended a general policy of delegating management and staffing responsibilities downwards and outwards. Within the administration, departmental heads should be held squarely responsible for the efficiency and effectiveness with which departments carried out ministerial policies, and if not already so
should be made the accounting officers for their departments. Coombs seemed to envisage, even more than the others, a general diffusion of responsibility within departments—by breaking down hierarchy, group decision-making, allocating more authority to regional and local offices, and so on. It is easy to see, in theory, that such developments should free the central agencies, and perhaps ministers, to exercise more effective control over “the big issues that really matter”. Yet for the purposes of responsible government, small issues may often matter just as much . . .?

Sanctions

On this aspect of responsibility there is no particular need to distinguish between the various inquiry reports: they do not differ in attitude and RCAGA can be used as illustration if only because it develops the question most fully. It seems fair to say in summary that the RCAGA report explicitly accepts “responsible government” as the central tenet of our kind of system, explicitly agrees that the nineteenth-century mechanisms for enforcing responsibility upon ministers have lost most of their meaning, and argues that the essentials of the system can be resuscitated with an infusion of new mechanisms—especially in this context the elaboration of sanctions (and rewards) applicable to members of the administration at every level and not merely to ministers.

The relevant term frequently emphasised in the earlier part of the report is “accountability”. In its first few pages the report recalls how ministerial responsibility has been eroded by ministers’ ability to evade responsibility for many official acts, by their inability to know all that goes on in the administration, by the statutory sharing of ministerial responsibility for their departments with the PBS, the departmental head and other officials and by the autonomy of some statutory corporations. And where decisions affecting the public are made by officials whom ministers cannot really control (whether they are anonymous or not) and who cannot be called to account in the way ministers are supposed to be checked, there is “a gap in the hierarchy of responsibility and accountability through which political control could escape altogether” (RC 2.1.6.). The report then notes that there have already been some moves to make certain officials directly accountable to parliament, which “may be seen as weakening direct ministerial responsibility and therefore political control”. The central orientation of the report in this matter is then defined as an attempt to balance the demands of ministerial responsibility and official accountability,
recognising that the realities of contemporary government require that
the bureaucracy be seen as exercising some powers in its own right;
that the independence of those powers requires that those exercising
them should be held accountable; and that the tradition of the
supremacy of Parliament requires that the lines of that accountability
should lead ultimately to Parliament (RC 2.1.8, 2.1.9).

The most significant feature of this brave aspiration, from the
point of view of responsible government, is its apparent assumption
that the lines of responsibility not only cannot, but need not, always
run through ministers. This seems to be a clear assertion that
responsible government does not rest exclusively upon the mecha­
nism of ministerial responsibility, individual or collective. But it is
a brave assertion because it embodies the hope that parlia­
mentarians in their private member capacity can meaningfully fill
the gap that ministers, despite their close connections to the
administration, can no longer straddle. Coombs proposes to further
this process by elaborate and far-reaching mechanisms of official
accountability: the closer matching of rewards and penalties to
individual performance, the more explicit definition of objectives
and tasks against which to measure performance, the transfer of
the main responsibility for “efficiency audit” from the PSB to the
Auditor-General, the development of “effectiveness audit” in PM & C,
the work of the ombudsman and many more detailed measures.
The whole congeries of suggestions makes up a painstaking
prescription for the support of responsible government by institu­
tional reform, but there are at least three awkward problems it does
not squarely face.

One problem is that an unknown, but large, proportion of the
work of holding officials to account cannot, for practical reasons,
be “led back ultimately to parliament”, but must be dealt with by
other officials. The volume of transactions is too vast, and many
are too trivial, not to say technical, to carry to parliament. As at
present, the burden of enforcing responsible official behaviour will
remain largely on official shoulders. How effectively it is borne, from
the point of view of the “public interest”, will depend on elusive
factors like the level of professional integrity and the vigilance of
formal law enforcement, rather than upon those other elusive
factors, the concern and diligence of elected politicians.

A second problem is that the RCAGA recommendations would still
mean an increased mass of reports from the Auditor-General and
other authorities getting through to the parliament for scrutiny and
action. Is parliament capable of expanding its effort, or its
membership, to cope in any significant way with these implications
of “responsible government” in the contemporary situation?
A third problem, only dimly envisaged at the moment, concerns the inherent conflict between this proposed new flow of accountability back to the parliament and the continuing responsibility of ministers which still, in theory, covers so much of the administration. This is not a new problem since it is already raised by the activities of the joint committee of Public Accounts and other parliamentary committees. But if RCAGA were taken seriously the problem would be considerably extended.

**Responsiveness**

If the proposals already discussed, for a more open acknowledgment of official accountability, lead away from traditional ministerial responsibility to a degree that may at times prove embarrassing, much more so does the whole range of suggestions, most extensive in RCAGA and Corbett, for promoting enhanced “responsiveness” in the administration. Here it is recognized that officials deal directly and frequently with interest groups and pressure groups, that they resolve innumerable issues in face-to-face and correspondence contacts with individual citizens, that they may be more intimately familiar with the needs and demands of many groups, and their possible political consequences, than ministers can be. But the quality of many of the contacts, especially with the underprivileged, the unorganized and the uninstructed, leaves much to be desired.

The RCAGA and Corbett cures for the crudity of many official dealings with the citizen are to encourage those dealings to be closer, more direct, more sensitive and more numerous. “Access” to officials at all levels should be smoother and less discriminatory. Official anonymity should be further diluted. Decisions should be taken closer to the point of contact, and there should be more points of contact available. Officials should be openly seen as influential in the development of policy, and so in some sense share the responsibility for it. In practical terms, the disgruntled client at the grassroots as well as the corporation executive paying a lobbyist in Canberra should know who is really to blame when things go wrong. Or so I interpret the general drift of the Coombs discussions, at least.

What this report in particular seems to be saying is first, that at one end of the administrative scale machinery should be developed to enhance ministerial control and broaden ministerial responsibility; second, that through the middle of the scale the old
vertical lines of hierarchical control should be weakened in favour of rank-and-file participation in decisions, task-force-type operational teams, more informal procedures and more delegation of authority; third, that officials at all levels should be held directly accountable for administration through processes of incentives, penalties, efficiency audits and appeal tribunals monitored not by ministers but by parliamentary committees; and fourth, that officials in the operational front line should abjure their vows of silence, anonymity and obedience and become somehow directly accountable not to parliament but to the public. It is not clear just what sanctions could make this accountability effective, while the Public Service Acts are in and people's courts are out. And if the reader feels there is some conflict between the various propositions just listed, it is not because he has misread the text. Either I have misread RCAGA, or not read it closely enough or there is in fact some conflict among the recommendations touching on responsible government. But perhaps some logical contradictions are inherent in any attempt to readjust the idea of responsible government to the realities of modern administration.

**The meaning of Westminster**

It is possible, indeed, that this sense of conflict results more from the potency of the "Westminster" way of looking at government than from the nature of the problems we are considering. For present purposes it is rather important to unravel the tangle of intellectual constructs, emotional responses and pictures of the real world evoked by the phrase "the Westminster system". Central to these (as it seems to me) is what I shall call "the Westminster syndrome"—an abstract model of a set of institutions, and of relationships between them which, after the mid-nineteenth century, were held to facilitate effective government administration which was at the same time amenable to popular influence and, ultimately, control. This syndrome had a complex relationship to the real world of British government. Some scholars and politicians claimed to have inferred the model from observation of evolving governmental practice. Some held up the model, however invented, as a set of precepts to be followed within certain sectors of government. Many politicians and public servants eventually came to believe that they did indeed follow these precepts in their daily work, and the ideas undoubtedly exercised the same diffused influence over behaviour as popular moral canons do, and like them were embodied in laws.
Before offering my version of the Westminster syndrome I shall try to suggest some of the ways in which it is related to the real world. A "Westminster system" is some aspect of a real world in which the Westminster syndrome of ideas or precepts is more or less influential. It is possible to say that in the British parliamentary system the Westminster syndrome is as prevalent in the minds of politicians and public servants as it was a hundred years ago, but that it is less effective—it determines a smaller proportion of the range of government actions now than then. I believe that the Westminster syndrome is as prevalent in the minds of Australian politicians and public servants now as it is among their British counterparts—but that here also it is effective over only a part (I do not know what proportion) of the transactions of government. On these assumptions, which I shall not try to prove, one can say if one likes that Britain (or Australia) now does not "really" have a Westminster system (or a Westminster system any more) because a great many actions in government are taken as though the Westminster syndrome of ideas did not exist. Or one can say that both countries have a Westminster system because much of the syndrome is embodied in legislation and in practice in both countries, and most politicians and senior public servants in both countries would defend the theoretical model of the Westminster system, and many would claim that it guides their official actions—perhaps "ultimately". Whichever criterion one adopts to define "Westminster system", I do not believe there is much to choose between the present real world situations in Britain and Australia.

Some journalists and academic people in Australia bridle angrily at the suggestion that Australian government operates on "the Westminster system", or that it does so "any more". It is often doubtful to others whether this means that the critics dislike the Westminster syndrome (as I call it) because they think it illogical or immoral, or that they think it has little or no influence (or less influence than at some past time) in our governmental systems. A third (I think more sophisticated) criticism is that too many politicians, and particularly officials, hypocritically profess to live by the Westminster syndrome while making decisions in ways that pay no respect to it at all. Now I can no longer delay defining the Westminster syndrome.

But first I cannot stress too much that this set of concepts (if I have it right) was never intended to apply to the whole range of state institutions—for example not to local government nor to judicial, quasi-judicial and certain other agencies created by parliament to be autonomous under their statutes, such as universities and state broadcasting corporations and nationalized industries in
Britain. Apart from these, however, the syndrome assumed that as much as possible of government administrative activity would be brought under the direct control of elected ministers sitting in and "responsible to" the parliament.

So the "doctrine of ministerial responsibility" is the first essential part—but only a part—of the Westminster syndrome. It is perhaps the most difficult part to make sense of, whether as a deduction from practice or as a precept. What is "responsibility"? The usual reply is: accountability—for what is done or proposed by the minister or those under his authority—to parliament or the electorate, on pain of removal, voluntary or enforced, by the parliament or the electorate. This is only translating "democratic control" into institutional terms—but how far do the institutions work like that? How far did they ever work like that? So a part of the critique of the idea that we "have a Westminster system" is a disillusioned answer to those questions—a scepticism about the reality in practice of "ministerial responsibility".

The second part of the Westminster syndrome (as I see it) is the need for an officialdom, quite distinct from the political set of ministers and other parliamentarians. Officialdom is needed for three different kinds of reasons. First, ministers cannot do all the work themselves. Second, much of the work needs more or less elaborate forms of expertise ministers cannot be expected to have or is of a routine kind which would waste ministers' time. Third, an appointed official, who does not owe his place to a popular election or to an elected minister or private member, is more likely to show neither fear nor favour in his dealings with citizens than one who depends for his place on sectional interests. Thus the politician is elected and removable by the popular vote—removable simply when a majority of the electorate do not like him or what he and his minions have done; officials are appointed by an independent authority and no-one can remove them on purely political grounds.

Here we pause a moment to note what the Westminster syndrome does not require, in this connection. It does clearly distinguish the status of the politician from that of the official, in terms of the respective modes of their selection and removal. The politician is elected in order to make him dependent, for his office, upon the will of voters and other political forces. The official is appointed and removed by a quasi-judicial authority according to legal rules, in order to make him independent of such political pressures—a servant of the public. Provided he is appointed and removed in this way, the syndrome does not seem to prescribe other aspects of his tenure—for example, whether it should be permanent, long-term
or short-term. No one suggests that the "temporary" appointments made under all public service acts are inconsistent with the Westminster syndrome. The term of appointments is simply a technical question of what best conduces to the efficiency of the official in the particular position. Some positions may call for long experience and familiarity, some for fairly rapid rotation of incumbents. So the distinction the Westminster syndrome draws between the politician and the official is not between the temporary and the permanent, nor between the short-term occupant of public office and the long-term, but between the elected and the appointed incumbents, between the one subject to political accountability and the one appointed by due process in order to secure expertise and impartiality.

The third part of the Westminster syndrome concerns the "proper" relations between ministers and officials—and here there has been much confusion of thought. It is not essential to the syndrome that there be a clear-cut division of labour—a clear distinction of functions—between the minister and his officials. It does not endorse such cliches as "the minister makes policy, the official is concerned with administration", or "the minister makes the decisions, the official only carries them out", or "the minister is concerned with politics, the official with administration". Indeed, the usual laymen's attempts to distinguish between "politics" and "administration", or policy and administration, simply do not meet the case, as I tried to prove many years ago. Even in layman's terms, one can imagine a minister running a (fictitiously simple) department by himself, policy, administration and all. No one would say he should only make the "policy" and not try to carry it out. By the same token, it is now a platitude that many officials—not only those at the "top"—help to make policy. Some of them do it in close collaboration with the minister. No one suggests that this offends the Westminster syndrome.

What the latter requires is merely that in all decisions (and decisions inevitably merge policy and administration) the elected minister should have the last word, and the appointed official must bow to that. And this of course does not mean that the minister must make all decisions and the officials none. Nor does it mean that the minister should make "only the policy decisions", or the "important decisions". It means that potentially the minister should be in a position to make any decision about anything done by the department (as distinct from appointments and careers of officials), from top to bottom. He is free to intervene anywhere at any time. He cannot intervene everywhere, being human. So he expects, and should make arrangements to ensure, that the department will
always be doing what he would want it to do, and in the way that he would want. To sum up so far, the essential relationship contemplated by the Westminster syndrome does not assume a distinction of function between minister and official, but a distinction of status (elective versus appointive) and the right of the minister to have the last word.

The fourth and final element of the Westminster syndrome, I believe, draws out an implication of the earlier parts. This is that the lines of accountability of the whole administration run from the lowliest official up through his minister to the cabinet, the parliament and ultimately—and only by that circuitous route—to the elector. There is also a rationalization for this element, from the point of view of democratic control. It is related to the notion of the collective responsibility of cabinet. The coordination, through discussion and bargaining in cabinet—especially over the budget—of what all parts of the administration do, is the only means within government, however ineffective, of ensuring that the claims of the interests served by one part of the administration are measured against claims from the rest. Indeed, I would argue that such attempts at fairly balancing the conflicting claims of different interests, and apportioning state-provided “goods” (material or regulatory) accordingly, is the nearest possible approach to a rational conception of “the public interest”. It follows from this reasoning that the internal strains within the administration would be greatly exacerbated by any arrangement which made parts of the administration directly accountable to their own clients and primarily dependent on the latters’ ideas and goodwill. As suggested already, this is one of the problems that some of the Coombs recommendations seem to raise.

It may be helpful to set out this view of the Westminster syndrome diagrammatically, placing it in the wider context of the governmental system as a whole, and thereby noting in passing that the Westminster syndrome is only one aspect of responsible government, and that parts of the system still lie outside responsible or even democratic government.

**Need responsible government stop at Westminster?**

The Westminster syndrome sets up institutions and relationships considered valuable to democracy in parliamentary systems where government is relatively active and technical. But this prescription has not met all the requirements of such systems. First, it is confined to that part of government nominally under “ministerial control”,

POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Other? — Prerogative powers

Executive — Governor-General

Responsible government

Political parties — Electoral system — Media — Courts & tribunals — Statutory corporations

The "Westminster syndrome"

1. "Responsible ministers" in parliament.

2. A partnership of elected ministers and appointed officials (the latter not necessarily permanent).

3. A relationship between ministers and officials: both are engaged in "policy" and "administration" but the minister should be able to have the last word at any level, and officials should be loyal to the current minister.

4. Accountability which runs from official to minister to cabinet to parliament to voters. This is to enable demands of interests pressing on one part of the administration to be measured against competing demands, in "the public interest".

whereas it has proved necessary to entrust some functions to other institutions—courts, local authorities, statutory corporations, parliamentary committees, administrative tribunals, ombudsmen—in which democratic restraints operate (if at all) partly or wholly outside the scope of ministerial control, and in some cases to check ministerial power itself. Second, "ministerial responsibility" as one of the essential elements of the Westminster syndrome has fallen far short of the demands that modern big government has placed upon it. Not only have ministers never secured the right to control all that goes on under government, but they have proved unable to know all that happens even within their own nominal jurisdiction and they have refused to accept responsibility for things done by their own departments which they have not personally supervised.
Further, the sanctions which once held ministers to their responsibility have been weakened by the growing power of both ministers themselves and of political parties.

As we have seen, some of the RCAGA recommendations are directed to increasing the capacity of ministers for more comprehensive control of what matters within the ministerial-departmental realm. Some of the recommendations, also, are directed to making it harder for ministers to evade or disclaim responsibilities in that realm which improved arrangements could bring within their grasp. If we remember that the Westminster syndrome calls only for the potential intervention of the minister wherever it is necessary in order to keep official actions in line with government policy, we should be able to narrow somewhat the range of matters over which ministers can legitimately claim to have lost effective control to the officials. To put the same point in another way, it would be facile to assume that officials are free to run things their own way—differently from the current government’s—to the extent that they have to make decisions on their own without the minister’s direct participation. There are ways of ensuring that, by and large, such decisions will be consistent with what the minister would have wanted. If it were not so, no organization could ever operate consistently once its transactions multiplied beyond the ability of one person to oversee them all directly.

But in relation to modern government it seems to be generally accepted that, even though certain reforms could broaden the scope of effective ministerial control, much will still escape it in practice. While the Westminster syndrome requires only that the minister should be able to have “the last word” where there is a potential divergence between the official and himself, it is, for the operation of the syndrome, too frequently the case that the minister, who might have judged otherwise, is not brought into the situation of confrontation where he has the opportunity of having the last word. RCAGA seems to accept this—hence its search for other forms of accountability that can be applied to the administration. At the same time the commission seems to have believed that the Westminster syndrome provides comprehensive canons for the operation of democratic parliamentary government. Thereby, perhaps, RCAGA falls into a logical trap. On the one hand it has demonstrated, or at least asserted, that a vital aspect of the Westminster syndrome—ministerial responsibility and therefore parliamentary and popular control through ministers—is to a serious degree unworkable. On the other hand, when trying to suggest alternative forms of accountability, RCAGA stops short of some very important steps—such as breaking down ministerial control over public information.
and records, and breaching official reticence—because they seem inconsistent with the Westminster syndrome, while recommending others—such as greater devolution and less hierarchy in decision-making—that seem calculated to weaken the ministerial control over administration which is a central feature of the Westminster syndrome.

It is possible that a clearer view of the nature of the Westminster syndrome itself, such as I have attempted to give above, together with a recognition that the syndrome does not inform all aspects of modern parliamentary government, could have helped to avoid or resolve some of the inconsistencies we have sensed in the report. In order to test this, let me briefly examine the series of additional forms of accountability mooted—but not always endorsed—in the RCAGA report, in the hope of seeing (a) whether they would really clash with the essentials to which I have tried to pare down the Westminster syndrome, and (b) which of such clashes may be justified in the light of the broader conception of responsible government I have outlined—of which the Westminster syndrome is a subordinate, only partly effective, and not unalterable part.

As already indicated, the commission’s majority shrank from endorsing a decisive shift toward “open government” as a means of making ministers and officials more accountable. Untrammeled public and parliamentary access to public records (as one form of open government) is resisted in the name of the Westminster syndrome, by suggesting that ministers should be held responsible for deciding which records if disclosed would infringe the individual citizen’s privacy, or advantage his business competitors, or betray the confidences or security of foreign states, or shatter the mutual loyalty of members of the cabinet. But it is not the Westminster syndrome which justifies ministers in claiming that right of decision. It is merely the fact that ministers are heirs to the undemocratic powers (the “prerogatives”) of absolute monarchs. The political significance of the ministerial monopoly of the control of the “public” records is that it is open to grave abuse: ministers are powerfully tempted to conceal as long as possible what may be to their discredit, while genuinely responsible government would require precisely that material to be open to the scrutiny of the political opposition and the public which has a greater claim to control the records than an ephemeral ministry. This is not to deny that there may be good reasons, as indicated above, for withholding some records, but rather to suggest that judicial tribunals, which have already made some inroads in this direction, would be the appropriate bodies to identify those records under a system of genuinely responsible government.
A closely-related means of strengthening accountability which RCAGA also rejects would be much freer public and parliamentary access to the knowledge and views of officials, including the views expressed in their advice to ministers or other responsible office-holders. Such proposals, especially the last one, are strongly resisted on the ground that they would threaten the stability of the relationship between ministers and officials which we have included as the third element of the Westminster syndrome. The arguments are familiar, and in an earlier section we have noted the doubts eminent commentators have thrown upon them, while recognizing the great growth in personal maturity and security that would be required to modify the conventional relationship. The notable inconsistency of RCAGA in this connection lies in its reluctance to disturb the present rights of ministers to muzzle officials in their own interest, after talking about the need to acknowledge more openly the autonomous roles that officials play in the development of policy and in the relations between government and private groups. Given that the Westminster syndrome requires that the minister should always be able to have the last word, even public comment on current issues by officials would be legitimate if those concerned were relaxed enough to cope psychologically with it. But whatever awkwardness the unmuzzling of officials might have for the Westminster syndrome under present conditions, it is a necessary condition of democratic, responsible government in the broader sense.

On closer examination the relationship between accountability and RCAGA’s recommendations for more delegation and more responsiveness in the administration appears to be indeterminate. The fixing of clearer responsibilities upon specific officials down the line is not necessarily incompatible with retaining an effective “last word” for the minister, nor with the minister remaining answerable to parliament. Neither is a greater responsiveness of officials to public needs and demands—as long as there is ministerial authority for any substantial change in policy or practice. If delegation of authority more clearly identifies those who actually wield it, to that extent it makes government more responsible. But greater delegation and more responsiveness could also mean more real official autonomy in practice, in which case accountability through the minister would be weakened (as RCAGA noted). As was also noted, accountability through the minister has become pretty tenuous in any case. Are there any forms of official accountability which do not simply confuse issues and tangle lines of responsibility?

Any form of official accountability which by-passes ministers and simply “leads back to parliament” tends either to tangle the lines
or to have little meaning for responsible government, or both. The obvious examples in RCAGA are the various proposals to make officials more “accountable” by systems of incentives, rewards and penalties, by personal assessment, efficiency audits and reviews by a parliamentary committee on public administration. Several points can be made about these. A line of accountability that leads back to parliament may conflict with the line of responsibility that leads from the official to the minister (and thence in a different way to parliament). This conflict comes to a focus where the parliamentary committee wants records or views from the official that his minister does not want them to have: In that impasse the Westminster syndrome at present generally prevails over effective responsible government. Second, the parliamentary committee (and parliament itself for that matter) has no way of enforcing accountability against the official. So the only way of making this process significant would be, as already suggested, to enable it to be used to enforce responsibility against the minister—by getting at the facts and judgments by which the minister’s own performance and that of his department can be more knowledgeably appraised. However, as things now stand, a parliamentary committee will not be able to promote accountability in much of the administration in a year. Just as control of the bureaucracy might be enhanced by a much enlarged ministry, so accountability of officials or ministers to parliament would require at least a massive increase in parliament’s resources, and might benefit from an increase in its size. Short of extensive changes in the machinery and attitudes of parliament, the accountability envisaged through efficiency audits and the like would be mainly the mutual accountability of officials, and would have little to do with responsible government.

It may be suggested, finally, that the line most worth exploring for more effective accountability of the bureaucracy is one which potentially ignores ministerial responsibility and cuts through the whole of the Westminster syndrome, and upon which the Coombs report had virtually nothing to say despite its emphasis upon improving accountability. It is possible that the whole of the RCAGA recommendations on that subject would not do so much for responsible government as a determined and sustained attempt to develop a comprehensive and coordinated system of administrative law and tribunals. As a result of an extensive inquiry in 1971–72 the Law Reform Commission of nsw estimated that a citizen of that state had a right of appeal against about one in twenty of the types of decisions that public authorities, including ministers, could make affecting him. That commission’s recommendations for rationalizing and enlarging the system of appeals in administration
gain more interest from the promptitude with which the state ministry rejected them—save for the least significant (though useful) one, the establishment of an ombudsman.

Notes

4. Enid Campbell, “Ministers, Public Servants and the Executive Branch”, paper delivered to the Federal Anniversary Seminar, University of Melbourne Faculty of Law, 8 August 1976 (mimeo), 43, 45.
10. At Canberra the institution of “budget cabinet”—cabinet meetings specially devoted to hammering the draft budget into final shape—provides bargaining opportunities at this level apparently denied to ministers in, say, London and Ottawa where cabinet first sees the budget in virtually its final form.
The chapters by Professors Self and Parker address in depth such a diverse range of issues that a review of them must be selective. I have chosen to concentrate upon an area in which they overlap: the efficacy of the Westminster model for descriptions of and prescriptions for contemporary Australian government. In particular, I shall be concerned with questions about the relationship between officials and ministers—the appointed and the elected elements of the executive—within the context of conventional notions of ministerial responsibility. While these matters are of central importance to both chapters, no less than for RCAGA and the other inquiries under discussion, the proportion of each chapter within this area of overlapping concern differs considerably. Thus it will be apparent that to select this topic is to focus discussion more towards Professor Parker’s chapter than towards Professor Self’s, but Self’s has in part supplied the lens through which the issues are being examined.

Self’s overview: the agendas of administrative reform

In a characteristic combination of gentle manner and tough judgment, Self describes the RCAGA’s report as “generally interesting and sometimes subtle”. His own chapter is invariably interesting and always subtle. We are given a clear delineation of the dominant features of the report as well as a precise indication of the significant details. The vantage point is Self’s critical discussion of theories of administrative change; as a perspective upon the commission it has lifted our debate not only upon RCAGA but upon all of the inquiries discussed. His overview has done more than give shape and order to our reading of RCAGA: it has taught us new ways of understanding this field of investigation.

Self’s sympathy towards the commission, its staff, and the circumstances of the report is evident throughout. Yet his criticisms of the report are far-reaching and should be understood as the sum
not only of his suggestions and specific doubts, but also of his reticence—of leaving unstated, though rarely failing to suggest, the broader implications of many of his detailed observations and reservations. Self's analysis of the report's forward estimates proposals, the centrepiece of RCAGA's recommendations, is an illustration of the full force of his judgment, animated by an insistence upon the capacity of government to defy vogueish theory and vaunted reform alike. One does not need to emphasize how much of the report is undone even by this example of Self's critique.

Self's typology of possible agendas of administrative reform enables us to make sense of the inconsistencies in RCAGA, putting its disparate fragments into related bundles, while exposing the lack of coherence between them overall. This lack of overall coherence accounts for a widespread sense of disappointment with the report, as in Spann's comment that, notwithstanding its merit in parts, the report offered "no sense of well-directed intellectual inquiry", or, indeed, in Self's own observation that it might have aimed rather more at becoming a durable blueprint for reform.

We all realize the commission's plight. RCAGA's terms of reference required it to cover all three of Self's agendas. Wishing to achieve change (to act politically), it made political calculations about which agendas of administrative reform it would get through. Hawker and Bailey have explained with great candour the rationale behind these choices. In Hawker's words, "a committee appointed to do a political job will not produce an analytical exercise". Alas for RCAGA! A commission of inquiry will inevitably be judged both for its political effect and as an analytical exercise. Some might even want to argue for a correlation between the quality of analysis and the prospects for political effect. The demand for overall coherence or superior analysis does not require that the eventual report make explicit a commission's views on every subject conceivably before it, or to which it has given consideration, but simply that within those things a commission chooses to say, and between these and those matters for which tactics or time dictate silence, it is desirable to discern a pattern or design which has imposed some order upon its priorities, some intelligibility in the evidence it has assembled, and some vigour in approaching its conclusions. This does not appear to have happened with RCAGA. Rather, from Hawker's chapter we gain a picture of a commission bent upon reforming government yet resembling nothing so much as the government which created it.

In his review of what RCAGA made of its daunting task, Self demonstrates its preoccupation with the social agenda, discounting the significance of most of the little it contributed on either the
political or the managerial agendas. Although it is under the "social agenda" that the commission may be expected to have its greatest impact, the longer-term administrative and political implications of some of these proposals are "less clear" than the familiar themes inscribed on that agenda.

At this point Self's typology assists my discussion of the treatment of relations between ministers and officials both by RCAGA and by Parker. The commission divorced its treatment of the social agenda from the other two, and especially from the political agenda. As a result it has been able, in Self's words, to denigrate the conventions of the "Westminster model" without (probably) really altering them. I shall also argue, later, that a failure generally to harness proposals under the social agenda to the political agenda effectively weakens the elected element of the political system with disturbing implications for representative democracy. A discussion of the political agenda is thus seen to be crucial for theories of and attempts at administrative change.

**Parker's syndrome and responsible government**

The items Self lists on his political agenda are the questions Parker takes up in his chapter. He offers us an interpretation of "the meaning of Westminster" with, if I understand him, two broad aims in mind. First, he seeks "to unravel the tangle of intellectual constructs, emotional responses, and pictures of the real world evoked by the phrase 'the Westminster system' ". Second, he aims to cut through the tangle, identifying the essentials in a way that would permit a reformulation of notions of responsibility congruent with the "Westminster syndrome", as he calls it, and applicable in the contemporary world. The problems Parker tackles are indeed vital and serious challenges for students of Australian government and administration, though I have a number of difficulties with and objections to his account. Exploring these difficulties and objections may add a piece or two to the puzzles he has set before us.

**The Westminster syndrome: problems of construction**

My first set of difficulties with Parker's account of the Westminster syndrome concerns the construction of his account. My problems begin with his term, "syndrome", and with what it is intended to cover. When introduced the "Westminster syndrome" is defined as an "abstract model of a set of institutions and of relationships
between them . . . .". Later, however, it becomes a set of "ideas or precepts" more or less prevalent in the minds of politicians and public servants; it is a "set of concepts"; and it "sets up institutions and relationships . . . ." Clearly my chief difficulty here is the departure from the original definition to the extended discussion in terms of the Westminster syndrome as a set of ideas or precepts. The latter seems to me to be what he has principally in mind when referring to the syndrome; my interpretation will follow his usage of his term rather than his formal definition of it.

It is important to establish this reading of Parker's term because I want to distinguish between Westminster syndrome and Westminster system, broadly between ideas or principles on the one hand and institutions on the other. I shall interpret the Westminster syndrome as the set of axioms which underlie those concrete institutions and practices which Parker refers to as the Westminster system.

This brings me to the second of my difficulties with Parker's construction of his account. The syndrome, or set of axioms, may be discovered or inferred from an inspection of the institutions and practices of a polity or polities. His account suffers from a difficulty attending most constructions of the Westminster model. One can envisage a model being abstracted from a comparative inspection of the parliamentary democracies in the new commonwealth, or even of Britain and the old dominions, and labelled the "Westminster model". Most accounts, however, begin not with a comparative inspection but essentially with a special case—the British system. Westminster is more deeply embedded in most accounts of Westminster models than is usually admitted Parker's account seems to me to be no exception. This presents serious difficulties when transposing Westminster doctrines of responsibility into the alien landscapes to which the model is said to have been transported. Such difficulties are of two kinds.

First, there are axioms which arguably underlie politics in Westminster yet which are not present in our system. In what sense is Parker's account of the Westminster syndrome complete without including such axioms? Upon what criteria are they excluded? An example of this sort of difficulty is the axiom of British politics that parliament is sovereign. Clearly this is a fundamental idea or principle: much opposition to British membership of the EEC appealed to this axiom against the abridgment of that sovereignty by supranational institutions. Clearly also this axiom interlocks with those identified by Parker: indeed one can ask whether the dignity ascribed to parliament by this axiom does not increase the weight and seriousness of the axiom that ministers are responsible
to parliament for the conduct of their departments. However, it is sufficient for my purposes that his syndrome omits an axiom crucial for politics in Westminster, yet which we do not and cannot share.5

Second, those axioms which Parker identifies as the Westminster syndrome are frustrated, fragmented or confused by our institutional framework. Is it therefore appropriate to seek to apply these axioms here at all? Two examples may illustrate different aspects of this problem. First, what strength does the axiom that ministers are responsible to parliament derive in practice from the unitary nature of British politics? By contrast, how depleted, indeed how practicable, is this axiom in a federal system such as our own? Granted, Parker notes the “exacerbation” of difficulties in maintaining responsible government presented by federal systems, but are these difficulties of kind or of degree? Federalism fragments, obscures and confuses the spheres of responsibility and hence the lines of accountability. Where power is shared so intricately how are the mechanisms of information, control, sanctions and responsiveness to be put to work? Can we with hindsight give a different administrative content to Hackett’s 1891 declaration of the essential incompatibility between federalism and responsible government?6 RCAGA’s relative silence on these problems may be understandable yet this surely breeds a great unreality in the report as Self implies. For this very reason, while I welcome Self’s observation that some of our problems with the Westminster model are peculiar to us, I dissent from his observation that the administrative effectiveness of Australian federal ministers should be greater than their British counterparts because the volume of central government business is substantially less here than in Britain. This overlooks the additional difficulties for ministers and departments of coordination and competition presented by our system, particularly since the “national” parties are state-based.

A further illustration of the difficulty of making a shared axiom congruent with a different set of institutions is posed in the problem of how the axiom that ministers are responsible to parliament is to be translated from an essentially unicameral legislature to a bicameral legislature in which the powers of the two chambers are virtually equal. This is now a compelling question in Australian politics and it is one to which I see no ready answer. What meaning is now to be given here to the expression of the doctrine of ministerial responsibility in the form that ministers are obliged to “resign if censured by a majority of the parliament”? As Colin Hughes has observed
today constitutional logic demands that [a government] or [a Minister] must resign should [a motion of no-confidence] be carried in either chamber. If there is no resignation, then supply can be withheld to enforce the point. Accordingly it can be argued that when the then Attorney-General, Senator Murphy, erred in not resigning when the Senate carried a motion of no confidence in him, the then Governor General, Sir Paul Hasluck, erred in not withdrawing his commission when he did not resign . . . .'

Have the events of 1975 made government with a hostile senate impossible? Can any government now be legitimately commissioned with a majority in the house of representatives alone? What would Sir John Kerr have done if the results on 13 December 1975 had repeated those of 18 May 1974? It is at present uncertain how an essential axiom of responsible government is to be made to work in our institutions. Moreover, the questions that pose this problem are a timely reminder that critical tests for responsible government can arise independently of officials and the mechanisms of administrative responsibility and almost entirely within the domain of party politics.

Yet insofar as the axiom holds that officials are responsible to parliament through ministers, our assertive bicameralism has a direct impact upon officials no less than upon ministers. The summoning of officials before the bar of the senate in July 1975 raised the question, "to whom ministers are responsible?" in its sharpest form. Do officials called before the bar of a chamber owe a greater obligation to the "parliament" or to the "government"? If an obligation is owed to the government, is it greater than that owed to a minister of the government? As Spann notes, the PSB's oblique reference to the salient test case for this dilemma, namely Sir Frederick Wheeler's obligations to Dr. Cairns, continues to assert the duality of the obligation to minister and government. That verdict must be seen as seriously qualifying an official's obligation to his minister and simultaneously enlarging the scope for official discretion in relation to that obligation.

The Westminster syndrome: problems of interpretation

Turning from difficulties with Parker's construction of the Westminster syndrome to the interpretation of responsible government based upon it, my problems again come in pairs. The first relates to the syndrome's constituent parts and hinges upon the relationship between ministers and officials. My second criticism relates to Parker's evaluation of the relationship between the syndrome and
the broader system of responsible government. A revised version of the syndrome—or set of axioms, in my terms—allows me to present a different and more positive evaluation of the function of these axioms and their associated institutions as legitimizing the broader political system, including limited departures from practices consonant with these axioms.

Parker identifies four parts to his Westminster syndrome. These are:

1. The doctrine of ministerial responsibility.
2. A distinction in status between the elected and the appointed governors (arising from "the need for an officialdom").
3. The right of the minister to have the last word in relations with officials.
4. Lines of accountability run from official through minister and cabinet to parliament, and only thence to electors.

My quarrel here is with the second item, which I believe must be eliminated from the series. The first item implies the existence of or "need for" an officialdom, while the third part is the axiomatic expression of the relationship between minister and official, and hence defines their respective status. The four-part syndrome can therefore be reduced to a logically consistent triad:

1. that ministers are responsible to parliament for the conduct of their departments;
2. that in relations between ministers and officials, ministers have the last word;
3. that officials are accountable to the public only through the accountability of ministers and cabinet to parliament.

In this light Parker's discussion of the second part of his syndrome can be seen to belong to the level of institutional innovation rather than to the level of axiomatic discourse. Indeed his lucid discussion of the distinction between tenure and status of officials seems to me an excellent example of how to go about devising institutions and practices congruent with the basic ideas and precepts.

Furthermore, this reformulation of Parker's syndrome into axiomatic principles is necessary because his discussion of ministers and officials at this point is inconsistent with the other parts of his syndrome. Indeed, in this respect his Westminster syndrome departs from the Westminster model rather than illuminates it. I have already maintained that the distinction in status between official and minister is covered by the third element, reinforced by the fourth and the first. I am not denying the importance of officials here, nor their political role. They were surely described accurately by Richard Neustadt over a decade ago when he portrayed the
government of Britain as a "virtual duopoly" of ministers and senior officials, based upon the "tacit treaty" by which officials trade loyalty to government decision in return for ministerial consultation with officials before decisions are taken.\footnote{Parker's departure from both the requirements of his own prescriptions for lines of accountability and a classical feature of the Westminster model occurs in his description of the official as "a servant of the public" and in his suggestion that the quasi-judicial mode of the official's appointment is to secure "expertise and impartiality". As the axioms make apparent, the thrust of the Westminster system is that officials are servants, not of the public, but of the government of the day. In this sense, what is required of officials whose expertise is placed in the service of the government is not so much "impartiality" as \textit{loyalty} to that government.}

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The constant challenge of the Westminster model, both to theory and in practice, is therefore how to achieve genuine vulnerability of government to opposition without sacrificing the efficacy of government altogether. There is a perennial trade-off between accountability and efficiency. Not every test of ministerial responsibility will invoke its direct sanctions. In terms of the wartime distinction between \textit{SABUS} and \textit{SNAFUS},\textsuperscript{10} it will be important to distinguish between the mundane administrative mistake and the monumental executive blunder. Thus, as David Butler argues, the everyday test of ministerial responsibility is simple ministerial answerability, arousing parliamentary expectations of domestic courtesy rather than of dramatic scenes.\textsuperscript{11} None of this gainsays that in an age of big government the odds are stacked in the executive's favour. That the Westminster model's fusion of bureaucracy and ministry exacerbates this problem, I freely concede. Yet I believe that many of the model's would-be reformers, and most of its critics, have misunderstood or underestimated the difficulties either of altering or of abandoning it.
This brings me directly to the problem of evaluating the significance of the axioms, to assessing the relationship between Parker’s syndrome as I have modified it and the broader operations of responsible government. I agree entirely with Parker that democratic or responsible government refers to much more than ministerial responsibility. It is also evident that large and important areas of political systems of this sort will be independent of or only remotely linked to the institutions of ministerial responsibility. My dispute is with his assessment that ministerial responsibility is a “subordinate” part of the broader conception of responsible government.

Ministerial responsibility is at the heart of responsible government because the function of the axioms I have identified is to legitimate government within the system as a whole. Of course these three axioms are not a full account of the principles of legitimacy for the total system: other axioms affect such key elements of a responsible system as universal adult suffrage or due process at law. Nevertheless, while not a sufficient account of legitimacy, these axioms are necessary. Their vital contribution is to make rule acceptable. They connect the other values underlying the system to the parliamentary confrontation between the powers of government and the mechanisms of representative democracy. These axioms are at the heart of the system, rather than subordinate within it, because they concern those institutions which are central both to authoritative political decision and to popular representation within the system.

Indeed, it is possible to extend this argument to include those aspects of the broader system which are not covered by the institutions of ministerial responsibility. The autonomous, and at times undemocratic, operation of such parts of the system requires to be justified as a departure from the basic set of ideas and institutions. The legitimacy of other organs and institutions within the system thus derives from the legitimacy attaching to the central representative institution—the legislature—and the central manifestation of the executive—cabinet and the bureaucracy. It is largely because these axioms are so vital to the legitimacy of the system as a whole that the Westminster model so obstinately defeats attempts to get around it or to do away with it.

The link forged in the Westminster model between government and legislature may be crude, but it is undeniable. The connection between rule and representation gives the model its durability. By contrast, most attempts to escape the Westminster model become an escape from representative politics as well. The classic refuges from elective politics in our time are legalism, therapy and rational
decisionism. Examples of each of these can be found in the institutional reforms canvassed in Parker's chapter. Thus, judicial and administrative tribunals are an appeal to legal values. The link between open government and "more mature psychological attitudes" is, so long as politics breeds its own anxieties, a therapeutic hope as well as a slim one. The demand for more access to information as a means of enforcing responsibility suggests a rational conception of decisions: if we had all the papers, we would know all the facts, or all the reasons, or both.

Each of these forms of escape from the Westminster model is ultimately an escape from politics. The model's merit, and most of the difficulties it occasions, is that it attempts to forge responsibility while accepting politics. Contrary to some accounts, it does not separate administration from politics; the Neustadtian formula is thoroughly consistent with it. The Westminster model, indeed, makes nonsense of the recent invention in Australian politics of a "caretaker" government. That could only have been the work of lawyers.

Improving the system

The Westminster model may be in trouble, but the dominant response to its difficulties and deficiencies clearly reflects an avowal of reform rather than an attitude of despair. The preceding exposition of the model can be linked to these reform proposals through a brief comment upon two aspects of them.

First, more attention might be paid to bureaucratic means of strengthening the collective performance of cabinet within the system. Bagehot's "buckle" has loosened, but it is still there and it is still vital. The scope for ministerial involvement is greater than is often admitted. Indeed, the critique of ministerial responsibility is certain to be a comfortable doctrine for ministers themselves: it promises to get them off the hook. Are there devices that will assist ministers to assert their involvement and thus fairly keep them on the hook? Self has succinctly reviewed the typical innovations. Two call for comment here. First, I would underscore his criticism of RCAGA's neglect of long-term planning. This is an area in which cabinet needs and can reasonably be given collective as well as departmental advice. Moreover, such planning units offer a ready opportunity for the flexible mix of skills, backgrounds and careers which most reformers seek to inject into officialdom. Secondly, a cabinet must have resources to move the machine. Hence the vital significance to the elected rulers of Self's managerial agenda, again
so much ignored in _RCAGA_. Can the reformers devise means which will both enable governments to shape the bureaucracy to their needs, yet also protect the individuals within officialdom?

Second, attempts to create new forms of bureaucratic accountability contend directly with the institutional and axiomatic elements of political legitimacy, which is why change is so difficult, especially if piecemeal. Schemes proposing bureaucratic accountability independent of ministerial responsibility raise issues on each of Self’s agendas. Only analysis in terms of each agenda can reveal the impact of such proposals upon the system and its legitimacy. That is why partial analysis is unsatisfactory, and piecemeal attempts are inadequate. By confining itself to the social agenda and failing to confront many of its recommendations with issues on the political and managerial agendas, _RCAGA_ pursued a dangerous logic. The proposals for direct accountability of officials to the public appear to rest upon the naive assumption that a bureaucracy which ministers have difficulty controlling will nevertheless be amenable to its clients. Without even the weak intrusion of representative politics that we now enjoy, I believe that bureaucracy would quickly succeed in making its clients amenable to it. In places the logic of _RCAGA_ seems to be the logic of the administrative state.

The major difficulty confronting attempts to invent new forms of accountability for officials is, in Self’s phrase, ‘‘the incompatibilities between political and bureaucratic styles of decision-making’’. The possibility and desirability of reducing these incompatibilities is, ‘‘an issue which can be crucial for the affects of managerial innovations’’. _RCAGA_ failed to take this problem sufficiently into account. It is not the Westminster model that separates politics and administration, but the determined effort of many of its reformers.

**The radical critique**

The Westminster model has many doctors, but few coroners. The latter’s verdict, that the model is moribund, is a serious challenge to orthodoxy and a corrective to any facile complacency. While the radical critique surfaces in places in _RCAGA_ it has not yet supplied a sustained account of its position. Nevertheless, the outlines of the critique are clear and much of the evidence it assembles is an embarrassment for established doctrine. Before it can be fully effective as an attack upon the Westminster model, this critique needs to overcome two obstacles.

First, the critique has so far been directed to the institutions and
practices of government, rather than to the axioms underlying the system and the relationships between these aspects of the total model. As a critique of the institutions and practices, the radical account has so far been vitiated by concentrating almost solely upon the bureaucracy. Unfortunately, this allows the strengths of the radicals’ case to be overlooked and their position dismissed as crudely anti-bureaucratic. The critique has yet to turn its attention to deficiencies in the elected element of government. It has still to expose the contributions of politicians no less than of officials to the crisis of our political institutions. Moreover, the critique would gain additional force by examining certain assumptions within the model about the relationship between ministerial responsibility and other elements of the system, for example the role of the media. Surely the strains at the centre of the model have been exacerbated by the breakdown of related institutions, which no longer support the centre in the way the model suggests.

Second, by ignoring the axiomatic aspect of the model, the radical critique has underestimated the scale of its task. It is tackling the fundamental precepts of legitimacy for the system, but it has not provided an account of how its institutional recommendations fit the existing principles of legitimacy. Nor has it yet supplied an alternative constitutional theory that will connect a different set of axioms to a new set of institutions. One has only to pose the problem to see the magnitude of the task.

The struggle between leadership and bureaucracy is sharp, but scarcely new. Weber saw history as “the variegated struggle between disciplinization and individual charisma”.” We still live in the tension Weber describes, but, because we have seen the political shape it can take, we are unwilling to put our faith in his prescription for charismatic leadership of plebiscitarian democracy. Responsible government can be seen as a deliberate attempt to break through that struggle, yet its victory is never final.

Nor is its victory assured. As Self remarks, the traditional democratic theory of the relationship between political will and bureaucracy is no longer credible. Is it possible to invent new theories that will replace the discredited account? Herein lies the seriousness of the radicals’ challenge.

This suggests a hypothesis concerning commissions of inquiry. A collective commission of inquiry may be technically inventive, but cannot be theoretically inventive. Such commissions will at best codify existing theory and debates; at worst they will be captured by a particular and partial theory. They always depend upon the existing stock of knowledge.
Peter Wilenski hoped that RCAGA would be “a dividing line”. So it is. It shows us what was known then. Already we are on the other side of that dividing line. RCAGA, Self and Parker have set a lot of issues on an agenda for research and academic inquiry. We are already at work on the next commission and the quality of our analysis will affect the quality of its performance.

Notes

1. Professor Spann has suggested that three models of administration could be discerned in the report and that the commission did not always appear aware of the inconsistencies between them. He called these the “political” model, the “accountable management” model, and the “participatory” model. (Clues to the differences between these models can be found in his article “The Coombs Doctrine” in Cameron Hazelhurst and J.R. Nethercote, (eds). Reforming Australian Government (Canberra: RIPA and ANU Press, 1977), 78–86, as well as in his chapter for this volume.) It would be interesting to check the instances of these models within the report against the issues it is addressing in each case, and to relate these issues to Self’s typology of agendas. It might then turn out that the commission has been consistent in its inconsistencies, applying a different model of administration to each of these agendas.

2. He found support in Professor Wilenski’s view that “RCAGA was established as a political instrument to deal with political problems. After 11 November 1975 its failure was inevitable.” That view seems to me to underestimate the opportunity for the commission to make a lasting impact, beyond the immediate requirements of political expediency.


4. As has been noted, a “Westminster model” produced from this set of constitutional arrangements would make Westminster itself a departure from the model. A. Allott, cited in L. Wolf-Phillips, “The ‘Westminster Model’ in Israel”, Parliamentary Affairs, 26(4), 1973, 417n.

5. A point overlooked by RCAGA at RC 2.1.8 and RC 2.1.9. Compare Whitlam’s view that “It is the High Court’s function, not the government’s, to draw the line” limiting the constitutional exercise of power “The Labor Government and the Constitution” in G, Evans (ed). Labor and the Constitution 1972–1975 (Richmond, Vic.: Heinemann, 1977), 314.


12. Cf the discussion by Self on the lack of a clear connection between "more information" and "more accountability" and the obstacles in our system to "open government" on the Swedish model.


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