

APS 'impotent' in solving big challenges

Adrian Rollins

FORMER head of the public service Terry Moran warns chronic underinvestment by successive governments has rendered the bureaucracy "impotent" in solving the country's big challenges.

In a scathing assessment of the current state of the Australian Public Service, Mr Moran and Centre for Policy Development chief executive officer Travers McLeod, argue the increasing use of consultants and contractors is undermining the APS's capabilities and reducing government accountability.

"Successive governments

have made the APS impotent in solving big problems in the best interests of Australian communities," they said.

Their comments follow Prime Minister Scott Morrison's decision to launch a series of changes to the public service including cutting the number of departments from 18 to 14 and dumping five department secretaries.

The Prime Minister has said he wants to "bust bureaucratic congestion" and drive greater collaboration in order to improve the delivery of government services.

Mr Moran said some of the department amalgamations made sense. But he cau-

tioned that the government's extensive use of contractors was undermining the APS's ability to provide advice and deliver services.

"They have outsourced so much to the private sector that the APS no longer has a connection with what is happening on the ground, and is unable, in the interests of the citizen, to achieve joined-up service delivery."

Mr Moran and Mr McLeod called on the government to relax its constraints on resourcing the bureaucracy.

"The step-change the PM wants is achievable. But it will only be achieved with a public service funded to

think for itself and to deliver missions for Australia alongside communities and businesses," they said.

In his government-commissioned review of the public service, former Telstra boss David Thodey urged the government to scrap its cap on staffing levels because of concerns it was narrowing the APS's capabilities.

Mr Moran and Mr McLeod echoed Thodey review concerns of acute risks for policy, regulation and service delivery if its recommendations were ignored.

"The Thodey report nailed the real problems of the APS," Mr Moran said, adding

that improvements in performance will not be realised "unless the Prime Minister concedes the ... average staffing level caps corrode capability".

The government accepted most of the review's suggestions, though many only in part, and rejected several key proposals, including removing the staffing cap, moving towards a common set of pay scales and work conditions, and making it tougher to hire and fire department secretaries.

Mr Moran said that if the Prime Minister wanted to improve the delivery of government services he should

also consider the "place-based approach" advocated by the Centre for Policy Development, which he chairs.

The centre is helping trial a model for service delivery in which the Commonwealth, in partnership with a revitalised local government sector and state governments, operates to deliver services through local networks, under the authority of local government.

"[Such partnerships] draw a line under the fantasy that outsourcing is a panacea," Mr Moran and Mr McLeod said.

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Holding the fort over holidays

Daniella White

WORK is the last thing many Canberrans will be thinking about as they enjoy Christmas Day with family and friends.

But for some, it's just another day in the office.

From hospital workers, bus drivers, police, paramedics and yes, even journalists, there are plenty of people who keep Canberra running during the holiday period.

Canberra's light rail network will celebrate its first Christmas this year and driver Warren Parsons volunteered to work it.

He doesn't have any family in Canberra, so spending the day with customers is the next best thing.

"I do like to work so I can spend time with people instead of being home alone," Mr Parsons said.

"That's what I crave the most - to be around people."

Everyone will enjoy free travel on Christmas Day, but Mr Parsons is hoping to spread some more festive cheer. A keen baker, he will bring some Christmas cake to share with colleagues and dress up in an elf t-shirt and hat.

With decades experience in the transport industry, he's used to working at Christmas - after all people still need to travel during the holiday period.

"Out of the last 20 years I've worked the last 13 Christmases," he said.



ABOVE: Warren Parsons is a light rail driver who will be working on Christmas Day. LEFT: Wardsmen Tony Goreski and Jason Ford and registered nurse Megan Charlton are among the Canberra Hospital staff that will be working over the Christmas break. Pictures: Karleen Minney

patients' days. Wardsmen Jason Ford and Tony Goreski both do shift work so working on Christmas Day is nothing new to them.

"I've worked the last six in a row - it's a bit more festive than usual and you try to cheer people up," Mr Goreski said.

Wardspeople are essential staff to the smooth running of the hospital, with their jobs involving transporting patients, responding to code blacks, performing CPR and restraining violent patients. Working the holidays can take its toll, but they know sickness doesn't stop for public holidays.

"Everyone is in the same

boat, they're missing their families on Christmas Day so basically everyone you're working with is your family that day," Mr Ford said.

By helping to make sure the hospital functions, it means their kids miss out on having Dad home on the special day.

"You wake up, open the presents and rush to build them before you come to work," Mr Goreski said.

"The kids are a bit upset that you've got to come to work but you've got to do what you've got to do."

Nurse Megan Charlton will be working the morning shift on Christmas Day at the hospital.

She has young children so they are going to celebrate on Boxing Day instead.

"They're too little to know otherwise," she said.

Ms Charlton said she would focus on trying to make the day a little more bearable for patients.

"I'll wear a nice bright scrub shirt and I think some of the wards have put together little gift packs for patients to try to brighten things up and I'm sure they'll be lots of food," she said.

"No one wants to be sick on Christmas and especially when you're sick and away from your loved ones I think we'll try to brighten it up as much as we can."