

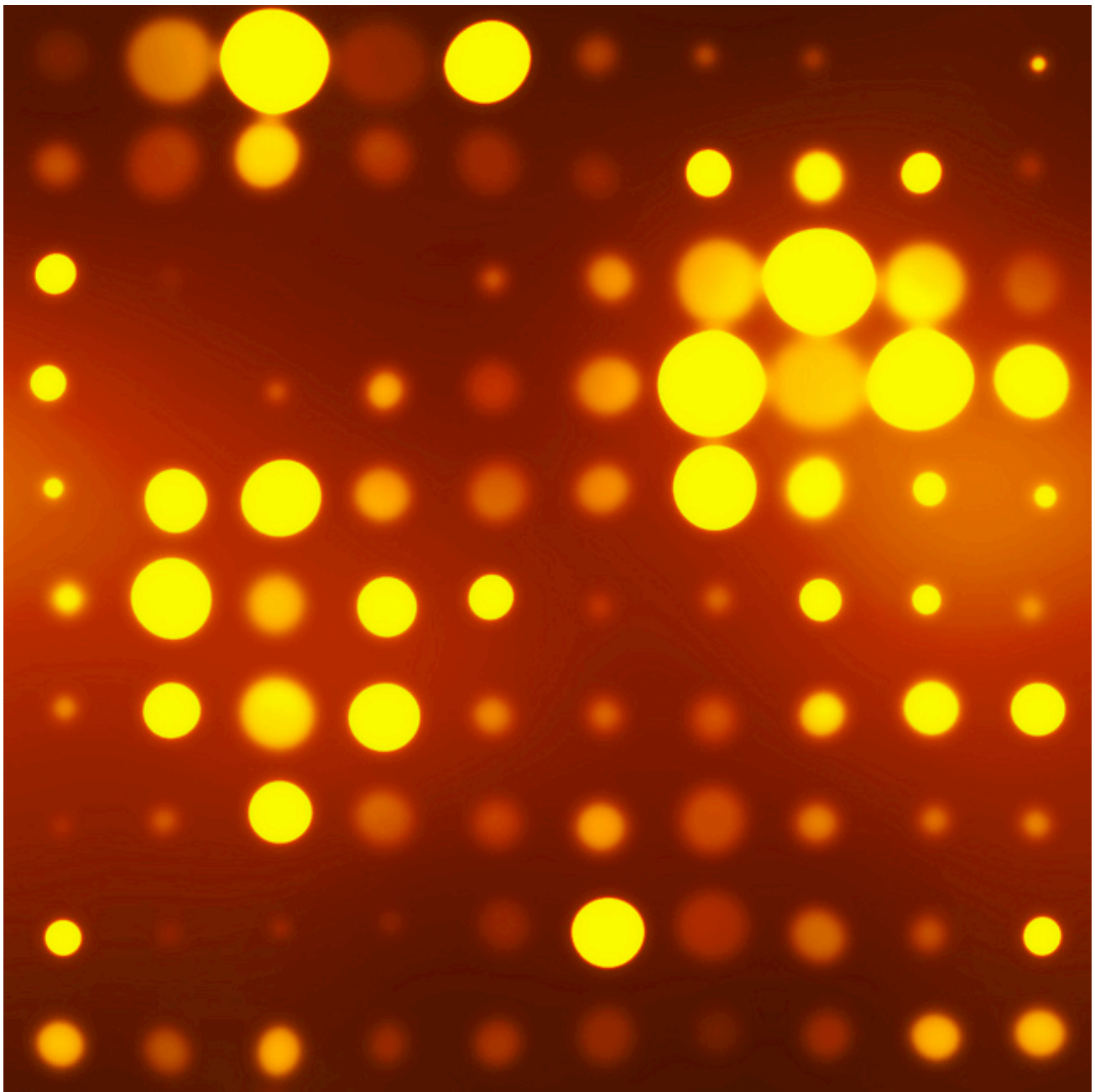
# STAFFING THE PUBLIC SERVICE

## HOW MANY PUBLIC SERVANTS ARE ENOUGH?

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## DOES THE 'BLOATED PUBLIC SERVICE' RHETORIC MATCH REALITY?

The size of the public service generates heated political debate. Anti-public service commentators typically resort to the 'big government' frame to promote the idea that the APS has too many employees. Conservative politicians, researchers and think tanks assert that the Australian Public Service has grown excessively and that, as a consequence, Australian citizens are over-regulated and excessively taxed.

Julie Novak, a research fellow with the right-wing Institute of Public Affairs, epitomised these arguments' recently in *The Australian* when she described civilian employees of the Department of Defence as an 'army of pen pushers' and referred to public servants engaged in the national preventative health service as 'federal health bureaucrats that consume our health budget without providing any medical services.' Brushing aside the many APS agency functions that are not directly involved in service delivery, Novak sledged the 25% of public servants who 'deliver no front-line public service of any kind'.

Novak is not alone in this anti-public service rhetoric; she is joined by many Liberal and National Party politicians and, not infrequently, by Labor politicians. Despite speaking highly of the APS, Kevin Rudd also referred to growth in APS staff during the latter years of the Howard Government as 'administrative bloating'.



*In his last key speech before the 2007 election, Mr Rudd said he was "dead serious" about trimming the size of the public service. "It just strikes me as passing strange that this [Howard] government that supposedly belongs to the conservative side of politics has not systematically applied the meat axe to its own administrative bloating for the better part of a decade."*<sup>2</sup>



*"It is hard to take this government on face value. The Prime Minister said he would take a meat axe to the Public Service. Clearly, the meat axe I use on a leg of lamb is a little different to the one the Prime Minister uses, because staff numbers have actually increased. The Prime Minister has increased political staff numbers by 30 per cent. The Prime Minister has increased both the ranks of Public Service numbers and political numbers. I guess his meat axe is a little blunt."*

Hon Stuart Robert (Fadden, Liberal Party) 25/5/09

Pledges to reduce the size of public service agencies are a routine element of the political cycle. In his response to the May 2011 Budget, for instance, Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey promised to 'slash' 12,000 public service jobs if the Opposition wins the 2013 election<sup>3</sup>. His pledge is consistent with the Liberal Party's record: the Howard government cut 10,000 public service jobs in each of the three years after being elected in 1996. Mr Hockey denied he was 'Canberra bashing', and argued that a reduction in APS staff would achieve some kind of equity: "How can you ask Australians to take a haircut if you are not going to do it yourself?" Special Minister of State and the Public Service Gary Gray pointed out the inconsistencies of Mr Hockey's social justice argument by noting the immediate economic consequences of retrenchment.<sup>4</sup> During the following week, the Minister pointed to a short-term decline in APS staff numbers as evidence that "the bureaucracy has not blown out on Labor's watch".<sup>5</sup>

Conservative politicians and their allies in right-wing think tanks routinely refer to 'bloated public services'. This rhetoric is strikingly consistent. Public service critics assert that there has been an unsustainable growth in public service employees and argue that to balance the budget, the incumbent government must axe thousands of these unnecessary jobs. What exactly is an 'unnecessary' public servant? Logically, one might assume that employees are unnecessary if the public service agency's function can be effectively performed with fewer employees. In the to-and-fro of political debate, however, 'unnecessary' is rarely defined so carefully. New South Wales Premier Barry O'Farrell justified the retrenchment of 390 public servants because they were not in permanent positions; accusing the former Labor state government of "rorts" by "allowing hundreds of workers without jobs to remain on the payroll."<sup>6</sup>

This kind of rhetoric is not unique to Australia. In Canada, Treasury Board President Tony Clement recently pledged to bring the budget into balance by “not replacing the approximately 11,000 public servants who leave or retire each year”.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, New Zealand’s National Party government plans to shut down several crown (state) entities, merge agencies and dramatically reduce public sector employment. More than 2,000 state sector jobs have been axed since the National Party took office in 2008.<sup>8</sup> Finance Minister Bill English has urged the community to “get its head” around these cuts and “stop relying” on the public service.<sup>9</sup>

Without doubt, the Australian Public Service is larger today than it has been at earlier times. When Australian states and territories federated in 1900 to form the Commonwealth, Sir Robert Garran was Australia’s only public servant.<sup>10</sup> Since then, the APS has grown to encompass 133 agencies, which collectively employ more than 160,000 people<sup>11</sup> (a full listing of agencies is included as an Appendix to this report). Three APS agencies account for almost half this total: Centrelink (16.7%), the Australian Tax Office (14.5%), and Defence (13.2%). These agencies’ comparative sizes reflect their ‘frontline’ or direct service delivery function.

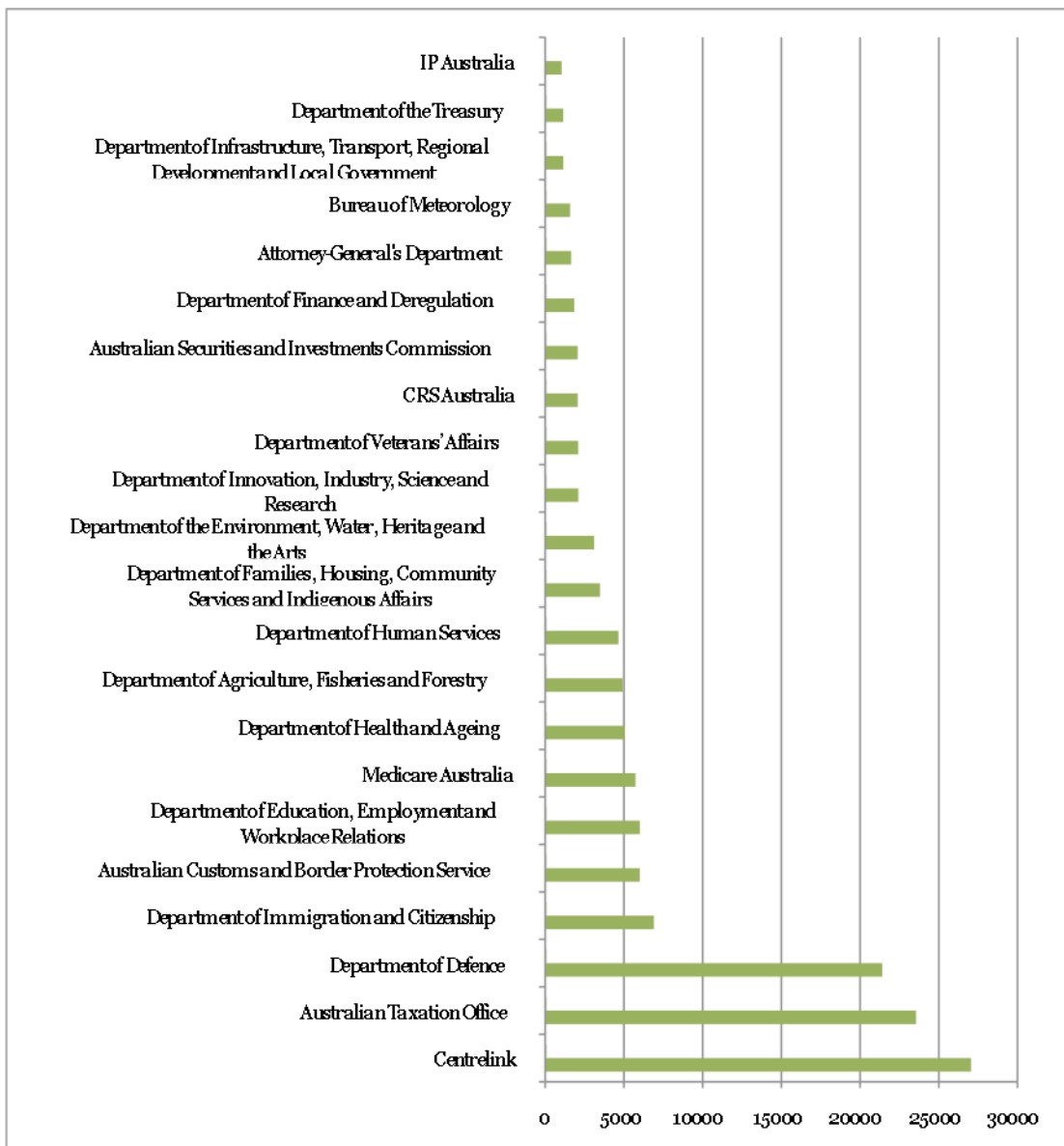


Figure 1: 2010 staff levels of major APS agencies<sup>11</sup>

To interpret the growth in public service employment, three contextual factors must be considered:

- Community expectations about service provision: there is no evidence that we expect less of the Australian Public Service or of state public services. In fact, attitudinal research suggests

the contrary<sup>12</sup>. Is it unrealistic to demand continuous improvement in service provision while cutting thousands of jobs from public service agencies?

- Growth in the Australian population: public services are required by a growing number of citizens.
- Medium and long term public service employment trends.

## Has the APS kept pace with a growing Australia?

The case for a 'bloated' public service is generally based on short-term employment patterns and is contradicted by longer-term trends. Between 1991 and 1999, the Keating and Howard governments reduced staff levels across the APS by approximately 50,000 (approximately one third). Since the low point of 1999, staff numbers have gradually returned to early 1990s levels as illustrated below.

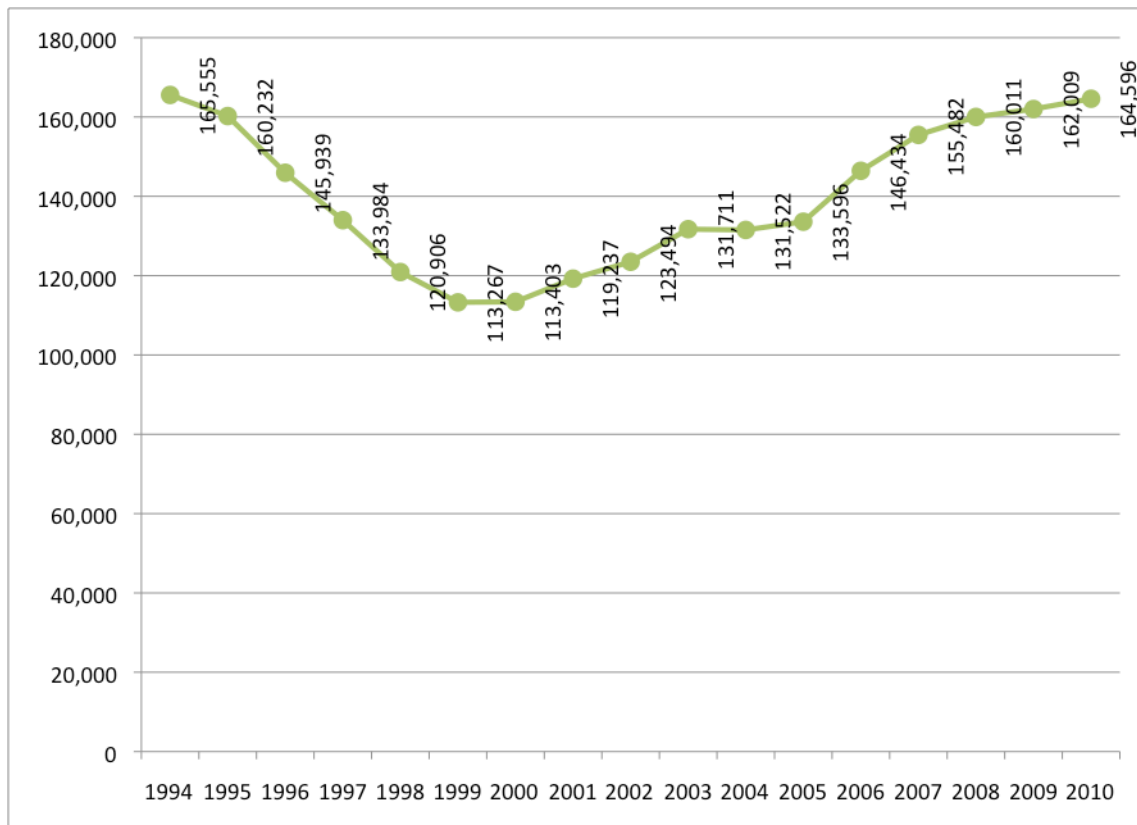


Figure 2: Number of ongoing APS employees 1992–2010 <sup>11</sup>

During this time, however, the Australian population has also increased. As a result, the service delivery capacity of the APS has diminished with respect to the number of service beneficiaries. In 1991, there was one public servant for every 106 Australians. In 2009, there was one public servant for every 135 Australians. During the intervening years, the APS reached a low point of one public servant for every 169 Australians. To return the ratio of APS staff to Australian citizens to 1991 levels would require increasing APS staffing to approximately 214,000, an increase of more than 40,000 staff.

Responding to Mr Hockey's post-Budget comments Nadine Flood, the national secretary of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), observed that growth in public services lags behind the increased population using these services. This is equally true at a state level where the same 'bloated public service rhetoric is invoked. Barry O'Farrell has justified his plans to freeze wages and cut staffing by drawing attention to the growth in the number of state public servants since the election of the (Labor) Carr Government in 1995. A cursory analysis shows that the increased number of NSW public servants since Carr's elected has lagged behind the growth in the state's population during the same period. The NSW population has grown by 19% since 1995, from 6.1 million to 7.3 million. During the same period, the number of employees in state public service

agencies grew by 15%, from 279,574 to 322,000. To keep pace with population growth, the public service would have actually needed another 10,000 employees.

To sustain the ‘bloated public service’ argument, Hockey, O’Farrell and their fellow travelers need to establish that:

- Community members expect less of the public service;
- An increasing population does not necessitate an increase in public service staff; and
- Public service agencies can fulfill their purpose and deliver services with fewer employees, reduced budgets.

Neither they, nor other outspoken public service detractors have established this case.

## TRENDS IN APS EMPLOYMENT

To analyse APS employment practices and trends, our independent report draws heavily on the Australian Public Service Commission’s thorough annual reports. Examining these reports between 1998 (when the first State of the Service Report was published) and 2010, several trends are evident:

- A higher proportion of public servants are employed at higher levels and a smaller proportion at lower levels
- Women are more strongly represented in more senior positions than previously, though men still dominate executive and senior executive positions
- Women are much more likely than men to occupy part-time, casual and non-ongoing positions.
- A small and contracting proportion of public service positions are held by Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities and employees with a non-English speaking background.

### Shifts in the distribution of senior and junior public servants

During the last twenty years, the structure of the APS has changed considerably. In 2010, a much smaller proportion of APS employees are classified in the lower bands (trainees and APS 1-3) than previously. In 1975, APS 1 and APS 2 employees accounted for half of all ongoing employment in the APS. The proportion fell slowly until the mid 1980s, then more quickly throughout the 1990s.

Conversely, a much higher proportion of employees are now employed at the higher APS levels, in Executive Level and Senior Executive Service positions. The growth in the SES has out-stripped the overall growth in the APS.

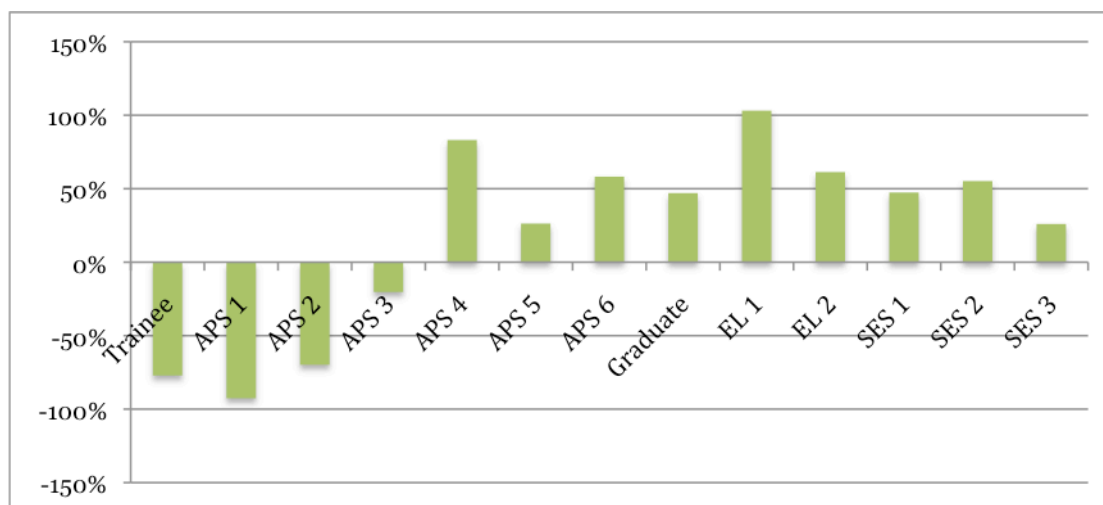


Figure 3: Ongoing employees by base classification % change 1996-2010 <sup>11</sup>



The Commission’s annual *State of the Service* report has described this trend as a “general consolidation... towards an older and more skilled workforce” and, in 2003, described the ‘typical’ new starter in the APS as “a 31 year old with tertiary qualifications who is at the APS 4 level and more likely to be a woman than a man.”



Now the total number of people on the Public Service payroll in this country is almost back to the level it was when the Howard government took office. But that is not all, because approximately 25 per cent of those nearly 140,000 people... are at the executive level, the senior management level. The proportion 10 years or so ago was 13 per cent. What has happened is the government have expanded the Public Service back out to where it was but with one important caveat, and that is that there are fewer workers, fewer people actually delivering services on the ground, and a lot more chiefs, a lot more fat cats, a lot more people at the top end earning very high salaries.  
 Hon Lindsay Tanner, Hansard 12/2/07

## Gender

Employment trends in APS reflect significant and persistent gender disparities. Until 1966, women were required to resign from the APS upon marriage.<sup>13</sup> Things have changed, and since 2000 women have represented more than 50% of the APS workforce. In general, though, women remain employed at lower classification levels than men. Between 1996 and 2010, the proportion of women in Senior Executive Service (SES) positions increased from 19.3% to 37.1%. While the gender gap at these higher level positions is slowly closing, a significant disparity remains. In 2010 1,641 men were employed in the SES (63%), compared to 969 women (37%). At the lower levels, on the other hand, women remain over-represented. In 2010 there were 24,468 women (57%) employed in the lower APS levels (APS 1-4) compared to 18,469 men (43%).

Women are also more likely to be employed on a part-time and non-ongoing (temporary and casual) basis than men. In 2010 there were 21,549 women employed on a part-time basis, compared to 4,300 men. Since 1994, women have consistently represented a higher proportion of non-ongoing APS employees than men. Female non-ongoing employees are more likely to be working part-time than any other group.<sup>14</sup>

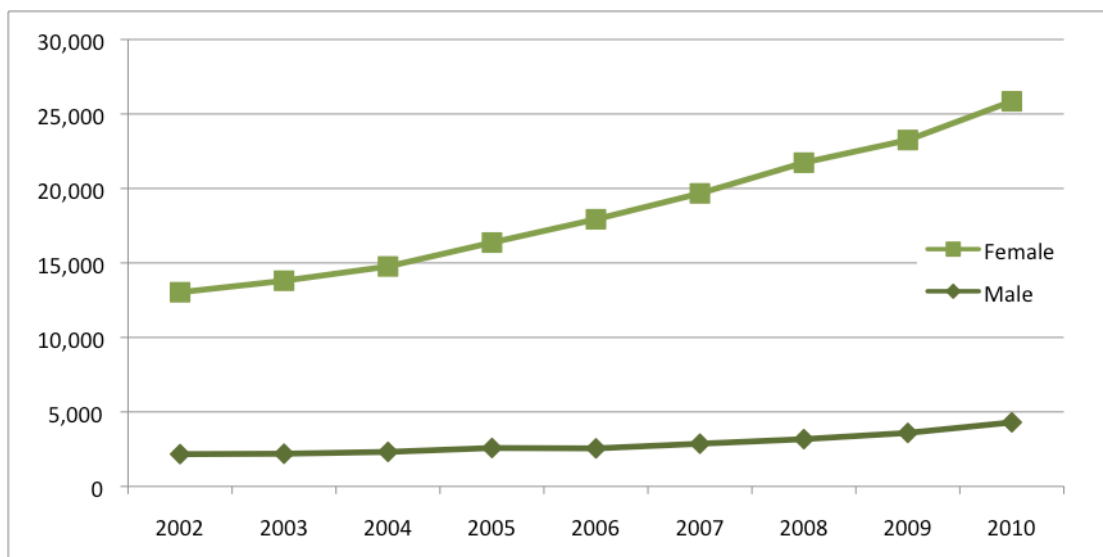


Figure 4: Part-time APS workforce <sup>11</sup>

The gender gap depicted in Figure 4 is significant. In 2010, 83% of part-time APS employees were women. The gap has narrowed slightly since 2006 when women represented 86% of the Service’s part-time workforce. Similarly, a higher proportion of non-ongoing employees are women (61.4%) than men.



## Retrenchment and redundancy

The idea of a life-long public service career is both a stereotype created through public service commentary and a value enshrined in the Public Service Act 1999 in which it is associated with effectiveness and cohesion (Section 10.1(n)). In fact, many agencies experience significant growth and retrenchment. Hostile political rhetoric, coupled with budgetary pressures including the Efficiency Dividend<sup>15</sup> create pressure on APS agencies to actively retrench, freeze recruitment and casualise their workforce. This may appease critics but has serious adverse impacts.

Firstly, avoidable redundancies are very costly. Each year, retrenchments cost the Australian Public Service tens of millions of dollars to fund leave entitlements and recruitment. The *Canberra Times*' public service reporter Marcus Mannheim observes that these costs are incurred even when agencies grow. During the 2009-2010 reporting year, the Australian Taxation Office retrenched 307 staff members and Defence retrenched 91 even though both agencies actually *gained* staff in 2010.<sup>16</sup> This trend recently prompted Special Minister of State for the Public Service Gary Gray to issue a new 'Redeployment Policy' for the APS to retain the skills and experience to "deliver on the Government's agenda".<sup>17</sup>

Novak refers to the 'big APS merry-go-round': where employees are treated as a 'protected species' and are simply reclassified from agency to agency and intended cost-savings turn into spending hikes elsewhere. Judging by the data presented here, Mannheim's depiction of an 'APS see-saw' that alternates between hiring and firing and in which public servants' tenure is increasingly insecure is closer to reality.

Secondly, abrupt staffing changes such as those experienced during 1997, 1998 and 1999 are likely to have long-term impacts on agencies' efficiency and their capacity to effectively acquit their responsibilities.



*Two years ago, when Labor returned to office, there was not a single urban planner in the entire Commonwealth Public Service... Not one. They [the Howard government] got rid of them all.*

Hon Anthony Albanese, *Canberra Times* 31/8/09



*The Howard government abused the Public Service and undermined its institutional integrity through a combination of fear, institutional reforms - or claimed reforms - and blatant political jobbery. In its first years there were substantial across-the-board job reductions throughout the Australian Public Service, with over 30,000 staff made redundant. This cost \$300 million in redundancy payouts by the end of the government's first year in office. Over the following years, many of these staff were subsequently re-employed as expensive consultants and contractors as the Howard government realised that its cuts had been too crude and that it required the skills and expertise that it had cut out of the Public Service so unthinkingly.*

Hon Kate Lundy (ACT, Australian Labor Party) *Hansard*<sup>18</sup> 23/06/08

A third adverse effect, of course, is the immediate impact on the economic circumstances of retrenched public servants, their families and communities. The mass retrenchments presided over by John Howard had a dramatic effect on Canberra's economy. Hon Gai Brodtman, Member for Canberra, observed that the Howard Government's public service cuts led to business closing and there were still empty shops four years later.<sup>19</sup> Figure 5 highlights the extent of retrenchment during the first few years of the Howard Government and the longer term trend.

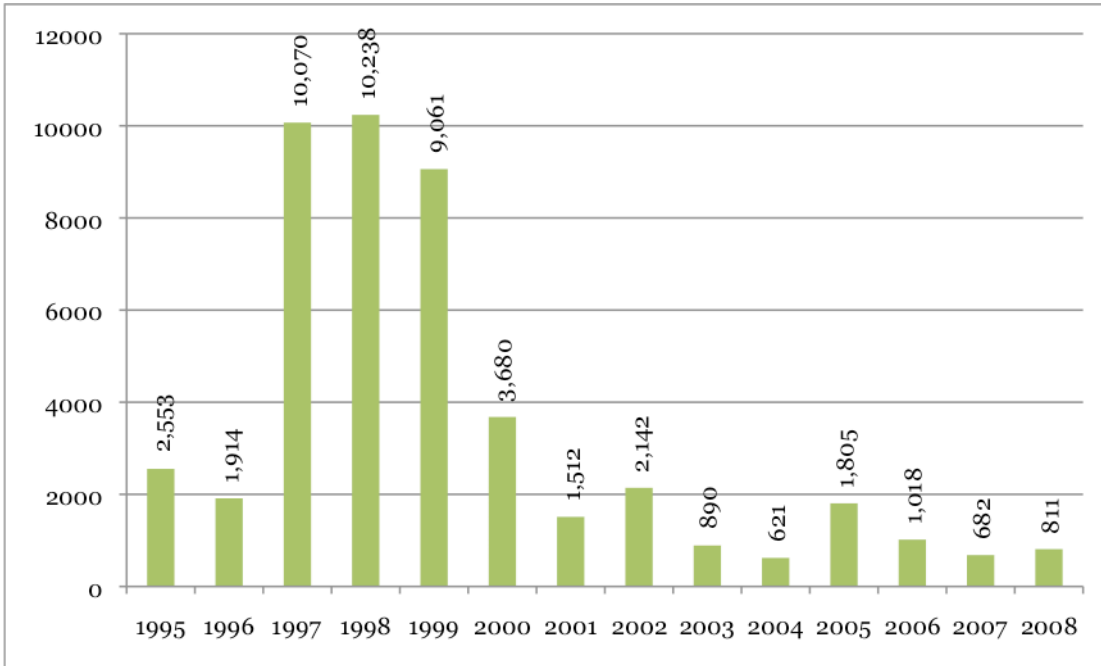


Figure 5: APS retrenchments 1995–2009<sup>11</sup>

## People with a disability

Between 1996–2010 the number of APS employees with a disability *decreased* by 2,485. In 1996, people with a disability reflected 5.5% over the total APS staff. By 2010, this had dropped to 3.1%.<sup>20</sup> This decline was recently described as ‘shameful’ and a ‘massive fail’ by Disability Commissioner Graeme Innes<sup>21</sup> who called on the Gillard Government to introduce quotas to force departments to change their hiring practices.



*Surely if we want private sector employers to provide employment opportunities for people with a disability then the public sector should be taking a leading role and setting an example.*

Hon Jodi Moylan, Member for Pearce (Lib) *Hansard* 28/2/11

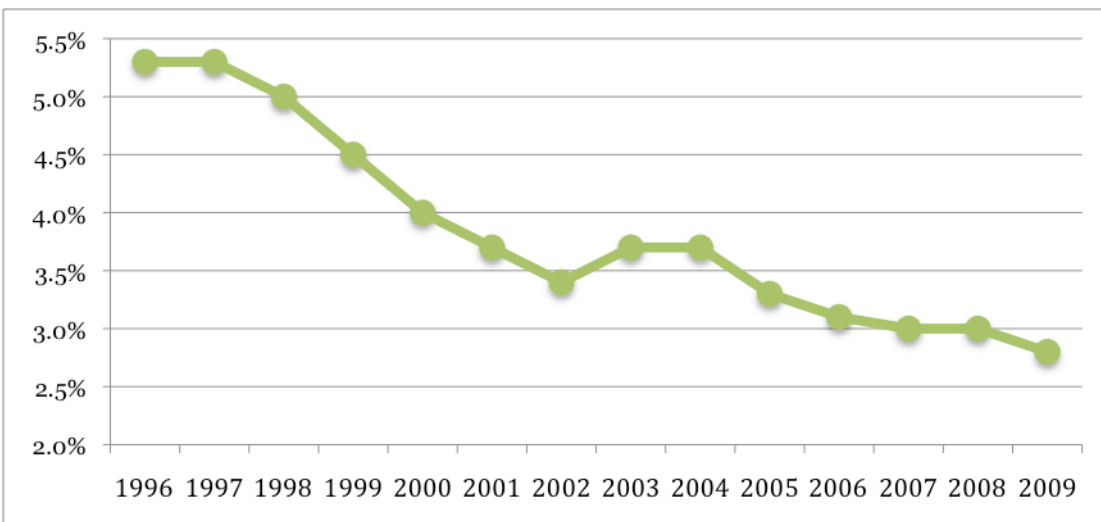


Figure 6: Percentage of APS employees with a disability<sup>11</sup>

## Diversity in the workforce

The values articulated in the Australian Public Service Act 1999<sup>22</sup> include a commitment to providing a workplace that is “free from discrimination” and “recognises and utilises the diversity of the Australian community it serves” (Section 10.1(c)). This value is invoked by the APSC’s claim that diversity of employment is a ‘traditional strength’ (APSC 2010 p.xxv). Independent expert on equity and diversity Professor Glenda Strachan from the Griffith Business School reinforces the claim by observing that the APS has been a “leader in equity and diversity since the 1980s” by “promoting promoted diversity management and successfully linking diversity to equal opportunity”.<sup>23</sup>

*But how are agencies performing against this target?*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are seriously under-represented in the APS workforce. Indigenous employees represented just 1% of the APS in 1996. This increased to 1.7% in 2002 before steadily declining to 0.5% in 2010 (APSC 2010 p.6). With Indigenous Australians representing less than half of one percent of the its employees, the APS is well short of its target for Indigenous employment determined by the Council of Australian Governments (CAOG) National Partnership on Indigenous Economic Participation. This partnership commits APS agencies to an indigenous employment target of 2.7% by 2015, reflecting Indigenous Australians’ proportion of the overall working age population.<sup>24</sup>

During 2009-2010, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations worked with nine other APS agencies to develop and implement the ‘Pathways to Success’ program to increase the representation of Indigenous Australians, resulting in 75 new recruits.

Employees with a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB), on the other hand, are somewhat better represented than previously, representing 5% of APS employees in 2010 compared to just over 4% in 1996.

## CONCLUSION

This overview of employment patterns highlights the mismatch between rhetoric and reality about the Australian Public Service. In particular, it contradicts claims of ‘bloating’ (over-staffing) in APS agencies. By necessity, this is a less comprehensive analysis than the APSC’s annual *State of the Service* reports and each agency’s reports. Other trends discernible in the Commission’s reports include decreasing mobility between agencies, fluctuations in employees’ length of service, recruits’ rising levels of education and correlations between age and classification.

The ‘take home’ insight from this analysis is that, contrary to media and political commentary, the Australian Public Service has not grown out of control. In fact, the workforce of the 130-plus agencies is now at approximately the same level it was twenty years ago.

## APPENDIX: AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE AGENCIES <sup>11</sup>

Agency	No. of employees
Aboriginal Hostels Limited	524
Administrative Appeals Tribunal	166
Attorney-General's Department	1,648
Australian Agency for International Development	994
Australian Bureau of Statistics	2,887
Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research	51
Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity	22
Australian Communications and Media Authority	639
Australian Competition and Consumer Commission	803
Australian Crime Commission	516
Australian Customs and Border Protection Service 6	6,007
Australian Electoral Commission	878
Australian Fisheries Management Authority	228
Australian Human Rights Commission	115
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies	124
Australian Institute of Family Studies	79
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare	352
Australian National Audit Office	366
Australian National Maritime Museum	124
Australian Office of Financial Management	40
Australian Organ and Tissue Authority	37
Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority	160
Australian Public Service Commission	238
Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency	154
Australian Research Council	114
Australian Securities and Investments Commission	2,061
Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority	64
Australian Taxation Office	23,558
Australian Trade Commission	556
Australian Transaction Reports and Analysis Centre	331
Australian Transport Safety Bureau	102
Australian War Memorial	294
Bureau of Meteorology	1,580
Cancer Australia	22
Centrelink	27,048
Comcare	576
Commonwealth Grants Commission	43
Commonwealth Ombudsman	167
ComSuper	537
Corporations and Markets Advisory Committee	2
CrimTrac Agency	201
CRS Australia	2,063
Defence Housing Australia	703
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry	4,923
Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy	724
Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency	877
Department of Defence	21,409
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	6,012
Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs	3,478
Department of Finance and Deregulation	1,847
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	3,064
Department of Health and Ageing	5,061
Department of Human Services	4,652
Department of Immigration and Citizenship	6,906
Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government	1,149

Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research	2,108
Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism	438
Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts	3,103
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	703
Department of the Treasury	1,143
Department of Veterans' Affairs	2,100
Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency	24
Fair Work Australia	264
Family Court of Australia	647
Federal Court of Australia	399
Federal Magistrates Court of Australia	187
Food Standards Australia New Zealand	121
Future Fund Management Agency	66
Geoscience Australia	741
Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority	232
Insolvency and Trustee Service Australia	318
Inspector-General of Taxation	6
IP Australia	1,045
Medicare Australia	5,734
Migration Review Tribunal and Refugee Review Tribunal	265
Murray-Darling Basin Authority	302
Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House	86
National Archives of Australia	499
National Blood Authority	45
National Capital Authority	57
National Competition Council	7
National Film and Sound Archive	223
National Health and Medical Research Council	257
National Library of Australia	548
National Museum of Australia	311
National Native Title Tribunal	234
National Offshore Petroleum Safety Authority	56
National Water Commission	56
Office of National Assessments	140
Office of Parliamentary Counsel	55
Office of the Australian Building and Construction Commissioner	150
Office of the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions	573
Office of the Fair Work Ombudsman	816
Office of the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security	12
Office of the Privacy Commissioner	55
Office of the Renewable Energy Regulator	22
Private Health Insurance Ombudsman	12
Productivity Commission	195
Professional Services Review	33
Royal Australian Mint	183
Safe Work Australia	102
Screen Australia	70
Social Security Appeals Tribunal	115
Torres Strait Regional Authority	86
Wheat Exports Australia	17
Total	162,237

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