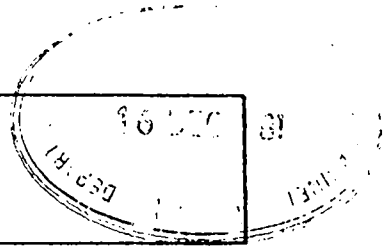




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**PRIME MINISTER**

FOR MEDIA

MONDAY, 15 DECEMBER 1981

SPEECH AT CHRISTMAS RECEPTION FOR SENIOR PUBLIC SERVANTS, CANBERRA

It has not been a custom on these occasions to raise issues of major concern in an explicit or formal way. However, I have wanted for some time to comment on the view, and I have no doubt that it is a widespread view, that there has been a slippage in public service morale because of criticism and pressure on the service. I have chosen this occasion to say something about the Public Service and its future because I particularly want the people here to be aware of my concerns, and the concerns of the Government in relation to it.

I do not need to tell anyone here that public servants seldom receive many plaudits for the contribution they make to the smooth running and the progressive development of Australian society. The contribution made over the years has been an enormous one and it has not been adequately recognised. On the contrary, public servants and even politicians are bound to accept a degree of public criticism, some of it unwarranted, as part of the system to which we are committed.

In this connection, there is a question as to how concerned we should be about the "image" of the Public Service, or perhaps I should say its so-called image in the wider Australian community. I have in mind in parts the words of William Plowden, Director-General of the Royal Institute of Public Administration, who spoke on this topic in Brisbane some 12 months ago. Plowden said, "the whole relationship between media comments and reports on any subject, and public views of the subject, is extremely problematical..." and he went on to explain his point by saying "don't believe everything you read in the newspapers, and don't believe either that everybody else believes it".

In any case I don't know that many of you would appreciate too many public plaudits even if you could get them, because the real challenge of work in the Public Service lies in different directions. The real challenges are to combine efficiency with the kind of administration and service which the people whom we serve are really seeking, and to combine dedicated service to the government of the day, whatever government that might be, on the one hand with the level of expertise on which effective modern government depends, and on the other hand with the non-political character which is at the foundation of our public service system.

I don't believe for one moment that good government would be enhanced in Australia by importation of the US system, where governments change ever 4 years and push out one group of advisers and puts in another.

No-one appreciates the proper nature of the relationship between the Public Service and the Government better than senior Public Servants, and I believe that the provisions which the Government introduced some years ago in relation to the appointment of Permanent Heads also make an important contribution in terms of enshrining and institutionalising the nature of that relationship to take it out of political hands for the sake of politics.

I cannot emphasise too much the importance to the future of this nation of an efficient and competent Public Service. It is crucial that the traditions of dedication and service to the Government of the day continue, that the motivation and morale of the Service be maintained, and that the quality of the Government's advisers and of their management skills be progressively enhanced in the face of the growing complexity of Government administration.

As Prime Minister, I have welcomed and appreciated the quality and frankness of advice that I have received, not only as Prime Minister, but in my earlier years as a Minister. It is the responsibility of senior Public Servants to tell Ministers both the good and the bad news. The Government may take a view different from the advice that it has received from its Public Service advisers, but that is in the nature of the democratic process; it certainly does not reflect either on the advisers themselves, or on the quality of their advice. I have no doubt that it reflects on the quality of the Ministers and their capacity for judgement.

I said some years ago that: "Politicians and Public Servants are partners in Government, whatever political parties are in power. And they share another characteristic which I strongly hold. They are both servants of the people". We have determined, as a policy, that part of the way Government is organised and run is to enable staff to do its best, and part of doing it best lies in not only looking after public money but also in giving a good service to the client. I am sure that this is a policy which nobody here would want to argue with, but there are some other aspects of policy which also call for comment.

It is obviously impossible to consider issues of concern for the Public Service without taking account of the fact that in recent years Governments throughout the world have faced great difficulties, and the need for some new policy directions arising from significant changes in the international economic and strategic situation.

These challenges have been reflected in the nature and volume of the demands placed upon Public Servants, in particular demands on First and Second Division officers. I saw

representatives of Second Division officers today - Sir William Cole was there - and they were useful discussions and designed to improve communications in a sensible way. The demands on the Service have seen not only greater complexity and sophistication in the policy advice and management skills required, but also a reduction in the level of staffing and financial resources made available to the Public Service to do its job. I know that our staff ceiling policies have imposed pressures and challenges on the Public Service. While I make no apology for the policies which require a leaner Public Service, I would emphasise that decisions to reduce the size of the Public Service should not be interpreted to mean that we are dissatisfied with the standard of competence or dedication of Public Servants.

Moreover, against a background of increased interest by the community in the rights of individuals and in the administration of policies affecting those rights, we have seen a very considerable growth in mechanisms for imposing greater accountability on the Public Service.

In brief, you have been required to carry out more difficult tasks, often with less staff, and in the face of increasing public scrutiny. I believe despite the stresses and strains that have arisen, the service as a whole has accepted the challenges placed upon it, and responded in a very creditable way to these challenges. And I must say that in spite of a good deal of talk about the Public Service, I am heartened by the quality of people that we have attracted into the Service, and at the contribution that they are making. I am heartened also at the endeavours that are being made to upgrade the skills and development of younger officers through schemes such as the Executive Development Scheme and the Interchange Programme, because schemes such as these have the capacity to widen the skills of Public Servants and also to increase their understanding of attitudes and problems in the wider community.

In a smaller, leaner Public Service, management skills, intellectual ability and capacity to cope with a new technology will all be of increasing importance. Nor should the value of the fundamental, old established traditions and attributes of the Public Service be forgotten. These are the need for full frank advice to Government, neutrality, impartiality and dedication in implementing the decisions of Government and of the Parliament, together with fairness and equity in dealing with the claims of individuals.

In all of these things I remain as I have always been confident of the response of the Public Service. I am on record, in the Parliament and elsewhere, as appreciative of the professionalism and competence of our Public Service, and have no hesitation in endorsing comments by senior private enterprise managers to the effect and, to quote one of them, "Don't ever let anyone tell you that the executive level of the Public Service does not earn its keep".