Attitudes toward the public service

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with Anna Long, Nicola MacColl and Daniel Lau
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About the Author
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Title page graphic
This word cloud was created from a text file containing statements made by Federal Parliamentarians and Senators between 2005 and 2011. The relative size of each word reflects its frequency in these statements.
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MAIN POINTS

This report presents a summary of attitudes toward the public service drawing on a range of sources and examining the perspectives of community members, Australian politicians and public servants. Our synthesis of attitudinal studies draws on surveys that have been conducted during the last twenty years by government agencies and researchers. We examined the views of elected representatives by analysing contemporary media coverage and the Parliamentary record (Hansard) between 2006 and 2011. Our main findings are that:

- Most Australians support government exercising an active role in society and the economy.
- There is strong community preference for public (rather than private) sector agencies delivering services including transport, policing, health and education.
- Outsourcing and privatisation occur despite and contrary to these preferences.
- Australians are generally supportive of increased public service funding, even if that means paying higher taxes.
- A majority of citizens express reservations about the current bipartisan determination to return the Australian budget to surplus as soon as possible. Surveys indicate that this is not widely supported if it comes at the expense of adequately funded public services.
- Surveys indicate a higher level of confidence in public service agencies than major companies.
- Agency surveys provide an inadequate assessment of client satisfaction.
- The mainstream media communicates primarily negative stereotypes of public servants.
- Australian politicians reinforce these stereotypes, expressing distinctly less positive attitudes toward the public service than those of other community members: they are less likely than citizens to express satisfaction, confidence or willingness to fund and regularly invoke very negative stereotypes.
- Studies of APS employees toward their workplaces and employers present contradictory impressions. Surveys administered by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) present a largely positive picture including high levels of employee satisfaction, motivation and sense of personal accomplishment. These surveys also indicate that many APS employees feel that their agencies discourage innovation and that their interactions with Ministers and other elected representatives are often difficult.
- Surveys conducted by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) present a significantly less positive impression. For instance, a significant proportion of female public servants report their work-life balance difficulties and bullying in their workplaces.

Our research highlights shortcomings of the available attitudinal studies. In particular, there are few independent and longitudinal sources to measure trends and reliably indicate whether Australians are more or less satisfied with and confident in the Australian Public Service year by year. Instead, different questions are asked in different ways making trend analysis impossible. One solution to this problem would be to conduct a standardised national survey of Australian citizens’ views of the APS. This would provide a reliable and independent assessment of community views to inform decisions about public service funding and staffing. This could be based on the ‘Citizens First’ survey administered every two years by the Canadian government, as was recommended in the 2010 Moran review of the APS.
OVERVIEW

The Australian Public Service delivers services fairly, effectively, impartially and courteously to the Australian public and is sensitive to the diversity of the Australian public.

Public Service Act 1999 ‘APS Values’ Section 10.1(g)

The public are now much better educated about their rights as consumers of government services, and have great expectations of what and how services will be delivered. We will see more demanding consumers over time.

Lynelle Briggs, Australian Public Service Commissioner 2005

As in many other countries, Australia faces unprecedented challenges to address citizens’ increasing demands, rising expectations and seemingly intractable social problems in a tight fiscal environment.

Terry Moran, Secretary, Prime Minister and Cabinet

Attitudes toward the public service matter. Important decisions are based on actual and assumed attitudes. Are there enough or too many public servants? Are public service agencies and the services they provide meeting our expectations? Do Australians feel we are adequately investing in public services? Answers to these questions inform significant political and economic decisions.

The 2009-2010 Moran Review of the Australian Public Service (APS) actively solicited community perceptions. Community members participated actively in the review’s consultation processes, making more than 200 written submissions and posting 805 contributions to an online dialogue. On the basis of these and other inputs, review chair Terry Moran concluded that the leading challenge facing the APS is rising citizen expectations. How is the APS travelling with respect to these expectations? Do Australian citizens consider that the APS is meeting our needs?

This CPD report examines attitudes toward the Australian Public Service. Our analysis is informed by a robust body of attitudinal research conducted by a range of organisations over more than two decades. Table 1 describes some of these studies.

The breadth and diversity of these sources allows researchers to identify trends with a degree of confidence. While attitudes toward public services are well researched, surveys do not provide an exhaustive picture and further research is definitely warranted. Before presenting our summary, we note three limitations. First, attitudinal studies are often idiosyncratic: they are conducted just once with a unique set of questions. While this approach provides a snapshot to inform contemporary political debate, such as the regular surveys conducted by Essential Media, Roy Morgan and the Australia Institute, it does not generate data to monitor longer-term trends. These trends require longitudinal studies with consistent survey design and sampling approaches.

Second, it is difficult to distinguish between attitudes toward the Australian Public Service and attitudes toward state-based public services. While the current research cannot verify the claim, it seems reasonable to assert that relatively few Australians accurately distinguish between public service agencies administered by the Commonwealth and those administered by state governments. In responding to surveys, people are likely to conflate the APS and state-based services such as health and education. In fact, several of the studies we examined look at attitudes toward these primarily state-based services, but their interpretation is extrapolated to ‘public services’ in general. This distinction is especially difficult with respect to public services that are conducted by both state and Commonwealth agencies, such as environmental protection and infrastructure.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Sample size &amp; sampling approach</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian Public Service State of the Service ‘Employees’ Attitudes’ 2009-10</td>
<td>Perceptions of recruitment experience; leadership, engagement, innovation, satisfaction, work-life balance, interaction with stakeholders, perceptions of service delivery</td>
<td>Stratified random sample of 8,732 employees from APS agencies with at least 100 APS employees (in 2009)</td>
<td>Annually since 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Social Attitudes survey</td>
<td>Community attitudes toward work, globalisation, industrial relations reform, retirement, citizenship, political trust and family and community life</td>
<td>4,000 respondents selected randomly from the Australian Electoral Roll</td>
<td>2005, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and Public Sector Union’s ‘What Women Want’ survey</td>
<td>Working conditions, experiences and perceptions of female public servants</td>
<td>Online survey of 9,000-10,000 respondents</td>
<td>Annually since 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential Media Communications</td>
<td>Preferred service provider; willingness to fund services; attitudes toward taxation (different topics each week)</td>
<td>Approximately 1,000 respondents</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliamentary Library research</td>
<td>Attitudes toward social spending and taxation</td>
<td>Macro-analysis of attitudinal polls over 20 years</td>
<td>Various</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantum Market Research 2002</td>
<td>Role of government</td>
<td>National face-to-face survey of 1,950 respondents</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throsby &amp; Withers 1994</td>
<td>Willingness to pay for public goods and services</td>
<td>600 adult respondents</td>
<td>1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Values Survey</td>
<td>Confidence in civil service and other social institutions, values and a wide range of related indicators</td>
<td>Representative national sample of &gt;1,000 people in more than 80 nations</td>
<td>5 year ‘waves’ of surveys since 1981</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Studies of Australians’ attitudes toward the public service

Third, attitudinal research can conflate attitudes toward government, political parties and the public service. This is especially the case with respect to questions of confidence and trust. Peri Blind claims that this is a common occurrence in social surveys because political trust can be directed at the political system, government agencies and individual politicians but the perceived failure of any one entity can influence levels of trust and confidence in the others. Clive Bean and David Denemark similarly ask, ‘Do the roots of the problem [of distrust] lie less in the public service itself and more in politically elected government?’

In exploring attitudes toward the APS, this report presents three related perspectives: those of citizens, of politicians, and of employees of APS agencies.
Citizens’ views toward the public service are the subject of sustained interest and attention. Although the surveys and studies listed in Table 1 canvassed a range of questions, four themes have received regular attention and serve as the structure for the following synthesis:

- Defining a role for the public service and government
- Willingness to fund
- Satisfaction and confidence
- Stereotypes: How are public servants depicted in popular culture?

### Defining a role for the public service: Big government or contracting state?

There is a belief in boardrooms and among America’s tax-cutting right that a monstrous, ever-growing state is the creature of make-work bureaucrats and leftist politicians, and sometimes that is true.  

*The Economist* 17/3/11

Given the prevalence of the ‘big government’ frame in political discourse and media such as *The Economist* (above), it makes sense to start here. Do Australian citizens resent the size and cost of the APS? Or, conversely, is there political support for increased levels of funding and staffing so that public service agencies can meet the needs of individuals and communities?

Concerns about the size of the public service are not new. The 1977 Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration chaired by H.C. (‘Nugget’) Coombs concluded that,

> the most frequent criticism... is based on outright hostility to the size and cost of the public bureaucracy. This feeling is not peculiar to Australia and has inspired a variety of 'anti-big government' movements of both right and left in many western countries in recent years... it is essentially a protest against the activities of government itself and can only be evaluated in terms of the propriety of government interventions in fields such as health, welfare, pensions, transport and countless and increasing others.9

‘Big government’ critics assert that government institutions are prone to failure, including corruption, inefficiency, producer-bias and democratic deficits. How widely held are these attitudes? Would Australians prefer that these flawed institutions stay out of or lives? On the contrary. Terry Moran, Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet, recently drew attention to attitudinal research showing that, on the contrary, “the Australian public welcomes an active role for government.” Mr Moran referred to polling by Quantum10 that demonstrated strong and consistent support during the last two decades for government playing an active role in both business and “taking care of people who can’t help themselves”:

> Around 85% of Australians support this proposition. The Quantum survey reveals an interesting paradox. Reforms that have successfully shifted the role of government and increased the influence of markets have continued, despite community attitudes and values which favour a strong role for government in the Australian economy and in Australian society.11

Mr Moran asked, “How has this been allowed to happen?” His observation is consistent with the Australian Election Study conducted in 200112 which found that over 60 per cent of Australians...
agree that ‘government by its nature is the best instrument for promoting the general interests of society’.

Just as we look to government to address community needs, surveys consistently indicate that Australians prefer government agencies rather than private sector organisations to provide essential community services. In 1994, David Throsby and Glenn Withers asked 600 adults their preferences regarding public and private sector provision of transport infrastructure, police, hospitals, schools and airlines. Figure 1 shows the results: a clear preference for public provision. More than twice as many respondents supported public over private provision of health and education services and five times as many people supported public provision of motorways. As Moran noted, the steady trend toward privatisation of these services during the ensuing years has occurred despite these expressed preferences.

![Figure 1: Preference for public or private sector provision of community services (1994)](image)

The Australian Social Attitudes (ASA) studies reinforce these trends. These surveys of more than 4,000 citizens have revealed strong and consistent support for government (public service) agencies to deliver education and health services. Figure 2 illustrates the very high level of support for government provision of education services (83%) reported in the 2005 survey. By comparison, only 10% of the respondents identified the private sector as their preferred provider of schooling and other educational services.
Similarly, most Australians prefer health services to be delivered by government agencies. Figure 3 shows that 80% of ASA survey respondents expressed a preference for government agencies to deliver health services, compared to 14% support for private sector health services.

Health and education are highly visible services with a strong tradition of public sector provision. Do these attitudes extend to other services in an era of increasingly outsourced and privatised services? Essential Media Communications (EMC) recently examined community attitudes toward a range of services, asking 1,053 respondents, “Which of the following are better run by the private sector and which are better run by Government?” Their study reported that a substantial majority of respondents consider the government is better than the private sector at running prisons (76%), community services (71%), water (70%) and motorways (70%). These preferences were a deciding factor in the NSW Government’s decision not to privatise Sydney’s ferry services. However, Australians are slightly more likely to consider the private sector better at delivering property insurance (55%) and broadband services (53%).
EMC also examined whether these preferences were influenced by respondents’ voting preference. They concluded that,

Although Liberal/National voters were a little more likely to favour the private sector on most issues, they also supported the Government running most services except for broadband services (63% private/24% Government), health insurance (59%/32%) and property insurance (65%/23%). Labor voters favoured the private sector to run broadband (44%/38%) and property insurance (50%/31%) but were split on health insurance (41% private/43% Government).

This finding is especially interesting, given the distinction between the major parties’ positions on the public sector that is examined in this report.

**Willingness to fund public services**

Given the polarised political debate about public sector funding, social scientists and others are interested in citizens’ willingness to fund public services. Would citizens prefer to increase or decrease funding for Australian Public Service agencies? Studies tend to contradict the news headlines: Australians are generally supportive of increased public service funding, even if it means paying higher taxes. Researchers have arrived at this conclusion through studies utilising a range of data collection and analysis approaches and techniques.
The ASA reports provide a useful long-term picture of support for ‘social spending’ including investment in public services between 1967 and 2005, as summarised in Figure 5.

This synthesis shows strong and growing support for increased social spending, following a low point during the 1970s and ‘80s when a higher proportion of Australians favoured tax cuts. In 2003, 48% of respondents supported increased social spending (47% in 2005) whereas 28% favoured income tax cuts (34% in 2005).

The ASA report concluded that, “Australians were more willing to forgo income to pay for major welfare services in 2003 than they have been at any time in previous two decades”

Figure 5: Public support for lower taxes or increased social spending 1967–2005

The ASA report concluded that, “Australians were more willing to forgo income to pay for major welfare services in 2003 than they have been at any time in previous two decades”

Figure 6 highlights the relationship between two trends: support for lower taxes and support for increased spending on social services. Since the mid 1980s, there has been a significant decline in the proportion of Australians who favour lower taxes and a corresponding increase in support for increased social spending. In 2001, these two trend lines were on track to converge.
Figure 6: If the government had a choice between more spending on social services or less tax, what do you think it should do?  

Willingness to pay higher taxes in order to fund public services is differentiated, in some studies, according to specific services or public service functions. The ASA study found that more citizens were willing to pay increased taxes to fund health and education than for environmental protection or welfare benefits. As Figure 7 illustrates, more than two-thirds (67%) of respondents were willing to pay ‘a little’ or ‘quite a bit more’ tax in order to increase funding for health and Medicare compared to 34% for welfare benefits.

This strong community support and demand for health and education services and the relatively lower level of willingness to fund welfare payments is echoed in other studies. Figure 7 summarises Throsby and Withers’ survey which compared ‘willingness to fund’ responses across a wider range of portfolios.
Figure 8: Public support for increased or decreased government expenditure for services

Figure 8 reiterates the high level of community support for increased government investment in health and education services and indicates a relatively lower level of support for expenditure on sport, the arts and welfare. Another noteworthy result is the relatively low level of support for general government administration. These public servants tend to be the first target for politicians seeking to reduce staffing levels. In part, this may reflect (and is certainly consistent with) negative stereotypes of public servants (‘bureaucrats’). It may also reflect the high level of visibility of service providers and the comparative ‘invisibility’ of public servants engaged in administration, law making, rule making, policy development and managing government finance. Of course, ‘frontline’ public servants cannot effectively deliver their services without these parallel and less visible support services.

Another way that attitudinal studies have assessed ‘willingness to fund’ has been to examine citizens’ perceptions of the benefits of public services. Figure 9 presents a ranking of the perceived benefits to individuals and the community of a range of public services. The rank order follows a strikingly similar pattern to Figure 8 (public support for increased government expenditure).
These results demonstrate that some services such as police, law and order and roads are seen to provide significant benefit to communities even if they are not perceived to provide a lot of benefit to individuals' families and households. This result suggests that attitudes toward public sector investment are shaped by altruism and a sense of community, rather than simply self-interest.

Another recent EMC poll confirmed the ‘willingness to fund public services’ trend and put them in the context of political and economic rhetoric. Joe Hockey and others who pledge to reduce the staffing levels of public service agencies do so by appealing to public support for a budget surplus and its assumed benefits to individuals. This report does not examine the prevailing ‘surplus fetish’ and its economic rationale other than to note it is a persuasive device utilised by both major parties to justify their current economic management preferences. EMC’s research asked citizens to consider the relative merits of returning the budget to surplus by 2012-13 versus cutting public services and increasing tax levels. A clear majority (69%) of respondents supported delaying the return to a surplus, a preference that is diametrically opposed to the preference by both Labor and conservative politicians. Only 14% supported the ‘surplus push’. Almost half of the respondents (49%) supported maintaining current public sector spending and 15% advocated increased spending while just 22% supported further cuts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Individual / household</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Gov Admin.</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; public broadcasting</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry Assistance</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Defence</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport &amp; Recreation</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retraining</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Transport</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Assistance</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Pension</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roads</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police, Law &amp; Order</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical &amp; hospital</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Public services perceived to provide 'a reasonable amount' or 'a lot' of benefit to the individual / household or to the community.
Confidence and satisfaction

Confidence in American government has been declining for three decades. Three-quarters of Americans said they trusted the Federal government to do the right thing in 1964. Today, only a quarter do.18

Attiudinal surveys often focus on the question of whether citizens are satisfied with the performance of public service agencies. To what extent do Australians consider public services are delivered in a professional and ethical manner? How confident are we in APS agencies and their staff?

As noted elsewhere in this report, it is difficult to reliably separate confidence in the public service from confidence in government. And there is evidence that confidence in government institutions is in decline globally. The World Values Study19 measures confidence in a range of social institutions including the legal system, the press, the federal government, the public service, unions and major companies. Since 1981, their surveys in more than 80 countries have tracked a 'sharp decline' in confidence in many of these institutions, but no in public services. During this time, Australian citizens’ confidence in the public service has declined modestly from 41.6% (respondents who express ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence) in 1981 to 39.1% in 2005. Results of attitudinal studies in Australia are comparable to those for the United States (41.5%) and indicate a somewhat lower level of citizen confidence in the civil service than in Canada (55.8%), New Zealand (43.9%) and the United Kingdom (43.8).

Australian citizens tend to have considerably more confidence in the public service and in government than we do in major companies.

Figure 10: Confidence in institutions 19

To the extent that citizens conflate government and the public service, declining confidence in one is likely to influence attitudes toward the other. Figure 10 shows comparable levels of confidence in both.

Accessibility to the APS is one indicator to determine citizens’ levels of satisfaction. Since the 1977 Coombs Commission, Australian citizens have expressed dissatisfaction with their level of access to Commonwealth public servants, about one-third of whom are based in Canberra.20 Citizens residing outside state capitals and in remote and rural areas are most likely to report this source of dissatisfaction, and calls to situate public service offices in rural areas are not uncommon.21
Another indicator measured in surveys of citizen satisfaction is the apparent level of public servants’ commitment. More than half (54%) of the respondents to the 2005 ASA survey considered public servants very committed and a further 10% described them as ‘somewhat committed’.

Figure 11: How committed is the APS to serving the Australian people? (2005)  

Measuring satisfaction

Most APS agencies routinely measure levels of client satisfaction: 93% of agencies with public contact have a link for web-based feedback and complaints and 74% have complaints hotlines.23 The most recent survey of APS employees found that 70% use feedback from customers and clients to improve the services they deliver.24 Many agencies also conduct or commission client surveys to complement these routine feedback mechanisms. The Department of Human Services, for instance, gauges Child Support Program client satisfaction through its ‘Customers Having a Say’ point-of-service customer survey. This agency-administered survey suggests a high level of satisfaction, with 70-75% of client satisfaction during 2009-10.25

The Australian Tax Office (ATO) has commissioned an annual Community Perceptions Survey since 1996 to monitor community perceptions of the ATO and its administration of the tax system. Their survey of 2,000 adult clients provides useful metrics to guide the agency. The 2009 report26 highlighted positive aspects of the agency’s performance. Respondents felt the ATO was:

- Making it easier for taxpayers to complete their income tax return (73% agree)
- Listening and responding to complaints (77%)
- Being fair and professional in how it administers the tax system (80%)
- Staff are really helpful (85%)
- Communication provided enough guidance to answer my question sufficiently (80%)
- Overall experience [with representative] was positive (75%)

The survey also generates feedback about agency weaknesses and challenges. For instance, 40% of respondents to the 2009 survey said they “feel very confused about taxation matters.”

The overwhelmingly positive impression communicated in these ATO reports was contradicted, however, by recent media reports27 that the Commonwealth Ombudsman had received a record number of complaints about the ATO’s performance: 50,000 during the 2010-2011 financial year, a sharp rise from 40,665 and 27,942 in the previous two years. Although most (77%) respondents to the ATO’s survey agreed that the agency “listens to and responds to complaints” these Ombudsman complaints are not referred to in the ATO’s Community Perceptions Survey. As a result, two starkly
contrasting impressions were created: Commonwealth Ombudsman Allan Usher and his team spent 20% of their time investigating complaints about the ATO while taxation commissioner Michael D’Ascenzo reported that 83% of survey respondents thought the Tax Office was doing a “good job.”

This highlights an issue with over-reliance on agencies’ self-administered client surveys as evidence of citizen satisfaction: they tend to emphasise positive feedback. There are other reasons to look beyond agency reports. They are also difficult to locate on many agencies’ websites, they’re often slow to be published (the ATO’s 2010 report is not yet available online in mid-2011) and tend to be lengthy reports ostensibly written for an internal audience.

There are exemplary models for agency surveys. The Queensland Crime and Misconduct Commission’s biennial survey28 solicits feedback from approximately 1,500 citizens to provide an assessment of public servants’ honesty and behaviour, and confidence in agencies’ complaints mechanisms. The rigour of this report is perhaps a reflection of its purpose and mandate: the state’s Crime and Misconduct Commission has legislative responsibility for monitoring and responding to corruption.

The architects of Canada’s annual ‘Citizens First’ survey assess five dimensions of citizens’ satisfaction with public services: “timely service; staff knowledge and competence; an approach to service that is not only courteous and friendly but goes the extra mile to assist the citizen; fairness; and outcome.”29 It is fair to conclude that few, if any, APS agencies provide such a rigorous and balanced appraisal of client satisfaction, or generate metrics that are comparable from agency to agency. The merits of this survey and its applicability in Australia are discussed further below.

**Public service depictions in popular culture**

Popular culture presents another set of impressions of the public service. How are public servants depicted in magazines, newspapers, electronic media and film? Michelle Pautz and Laura Roselle30 examined the depiction of public servants in Hollywood films, examining the top ten box office grossing films in the United States between 1992 and 2006. They started with the premise that “government bureaucrats are among those individuals that Americans love to hate” and that “bureaucrats - with the word uttered in contempt - are alleged in all quarters to be lazy, incompetent, devious, and even dangerous.” Films such as ‘Batman Begins’ (2005) reinforce these stereotypes. In Gotham City, few police officers are honest and the city’s administrators are corrupt and unable (or unwilling) to control crime. Conversely, this study identified several Hollywood films with ‘bureaucrat heroes’ and observed that filmgoers “have a good chance of seeing civil servants depicted in film.”

We expected, and found, a negative depiction of government in general. Overall, out of 105 films that contained some depiction of government, 40 percent of the films portrayed government as competent, efficient, and/or good, whereas 60 percent depicted the government as inefficient, incompetent, and/or bad.30

To gain an impression of how public servants are depicted in popular culture, CPD examined more than 500 newspaper articles containing the expressions ‘public service’ or ‘public servants’ printed in Australia and the United Kingdom during 2010 and 2011. This analysis revealed some very positive portrayals including “hard-working, ethical and capable”31 and “a precious, civilising embodiment of our best collective endeavours.”32 On balance, though, newspaper articles, opinion columns and editorials tend to present negative stereotypes much more frequently. A sample of these stereotypes is presented in Table 2.
"wasters, lazy jobsworths, leeches, freeloaders"  
“lazy”  
“work-shy public servants taking endless coffee breaks on my tax money!”  
“fat cat bureaucrats”  
“cardigan wearers”  
“a mess... waste and inefficiency”  
“the Soviet Union but without the nuclear threat: all drab suits, grey offices, unattractive women and queues... that gloomy bureaucratic Mariana trench”  
“bureaucratic obesity”  
“generally more pre-occupied with the benefits they can receive than the actual benefits of the services they provide to the public.”  
"the enemies of enterprise ... taxing, regulating, smothering, crushing, getting in the way... the bureaucrats in government departments who concoct those ridiculous rules and regulations that make life impossible for the community, particularly smaller businesses”

Table 2: Derogatory expressions used to describe public servants

In the synthesis of politicians’ view that follows, many of these negative stereotypes are invoked.
Experience shows public servants are an easy target. In fact, the pleasure taken in bureaucrat bashing has of late reached new extremes, fired by the passions of our political opponents. This trend had proved a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the Australian public service is constantly exhorted to sharpen up, trim down, reach out and rein in. And to some degree, that’s fair enough. The public demands improvements. The press castigates failure. The pressure for faster, cheaper and better outcomes is relentless. But we have also learned, to our cost, that constant negativity has its perils. When you lose sight of all but stuff-ups and past failures, you may well lose faith that success can be achieved. We have set ambitious goals for a richer, fairer and greener Australia, and we cannot deliver them without public servants of the highest calibre.

Senator Kim Carr, Canberra Times 7/2/11

Public servants have not always benefitted from the rhetorical support of government... I am an avid believer in the importance of the public service to deliver... The opposition leader’s desire to see 12,000 public servants out of work perhaps gives more insight into the Liberal Party’s irrational, populist and unhelpful attitude to the public service.

Gary Gray, Special Minister of State for Public Service and Integrity

Senator Carr’s observation is consistent with our research into political commentary. The compendium of statements about the APS made by Australian politicians in the following pages reflects the adversarial and opportunistic nature of much of this commentary. Debates in the Australian Parliament and Senate present a bipolar impression of APS agencies. On one hand, public servants are ‘dedicated, ‘competent’, ‘honourable’, ‘invisible heroes’ doing ‘great work’. On the other, politicians such as Wilson Tuckey, Stuart Robert and Joe Hockey would prefer a much smaller public service that essentially ‘kept out of the way’.

To understand Australian politicians’ attitudes toward the public service, CPD analysed five years of Hansard, the Parliamentary record. This analysis highlights four recurrent issues that dominate political discourse:

- The size of the public service: agencies’ budgets and staffing levels;
- The efficiency of APS agencies: Joe Hockey and Wilson Tuckey’s comments exemplify the negative end of this continuum; Chris Ellison, Doug Cameron and Kim Carr’s comments characterise the positive end;
- The value and independence of public servants’ policy advice, and the associated issue of politicisation; and
- Issues associated with outsourcing and privatising public service functions.

A sample of representative comments follow to illustrate these and other recurrent themes in public service commentary.

Politicians’ views are clearly divided. To some extent, this polarisation reflects party lines: conservative politicians invoke the ‘big government’ frame and negative stereotypes while Labor Senators and Parliamentarians generally describe public servants and their contribution to society in positive terms. Politicians in both major parties speak of waste and the importance of economising. The Greens and politicians who represent Canberra and the Australian Capital Territory (Gary Humphries and Gai Brodtmann) express the most consistently positive portrayals of the APS.

The attitudes of Australian politicians differ markedly from those of the Australian community: they are less likely than other citizens to express satisfaction, confidence or willingness to fund.
ON THE RECORD:
politicians’ attitudes toward the Australian public service

HON ANTHONY ALBANESE
Member for Grayndler (ALP)
Minister for Infrastructure and Transport

“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.” Canberra Times 31/8/09

SENATOR SIMON BIRMINGHAM
South Australia (Liberal)

“This is a case of the government deciding that it is about serving the Public Service and creating a bigger bureaucracy before it actually gets on with talking about policy decisions and policy actions... the response is simply to set up an agency - not to consider any of the other substantive recommendations of the report but to swell the ranks of Canberra’s Public Service a little bit more by setting up an agency.” Hansard 28/10/09

HON BRONWYN BISHOP
Member for Mackellar (Liberal)

“When we were in government and when I was the minister for aged care, we did abolish the Public Service compulsory retirement age of 65. So we now have people in the Public Service who are working well into their 70s and giving splendid performance.” Hansard 28/2/11

SENATOR RON BOSWELL
Queensland (National)

“The Renewable Energy (Electricity) Amendment Bill 2010 is a bad bill to fix a bad law based on a bad policy. It appears that the scale and pace of a program has, again, overpowered the ability of the Public Service to manage and monitor it.” Hansard 21/06/10

HON ANTHONY BYRNE
Member for Holt (ALP)

“The coalition’s proposed public service freeze will significantly undermine the Public Service capacity to deliver essential services” Hansard 21/6/10

SENATOR DOUG CAMERON
New South Wales (ALP)

“They [the coalition] are going to cut back on the Public Service. When you cut back on the Public Service you cut back on services to the public.” Hansard 4/2/10

“Over the 2½ years I have been here, I have been really surprised at the talent and diversity and capacity of the public service to act in the national interest. Nothing will be more important in the forthcoming period, when we have to deal with the floods in Queensland, the flooding in northern New South Wales, the fires in Western Australia and the flooding in Victoria, than having the public service operate effectively and efficiently to deliver the restructuring and rebuilding of this country.” Hansard 9/2/11

HON DARREN CHEESEMAN
Member for Coorangamite (ALP)

“I rise today to put on the public record my concern about the opposition’s plans to cut the Public Service and the particular impact that may have not only on my community but also across many parts of rural and regional Australia.” Hansard 21/6/10

SENATOR STEPHEN CONROY
Victoria (ALP)

“The government is confident that the Australian Public Service’s lead role in policy development is absolutely central. The government is committed to the development of evidence-based policy making, with policy design and evaluation driven by analysis of all available options. Governments of different persuasions over a long period of time have used consultants, and that should not be seen as a vote of no-confidence in the public service.” Hansard 25/11/09

SENATOR DAVID JOHNSTON
Western Australia (Liberal)

“Without the economic boom associated with the resource industries... the Western Australian economy, already preyed upon to fund an ever-increasing and bloated state public service, would be in serious trouble.” Hansard 7/2/07
“What we are talking about here is the suggestion that somehow or other Australian public servants cannot be independent. That is the allegation that is being made. I find that an offensive remark... The Australian Public Service is made up of extremely competent, professional nation builders. They do not get everything right, but in my experience they are highly competent people who provide high-quality advice to government on most occasions. They are professional in their approach.”

Hansard 10/3/10

“The nomination of threatened species or heritage sites for listing... [is the type of action] one expects from the Australian Public Service, the sorts of actions that have given us an international reputation as a country that produces some of the best public servants in the world.”

Hansard 29/11/06

Senator Kim Carr
Victoria (ALP) Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research
ON THE RECORD:
politicians’ attitudes toward the Australian public service

“The coalition is about to extend the threat to the Australian Public Service with a freeze for two years on new public service jobs... [the] Abbott government is slinging off at the Public Service, without which this country would not be what it is and who work in the country’s interest”
Hansard 13/5/10

“In the recession, Public Service jobs should be retained rather than shed. We are pleased that there will be new Public Service jobs flagged in this budget.”
Hansard 14/5/09

“Those invisible heroes are our public servants... are people who are dedicated to the service of this country, to improving people’s lives, to improving the economy, to keeping our country safe... they are often derided by people in this House and by people around Australia. I find that really sad. These people should be lauded for what they do. They are dedicated to improving people’s lives and to public service.”
Hansard 24/11/10

“The coalition does not care about Canberra; it does not care about the Public Service. It has complete disdain for it.”
Hansard 25/11/10

“As long as I am in this place I will defend the women and men in the Australian Public Service, because public servants are, after all, servants of democracy.”
Hansard 18/10/10
SENATOR CHRIS ELLISON  
Western Australia (Liberal)  
“As a minister, I have received the support and advice of a Public Service who are too often overlooked and too often not noticed for the great work that they do in the service of their country. Whether it be Centrelink during times of emergency, Medicare providing valuable services to the people of Australia or the AFP and Customs keeping Australia safe and secure, I have seen outstanding work.”  
Hansard 3/12/08

HON MARTIN FERGUSON  
Member for Batman (ALP)  
“Over the last few years the Public Service has been under siege, and the reputation of the vast majority of hard-working public servants has been sullied by the few who have not upheld appropriate values and ethical standards. Many of them have felt powerless, in the face of political pressure to alter advice, to stay silent or to simply do nothing lest unpalatable truths emerge. Labor believes in rebuilding the Public Service and sees the restoration of its faith and courage to do the right thing by the Australian community as a top priority. I think it is very appropriate here today to remember that, despite the pressure the Public Service is under and despite the despair in many departments and agencies around Australia, there are many stories of outstanding public service and commitment.”  
Hansard 22/3/07

SENATOR STEVE FIELDING  
Victoria (Family First)  
“The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet will grow by 65 people... (This is) a 'little gift' for the Prime Minister tucked away in the budget. At a time when Australians are told to cut back and make do, this excess by the Prime Minister is obscene.” The Australian 14/5/09

“Joe Hockey said part of the answer was to sack 12,000 public servants in Canberra, as if that wouldn’t make “things harder for Australians”. Unless of course public servants are not Australians and they don’t have families to feed.”  
ABC’s The Drum 11/5/11

HON GARY GRAY  
Member for Brand (ALP)  
Special Minister of State for the Public Service and Integrity

HON KELLY HOARE  
Member for Charlton (ALP)  
“The real benefit of the (Access Card) scheme for the government and the Public Service executives is the enhancement of social control. They want to be able to exercise more power over the public.” Hansard 27/2/07

“IT IS NOT CLEVER TO SLASH PUBLIC SERVICE JOBS when, according to this government, they have a range of new reforms they want to carry out which will need an experienced, well-resourced Public Service. Cutting of the kind they are talking about now will be counterproductive in that regard.”  
Hansard 13/3/08

SENATOR GARY HUMPHRIES  
A.C.T. (Liberal)

SENATOR ANNETTE HURLEY  
South Australia (ALP)  
“One of (the Liberals’) key platforms, apparently, is to freeze the Public Service, so if people leave the Public Service then there is a freeze on that number. That would dramatically reduce services and our skills base in the Public Service.”  
Hansard 26/9/10
ON THE RECORD:
politicians’ attitudes toward the Australian public service

HON BOB KATTER
Member for Kennedy (Independent)

“We are continuously told in this country how wonderfully well off we are. If you look at the internal economy, then I think the government would get about 80 per cent. They have done a good job and their Public Service has done a good job.” Hansard 16/8/06

HON SUSSAN LEY
Member for Farrer (Liberal)

“Mr Tanner, as the Minister for Finance and Deregulation, is with his razor gang - and it always happens at this stage of the political cycle - going through the Public Service expenditure line by line, slashing and burning.” Hansard 04/02/09

“Under the government’s new Paid Parental Leave scheme, Australian taxpayers are having to contribute twice for these employees. This is not a criticism of the Public Service - we love them and they do good work - but this is not right.” Hansard 28/02/11

HON JOE HOCKEY
Member for North Sydney (Liberal)

“… that document might be floating around somewhere in that ocean of paper that comes out of the public service on a daily basis.”

Hansard 3/2/10

“The last three years of Labor has been a servant-master relationship in the public service and we’re going to bring it back to what it was a partnership between the elected officials and honourable individuals working hard in the public service.”

Canberra Times 16/8/10

SENATOR JAN LUCAS
Queensland (ALP)

“Senator Xenophon… the Public Service is there to provide excellent, well-briefed, well-researched advice to government. That is its job, and it is tasked to provide it in the baldest way: ‘Tell us the facts and then when we have all of those facts decisions can be made.’ My concern with your amendment is that that encourages the Public Service to behave in a different way than we would ordinarily expect of it. It would then be tailoring advice to try to understand or pre-empt what the government of the day is thinking.”

Hansard 17/11/10
SENATOR KATE LUNDY  
A.C.T. (ALP)

“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 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. The Rudd government, by contrast, values the importance of a professional, impartial Public Service and will be working to restore the values of the Westminster tradition to the Australian Public Service. The Rudd government has ambitious policy goals and a determination to deliver on its commitments to the Australian people. We are looking forward to working with the Public Service in delivering better outcomes for all Australians.” Hansard 23/6/08

SENATOR IAN MACDONALD  
Queensland (Liberal)

“We have now learnt from question time today the enormous bureaucracy that will be set up to administer the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme. If there are to be any jobs at all made out of the emissions trading scheme, quite clearly they are going to be in the Public Service. Senator Trood’s question very skilfully highlighted the enormous bureaucracy that will be built up around the emissions trading scheme.” Hansard 11/3/09

SENATOR NICK MINCHIN  
South Australia (Liberal)

“I indicate our strong support for what we know from our years in government is an extremely professional and confident Australian Public Service. As Senator Evans has indicated, they are involved in assistance on very many levels across the breadth of the Public Service. I thank him for his explanation of the circumstances surrounding Centrelink and for dealing with that.” Hansard 11/02/09

HON RICHARD MARLES  
Member for Corio (ALP)

“Most of us who grow up in political parties may tend to undervalue the role that the public service plays.” The Australian 17/4/10

“Those on the other side continue to attack the Public Service. The Public Service are just that: they are there to serve the public. The sorts of attacks we saw from the Treasurer, and then from the Prime Minister, on the Public Service sends a shiver down the spine of anybody who has any respect for the worthiness of others and for the professional advice that I know comes from those departments.” Hansard 3/6/08

HON IAN MACFARLANE  
Member for Groom (Liberal)

“This has taken time for governments and the Public Service to adopt such an open, accountable attitude and to accept that information in the public sphere is not the enemy... attitudes are changing, and the Public Service, led by ministers, has been increasing (in) transparency.” Hansard 12/5/10

HON JUDI MOYLAN  
Member for Pearce (Liberal)

“Customs and Border Protection is providing officers to assist Centrelink to process food related claims. As the minister responsible for these two agencies for the past 18 months, I am used to seeing outstanding acts of public service. Once again I have been impressed by the level of commitment and dedication shown by both these agencies in dealing with the task at hand. Their response to this disaster is just another fine example of the magnificent work they do to serve the community.” Hansard 22/2/11

HON ROD SAWFORD  
Member for Port Adelaide (ALP)

“The politicisation of the federal Public Service... and the imbalance between the public and private good diminish this nation.” Hansard 15/08/07
“I reckon about 50 per cent of the workforce today employed in the public service is in some sort of activity to tell you what you cannot do.”
Hansard 10/03/09

“That is communism and that is socialism where you have a new elite; they are called the public service.”
Hansard 01/06/09

“Then I ran into the brick wall called the Public Service.”
Hansard 01/06/09

“I want the government to be small. I want the public service reduced, if that is what it is going to deliver. What the community wants is a say. What the community wants is to have ownership over its own affairs. What the community wants is government to get out of the way so that the community can get on with doing what it does best - which is delivering great things within the community.” Hansard 22/11/10

“We have no agenda to start hacking into the total size of the public service, unlike our opponents, who clearly regard it as open season on services and on jobs.” Canberra Times 6/2/10

“More than $1billion will be saved over four years... We are focused on finding savings in government operations, but that is concentrated on increasing efficiency in the way government works and removing waste.” The Australian 14/5/09

“Unfortunately, the opposition neglected to note that when you freeze Public Service numbers in enforcement agencies for example, people in the Australian Taxation Office chasing tax avoidance activities - you lose revenue.” Hansard 25/5/10

“We have put forward a dramatic change in the structure of procurement in the processes of government... These are all things that the Howard government could have and should have done but refused to do because of its obsession with mimicking the private sector.” Hansard 13/5/10

“Instead of a new tax, the government needs to... put a freeze on Public Service recruitment.” Hansard 24/2/11

“Do not let Sir Humphrey in. Avoid the temptation to allow the overly bureaucratic tendencies that sometimes flourish within the Public Service. Stamp them out and seek always more effective ways of doing things.” Hansard 20/6/07

“Squeezing public servants probably appeals to some people. I think the critical thing to ensure is that Government delivers its services efficiently at every level but you’ve just got to be smart about it.” Canberra Times 7/5/09
“Australians are generally well served by honest, capable and highly committed public servants... (but) the community still sees government agencies as bureaucratic and unresponsive to individual needs.”
Canberra Times 21/11/09

“The model of government, which those opposite are advancing, is this: the responsibility of ministers is to stand up here simply as the mouthpiece for government departments... for public servants. This government has a different view: not only do we welcome advice from public servants but we will engage in debate with the Public Service. We will not always agree with the Public Service and, as I have said repeatedly, we will take advice from beyond the Public Service. We welcome the contribution of the Public Service to the debate. The contribution of the Public Service is absolutely critical.”
Hansard 29/5/08

“Do we respect the independence of the Public Service? Have we maintained the heads of the Commonwealth agencies? When those opposite assumed office, they took out the revolver and shot them one by one by one, creating a climate of fear in the Public Service. That is not the way in which this government proposes to govern.”
Hansard 23/6/08

“Mr Speaker, I note that the Leader of the Opposition routinely disputes the advice provided to us by the independent Public Service of Australia. It is part of a routine behaviour: attack the Secretary of the Treasury when you do not like what the Treasury advice is, and on this day, attack the Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship because you happen to disagree with what his advice is.”
Hansard 16/11/09
EMPLOYEES’ ATTITUDES

Public servants’ attitudes towards their agencies provide a complementary set of insights to those of citizens and elected representatives. As insiders, public servants are well located to provide an informed view of their agencies and of the service as a whole. Compared with politicians and media commentators, public servants have a very direct interest in the efficient functioning of their workplaces. Further, employee satisfaction is arguably a necessary precondition for agencies’ stability and performance.

This part of our synthesis of attitudes toward the public service is primarily informed by two annual studies: the Australian Public Service Commission’s employee survey and the “What Women Want’ survey conducted by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

The APSC employee survey has been conducted annually since 2003. The 2010 survey (published in 2011) was conducted by ORIMA Research on behalf of the Commission. It sought the views of a representative sample of APS employees in agencies with at least 100 APS employees: 5,607 valid responses were received, representing a 64% response rate. The questionnaire addressed topics listed in Table 3.

Recruitment experiences
The quality of SES leadership
APS employee perceptions compared with UK and US government employee data
Employee satisfaction for the employee engagement factors
Areas for improvement in employee engagement
Engagement and willingness to be innovative
Engagement and intention to leave
Satisfaction for factors by classification
Satisfaction for factors by length of service
Satisfaction regarding Work-Life Balance
Extent of employee interaction with non-government stakeholders
Service delivery employee perceptions
Agency mechanisms for collecting feedback from the public
Perceptions of APS innovation

Table 3: APSC employee survey topics

‘What Women Want’ has been conducted by the CPSU annually since 2006 and surveys 9000-10,000 female employees in the public services agencies of the Commonwealth, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. The CPSU extends their sampling to employees in the private sector, including companies such as Telstra. More than 9,000 women participate in the survey each year: 9,167 women in 2010. This survey seeks women’s views on a range of issues summarised in Table 4.

These two surveys are wide-ranging in scope and present very detailed findings. This report examines a subset of the topics examined by the ASPC and CPSU: job satisfaction; mobility and preference for public sector employment, and interactions with elected government.
Caring responsibilities
Hours of work and overtime
The intrusion of work into women’s non-work time
Flexible working arrangements
The capacity to influence work and levels of job satisfaction
The availability of training and career opportunities
The impact of financial factors on career decisions
Performance pay
Bullying, sexual harassment and discrimination
Occupational Health and Safety
Travel – both to/from work and work-related travel
Superannuation

Table 4: CPSU ‘What Women Want’ survey topics

Job satisfaction and work-life balance

The record of the APS as an employer was one of the main criticisms noted by the 1977 Coombs review. Since the 1970s, employees’ levels of satisfaction and perceptions of the APS have been studied closely. The benchmark for employees’ attitudes and experiences is set by the Public Service Act 1999 which articulated fifteen values (which are included as an Appendix to this report), ten of which relate to the workplace.

Employees’ satisfaction with their work and workplace is the focus of many questions in both the APSC and CPSU surveys. The most recent APSC survey found that:

- 78% of employees enjoy the work in their current job
- 82% are motivated to do their best possible work
- 97% are willing to put in extra effort to get the job done when needed
- 63% have a feeling of personal accomplishment from their job

Moreover, 84% of employees would recommend the APS as a good place to work, and 66% would recommend their agency as a good place to work. Inverting these results, about one-third of public servants do not report a sense of personal accomplishment and would not recommend their agency as a good place to work.

Both surveys assess attitudes toward work-life balance. The CPSU survey reports that many women (50%) find it difficult to combine work and family and that 20% are dissatisfied with the balance between work and other life responsibilities; 40% feel that taking time out for family reasons would disadvantage their career prospects and nearly 20% of women are working an additional ten or more hours each week with “little or no influence over whether they work additional hours.”

The authors of the two survey reports communicate results quite differently: in general, the APSC adopts a ‘strengths-based’ approach whereas the CPSU report adopts a ‘deficit’ approach that focuses on weaknesses and concerns. The APSC results (summarised in Figure 12) show that 50% of SES respondents and 73% of employees at lower levels in the Service are satisfied with their work-life balance. Not only is this a ‘glass-half-full’ interpretation, it actually shows a higher level of employee dissatisfaction than the ‘glass-half-empty’ version reported by the CPSU (80%).
Figure 12 also highlights other differences between the attitudes of members of the Senior Executive Service (SES) and other APS employees. Employees in SES positions are generally more satisfied with their job and less satisfied with their work-life balance than public servants employed in lower bands. They are also more likely than APS staff at lower levels to have experienced an increased workload and task complexity during the last five years.

Most APSC survey respondents report that their learning and development needs have been fully (33%) or partially (51%) identified and agreed with their manager and that they are satisfied with their agency's arrangements for access to learning and development opportunities (58%). By contrast (continuing the ‘glass-half-empty’ analysis), the CPSU survey found that 20% of women have applied for and been denied training in the past year.

**Mobility and private-public sector preference**

Many respondents to the APS survey (59%) reported interest in gaining “broader work experience” through a secondment or short-term transfer outside of their agency: either to another APS agency (53%), another level of government (21%) or in a private sector organisation (15%).

A recent study, commissioned by the Canadian public service commission examined employees’ attitudes toward the public and private sectors. Comparing the attitudes of new recruits to the attitudes of the same employees twelve months later, the study revealed some “troubling shifts.” In particular, researchers found that the importance that employees ascribed to the opportunity to be creative had declined by 9% during their first year with the public service, and the importance they attached to the prestige associated with their jobs fell by 10%. Conversely, more than half (57%) of settled employees expressed a preference for a job in the public rather than private sector and ascribed this preference to the work-life balance and other benefits including job security and pensions. Employees had more positive attitudes than potential recruits regarding public sector working conditions including opportunities to be creative and work autonomously, attractive compensation, advancement opportunities and meaningful work.

The APSC survey also examines attitudes toward innovation and creativity. The survey’s 2010 results show 47% of respondents said that their agency is prepared to pilot and trial new ideas and 34% of employees agreed their agency celebrates its success in innovation and learns from
everything it does. These results suggest that in many agencies the majority of employees feel that innovation is discouraged.

Both the APSC and CPSU surveys examine attitudes toward workplace behaviour, ethics and values. The APSC’s 2010 survey reported that more than 90% of respondents felt that colleagues, supervisors and SES leaders act in accordance with the APS Values: that their workplaces are characterised by merit-based employment decisions, freedom from discrimination, high ethical standards, accountability, equity and cooperation (see Appendix A, especially values 10.1a-d and h-o). The CPSU survey, on the other hand, reported that more than 25% of women have experienced bullying and harassment at work in the past 12 months. Alarmingly, of those who reported these incidents, just 12.5% were satisfied with the response of management.

**Interactions with government**

The values enshrined in the Public Service Act (1999) set high expectations regarding public servants’ interactions with the legislature or elected arm of government. Under the Act, APS agencies and their staff are to be apolitical, impartial and professional, act with the highest ethical standards, be openly accountable for their actions and responsive to the Government in “providing frank, honest, comprehensive, accurate and timely advice and in implementing the Government’s policies and programs” (see Appendix A, especially sections 10.1a, d-f).

The APSC survey asks public servants whose work entails direct contact with ministers and their advisers about their experience in meeting these expectations. In 2010, almost a third (31%) of Senior Executive Service and Executive Level employees reported that they faced a challenge in “balancing the need to be apolitical, impartial and professional; to be responsive to government; and to be openly accountable in dealing with ministers and/or their offices.”

These interactions were also examined by Kathy MacDermott who found that departmental secretaries were more confident in balancing the APS values than lower level appointees: “public servants as a group are less confident than their departmental secretaries in their interactions with ministers and their advisers: they are less likely to be familiar with any conventions or protocols that apply to such interactions - and have less power to assert any such knowledge.”

**Policy Implications**

This report opened by noting the relationship between attitudes and political decisions. Policies and decisions to increase or decrease the staffing and funding of the APS are regularly justified by reference to actual or purported community opinion. In a participatory democracy, it follows that popular opinion is and should be one factor in these decisions. It is not helpful, though, to distort or misrepresent community attitudes. The negative stereotypes presented in the media and political discourse should not be used to justify decisions that potentially affect the beneficiaries of public services – Australian citizens who invest willingly in these services.

To generate a more reliable indication of community attitudes toward the APS and its 130 plus agencies, the Australian Government is considering implementing a regular survey similar to Canada’s biennial ‘Citizens First’ survey. This survey of attitudes toward local, regional and national public services was initiated by a consortium of senior government officials who established the Citizen-Centred Service Network. The survey has been conducted every two years since 1998. Since 2005, it has been managed by the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service, working with a consortium of partners that represent federal, provincial, territorial, municipal and regional jurisdictions.

The survey utilises the Common Measurements Tool which asks respondents to assess five dimensions of service delivery: responsiveness; reliability; access and facilities; communication; and cost. The survey provides feedback on:
- Citizen satisfaction with services (timeliness, staffing, outcomes, experiences, service quality);
- Feedback on the channels that citizens use to access services;
- Expectations; and
• Confidence (whether agencies are considered to be fair, honest and in touch with the community).

The Moran Review of the APS recommended the adoption of a similar survey in Australia.51 The Review concluded that a survey based on the Canadian model would have a range of benefits, helping the Australian Government:

• Understand current views of citizens in regard to individual agencies;
• Understand citizen’s desire for service delivery;
• Identify drivers of citizen satisfaction with government services (including regulation) and opportunities; and
• Develop a better data set for benchmarking the Australian Government against other jurisdictions, including internationally, and tracking progress over time.52

The Canadian survey instrument focuses primarily on service delivery. There is more to the Australian Public Service, of course, and it is equally important to assess citizens’ views toward functions including policy development, law making, rule making, and monitoring and enforcing laws and regulations. Ideally the survey should be revised to assess these public service functions as well.
APPENDIX A: PUBLIC SERVICE VALUES

The APS values are as follows:

(a) the APS is apolitical, performing its functions in an impartial and professional manner;

(b) the APS is a public service in which employment decisions are based on merit

(c) the APS provides a workplace that is free from discrimination and recognises and utilises the diversity of the Australian community it serves

(d) the APS has the highest ethical standards

(e) the APS is openly accountable for its actions, within the framework of Ministerial responsibility to the Government, the Parliament and the Australian public

(f) the APS is responsive to the Government in providing frank, honest, comprehensive, accurate and timely advice and in implementing the Government’s policies and programs

(g) the APS delivers services fairly, effectively, impartially and courteously to the Australian public and is sensitive to the diversity of the Australian public

(h) the APS has leadership of the highest quality

(i) the APS establishes workplace relations that value communication, consultation, co-operation and input from employees on matters that affect their workplace

(j) the APS provides a fair, flexible, safe and rewarding workplace

(k) the APS focuses on achieving results and managing performance

(l) the APS promotes equity in employment;

(m) the APS provides a reasonable opportunity to all eligible members of the community to apply for APS employment;

(n) the APS is a career-based service to enhance the effectiveness and cohesion of Australia’s democratic system of government;

(o) the APS provides a fair system of review of decisions taken in respect of APS employees.

Source: Public Service Act 1999 Section 10.1
REFERENCES


39 Anti-public service campaigns make extensive use of YouTube. Typical rhetoric includes ‘Idiots guide to public sector that produces no wealth’ [retrieved 21 June 2011](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yi2l0NilEBE&feature=related) and ‘Three reasons public sector employees are killing the economy’ [retrieved 21 June 2011](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LWNTUK8kTA&feature=related)


52 Moran 2010, p.40.