The Canberra Times published an article outlining the Australian Public Service Commissioner’s views on the changes to the Public Service Act.

This is my report card on the claims being made by the Commissioner, Steve Sedgwick, in this article.

It is claimed that these changes could lead to major transformation. In some instances this is correct. However, in some key respects these changes are simply a reassertion of the status quo and, in my view, a defensive reaction to changing times.

To make matters more complex some of the changes presuppose a change in mindset and a dismantling of administrative mechanisms and practices that support a culture and management practices that are increasingly problematic.

My comments against the points made in the article are in red text. You will see the use of two symbols throughout the article.

![X] Meaning that the claim or comment being made has significant flaws or problems

![?] Meaning that while the claim or comment being made is correct there are critical questions to be considered

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Challenges in a changing world

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Australia's public service is undergoing changes that could lead to major transformation, writes Noel Towell.

Australian Public Service Commissioner, Steve Sedgwick at his office at Aviation House in Phillip. Photo: Melissa Adams
Stephen Sedgwick is not the type of bloke to get carried away.

But the Public Service Commissioner, the man who leads workplace policy for Australia’s 168,000 federal bureaucrats, believes sweeping changes to the service's legal framework can transform the organisation.

Just don't expect any overnight sensations, the commissioner said this week. After all, it's still the public service.

But the commissioner believes that sweeping legislative changes enacted this month can help the massive organisation adapt to the challenges of a changing world and also leave a few bad habits in the past. ❌

Such bad habits as micro-managing employees, demanding blind compliance, hounding out those deemed to ‘not fit in’ and regarding the chain of command as the chain of information? I think not. Rather what some of these changes do is enshrine these bad habits.

The July amendments also widely expand Sedgwick's power to make directions in all aspects of human resources policy and "APS values" across the service. ❌

The presumption here is that human resources is the solution to all that ails the Australian Public Service. The human resource function has been allowed to become a policing function over the years and has failed to deliver. It is difficult to see how more of the same will not simply make matters worse.

Sedgwick has all the caution - and the language - of a man who has worked in the public service for 41 years, but you get the feeling he thinks big things are possible from these reforms.

Just not in a hurry. Changes to the Public Service Act that came into force on July 1 have given the bureaucracy a much tougher disciplinary edge, with federal government workers facing more scrutiny of their behaviour, attendance and even web browsing. ❌

Management practices within the Australian Public Service have quite a lot in common with the classrooms of the 1950s. It is also characterised by a crude form of behaviourism. This created an environment where systemic bullying and mobbing can thrive. So again, this is a backward looking approach.

Other changes to the public service code of conduct will extend bosses' power to punish staff for off-the-job misbehaviour, including conduct on Twitter and Facebook. ❌

This is a vary clear example of the Australian Public Service implementing a compliance model focused on censorship. This is anathema to freedom of speech, transparency and accountability. Public servants and citizens have the right to engage in open on line
discussion concerning service delivery and the practices of public service agencies. In fact, doing so is a means of organisational improvement.

A new clause will make employees liable if they have not acted with "honesty and integrity" during the hiring process; PS speak for lying your way into a job.

But Sedgwick argues that the biggest shake-up since 1999 to the way the service governs itself goes way beyond disciplinary matters, to the heart of how public servants, particularly the top brass, approach their jobs.

The commission has been promoting aspects of the new legal environment under the acronym ICARE (impartial, committed to service, accountable, respectful, ethical) and Sedgwick believes that, slowly, the new framework will take the service in new directions.

The idea of breaking down silos in the bureaucracy, dragging public servants out of their own little worlds and getting them to focus on the big picture, is not new but the commissioner says the rhetoric must become reality.

"I put the changes to the act in the general current of reform or progress and in that case, what the act is doing is giving broad legal expression to those currents and trends that have been around the service for a while," Sedgwick says.

Some of these trends are destructive and backward looking. For example, the over emphasis on management, the growth of human resources, demands for blind compliance and excessive hierarchy. The only legal expression such trends should given is the one that shows them door.

Yet, one of the most positive trends - social media dialogue and engagement - is actively discouraged by vague yet threatening provisions.

"If you go back to the blueprint for reform in 2010, some of the broad currents that were reflected through that blueprint were that increasingly some of the problems that governments are dealing with are complex, multi-dimensional, some of them are multi-jurisdictional, think of health and education.

"So, both in the policy development space and increasingly in the implementation space, if government is going to have the best impact that it can for the citizens of the country, then we need the agencies of government to be able to collaborate."

True. Yet the biggest impediment of collaboration on the ground is impeded by the reticence of Australian Public Service agencies to enable open collaboration between public servants within and between agencies. Let alone with the community. This mindset has set the public service back years and the stance taken on social media is proof of that.
He also reckons that the new legislation will help with a problem often highlighted by critics - an underlying weakness in policy development or what they call "strategic foresight capability".

"From our point of view, we've defined something we call the Stewardship Agenda," Sedgwick says.

"That's a recognition that for a long period of time, certainly since the early 1980s, the public service has got really good at being responsive to the agenda of the government of the day.

"It can implement things amazingly well, and when something goes wrong, it stands out and that's because things get done and they get done pretty well. Some people now believe that it's too reactive."

Time to get on the front foot, Sedgwick argues. "Some ministers and some governments are looking for a more forward-looking public service that is prepared to be more actively engaged in strategic policy discussion, which has a greater capacity to engage in discussions about what should be, as well as how we can help implement an agenda," he says.

The time to get on the front foot was years ago. Yet, what we are still seeing in some of these changes is backward looking and, in some key respects, is the reassertion of outmoded forms of control. In particular, of controlling dialogue.

"The act has been amended to reflect the fact that in addition to doing the day job, responding to the agenda of the government of the day, a [departmental] secretary has got responsibilities to this enduring institution, which is both their own agency and to the Australian Public Service, which is to build that capability. But it's a slow burn, you don't build capability in five minutes."

Neither should it take years to build that capability. The public service has large numbers of public servants with the capabilities and mindset needed. Yet some of these measures are actually part of the problem. A lot of this has to do with the notions of hierarchy, leadership and management that currently prevail. I’d add job design and the role of human resources to that list.

Ultimately, the goal is to have every public servant, from the bottom of the APS ladder to the heights of the Senior Executive Service, having a clear idea where their work fits into the service's broader agenda. Ambitious stuff. "Hopefully, you can situate what you're doing in a broader strategic agenda and we know that tends to improve employee engagement," Sedgwick says.

I could not agree more. The importance of employees knowing where their work fits into the bigger picture has been known for years. Siloing employees because of their APS level, pretending that operational and strategic thinking are somehow separate, a narrow interpretation of leadership, the oppression of dissenting views and perceptions of
whistleblowing are all part of the problem. Removing the mechanisms and practices that support such a culture is essential. Yet some of these changes actually support increasingly dysfunctional practices.

"We will also get a focus on how to produce a high-performing organisation, and there’s been a lot of work done in the commission around clarity, around goals and how to nest your piece of action within the broader context."

That brings us to the sore subject of "performance management," a battleground in the service in recent years, with managers in some agencies unsure when a routine work appraisal will turn into a bullying allegation and many workers simply groaning at the sound of those two words. Sedgwick does not try to downplay the challenge.

"Eighty per cent of managers believe they have the skills to manage performance effectively, and 80 per cent of the staff disagree with the statement that underperformance is managed well," he says.

"That says we might have a little work to do. It’s also true that it’s less than 50 per cent of staff [that] believe that their last performance management discussion actually helped them to improve their performance."

The Australian Public Service has invested huge amounts of taxpayer funds in performance management. These statistics are a clear indication that this human resource experiment has failed. In fairness, this is not restricted to the public service. It is also clear that performance management systems are used to force blind compliance from employees and are an enabler of bullying and mobbing.

In the main these systems fail as they are overly bureaucratic and too many managers use them as an instrument of power.

But according to Sedgwick the changes to the performance-management rules, and this is another ambitious bit, aim to move the process from one that simply prevents poor performance to a culture where "high performance" is encouraged.

"The more we focus on high performance, then the more likely it is that the focus of the public service shifts from what can at times be seen as an excessively compliance-orientation towards managing performance in the workplace, towards one that recognises that managing performance is about achieving the maximum outcomes.

"Within an agency, typically you'll find people who get it and have very good understanding and very good relationships within their workplace and then you have people who are compliance-orientated, and what we hope to find over a period of time is that the more we have these conversations about the effectiveness of the organisation and the high performance of the organisation, the more we will see the balance will tip."
I agree. However, human resource speak and approaches will be seen as just more of the same. People lay at the core of this. Consequently, the approach has to be more about inspiring people than managing them. So, again, the very notions of management shaped by hierarchy need to be dismantled.

A major part of this involves letting go. Of managing less, reducing the pervasiveness of hierarchy and embracing greater openness.

"So I'd expect over time that those cultural shifts will reflect in the life of an APS 6 and make life more rewarding frankly."

But again, time and patience are required. "Whether you see the change in 12 months? We've got an organisation of 168,000 staff, we've got 108 agencies, but you'll find some of the agencies will pick it up over time and we'll see it reflected in the statistics we see in the state of the service report," Sedgwick says.

I completely agree with the Commissioner’s sentiment about making life more rewarding. However, as can be seen from my comments throughout this ‘report card’, I do not agree that some of these changes serve that sentiment well at all.