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What Future for FREE AND FRANK Advice?

This paper was presented to a round table on 'Free and Frank Advice' organised by the Institute of Public Administration New Zealand (IPANZ) and the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, held at the Victoria University of Wellington council chamber on 30 May 2012.

I would like to begin by thanking the Institute of Public Administration for their invitation to deliver this lecture as part of their centennial commemorations of the Public Service Act of 1912. This act deserves to be remembered because it formally enshrined certain values that remain fundamental to government but which have not always received due recognition from those who comment publicly on public service matters.

The main thrust of the Public Service Act was to establish a unified professional, career-based public service. Appointments and promotions were to be made according to service-wide standards and rules administered by public service

commissioners and free of political influence. In making this change, New Zealand was not alone but was following international trends. All modern western governments were in the process of reducing the influence of political patronage and jobbery on administrative appointments by restricting the role of politicians and other powerful outsiders.

In Britain and other British-style jurisdictions, the Northcote-Trevelyan report of 1853 (Northcote and Trevelyan,

1853) made a seminal contribution. Using models pioneered for the Indian civil service, Northcote and Trevelyan recommended a system of independently administered service-wide examinations as a basis for appointments, backed up by transparent, merit-based procedures for internal promotion. The Westminster model subsequently developed a particularly sharp distinction between elected ministers, who retained responsibility for general policy and administration, and politically unaffiliated, permanent officials who controlled appointments in return for loyalty to the government of the day. This system, with minor variations, still persists in Whitehall, as well as in Ottawa, Canberra and Wellington.

How public servants are appointed might seem a relatively minor aspect of government organisation when compared with, say, the impact that government and its agencies have on individual citizens and society at large. Why give

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so much attention to the selection and career paths of officials when what really matters is their subsequent performance in terms of the objectives we set for them? Indeed, if democracy demands that governments should follow the people's preferred directions, why go out of our way to prevent the citizens' elected representatives from deciding which individuals should be given the important task of carrying out government policy?

In practice, however, the values that underpin merit appointment to the public service, namely the application

or patronage will have less compunction about bending the rules when dealing with members of the public.

New Zealand is consistently ranked among the least corrupt countries in the world in which to do business. This deserved reputation for high standards of impartial and transparent government rests on many factors, not least a vigilant media and a public opinion intolerant of ministers who improperly interfere in departmental processes. But we should not forget the part played by government's own institutions, including the State Services

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of transparent rules and procedures and freedom from political interference, have application far beyond the conduct of personnel policy. They are also fundamental to how public servants carry out their main functions as public administrators. For instance, when providing services to individual members of the public, government officials are often called on to apply general rules and regulations to particular cases. They are required to act in strict accordance with the rules, without fear or favour, and to keep a full and accurate record of all procedures followed. If a minister or any other politician seeks to intervene on behalf of an individual citizen, he or she is informed about how the rules apply in this particular case and any suggestion of special consideration will be politely rebuffed.

This respect for impartiality in the implementation of policy is seamlessly linked to a similar respect for due process in the appointment and promotion of government officials. Public servants whose employment is grounded in merit-based procedures will have the same respect for procedures when dealing with the public. Conversely, officials who owe their positions to personal connections

Commission (SSC), the direct descendant of the original Public Service Act. The SSC continues to perform a vital function in protecting the values of a non-aligned professional public service, particularly at the interface between ministers and departmental chief executives. As such, it is the envy of other mature Westminster democracies (e.g. Aucoin, 2012). In Australia, for example, the corresponding body, the Public Service Commission, has lacked the same role. Under the Howard Coalition government it was unable to prevent some unfortunate politicisation in the appointment of department heads. Current revisions to the Australian Public Service Act are aimed at strengthening the role of the public service commissioner but he or she will still lack some of the powers of the New Zealand state services commissioner. In this context, it is disturbing to read a recent proposal that the State Services Commission might eventually merge with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Better Public Services Advisory Group, 2011, p.51). New Zealand should think long and hard before it compromises the independence of the one central agency that focuses on issues of public service integrity.

Public service values of integrity and impartiality are important not only in making personnel decisions and in implementing government policy but also in another crucial public service role, which is the main topic of this lecture, the advising of ministers. The advising function tends to be overlooked in our recent concentration on managing for performance and outcomes. But it remains critically important. The State Sector Act 1988, for instance, in listing the responsibilities of the department chief executive, places 'Tendering advice to the appropriate minister and other ministers of the Crown' next after 'carrying out the functions and duties of the department'. Indeed, if we go back as far as Northcote-Trevelyan, we find advising ministers named as the first function of permanent public servants. Advising, of course, has always been a predominantly head office task. The majority of today's public servants, who staff the regional offices and local branches and who deal directly with the public, have little direct input into policy advice, although their views may be sought from time to time. But if advising occupies a relatively small proportion of the public service overall, it still remains a crucial public service function.

Public service advice takes many forms. It includes, for example, practical suggestions on how ministers should deal with their immediate, daily tasks and crises; draft letters in the minister's name replying to the minister's extensive correspondence; and policy papers analysing various options for dealing with policy problems faced by the minister and the government. More broadly, the advising function can cover the collection of statistics and other relevant data, as well the evaluation of existing policies, and medium to long-term research into issues judged likely to be salient in the future.

Public servants do not have a monopoly on providing advice to governments. Ministers also listen to their political advisers and colleagues, as well as to representatives of organised interests and to members of the community. Policy-relevant research is also carried out by other government agencies, including

universities and research institutes, and by independent organisations and think tanks. Public servants have, however, occupied a unique position in the policy-advising system, combining close access to the centre of government decision-making with a distinctive approach to the formulation of advice.

What sets public service advice apart from advice ministers receive from other sources? By hallowed tradition, public service advice is said to be 'free and frank'. At least, this is the formulation favoured in New Zealand and the United Kingdom, Australia preferring a slightly different, though equally alliterative, version, 'frank and fearless'. The label implies that public servants are obliged to speak their minds openly and honestly. They should be willing to tell ministers things that ministers may not wish to hear. They should not question the government's basic political direction, but, within this general constraint, they should freely indicate their views of how the government's policy objectives can be best achieved, even if this means challenging other opinions that ministers may hold dear (Mulgan, 2008).

Being free and frank, in this sense, is certainly an important aspect of good public service advice, but it should not be singled out as the one essential characteristic of such advice. Public servants are not the only people expected to be free and frank in their advice to ministers. Ministers also look for the same degree of openness and honesty from their personal advisers, who comment on matters of political tactics and media presentation.

Nor is the value of free and frank advice confined to politics and government. Leaders as diverse as captains of industry, bishops, and vice-chancellors all need trusted advisers who will speak their minds freely. We should also remember that speaking freely and frankly does not necessarily require speaking in confidence behind closed doors. Newspaper editors, for instance, do it openly, as do political activists and academics.

For these reasons, then, free and frank advice may be one important aspect of public service advice, but, on its own at least, it is not the defining aspect. To

better grasp the distinctive nature of public service advice we also need to refer to the public service values such as impartiality and integrity which we have seen to underlie other aspects of the public service, such as appointments and policy implementation. Compared with advice from, say, a media adviser or a lobby group, public service advice is expected to be scrupulously accurate in its factual material, balanced in its assessment of evidence, and unbiased in its analysis of options. In effect, these are intellectual values that are often associated

main professional imperatives faced by senior public servants. If we cannot trust the judgement of public servants, then whom can we trust?

Of course, public servants cannot think or argue with total objectivity or impartiality. Indeed, nobody can. But we should not be tempted into a shallow relativism which holds all opinions to be equally subjective and all judgements therefore equally biased. Instead, we can talk sensibly in terms of degrees of impartiality and reliability as interpreted in particular contexts. From

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with the best scientific or academic work – accuracy, objectivity, lack of bias and so on. The main difference is that, unlike academics and other researchers, public servants must always operate within a framework which acknowledges the government's right to determine directions and make final decisions. Unlike academics, also, they often cannot afford to delay judgement in the absence of definitive evidence. Moreover, even when advising in the midst of uncertainty, public servants are expected to exercise the rational virtues of concern for factual accuracy and balanced judgement in the weighing of evidence.

Respect for the intellectual integrity of public service advice is a regular feature of our political discourse. Ministers who wish to vouch for the accuracy of a factual statement or the reliability of an argument will commonly preface their statements with words such as 'departmental statistics indicate' or 'as my officials advise me'. Opposition politicians, keen to score a point against the government, will seize on instances where ministers appear to have gone against advice from their departments. In doing so, they are trading on an assumption that the department's view is particularly reliable. Safeguarding this reputation is one of the

this perspective, it makes sense to expect public service officials to be more reliable and judicious than other players in the policy-making system. Spokespeople for particular interest groups have obvious axes to grind, as do many of the so-called think tanks. Consultants have incentives to please those who have employed them and whom they hope will employ them again in the future. Politicians and their personal advisers are often more interested in headlines and opinion polls than in serious analysis of policy issues. Only public servants have the resources of access and information, underpinned by professional values of integrity and independence, to maintain an impartial stance.

The defining characteristics of good public service advice, then, are factual accuracy and balanced judgement applied to policy issues. We can call this free and frank advice if we wish, out of respect for well-worn tradition, in the sense that public service advice may involve telling politicians what they do not want to hear. Public servants should not compromise their respect for truth and evidence in order to accommodate the views of their political masters. But, as I have attempted to show, it is respect for truth and evidence that is the key.

II

Public service advice is facing a number of major challenges, both here and elsewhere. To begin with, there is a perception that the policy function has been comparatively neglected within government bureaucracies. Two recent authoritative reports on either side of the Tasman, the Moran report in Australia (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration, 2010) and the Scott report in New Zealand (Review of Expenditure on Policy Advice, 2010), have indicated similar systemic weakness in policy performance among major government departments, particularly in relation to long-term strategic policy. Admittedly, any such generalised judgement is hard to substantiate and performance is clearly varied across agencies. Dissatisfaction with the quality

through general management. As a result, the best and brightest who rise to the top in the public service are more likely to have made their mark as managers than as analysts.

One major long-term development which has affected the standing of public service advice is the fact that public servants do not have the ear of ministers to the same extent as they did in previous generations. A number of things have contributed to this trend. A commonly cited factor is the expansion of the number of ministerial advisers, understood as members of the minister's office appointed directly by the minister and not belonging to the public service. Acting as the minister's eyes and ears, these political appointees have enabled ministers to extend their influence much further over policy and over their

of public service advice. Moreover, the fact that advisers increasingly control access to ministers can sometimes make it harder for senior public servants to get to see their ministers in person. If ministers are inclined to distrust the loyalty or competence of their department, advisers provide a ready conduit for relaying this distrust. However, generalising in this area remains difficult. Whether the growth in the number of advisers has in itself seriously affected the relationship of ministers and departmental officials remains a contested issue. In New Zealand, at least, research suggests that it has not.

When critics complain of the growing influence of advisers they often have something else in mind, namely the increasing importance of media management in the priorities of ministers. The '24-hour news cycle', 'media spin' and the 'continuous election campaign' have become clichés of contemporary political commentary, but only because they represent a real and profound change in the conduct of democratic politics. Successful politicians have always had an eye on publicity and public opinion, but, in recent times, dealing with the media seems to have become an almost overwhelming obsession. The speed of the media cycle requires constant responses throughout the day. The perceived importance of frequent opinion polls forces ministers to tailor their actions and priorities with a view more to immediate media impact than to longer-term policy. Ministers are therefore thrown more into the arms of their media experts and tactical advisers. It is not so much that the number of advisers has grown, but that their particular role has become more dominant. By the same token, ministers have less time to consider serious policy issues.

The importance of media presentation is a worldwide phenomenon which represents a serious threat to the influence of public servants and the role of robust, impartial policy advice. Again, the experience across countries is not uniform. Australia, for instance, has been suffering from a particularly acute dose of the disease, with both sides of politics engaged in shallow sloganeering to the general despair of the broader

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and depth of departmental advice is a longstanding complaint, particularly after a change of government.

Nonetheless, over the last two decades or so the advising function and the related skills of policy analysis do seem to have received less attention than the management of government agencies and the delivery of government programmes. A generation of public sector reform has been aimed at improving managerial efficiency and effectiveness, primarily in the delivery of public services. Policy advice and analysis have not been wholly forgotten. They have been subjected to their own managerial restructuring in terms of assessable outputs and outcomes, however artificial these may be appear. But they have not been the site of the main action in terms of innovative public administration. For individual public servants, as Scott reports (Review of Expenditure on Policy Advice, 2010, p.51), the path to promotion tends to lie

departments.

In terms of basic democratic principles, such influence can only be applauded, as helping to make the bureaucracy more responsive to the will of the people's elected representatives. When ministers faced the combined weight of their departments almost single-handed, the balance of power was tipped too far towards the professional bureaucrats. Indeed, experienced senior public servants have welcomed the political adviser's role. They see a sensible division of labour between public servants, who provide the balanced analysis and research, and the advisers, who help with the more politically partisan aspects of policy making (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2007; Shergold, 2004).

Occasional evidence does surface of advisers putting pressure on public servants to adjust advice to suit the adviser's preferred views, a clear attempt to pervert the free and frank expression

policy community. Relations between the previous prime minister, Kevin Rudd, and his department secretary, Terry Moran, appeared to have virtually broken down, with the pair going for months without meeting. Senior public servants began indicating, with suitable mandarin discretion, that ministers, and the political class generally, could not be trusted to concern themselves with careful policy analysis, particularly of a more long-term and strategic nature. The Moran report itself called for the public service to undertake long-term strategic analysis, on the obvious assumption that ministers could not be expected to show an interest in anything beyond the immediate headline and photo opportunity, a not surprising assumption given Rudd's treatment of Moran. Around the same time, the secretary of the Treasury, Martin Parkinson, publicly criticised both government and opposition leaders for ignoring important economic issues facing the country (Parkinson, 2011).

I cannot comment on the current situation in New Zealand. But, if worldwide trends are any evidence, getting ministers interested in longer-term policy is certainly not becoming any easier. Moreover, even when ministers do wish to consider substantial policy options they are not confined to taking advice from their public service advisers. In the last few decades it has become accepted wisdom that the public service no longer has a monopoly of the advising function and must compete with other potential sources of advice, such as consultants, think tanks and interest groups. The claim is somewhat exaggerated and, like most assertions of fundamental change, relies on an oversimplified account of the pre-existing situation. Governments have always made use of external advisers, by from time to time commissioning independent reports or co-opting experts from outside the core public service. There is nothing new in that. But in the past such external advice was usually seen as ancillary and supplementary, and not as seriously threatening the dominant role of public servants in advising ministers. Today, however, that dominance can no longer be taken for granted.

One reason has been the general acceptance of outsourcing as a legitimate and efficient method of meeting government functions. If other government services can be contracted out to external suppliers, so too can the provision of policy advice. Policy consulting firms have been one of the boom industries over the last quarter of a century, often offering expertise and political flexibility that is beyond the capacity of less nimble government departments.

Also influential has been the growing fashion for so-called 'evidence-based' policy as the preferred method of justifying government action. An older notion that policy involves a clash of interests and values which must be negotiated through political compromises has fallen out of favour. Instead, policy is

policy stances. Every major interest group employs its own in-house policy experts. Think tanks and consultancies have mushroomed to meet the demand for analyses which will reach the desired conclusions in an intellectually plausible format. What they are offering, however, is often not so much evidence-based policy as policy-based evidence: that is, evidence selected and presented in a way that is favourable to their paymasters' interests. Policy discourse is therefore awash with rival policy analyses, all purporting to be in the national interest and marshalling relevant evidence to suit their position. Ministers have many options to choose from and are by no means wedded to accepting their departments' own advice.

Also contributing to a sense that ministers and departments are no longer joined at the hip is the effect of greater

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seen as a more practical and technical matter of determining 'what works' in achieving generally agreed objectives. In turn, finding out what works is a matter of empirical research and evidence.

Of course, the notion that politics can be sidelined and policy making reduced to a technical matter of scientific evidence is a delusion. It is yet another version of the rationalist fallacy that has seduced otherwise intelligent thinkers from the time of Plato. Politics has not disappeared, but it has been forced underground. To appear respectable it must now talk the language of the public interest and research-based evidence and suppress any concern for the interests of a particular group. As a consequence, vested interests everywhere have put extensive resources into providing rational-seeming arguments that suit their own preferred

transparency of departmental documents encouraged by official information (or freedom of information) legislation. Much of the written advice that public servants prepare for their ministers now emerges, sooner or later, into the public arena and can become a topic of public debate. Departments now find themselves publicly declaring their own openly independent policy stance, which may run counter to that adopted by the government.

In some cases, public servants, out of traditional public deference to their ministers, have tried to avoid such open confrontation by keeping controversial opinions out of documents that are likely to be disclosed. At other times, however, departments have welcomed the opportunity of publicly pressuring their own governments. The New

Zealand Treasury was a trailblazer with its highly influential briefings published after the 1984 and 1987 elections. The publication of post-election briefings has since become the norm in both New Zealand and Australia as a way of trying to set a new government's agenda. The general trend to publish departmental policy documents is welcomed by open government advocates as part of a new, proactive policy of disclosure. Publication is also claimed to be in the interests of government agencies. It allows them to put their own views into the public arena to counter any misrepresentation they may receive from ministers or the media.

Such a justification is significant

incoming secretary of the prime minister and cabinet, Ian Watt. He claimed that his overriding mission was 'for the APS [Commonwealth Public Service] to be and remain *the first choice* [emphasis added] for policy advice, policy implementation and program service delivery for Australian governments'. In other words, the public service cannot assume that it will be automatically called on to perform its traditional functions, including tendering policy advice to ministers. It must earn its right to be chosen. A similar perspective is adopted in the Scott review of public service advice in New Zealand (e.g. Review of Expenditure on Policy Advice, 2010, p.54).

position of choosing which advice to accept from the range of views put before them. But how are ministers to make such choices? Ministers certainly cannot do this on their own but need to be assisted by advice – what we might call 'meta-advice, advice on advice'. This meta-advice needs to be well-informed, politically sensitive, intellectually robust and given in confidence. To whom should ministers look for such help in deciding which policy recommendations to follow? If departmental public servants are excluded from this meta-advising function, who is left? The minister's own political advisers, who generally lack political experience and most of whom are obsessed with media headlines and opinion polls? Paid consultants more attuned to what ministers want to hear than what they ought to hear?

Once we ask the question in this way, it becomes obvious that professional public service advisers ought to be part of this confidential inner circle. No doubt they are not to be the only members. The minister's personal office has a vital role to play, supporting the minister's political priorities, as do other occasional sources of advice supported by ministers. But trusted public servants have unique resources of experience and information to contribute in analysing the strengths and weakness of policy proposals, including proposals from their own departments. The key to the effective performance of this meta-advising function is trust. Ministers need to know that their public service advisers will be loyal to the government in the sense that their advice will be tailored to the government's political agenda and that any disagreements will remain strictly confidential. In political systems as ruthlessly adversarial as our own, ministers cannot afford to allow open disclosure of internal disagreement over policy.

There is, thus, a clear tension between two models of free and frank policy advice: an open, pluralistic model which places public servants, along with other potential players, at arm's length from ministers, and a closed, tightly controlled model in which public servants have a unique position as privileged and trusted insiders. Both models have their place.

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because it accepts that government departments are independent agencies with their own preferred policy directions which may well differ from those of the government they serve. Moreover, it also accepts that these differences of opinion can be safely revealed to the public. Public service advice remains free and frank, but this freedom and frankness is now to be expressed in public, not behind closed doors. This degree of openness marks an important shift from traditional notions of ministerial responsibility in which ministers and their departments presented a united front to parliament and the public, whatever their internal differences. Instead, public servants are assumed to face ministers as openly independent sources of policy advice in a more open and pluralistic policy environment, with no guarantee that their advice will be adopted by ministers or even receive favoured treatment.

In Australia, this new environment was acknowledged recently by the

There are obvious advantages in a more pluralistic system, where public service advice competes in a competitive marketplace of ideas. Exposing departmental research to public scrutiny can improve the quality of the research itself by opening it up to peer review and criticism. Moreover, as the proponents of freedom of information argue, policy analysis and research conducted by departmental public servants should be accessible to all political players as part of a well-informed democratic dialogue. They should not be the preserve of incumbent governments to disclose or conceal to suit their interests. Government information belongs to the people not the government and should be openly available, subject always to privacy and certain other legitimate concerns, including protection of national security and the judicial process.

On the other hand, the new policy-making paradigm carries certain risks. It clearly places ministers in the pivotal

There are good reasons for applying the open model to policy research and analysis carried out within government departments, along with similar research conducted by independent research institutes, in both the public and private sector. Here, all the arguments in favour of open government and the marketplace of ideas clearly apply. The advice can be free and frank in the sense of being both intellectually robust and not afraid to upset ministers.

On the other hand, when public service advice moves into the area of clearly commenting on policy alternatives and recommending particular options to government – i.e. meta-advice – the arguments for confidentiality have legitimate force as means of safeguarding the role of public servants as trusted insiders. Free and frank advice in such closed contexts is at risk unless serious disagreement between ministers and public servants is kept confidential.

III

What, then, are the lessons for the future? In the first place, the role of senior public servants as trusted insiders needs to be acknowledged and protected, as one of the enduring strengths of Westminster government. This is the original and still crucial setting for free and frank advice. Ministers need to recognise that their best chance of long-term success is to develop effective and firmly-based policies, and that their best chance of developing such policies is to work in close partnership with experienced public servants who combine impartial judgement with loyalty to the government of the day. For their part, public servants need to avoid acting in ways which could jeopardise their ministers' trust: for instance, by publicly disagreeing with the government's line. On the whole, these traditional Westminster conventions remain secure in New Zealand, in spite of state sector reforms designed to highlight different public roles and responsibilities for ministers and chief executives (Lodge and Gill, 2011; Boston, 2012). But attitudes to official information and transparency may need some rebalancing towards greater protection of the confidentiality of politically sensitive advice given by public servants, at least for a limited period.

In Australia, the Freedom of Information Act has recently been revised to restrict the categories of document exempt from disclosure, with the specific aim of ruling out potential political embarrassment for the government as a legitimate reason for confidentiality. The change was the result of a concerted campaign by media interests and the transparency lobby aimed at freeing up departmental advice that ran counter to government decisions. Yet avoiding embarrassment for their ministers is a core professional imperative for loyal public servants in adversarial Westminster systems. Avoiding ministerial embarrassment is essential in order to maintain the trust of ministers,

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which, in turn, is essential to secure the public servants' place at the nerve-centre of government.

By contrast, the United Kingdom Freedom of Information Act allows exemption for disclosure of information which would inhibit 'the free and frank provision of advice, or the free and frank exchange of views for the purposes of deliberation' (Freedom of Information Act 2000, s36 2 (b)). But even in the United Kingdom, with its stronger traditions of executive secrecy, use of the government's power to restrict access to controversial advice is proving highly contentious. It is almost universally condemned by legal experts, academics and media commentators. The case for confidentiality tends to be written off as executive special pleading and not firmly grounded, as it should be, in the principles of good governance.

This is not to say that all departmental documents should be protected. Much data and policy research produced by departments should properly be in the public arena as part of the public service's free and frank contribution to policy

debate. Such work does not imply the support of ministers; nor need it carry the personal imprimatur of the department's chief executive or senior management. But when policy advice moves to the frank consideration of options and politically sensitive recommendations from senior public servants, what I have called 'meta-advice', confidentiality should be the preferred approach in order to safeguard trust-based partnerships with ministers.

Where to draw the line is admittedly difficult and a matter of balancing competing principles. The distinction between advice and meta-advice is itself rough and ready and not capable of bearing much weight. One potentially useful contrast is between the department

and its leadership as potential owners of advice. The department, as a large, collective institution, can afford to have its own independent views. The chief executive and senior management, however, should tread more carefully and should think twice before they try to influence policy debate through the public arena. General reflections on long-term issues are to be welcomed, particularly if they can be framed in a non-partisan way. But comments that reveal a serious policy disagreement between a minister and his or her chief executive are to be avoided because they offer opportunities to the government's opponents and threaten the role of senior public servants as trusted insiders.

Apart from its key function in confidential advice to ministers, free and frank advice is also important in its other, more public role as part of the wider policy debate. This role, too, needs to be protected and encouraged. Such advice, it should be remembered, need not necessarily emanate from government departments under ministerial direction. All that is needed is that the researchers

and analysts should have the right values of impartiality and intellectual integrity, combined with readiness to speak out without fear or favour. Such values are more likely to be found in publicly-funded institutions, particularly in a small country such as New Zealand without a strong philanthropic tradition of privately funding public-interest research. But even within the public sector, excellent policy analysis can be provided by institutions at arm's length from government. The Australian Productivity Commission, recently copied in New Zealand, is one such successful model. Other research institutes and bureaus can also make effective use of their independence from government and the fact that they do not automatically speak for government. Universities can also play a part.

Departments and executive agencies should still do their own policy research. But if the logic of policy pluralism is accepted, they should see their policy branches not as the main source of

government policy, but rather as one set of contributors to a wider policy debate. Departments do start to frame government policy at the later stage of meta-advice, which largely operates behind closed doors. But in so far as they are conducting research and analysis for a public audience, there are advantages in seeing such advice as preliminary work which does not commit the government. In this sense, departmental policy and research branches could be looked on as to some extent arm's length from ministerial responsibility, even though they remain formally part of the department.

The ideal mix of public institutions dedicated to free and frank policy analysis cannot be prescribed and would depend on a number of factors, including the type of policy areas and the accidental location of good people. In general, however, we should accept the logical consequences of the fact that departments under ministers do not have a monopoly of advising. Moreover, we

should not try to plan too closely. The marketplace of ideas, after all, is a market. We know, or ought to know, that markets cannot be effectively planned. In some of the recent reports on policy advice, such as those of Scott and Moran, we catch a whiff of Stalinist centralism, the besetting weakness of those who sit at or near the top of central agencies, typically our best and finest public servants. They like to talk of the need for policy analysis to be more 'strategic'. But 'strategic' can be a slippery term. Certainly we need more strategic analysis in the sense of more long-term thinking about major policy issues. But the concept of 'strategy' can also betray its military origins, implying a desire for central control from policy HQ – which we should avoid. Instead, we should listen to the words of another well-known communist dictator, Chairman Mao: 'let a hundred flowers bloom and let a hundred schools of thought contend'.

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