

Colin James

Reforming the Public Sector and Parliament

Chris Hipkins' Goals

Back in the late 1990s senior public servants worried at Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) roundtables that 'siloes' of the state sector was hampering effectiveness. Also at that time an IPS roundtable of chief and deputy chief executives backed posting advice on agency websites when decisions were made or at some specific time after delivery.

Two decades on a new Minister of State Services is puzzling how to break down those silo barriers and is proposing, among a raft of changes for the public sector and Parliament, that policy advice be posted on websites.

Ho hum, another new-government shiny paint job, then back to business-as-usual when political and management "reality" cuts in? Or actual renovation?

At 39, State Services Minister Chris Hipkins has abundant energy. He needs that to manage a heavy workload: education (a critical portfolio given the changing nature of work), ministerial services and leader of the House (in Parliament) beside state services.

Hipkins needs also abundant determination if he is to wrong-foot the

'ho-hums'. He will need to carry with him his colleagues – and a public service last extensively renovated three decades back.

A core aim for Hipkins is a new Public Service Act to replace the 1988 State Sector Act which is administered by the State Services Commission (SSC). The SSC began work last year on revising the State Sector Act. Hipkins sees the SSC as itching for reform but probably more incremental than he wants.

Note the word 'public'. Hipkins shares commentators' and some officials' concerns that public servants have for a couple of decades focused too tightly on serving their ministers and too little on also keeping in mind, and thus serving, the wider and future interests and needs of the public.

In Hipkins' book that requires advice to be 'contestable' – the best advice officials can assemble on the evidence, not what best matches, or second-guesses, ministers' preferences.

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Hipkins uses the word 'stewardship', which some senior public servants have been using in the past few years. Ministers come and go. Officials outlive multiple governments.

Hipkins hopes his reform will inject more consistency into public sector governance. For example, he is bothered that Crown entities, operating under boards, have become 'laws unto themselves' on matters such as salaries. He wants them under the same governance rules and ethos as the rest of the public sector.

He wants greater public accountability for agencies' actions, akin to that for fiscal management under the Public Finance Act. Achieving fiscal targets can come at the

output, not a genuine outcome, which is what students do with the qualification.

This output-outcome disjunction was also debated in IPS roundtables in the late 1990s. The Treasury's CBAX test for new funding and the evolving social investment approach have been searching for a pathway from simple targets to complex outcomes.

The problem is such outcomes cross 'silo' boundaries. Managing funding, action and accountability is complex when two or more agencies are involved and may have different priorities.

To overcome this in the case of children's services, the National-led government set up Oranga Tamariki with

the Chief Information Officer should sit and if there should be a separate agency.

Greater connectedness has also encouraged people to expect more access to government information, generally and through the Official Information Act (OIA).

So, reflecting the conclusion of that late-1990s IPS roundtable, Hipkins wants proactive release of officials' advice (except where there is sensitivity, such as commercial confidence or national security). The posting would be either when a cabinet decision is made or, if in the case of advice not leading to a cabinet decision, when it is delivered to the minister.

Those who now file OIA requests could thus be directed to search departmental websites. That would, or at least could, save a lot of officials' (expensive) time and reduce frustration.

Hipkins seems serious about this. Other ministers are backing it. (Should we add: so far?)

A related point Hipkins has been arguing is for briefings to incoming ministers (BIM) to be released significantly before the election, so opposition parties can test their policies against officials' thinking and evidence well in advance, as the Budget and the Pre-election Economic and Fiscal Updates do for fiscal rigour. A number of the new government's first-100-days policies have exhibited avoidable shortcomings.

The leaning toward more openness feeds into Hipkins' aims for Parliament.

Newly out of opposition, Hipkins is firm that there is a legitimate role for the opposition to scrutinise the government. He argues that if information is more readily available there would be less scope for vexatious written parliamentary questions (and, he acknowledges, more risk for ministers). National MPs, still fuming at being ousted from government, took this to an extreme late last year, tabling a deluge of such questions, many trivial or mindless.

The questions were aimed more at annoying and distracting ministers than seeking real information for the public benefit.

Hipkins also instituted a larger role in parliamentary management for the

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expense of social, environmental and other outcomes if they are not tested as rigorously.

The Treasury has expressed concerns about the mechanisms for such wider accountability to Finance Minister Grant Robertson (though the Treasury's adoption of "wellbeing economics", to be incorporated in the March investment statement, is contiguous with such wider accountability). Hipkins acknowledges non-fiscal targets may need broader legislation and in any case ministers are wary of the Treasury having too central a role.

In fact, climate change emissions targets are to be legislated. And the Child Poverty Reduction Bill now before Parliament sets out ways to measure poverty, requires governments to set targets and account for meeting those targets or not and amends the Public Finance Act to incorporate that.

Note the word 'outcomes'. Hipkins is sceptical about the 2008-17 National-led government's Better Public Services targets. For example, he says, increasing the NCEA level II pass rate is in effect an

powers to buy in services for the children it serves, similarly to what the Accident Compensation Corporation does. Hipkins is cautiously positive about this as one way to breach silo walls.

The point for Hipkins is a single 'facilitator' of services for end-users. Community Link centres provided a single door for those needing help but those in need are likely still to deal with several different people for different needs.

This is relevant in Hipkins' book because digital technology enhances access to government agencies' services and raises expectations that dealing with the agencies will be simple – citizen-centric, in Hipkins' (and Chief Information Officer Colin MacDonald's) words.

Hipkins (and MacDonald) cite registration of a birth. That once involved up to six or seven different departments. Now the registration automatically issues the child a tax number and health system number and other registrations.

Communications Minister Clare Curran is due to decide soon where in this more highly connected government sector

opposition. National MP Anne Tolley was made a Deputy Speaker instead of one of the two Assistant Speakers, the previous custom. He has also given National the same five chairs and five deputy chairs of the 12 policy-focused select committees as Labour has. (The Greens and New Zealand First each have one chair and one deputy.)

He argues this will make Parliament more efficient. He also wanted smaller select committees, but National outmanoeuvred him on Parliament's first day after the change of government. This has had the unfortunate result of requiring ministers to sit on committees to make up the numbers which is constitutionally questionable.

Hipkins also aims for more predictability in the way Parliament organises its business, so it is better planned and less ad hoc. He aims to put Parliament into urgency only if the business is really urgent.

How far will Hipkins get down a reform track his predecessors either shuffled on or stalled? Will the shine wear off in a year or two and the public service revert to being a state sector, focused tightly on ministers?

The answer may lie in Hipkins' youth and the fact that post-baby-boomers command a number of the key portfolios such as Hipkins' three and health, social development, and finance. Post-baby-boomers have different ways of thinking

and acting – symbolised by a pregnant Prime Minister. Post-baby-boomers are not locked into 1980s market-liberal economics or new public management.

That is some cause for public servants (and commentators) to taihoa the 'ho-hum'. Hipkins might get some way down his track. For smart, forward-looking post-baby-boomer public servants, that might spell opportunity.

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