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Foundations for Good Relationships: Transitions, Trust and Learning

Tracee McPate & A/Professor Anne Tiernan

state**services**authority



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The Australia and New Zealand School of Government and the State Services Authority are collaborating on a partnership that draws together a broad network of policy-makers, practitioners and leading academics.

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Dr Anne Tiernan is an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Policy at Griffith University. She is also a Research Fellow with the Centre for Governance and Public Policy and is Director of Griffith University's Graduate Certificate in Policy Analysis (GCPA) program and the Executive Masters in Public Administration (EMPA) programs.

A qualified educator, Dr Tiernan has developed and conducted professional development programs for public sector managers, policy officers and ministerial staffers. In 2002 and again in 2004 she led the review and redesign of the Public Sector Management (PSM) Program on behalf of the Australian Public Service Commission.

Dr Tiernan was an invited participant at the Prime Minister's Australia 2020 Summit. She currently sits on the board of Queensland's Public Service Commission and was a member of the Premier of Queensland's 2009 Expert Roundtable assisting the Queensland Government's Integrity and Accountability Review. She has recently been appointed to Queensland Health's Strategic Policy Panel, an initiative responding to the Moran Review report, *Ahead of the Game: A Blueprint for Reform of Australian Government Administration*.

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Authors

Tracee McPate and A/Professor Anne Tiernan

It has long been a truism of Australian politics that changes of government are rare, and that the public, having decided on a change, will usually stick with a new administration beyond a single term. The fact that there have been only six changes of federal government since 1945, a trend mirrored across the country at the state and territory level, provides empirical support for this assumption. The voters might send a message at a new government's first poll – as they did despite their 'love affair' with Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1984, or when they gave John Howard a mighty scare in 1998 – but under most circumstances, incumbency confers distinct advantage.

The relatively lengthy tenures of Australia's governments have the practical implication of ensuring that those in opposition spend equally long periods of time away from the levers of power and the benefits that incumbency brings. These long spells in the political wilderness have implications for the experience and skills of new ministers, and impact on their leadership of government departments.

The past 12 months have been an unusually volatile period in Australian politics. Aside from the dramatic and often brutal leadership changes that have occurred nationally (Kevin Rudd) and at state and territory levels (Rann in South Australia, Barnett in Tasmania and Stanhope in the ACT), regime change – both expected and unexpected – has been a relatively frequent occurrence. The political context is thus ripe for a discussion of transitioning to government.

Changes of government or administration raise challenges and opportunities; they are unparalleled opportunities to effect change, to implement new policies and to set the agenda "with a comparatively clean slate" (Weller 1983: 303). However, the ability to exploit these opportunities may be constrained by the relative inexperience of incoming ministers and their private office staff. Several factors may be compounded by the complexity of their operating environments, including: their skills, which may be dated or undeveloped; their lack of relationships and networks within government; and their understanding of government. Under increasing public scrutiny, leaders and their ministers must develop the routines necessary to carry out their leadership and decision-making roles and establish effective and cohesive working relationships, all while learning what it means to be in government.

Informed by empirical research that underpinned Anne Tiernan and Patrick Weller's 2010 book *Learning to be a Minister: Heroic Expectations, Practical Realities*, and by the insights gained from two ANZSOG Applied Learning seminars held in Melbourne and Sydney in early 2011, this paper canvasses the challenges of government transitions. During the seminars, former Ministers the Honourable Bruce Baird, Mark Birrell, and David Kemp; former Chief of Staff Arthur Sinodinos; and Associate Professor Anne Tiernan spoke at length on the issue of transitions. The research findings and the views drawn from these sessions form the foundation of this account, which focuses on the critical importance of quickly establishing effective, mutually respectful and trusting relationships between ministers, their staff and public service departments, and canvasses practical strategies for doing so.

Making the transition from Opposition to Government

Incoming governments are acutely aware of the responsibility they have been given by the electorate. Dr David Kemp, former Howard government minister and Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, stressed that the aim of an effective transition is "to make sure that every government governs as well as we (ministers, staff and public servants) can help it to do". Ministers' appreciation of the enormity of the role they have undertaken is echoed by former prime ministers John Howard and Kevin Rudd (Tiernan & Weller 2010: 72). Indeed, as Kemp noted, "a strong sense of understanding and trust on all sides of government – public

servants, the ministerial staff and ministers – is required to achieve the goal of good government”. So, how can this environment of trust be created?

Beyond the excitement and relief of having won the election, the early days of a new government are characterised by uncertainty as the ministry is selected, machinery of government changes are organised, and private office staff are recruited. Newly appointed ministers need to move into their offices and become acquainted with their portfolios – a demanding task if they are appointed to one they were shadowing, but even more challenging if, as often occurs, they are handed an unfamiliar brief.

There is no formal educative process that prepares an individual to become a minister or that teaches them how to govern. Their experience and background – including as members of parliament – is important preparation, but most of their learning will happen on the job. New ministers use a range of methods to increase their knowledge, including drawing on the insights of friends and colleagues with relevant experience (Tiernan & Weller 2010: 70-71). Ministers must hone their skills and knowledge as they learn on the job, all while being expected to make crucial policy decisions and deal with a workload exponentially greater than when they were in opposition.

Mark Birrell, Bruce Baird and Arthur Sinodinos all rejected the notion of formal training for ministers, citing the experience one develops in opposition as being the most effective training. This view has been supported by research into the role of ministers, and echoes international experience (Bateman 2009; Tiernan & Weller 2010: 66-72). Kemp argued that despite some instructive documentation being available to ministers, such as in Incoming Government briefs prepared by their departments and the *Cabinet Handbook*, many ministers find themselves left largely to their own devices, having to ‘invent’ their roles.

As Tiernan (2011b) notes, incoming governments are well advised to draw on the expertise that exists within the various governance divisions of the chief ministers’ departments to help orient them to their obligations and accountabilities. She proposes that in the absence of training, new governments could be assisted by considered scholarship and advice such as that made available to new administrations in the United States (for example, the White House Transition Project – <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/>). Even at the earliest stages of a new government’s tenure, public service departments and agencies play a central role, in line with the constitutional rationale for having a career bureaucracy (Rhodes 2005: 147-148).

Ministers and departments

Working with a department is a challenge for new ministers. From opposition and without access to the public service, prospective ministers are required to be self-reliant, and to seek advice from party loyalists and experts that they have cultivated, as well as through ministerial and departmental channels in formal briefings (Tiernan & Weller 2010: 66-71). According to Birrell and Kemp, this is a common and appropriate way for potential ministers to seek information, develop an understanding of processes and programs, and foster relationships with the public service.

Winning government often offers many new ministers their first contact with departmental officials. In the case of huge majority wins, such as the recent NSW election, it may also be their first experience with the Parliament. Reflecting on his personal experiences, Baird recalled that he did not have an especially helpful introduction to dealings with his department. Upon election of the Greiner government, he was approached by departmental officials before being formally asked by the Premier to take a portfolio. In the department’s anxiety to seem responsive, it had been unduly hasty in its initial contact. Baird also remembered that after becoming minister, he discovered his portfolio responsibilities were much broader than those he had held in opposition and included a portfolio area completely unfamiliar to him. He admitted to being heavily reliant on the advice he received from the department at this early stage of his tenure but in his view, this reliance was misplaced, as his specific advice needs were unable to be met solely by his department.

Pressures on New Ministers

The sheer volume of work for a new minister is overwhelming, as is the support available to deal with it. Accustomed to doing everything for themselves, ministers and their staff must adjust to suddenly having access to the ample physical and material resources of a department to assist and, if delegated the necessary authority, to act for them (Tiernan & Weller 2010: 69-70). In addition, a minister may struggle to understand how a department can shift its allegiance to them from a partisan predecessor. Birrell speculated that a minister's workload, particularly as they acquaint themselves with their diversity of roles, may create an impediment to building rapport with their departmental officers. What could be perceived by officials as 'remoteness' or 'negativity' is more likely to be a response to the new and confronting situation faced by ministers, conscious of the need to appear from the outset as competent and on top of their portfolio.

Baird highlighted other pressures on ministers as they learn their craft, such as the need to perform in Parliament; the requirement to implement the government's agenda; and the need to develop relationships with the Premier or Prime Minister, their Cabinet and other ministerial colleagues, as well as with the community. Across all of these arenas there is the added pressure of the media's scrutiny of a minister's performance. Baird also noted that there were times when it seemed, to ministers at least, that the public service was uninterested in or unaware of the demands on their time. Tiernan concurred, and suggested that departments need to be conscious that their concerns are but one of the many pressures facing ministers at any time, particularly in the early days of a new government. She encouraged departments to be cognisant and respectful of a minister's "need to learn and become oriented to complex issues".

Overcoming the time demand, resources and information overload challenge requires understanding and trust. Communication channels between ministers, their staff and departments need to develop and remain open, particularly at senior levels. Ministers are aware that they need to meet with departmental staff, but the constraints of competing demands on their time often make this difficult. Effective routines and making use of support systems that are available to ministers both within and beyond the department were discussed as options for ameliorating these problems.

Ministers and their Private Offices

As ministers' roles have become more complex, they have required additional support to assist them both in discharging their obligations and in pursuing their priorities. Ministerial offices have become an increasingly important part of their support system, especially during the transition phase. Unlike bureaucrats, whose advice is expected to be professional and impartial, ministerial staff are often personal or party loyalists, known and trusted by the minister or recommended to them by someone they know and trust. Intended to bring complementary skills and expertise to that already provided by a department, staffers provide political and policy advice to ministers as well as supporting their employer administratively and personally.

Working closely with a minister often means staffers have insights into the minister's working style – for example, how they like to be briefed; how much information or background they might need in order to make a decision; and what they might expect from the department in terms of advice and ideas. Tiernan described staffers as 'interpreters' for the minister.

During transition periods and beyond, the importance of staffers cannot be underestimated. Setting the tone of the ministerial office, helping the minister establish a routine, and managing the day-to-day running of the office as well as the media are tasks for private office staff. While key people may move with the new minister from opposition, other positions are created once they are in government: "ministers on both sides of politics reach deep into their personal and professional networks to build the nucleus of their ministerial staffs" (Tiernan and Weller 2010: 79).

When entering the ministry, Baird discovered that he required additional support to supplement the advice given by his department. Issues early on in his tenure saw him realise that his department did not, or could not, accurately assess all his perceived needs, particularly in relation to party political advice. He explained that recruiting personal staff to provide alternative sources of opinion proved invaluable, allowing him to have increased contact (through them) with the department, and providing him with a fresh view on the advice proffered. This gave him the contestability he felt appropriate to forming an opinion and making decisions. Ministerial staffers act as an extension of their minister, augmenting their capacity to address their work and to think critically about the issues before them in order to make the best decisions possible (Tiernan & Weller 2010: 254-255).

At the apex of the ministerial office sits the chief of staff. New ministers must appoint a chief of staff on whom they can rely as they acquaint themselves with their new roles. The chief of staff is responsible for coordinating the activities of the ministerial office, and instilling its character and culture (Tiernan 2007: 33). Helping to manage relationships is critical if an office is to run effectively and efficiently. The chief of staff must deal with the minister's cabinet colleagues, the leader's office, the party room, the department, and stakeholders. Tiernan explained that the chief of staff has the responsibility of developing an office that is responsive to the minister – building on their strengths, recognising and compensating for weaknesses and managing their idiosyncrasies. The chief of staff's advice and judgement on questions of policy, politics and ministerial priorities in terms of how ministers should be spending their time is essential to the running of the office. Their role in then managing the relationships that develop is integral to the smooth running of government.

Serving a New Government

When elected after an extended period in opposition, new governments may have concerns about public service impartiality and its ability to respond effectively to its agenda. Australia's Westminster-style system of government assumes a seamless transfer of bureaucratic loyalty from an outgoing to an incoming government and ensures a continuity of bureaucratic administration and personnel, as well as retention of corporate memory. However, impartiality, professionalism and capacity can be questioned at times of transition (Tiernan & Weller 2010; Tiernan 2011a).

Changes to the senior ranks of the public service may follow machinery of government changes within a government's term, upon re-election, or with a change of government. Occasionally transitions bring sudden and dramatic changes to the senior leadership of the public service – signalling that the incoming government is distrustful of the public service and wants to assert its mandate to effect change.

While recognising that issues of trust and capacity arise when transitions occur, Sinodinos noted that lessons were learned from the Howard government's sacking of six departmental secretaries when it made the transition to government in 1996. He argued that a professional public service adapts to the needs and direction of the new government. In his view, the onus is on individual public servants to decide whether or not they can provide the impartial advice and options that an incoming government expects, and to leave if they believe they cannot.

In the early days of government, ministers rely on their departments to provide the 'frank and fearless' advice they expect. It is not always forthcoming, for several reasons including the lack of established relationships and a possible wariness on the part of the public service about how and when advice should be presented (Tiernan & Weller 2010: 105-108). While there is widespread support for the public service's considered appraisal of an incoming government's agenda, Birrell was more cautious in his assessment. He argued that the public service relies too heavily on what was said in opposition, resulting in an over-analysis of the incoming government's platform. He suggested that much of this could be overcome by developing an understanding of the long-term agenda, or as he put it, "taking less notice of the words and more notice of the substance behind them". Ministers were also guilty of fostering this over-analysis by often demanding too much too early and occasionally unnecessarily. This was symptomatic, he argued, of a minister trying to get a

firm understanding of the issues, and suggested that “less is sometimes more” in terms of what information a new minister should receive early on.

Each incoming government approaches the task of implementing their agenda differently. They also have varying views about the advice they want, or think is appropriate to receive, from the public service. Ministers may seek to alter advice to suit their style and agenda based on views from their own staffers, or perhaps need more time to establish a connection with the public service. Irrespective of an administration’s approach, speakers at the Melbourne and Sydney seminars argued that it is essential to find ways of bridging the divide.

Presenters at the *Times of Transition* seminars spoke of their experiences moving from opposition to government; how they dealt with the challenges; and what their expectations were then and are now, in the light of their experiences as former ministers, staffers and public servants. Clearly, during the transition period the opportunity for a new administration to effect change is tempered by many things, including the need to learn on the job; dated or absent skills; atrophied networks within the public service; and the sheer complexity of the environment in which new ministers and their staff find themselves. While each administration has a different approach on entering government, the importance of developing relationships was highlighted as particularly important. Priorities and goals must be established early and the type of advice expected should be clearly identified. In the absence of relationships and networks, good government cannot develop, and research indicates that the seeds of this are planted in the transition phase, where new ministers need the greatest support.

Audio recordings of the *Times of Transitions: Learning to be a Minister* Applied Learning events for Sydney and Melbourne can be accessed from:

Sydney: <http://www.anzsog.edu.au/userfiles/files/State%20library%20final.mp3>

Melbourne: <http://www.ssa.vic.gov.au/public-administration/ssa-anzsog-partnership/calendar-of-events/view-event/times-of-transition-learning-to-be-a-minister.html>

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