



APPOINTMENTS

MAKING OPPORTUNITIES KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR

Barack Obama and his advisers have a lot to answer for. In a way that defines the sloganeering global village, they turned the eye-glazing jargon of management consultants into the world's most potent political shorthand.

From Kurdistan to Tasmania, Japan to Iran, London to Sydney and an alarming number of places in between, "change" is the preferred political buzzword. Trying to find the similarities between Yukio Hatoyama, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, David Cameron, Nuri al-Maliki, Will Hodgman, Nick Clegg and Barry O'Farrell would test most people.

Yet each uses the promise of change: from the slavish, "Yes, we can change it", and banal, "Real change", to the action words, "Vote for change" and our very own "Start the change", from touchy feely, "Change that works for you", to the order, "Change". It is hard to imagine that a single word has so captured and defined a mood since the French Revolution and its alluring trio - liberte, egalite, fraternite.

For much of the first year of his presidency, the promise Obama would deliver "change we can believe in" was looking dangerously like something that would galvanise another generation of cynical disengagement. Then within a week he delivered healthcare reforms, freed up \$75 billion to increase access to tertiary

Winds of change run into reality



education and found a way to agree with the Russians and reduce the number of nuclear weapons threatening the planet. Not a bad week at the office.

But every sinecure of Obama's reforms is stretched by the reality of how they were won - the result of hard, complex, number-crunching work inspired by heart-breaking stories, but fraught with com-

promise, fear, uncertainty and ugly recriminations.

Yet ultimately faith in that exceptionalist American sentiment, "we don't fear the future ... we shape it", prevailed. As the President said in his first speech after the healthcare legislation won the votes it needed to become law, "This legislation will not fix everything that ails our

healthcare system. But it moves us decisively in the right direction. This is what change looks like."

Obama is such a skilful politician he always knew that changing anything as complex as the American health system would require painstaking, incremental work on wicked problems. Making it happen required political leadership coupled

with strategic policy development and ability to deliver.

The NSW Liberal leader, Barry O'Farrell, is promising a "radical change of attitude that flicks the switch from stagnation to action". It is hard to disagree with the sentiment, but making it happen, cutting through the vested interests, will demand deep knowledge, steady leadership and a public service able to do the hard, detailed work of strategy and implementation.

The reality is that change that lasts builds on what has gone before. As the tortuous, angry path to health reform in America showed on the news most nights, there is no magic wand that can be waved without blood being shed.

This preference for fundamental, yet incremental, change is captured in the blueprint to reform the Australian public service. Ahead of the Game, released in Canberra this week.

It is a comprehensive and careful document, the product of detailed knowledge of the history and theory of effective public management - tempered with the compromises of political reality. It aims to strengthen the capacity of the public service for frank and fearless advice, while focusing much more on the needs of citizens.

Because political news has generally been reduced to a gladiatorial contest between government and opposition, with colour provided by independents and minor parties, it is easy to forget how much the quality of life in Australia has been shaped by the collaboration, and at times robust contest, between elected politicians and public servants.

Few of the big reforms that changed the country were the work of politicians alone - Medicare, HECS, tariff cuts and financial deregulation, the GST, privatisation, superannuation guarantees and Job Network are the product of collaboration.

In its 109-year history the relationship between the Australian public service and politicians has varied depending on personalities and prevailing ideologies. Over this time our version of the Westminster system has also changed. Ministers are increasingly held responsible for operational as well as political decisions.

This can provoke tension between them and their advisers and departments, and adds another element to a department secretary's job description - "shock absorber". Decades ago mandarins ruled and politicians came and went, then the balance changed and the policy process was opened to more perspectives, before being replaced with market logic that mostly made the public in public service a dirty word.

Now departmental secretaries complain of having to manage complex organisations in the glare of a 24-hour news cycle with insufficient time for a long-term strategic approach.

As a result, the public service became intensely risk averse, keen to appease interest groups and the shrill demands of never-ending politics. Expertise was stripped out of many departments, there was little cross agency collaboration and pay and conditions varied greatly. It was scarcely surprising when an international survey ranked Australia poorly for strategic policy capacity in 2007.

The business of government is the largest enterprise in the country, and the biggest lever of change in our lives. Every day the human services departments alone receive 220,000 phone calls, undertake 361,000 face-to-face meetings and conduct 70,000 online transactions. Every day.

These points of connection are set to expand exponentially in the new web 2.0 era, marked by more participation and access to information, and much higher expectations. Preparing for the impact will require great agility and openness to innovation.

As the global financial crisis showed, the need for effective regulation, strategic policy, swift and decisive action is something that can only be provided by a highly skilled public service. The fact Australia navigated this crisis so well is a tribute to the quality of this expertise.

Yet over the next decade, nearly half the country's public servants will be eligible to retire, so this is time for renewal. The looming challenges - climate change, globalisation, population growth and ageing - are as great as any in peacetime, and require strategic, persuasive and deft public servants.

If the blueprint succeeds in minimising risk aversion and building capacity, while connecting more effectively with citizens, the public service is likely to attract more of the best and brightest. In the spirit of the age they are likely to be people keen to help make change a meaningful reality, but without standing for election.

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