Prospects for Regeneration in Government –
What we Talk about is More Important than What we Do or How we Do it

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We have heard a lot of discussion in recent times and at this conference about ‘regeneration’ – the new challenges ahead, the volition to make a difference, a forward-looking public service, and the injection of new life into public administration. However, there is a danger, I think, in mutual exhortation, in a kind of cheer-squad approach to this topic of post-reform regeneration.

Already at this conference we have seen some people yesterday narrowing the scope of regeneration to imply structural change or tinkering with organisations – a bit of tweaking here and there – as if restructuring was itself regeneration. The cynics amongst us may question what has been regenerated, especially if another restructuring in a few years time changes things back again. What was the whole exercise about?

So, my role here – and I think the role academics should perform – is to be a bit iconoclastic. What are the rationales, the reasons, the precepts, some of the assumptions that are hidden behind this debate about regeneration? Before we all lurch off with blinkers on down a road to regeneration, let us consider where we are going, why we are doing it and what the end result will be.

I want to stress that I am not criticising regeneration per se. I think it is a great theme for a conference, so I am not depreciating the agenda or discouraging efforts; that is not my intention. Rather I would like us to think more seriously about what it is and why we are doing it.

Why are we entertaining ‘regeneration’ now? After 25 years or more of reforms if we look across the globe – as John Halligan has done in his paper – we see there are many countries that have been engaged for a long time now in serious public sector reform. Many people argue that Australia is well reformed; we have become something of a beacon for other nations. The OECD often regards the Australasian jurisdictions as an important laboratory of innovation. Moreover, in developing countries, such as China, you will find they regard us as being best practice in almost everything we do. Professionalisation of the bureaucracy in China is a huge problem while we regard that as something we achieved some time ago.

Hidden Rationales – why are we discussing ‘Regeneration’?

What are the underlying rationales then of the ‘new regeneration’ after that 25-year history? First, some advocates may use the term and really mean it – they are committed to regeneration as a genuine agenda. It could include all the things we have tended to neglect or overlook over the past decades such as investing in human capital, harnessing our potential, building commitment and capacities, knowledge management and the like. We have to accept that as a possibility – that there is a
genuine element to the debate. But we also have to say that many of the people who are now talking regeneration were talking business reform five or ten years ago, and maybe in another five years we could predict that they would be talking about something else again.

Secondly, the focus on regeneration could be saying something about the nature of reform. We followed a very business-oriented reform project from the 1980s on, which introduced management flexibility into the public sector, but not necessarily better outcomes. A decade ago reformers were talking about ‘hollowing out’ as a good thing. There is an implicit assumption here that if we are now seriously talking about regeneration then many of those reforms have not worked, or have been misdirected, or have not had the intended results. Regeneration may be a critique of our previous tunnelled vision.

Thirdly, it may have something to do with the culture. We have dramatically changed the culture of the public service from being largely an administrative, directed culture to an intellectual culture – one in which the old 4th division has been abolished and only 7% of employees are at the lower grades (APS 1-2). The Commonwealth now reports around 50 per cent of its new recruits enter as graduates. The question after all those years of reform is: what do we do with this intellectual capital; how do we best occupy these people and harness their potential?

Another rationale is that it is a set of mixed messages about control. We have seen much exhortation about devolution and transferring decision-making to the coalface. At the same time, we have seen cautious politicians and executives seeking to retain control and influence. Often political events and unforeseen circumstances have resulted in the executive attempting to reimpose instruments of control – designing new clawbacks but often not calling them that. So, we have new discourses for the clawbacks – we prefer to call it coordination or whole-of-government approaches, or joined-up government. These euphemisms basically mean that the executive does not want too much decision-making devolved too far down. Those closest to the action still have limited capacity to make decisions or determine how they will deliver programs. Credit goes up the system, blame goes down. It probably always will. Maybe the current emphasis on regeneration is one way of trying to adjust to or step around some of that political control.

Fifth, for many Australian governments the expected electoral benefits of reform did not pay off. There are many governments, at the state and federal level, where premiers and prime ministers thought that there would be electoral benefits for reforming the public service in a businesslike way, but things did not turn out that way. Similarly, in Britain Margaret Thatcher is still highly unpopular despite winning elections in the 1970s and 1980s, and much of Britain’s current reform trajectory is aimed at ‘de-Thatcherism’. There is still enormous government disappointment about the previous reforms to the public service that did not really deliver tangible political benefits. The Blair government is now trying to reinvest again in the public sector and correct an austere neo-liberal agenda that initially paid off for a short time but not in the longer term.

The final rationale may be a reaction to recent scandals and obvious shortcomings in administration. Children overboard, scandals in child protection services, road and
rail controversies – the scandals that inevitably arise to dog particular governments. Governments tend to give a knee-jerk response to these incidents, such as: ‘we need to fix it; we need change; we need regeneration’. And while the scandal is high in the attention cycle governments seem concerned and prepared to take action – but less so as the crisis passes. Immediately after the children overboard affair, the Australian Public Service went into a regeneration mode stating: ‘we must make the public service more reliable, more careful and accurate with its information, clearly identifying fact from comment in briefings’ – things that we thought they had long ago achieved but had let lapse.

Capturing the Complexities of the Public Service Today

Assessing the impact of 25 years of reform on the public service suggests that administration has become more complex and contradictory. If we try to capture the main changes in tabular form we can detect some evidence of a drift from command-based bureaucratic hierarchies to more flexible and business-like organisations. One attempt to capture the differences is built upon Karpin’ Enterprising Nation report (1995).

Trends in Public Service Capacities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amateurs trained on-the-job for specific tasks</th>
<th>Professionals and intellectuals with broad skill capabilities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follows bureaucratic procedures</td>
<td>Uses business-like practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative focus</td>
<td>Policy focus, policy learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autarky and insourcing</td>
<td>Outsourcing and mix &amp; match arrangement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Command-driven authority</td>
<td>Collaborative involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code-driven rules</td>
<td>Values-driven orientations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operates under administrative control</td>
<td>Operates under political control</td>
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An alternative way of expressing these differences and capturing the new requirements placed on effective service delivery was produced by a British think tank (Demos 2004). The author wrote of the ‘dead generalist’ – the traditional civil service official depicted as professional, rule-bound, staid and detached. In place of the Weberian cipher, the delivery of complex programs today requires a new type of deliverer – the social activist practitioner. This practitioner was modelled on those working on a successful program aimed at reducing the numbers of people ‘sleeping rough’ on the street. Those working on this program were much more adaptive, more engaged and had more human interface with their clients and were much more passionate and committed to the program’s goals. Demos depicted the key differences between the civil service and the ‘sleeping rough’ practitioners in the following table.

Traditional Civil Service Approach versus the ‘Rough Sleeping’ Approach

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<tr>
<th>Generalist leader assigned to problems</th>
<th>Led by a ‘deep specialist’ practitioner</th>
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<tr>
<td>Staff assigned to the job from the service</td>
<td>Staff hand-picked from a range of backgrounds</td>
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Largely office-bound | Field-based, with management and staff out experiencing the services with the users
---|---
Officials have a ‘passing through’ mentality | Goal-orientated and time limited mentality
Issue guidance activity and ‘wait for the world to change’ | Committed, well-led, motivated group
Future careers dependent on servicing inside bureaucracy | Future careers dependent on success with this objective
Analyse the problem academically and as a detached policy matter | Analyse the problem from the ground and the customer’s perspective, redesigning services accordingly
Impartial | Passionate
Dominated by departmental silos | Joining-up services
Basic assumption is to carry on as before | Explicit about the need for change
Change has to be justified | Challenge assumptions and working practices, do things differently

Source: adapted from Demos 2004:26.

The main point about these tabular dichotomies is that they are caricatures; the attributes assigned to the different sides of the ledger are not mutually exclusive and each cluster of features listed on one side or the other are not necessarily consistent or co-existent. In most areas of public administration we find mixtures of the attributes are evident – cross-cutting intersections drawing on attributes from different sides of the ledger. The public service of today has multiple relations and multiple dimensions, and components of each cluster may be found in a single workplace. We find staff who prefer challenging assumptions working alongside staff who favour stability and predictability. We find impartial officials in agencies working with passionate advocates for their policy areas. Impartial officials may also be passionate about seeing results. Different contexts of public administration and different pressures on delivery will encourage different compositions of staff, skills, processes and attributes.

**Regeneration as Code**

So, is the new fascination with regeneration a code for something else? Is it symbolic politics in which we are engaged? One of the arguments might be that our interest in regeneration is a reaction to boredom – boredom with the lack of political leadership, the lack of passion for policy, the lack of excitement in our political leaders. Our leaders got burnt in the reform process; many are not that courageous any more; they are cautious. Is regeneration then a quest for leading the political agenda by public servants? Not too many political leaders across Australia are articulating and heralding regeneration. It is an agenda driven by proactive public servants.

Is regeneration code for a post neo-liberal discourse that is starting to appear? We have gone through the neo-liberal tunnel and we are starting to come out and say: ‘well, it didn’t really work as we expected and we want something else.’ This is certainly New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark’s view. Her idea of regeneration
in New Zealand is that she wants reliable, good quality, policy advice. She was not getting it from the regime she inherited and she wants better capabilities, more innovative ideas and potential solutions coming through her public service.

Is it code for restoring a new state vision, with government seizing new and wider responsibilities, accepting wider roles and involvement? Governments despite the rhetoric are not getting smaller or leaner. There are a lot of myths about declining state size. In the Garran Oration Andrew Leigh talked about a declining public service, but that is not true and misses the point. People in government employment delivering services is expanding exponentially. We have thousands more people delivering government services now, but they work under different arrangements. Some are consultants, or third-party providers, or charities, or work for non-government agencies with an ongoing contractual relationship with government. Moreover, the notion of who is a public servant is a flexible, floating figure, depending on what governments count in and outside the Act. But government is growing in terms of responsibilities and provision. Government is now larger than it has ever been, and I do not see any prospect of it shrinking. Government’s roles and responsibilities in all sorts of new areas now are still opening up.

Regeneration could be code to undo New Public Management. New public management was cold, brutal economics, which gave us a particular spin, a particular focus. Governments focused on the price of outputs rather than the social use or effectiveness of programs. Regeneration may be a way of saying ‘can we bring some of the social back onto the agenda after the vicissitudes of NPM’?

And a final possibility; regeneration may be a kind of well-meaning ‘greenish’ pitch to the intelligencia and middle classes, who don’t want to be disturbed or confronted. It may appeal to people who want to believe that our public sector organisations really are organic, caring and treating them like people – not necessarily instrumental, mechanical, faceless institutions that do nasty things to them. The rise of performance notions such as the triple bottom line are all part of that regenerative well-meaning thinking. So, some of this debate might be a morale boost and coping mechanism for a new public service.

**How Widely or Universally do we Intend Regeneration to Apply?**

Regeneration is often used in the generic sense – as if it covers all aspects of public service and government activity. But how universal ought we to apply this concept? Max Weber talked about an essential role of government being ‘a political or state monopoly over the legitimate means of control and force’. There is a dark side to the state – keeping populations in check, ruling, enforcing compliance and order. So, which bits of state power are we talking about regenerating? Are we talking about the regeneration of good detention centres for illegal immigrants and asylum seekers? Are we talking about a regenerated tax office run on a commission basis? Are we talking of more powerful gate-keeping individuals? Are we talking about regenerating regulatory bodies and tougher forms of regulation?

Implicitly behind this debate is the notion elite empowerment – we are regenerating to enable the elite to achieve its interests more readily. Much of the current debate about
regeneration assumes that the elite needs this new assistance and will still be there controlling and running that agenda.

Yet, most of the imagery of regeneration is applied only to the nice bits of the state – the beleaguered service deliverers, the caring industries. We envision it applying to social programs and assistance schemes, programs that are ostensibly about helping people with their solutions. Yet focusing only on the warm and cuddly bits distorts our view of what we are really talking about when we talk about the whole sector of government.

**Limits to Volition and Initiative**

The fourth point I want to make is that this debate, including many of the papers at this conference, demonstrates a misguided understanding of how regeneration comes about. There is an intellectual social science dilemma involved here concerned with the capacity for volition versus the weight of the structural conditions under which we operate. Much of the regenerative paradigm is infused with the fashions of strategic management and strategising. It believes that we can change our destiny; strategy drives structure, and through volition we can make things happen. There are new challenges always appearing. Some have taken this to an art form: in some agencies it is taboo to talk about problems. I remember one official saying to me: ‘stop talking about problems; we don’t have problems, we just have new challenges!’ That is evidence of the volition mentality – the notion that we can solve things, we can do things, we can drive things, we are in charge. The main consequence of this volition paradigm is that we elevate and invest in people who are believers in plans and strategic leadership, who believe in road maps, who believe in the ideas generated by inquiries, task forces and commissions. They like the notion that they are driving things and going somewhere.

Often those aspects of leadership are important. For example, take the long list of regenerative-style commissions of inquiry into the public service that have characterised not only Australia’s trajectory of reform but also many nations in the OECD (in Australia: Boyer, Coombs, Reid, Block, Wilenski, Corbett, Bland, the National Commission of Audit, and the MAC’s recent *Organisational Renewal*). Some of them have opened new directions and had some impact, but a lot of them simply consolidated what was going on around the time and aligned that with the new possibilities. Many of the ideas swirl around for a while, then burn out and become consigned to the dustbin of history – while the structures of government survive.

**Exogenous Triggers to Regeneration**

Hence, there are more substantial factors driving change and regeneration than simply volition. Arguably, the main causes of regeneration occur because of things that happen to us, not the exigencies of volition. These are the environmental causes, the structural conditions affecting how we operate. Sometimes we recognise them and we can harness them. Sometimes there are huge opportunity-driven agendas in recognising these forces. Writers like John Kingdom have provided good policy-making frameworks to harness these external conditions with the policy choices of policy entrepreneurs. A conscious awareness of the main changing conditions can
allow policy entrepreneurs to test the possibilities and make changes in directions to organisations or policy settings.

But the main triggers to regeneration are often exogenous; outside forces that impact in major ways on operational designs. For instance, the history of regeneration would highlight the impact of major crises and conflicts. The impact of the Second World War, both on the service at the time, and then over the next 20 years, was huge. There are still echoes today: the impacts of the East Timor conflict and the two Gulf Wars have had wide impacts especially across the Commonwealth and some state agencies. The current obsession with increased security is a hugely important trigger of change and regeneration.

Then there is the education system – it has changed the labour market enormously and in particular the number of graduates entering the public service. The gender of the workforce and changes in labour market participation by women has had a major impact on government. Greater diversity in employment bringing different ethnic and cultural values to bear on administration – all these factors represent a huge regenerative change that has happened and not necessarily as a result of volition or planning and sometimes with outright resistance. It would be interesting to speculate whether whitegoods and particularly the washing machine has had more regenerative impact on the public service than any head of PM&C or any Premiers department. These background forces are hugely important and we tend to take them for granted and not to take adequate notice of them.

Changing social values have also been an influential factor. The values of the old diggers of yesteryear have given way to politically correct attitudes, the welcoming of diversity, balance, equity and a certain sense of responsibility and fairness. In the broader context, these are relatively new attitudes and values; they were not widely shared in the 1950s or 1960s whereas we now take them as normal and commonsense.

The huge increase in the use and capacities of IT and data management gives governments the capacity to do things we could never do before or that required an enormous amount of laborious attention. Thousands of typists once spent their time retyping letters, memos and drafts – work that has almost entirely been supplanted or made redundant by the PC. The fourth division of the public service has almost entirely disappeared. The changing nature of work is also hugely important. The kind of work performed by the public service has changed from being laborious and process-driven to one much more heavily involved in policy and incentives, with far different arrangements with citizens and other providers.

Another exogenous factor is that governments at various times have imposed change on the public service, wanting to see different steering capacities. The Whitlam period (1972-75) was hugely important in this respect, not because of Whitlam’s plans or the policies he espoused (some of which were successful and some were bizarre and weird), but because he triggered a new relationship between government and the public service. And governments have since build on this legacy rather than gone back. Whitlam was asking what was government about and who ran the agendas. He wanted different kinds of advice from his senior officials. He wanted simply to see what options or contestable ideas were forthcoming from the bureaucracy. Whitlam’s successors – Fraser, Hawke, Keating and Howard – have not
reversed this structural change in political-administrative relations. You can see similar trajectories in the various states. In Queensland, for example, there were huge changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s from the breakdown of the Nationals regime to the rise of Goss who, with Ahern, was a major driver of some of the changes. The capacity of governments to challenge the advice provided by the public service represents an important structural change and we show no indication that we will resile from this state of affairs.

Aligning Structure and Intent

There is scope to assist in aligning and bringing together some of the major changes that shape government and public administration with the ‘regenerative’ intentions we might seek in an opportunistic or experimental sense. In the Garran Oration Andrew Leigh talked about systematic evaluation of experiments. That is really important today and fits with the current focus on empirical-based or evidence-based policy-making. We ought to ask: how do we know what works and why? How can we be predictive? Yet the answers may not be welcome to governments or ministers, and a preference for experimentation and variability may strain bureaucratic norms.

Academia has something to offer – new approaches and new theories. The whole notion of network analysis, which was not around, certainly in Australia, in the 1980s and early 1990s, is now a major form of thinking about how we act and what we do and what we need to get on top of. We need new studies of capacity. We talk a lot about capacities but the term is very similar to the concept of accountability; it is hard to apply, sometimes hard to recognise and almost no-one can prove it or demonstrate it. We do not have a lot of detailed or historical or comparative data on what are the real capacities of government. But, we can see some progress. The workforce capability that governments are now addressing is heralded as a new innovation. Governments of 50 and 60 years ago did undertake mechanistic workforce planning and often got it wrong. With new integrative knowledges and better scenario planning we can do a lot better.

Greater interaction between academics and public servants is an essential element of this. If we look internationally, Australia and New Zealand are probably at the most extreme of non-mixing of the public service and academia. Other political systems have much more direct interchange, both practitioners to academia and academics into governments. Most departments in Canada have academics-in-residence, researchers-in-residence on joint topics, there is also considerable academic-practitioner research published through such bodies as the Centre for Management Development. In Australia we tend not to do that. There is no real facilitation of exchange interactions, research sabbaticals spent in the other sector, or joint research endeavours.

In the future we need to think more seriously about what I would call ‘predictive policy-making’, where we are not just doing policy on a kind of instrumental, short-term basis for political gains, where programs are formulated on a ‘hope and see’ basis. As policy-makers we need to think much harder and in more sophisticated ways about what we want to achieve, how we can achieve the objectives, how we can align incentives with intent, how well do policy instruments achieve that intent, whether we can make differences and how we will monitor the differences/success.
Most policy that is announced has no real political objectives, is not adequately evaluated and often has perverse or counterproductive incentive structures.

Academics bring a different vantage point to the problems of government and administration and I think we need to bring that voice out more forcefully. I am sad that so few academics are involved in IPAA. When I first started coming to IPAA we had maybe 50 to 100 academics active in IPAA conferences and events; now it is a minuscule proportion, just a handful. Last year there were only three at the conference. Academics are just not talking to the IPAA community. We have a vibrant practitioner base at IPAA, but we do not have a vibrant academic base – and I would argue that this situation is largely the scholar’s fault. Today, perhaps more than ever, academics need to be sceptical, punching through the rhetoric, testing presumptions, pricking the balloon. The ANZSOG initiative has announced an extensive and collaborative research agenda (see AJPA March 2005), but it is only one avenue for such collaborative research. The agenda is broad and we aim to be inclusive; it is a good agenda for research and good collaboration is starting to emerge.

The Role of Regeneration in Context

What then is the role of regeneration? I think it matters less what we do and what we sweep under the heading of ‘regeneration’ and how we do it; but it matters more that we keep talking about it. It matters not so much what we are doing, or what topics are being addressed. It matters more that we are having a discourse about something. The politics of the discourse are much more important than the specific topics that come into the frame and often then quietly depart the scene. If we are talking about regeneration and capacity enhancing, this in itself is important. It doesn’t particularly matter whether we are applying it to efficiency and effectiveness, or to the APS values, or to discussions about the integrity and fairness of programs. It doesn’t really matter under the integrated leadership scheme what are the element of leadership, but it is important that we are talking about those things. The debate provides a good and useful framework. And it will change and develop s new problems are encountered. The point is that we are talking about energising and refreshing leadership, and that in itself is important. Discourse structures our politics. It gives us a professional base to challenge politicians and the plethora of vested interests and stakeholders in the field and yet also to be better prepared to better serve the community. We should keep challenging but building the narrative. What we talk about is more important than what we do or how we do it.