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Reith Proposals Erode Public Service Professionalism

Commonwealth Public Servants have become increasingly 'dispirited, fearful and lacking in self-confidence', and many of the reforms advocated by Industrial Relations Minister Peter Reith will only aggravate the problems, according to a group of current and former senior public servants.

The observations are contained in the response by the Australia Institute to the Discussion Paper released recently by Mr Reith, *Towards a Best Practice Australian Public Service*. The group that prepared the Institute's submission includes management consultants and academics as well as public servants.

The Institute's submission expresses concern that the ethic of service to the community, with all of its attendant obligations and norms of ethical behaviour, has given way to a system of specific and narrow contracts, performance measures and a general culture of mistrust and short-term relationships.

'Many public servants feel undervalued, especially when they see their work put out to contract', said Dr Clive Hamilton, Executive Director of the Institute. 'Contracting out is often used as a quick and easy alternative to internal reform.'

The submission says that the Reith paper is inconsistent. In some places it advocates a bureaucratic 'command' mode, backed with explicit controls such as performance measurement and performance pay, and in other places it advocates a culture of professionalism in public service.

'These are contradictory options', said Mr Ian McAuley, a lecturer in public sector management at the University of Canberra and one of the submission's authors. 'One approach is rooted in mistrust and control; the other is based on trust and professionalism.'

The Institute's submission calls for the strengthening of employment tenure for efficient officers while at the same time acknowledging that procedures for dealing with inefficient staff need to be streamlined. It also argues for a return to a professional career service and strongly criticises Mr Reith's proposal to bring back performance pay, widely seen as a dismal failure when it was abandoned two years ago.

'Public servants on contract without tenure are less likely to give frank and fearless advice', said Mr McAuley. 'No public servant should feel insecure because he or she has given unwelcome advice or bad news, or has refused to sign off against improper practice. But there are many instances of officers failing to express their doubts or criticisms of policy implementation for fear of damaging their careers'.

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