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Mr Roger Beale AO
Chair
Quarantine and Biosecurity Review
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Dear Mr Beale

I make this brief submission as a former senior public servant with extensive experience in policy areas and service delivery. My professional qualifications and interests are in both public administration and organisational psychology. In addition, I have relevant background in relation to this particular review, as Deputy Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and as AQIS Executive Director from 2000 to 2005.

The purpose of my submission is to draw attention to the framework within which decisions resulting from the Review's recommendations will ultimately be taken. It is important that conclusions reached about desired outcomes and structures are deliverable in the context of the broader environment – the labour market, the specific employment environment and culture, the sustainability of effort and the sheer 'do-ability' of the tasks prescribed.

This short paper addresses three major themes; Public Administration issues, Organisation Design issues, and Talent Management issues. These are of course neither totally comprehensive nor mutually exclusive categories. They are sets of issues which intersect and interact, but are separated here for the sake of convenience and clarity. They are presented in abbreviated form, as a focus and 'memory jogger' for my oral submissions of 6 May 2008.

Public Administration Issues

a. Policy and Operations: Together or Separate

There is no infallible model, although I believe that because 'the urgent drives out the important', the policy/operational split between Biosecurity Australia and AQIS generally worked well in my experience. Operational crises and leadership of large, decentralised agencies are unlikely to be conducive to timely and high quality policy development. In the end, a policy can only be as good as its delivery; it is easy to underestimate the leadership and management challenges in running a service delivery organisation. If you are dependent on 3000 operational staff, and catering for many thousands of stakeholders, a large part of your day will be spent dealing with people and their vagaries rather than the rational thought processes of science and policy making.

b. Structure: Statutory authority v departmental entity

I am aware that other reviews have called for the creation of a statutory authority in this area. While there may be advantages for many players in this model, I do not consider it essential for leading-edge quarantine and/or biosecurity. Other organisational characteristics, such as mission and values, organisation and job design, leadership and talent management, are more important, in my view.

c. The Quarantine Act

The Quarantine Act is a century old and looks it. How much better it would be to have a coherent law, with easily tracked regulations, that could serve as a tool for policy makers, operational managers and staff in their decision making, as a clear guide to importers and exporters (most of whom are keen to comply) and as a compliance tool for law enforcers.

d. Regulator v facilitator

This is a particular issue for AQIS, especially in its export certification functions. I note the recent ANAO Better Practice Guide 'Administering Regulation'. It is possible to be both regulator and educator/facilitator eg through outreach activities which educate various groups of stakeholders. But at the end of the day, the law and not policy or preference must be the centrepiece for operational decision making.

Organisation Design Issues: Aligning Function, Structure and Culture

a. 'Manageable Business'

In a more complex and fast moving world, there is now little option for large private or public sector organisations but to implement some form of matrix management, with lines of responsibility and authority across as well as down the organisation. Such organisation designs are supported by technological advances in systems and communication, but still require vigilant leadership at all levels and a breaking down of 'silos' that may be program or geographically based. This is likely to involve an iterative process of identifying functional and organisation design options in the context of current priorities.

b. Functional splits

There is no one right answer here either. It is necessary for work to be divided up, and this can be done along policy/service delivery, science/administration, quarantine/export, plant/animal lines or some mixture of these. The decision involves taking account of existing skills, stakeholder and staff preferences, priorities and/or crisis issues, and whether it would be best to put like team cultures together or deliberately mix them up in the interests of cultural change.

c. Cultural Change

There are always issues of culture in 'mergers', whether it is of large organisations or of teams subject to different functional and/or structural alignments. This must be taken into account if the reorganisation is to be immediately effective, ensuring that techniques for cultural change are provided through to the medium to long term. (eg the US Department of Homeland Security experience)

Talent Management Issues

a. Interdependence with organisation design

Sustaining a manageable business will involve winning the talent war, and that will mean designing an organisation attractive to those scarce resources. The questions include: what sort of staff do we want, where do we want them and how can we best attract and retain them? If this involves shedding some existing staff, how will that be done in a way which allows the current priorities and challenges to be met? If it involves 'upsizing' rather than 'downsizing' some functions, this may present an even greater challenge (as it did for AQIS in 2001).

b. Interdependence with organisation culture

Scientific organisations have a very different culture to policy organisations, and operational entities will be different again. People with particular skills will gravitate to different organisation cultures. A shift in the skills required also calls for cultural change management eg the nature of risk management skills in AQIS changed markedly with the IQI program. While greater intervention might seem to tighten quarantine efforts, it may have resulted in downgraded risk management skills. In the attempt to cover all perceived risks, the skills involved in risk profiling and management have been subsumed in the challenge of complex rostering, constant staff recruitment and training, and repeatedly redesigning queuing systems to handle passenger backlogs.

c. Career paths and other incentives

While it may be possible to provide good policy and science career paths to assist in attraction and retention of staff, it is likely to become increasingly difficult at an operational level, particularly in the regions, given the number of staff and the flat structures involved. At a time of skills shortages, sustaining a manageable business will necessitate imaginative recruitment and retention policies for all categories of staff, and for managers.

The issues raised in this submission may seem peripheral to the main objects with which this Review has been charged. But they will be central to the successful implementation of the Review's recommendations, and taking them into account in making those recommendations will avoid a subsequent attempt to populate an organisation structure which is doomed to fail.

I thank the Review members for the opportunity to speak to them.

Yours sincerely

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