

The Blueprint for Rudd's overhaul of the public service was launched last night. While there's much that's promising, it's fundamentally a very cautious document, writes Ian McAuley.

Monday night's launch of the Government's "Blueprint for the reform of Australian Government Administration" was a solemn occasion. It took place in the King's Hall, Old Parliament House, where the dominating presence was a massive bronze statue of King George V. Also looking down over the gathering of men and women in regulation grey suits were paintings of past prime ministers. Menzies, Hawke, Keating and Howard were there to remind us, as the report puts it, that "Ministers, agencies and public service officials comprise the executive arm of government".

In keeping with the atmosphere in King's Hall the Blueprint is a conservative document, with three main themes.

The first is to reverse some of the ill-considered "reforms" of the 1980s, which essentially meant that government employees were no longer "public servants"; rather, they became employees of particular agencies. In this way, agencies gained much more autonomy and a strong "performance management" framework was instituted. The cost of these reforms was fragmentation: there was less staff mobility, less inter-agency cooperation, a proliferation of meaningless performance measures and a loss of policy skills.

While the Blueprint does not explicitly criticise these past decisions, it does recognise the problems they caused. New initiatives are slated to restore staff mobility — which was impeded by widely differing standards of pay and conditions — and to review factors which led to an explosion of senior management ranks.

We find statements such as: "As the APS builds its capabilities by recognising and investing in core areas such as policy, service delivery, regulation and implementation, it is expected the APS will be able to reduce spending on consultants to do business as usual tasks." Perhaps the statement may have more honestly started "As the APS re-builds its capabilities" — but that's the clear implication.

The second theme is to roll back the politicisation of the public service that occurred under the Howard years. This is even more subtly covered, mainly by reference to new procedures involving the Australian Public Service Commissioner in appointing and dismissing department secretaries. At the presentation, Terry Moran, Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and chief author of the report, gestured to the previous notion that the public service should be "responsive" to Executive Government, likening this to serfdom. No such colourful language appears in the official document.

The third theme relates to engagement with the public and openness. There are some fine words but overall the report remains cautious. It refers to better use of information technology, citizen surveys to obtain feedback on satisfaction with government service delivery and more open access to data, however, it is still a long way from an inclusive notion of public engagement in policy. The public servant's master is still Executive Government and the public is served through serving the Executive.

While Moran's presentation at the launch and his performance in subsequent media interviews have been sharp and clear — he leaves the listener in no doubt that the public service needs to improve its professional skills. The Blueprint itself is written in the bureaucratic tradition of vague language.

The words "strategy" and "strategic" appear 136 times in the 81 page document, for example, but not once are they defined. This is more than a point of mere semantics, for it points to an absence of meaning. What is meant by the term "strategic policy". Is it long term and system wide? Is it just clever? Does it employ stratagems in the military sense? Management professors Fred Hilmer and Lex Donaldson in their 1996 book *Management Redeemed* list seven meanings of the word "strategy" — and even then they miss a few meanings.

Another word used freely — 63 times — is "leadership", again without explicit definition. For example, senior public servants are expected to "model leadership behaviours including promoting innovation and challenging unnecessary risk aversion ..." This all sounds fine — but note the tautology: leaders model leadership. The implicit leadership model, illustrated in the report with a neatly drawn pyramid, assumes that authority and leadership are closely intermeshed or perhaps even indistinguishable.

It's unfortunate that the authors have overlooked the work of Ron Heifetz of the John F Kennedy School of Government who, over the last 30 years has articulated a practical division between leadership and authority which is particularly relevant to public policy.

What Heifetz terms "adaptive leadership" is concerned with raising difficult issues, which may require people to undergo difficult changes in their assumptions, ways of thinking, lifestyles or careers. Those in authority, such as departmental secretaries, have a raft of difficult administrative tasks at hand. They are often working within a constrained field, particularly when they are accountable to a government sensitive to opinion polling and to media outlets that are always ready to capitalise on the public's fear of change.

To illustrate, just in the last two weeks there have been examples of public leadership coming from outside the traditional authority structure.

The CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology, rather than the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, have taken the lead in quelling climate change denial. And the Reserve Bank Governor, Glenn Stevens, not the Treasury Secretary, has warned us about the unsustainability of our housing boom.

These are indeed adaptive challenges. To borrow a line from Yes Minister, it would be a very brave public servant who took the lead in raising such tough issues, but those who are off to the side, outside the direct line of authority, have much more latitude. (In this regard, the Productivity Commission has become one of our most valuable institutions.) It is unfortunate that the authors of the report slipped into the traditional mode of thinking about leadership, particularly at a time when Australia is facing so many adaptive challenges.

But, perhaps that confirms Moran's admission on ABC Radio this morning. The public service, he conceded, is "not up to date ... in the latest ways of doing public policy".