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The inquiry “Independent Review of Job Network”, including Centrelink, can be achieved through internal or external evaluation. Of course the evaluation will be conducted mainly from inside the Australian administrative and political system, and therefore mainly by Australian individuals and institutions. But living in and being confronted with just one model of public service delivery can narrow the perspective of how advanced or far behind a system can be in a comparative way of looking at it.

Being a Ph.D. student from Germany writing his thesis about Centrelink I can try to give an “outsider’s” perspective, not only as an academic, but also living in continental Europe and thus dealing with a completely different administrative setting.

I have chosen Centrelink to be my focus of interest for my thesis and I want to explain why Centrelink is in my point of view – and in comparison with other settings (like the Special Operating Agencies in Canada, the Executive Agencies in Great Britain, the Crown Entities in New Zealand to name just the most advanced ones) – the “cutting edge” in public service delivery.

Regarding the changing nature of the day-to-day work in public management a new challenge was to be noticed: globalisation has an impact not only on the national economy but also on governments and therefore public administrations. At the same time, the state is confronted with several burdens (e.g. financial restrictions, diminishing identification of society with the political leadership, and increasing complexity of administrative work to name just a few). The Anglo-Saxon countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States of America) were the fastest to react in adapting the new paradigm, the New Public Management.

Besides other aspects including personnel, budget, programmes etc. a change occurred in the organisational set-up, especially in the front end-organisation of service delivery. This development had its origin in the rise of agencies in a purchaser-provider model. Although the idea of agencies is not new, it was “reinvented” under the New Public Management in a different context. Due to this model the strategic focus and programme-formulation remain within the department, the actual delivery was moved from units under the direct aegis of departments to more remote and independent units at the periphery of the public administration system.

Regarding the agencyfication, Canada, Great Britain and New Zealand were the first to react; besides – and despite – all differences, all of them remodelled their agencies to fulfil one very specific purpose. They were designed to maximise expertise in service delivery within a narrow field of administrative work. Therefore the number of those agencies grew enormously. There was no intention of cooperation between them, neither in the field of service delivery nor in the creation of joint products and services to be delivered.

Still there was a change in the responsibilities due to the introduction of purchaser-provider splits. The departments were responsible for the development of products and the underlying agencies solely responsible for the delivery.

Centrelink is different. Centrelink has implemented many of the demands coming from the new paradigm of New Public Management, which are by themselves modern but not new and do therefore not constitute the cutting-edge position of Centrelink in the modernisation of public management: customer orientation, no life-long employment, performance based pay, outcome/ output focus to name just a few.

Centrelink was established – besides other reasons – to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic work for the citizen when they get in contact with administration. Before Centrelink was established they often had to repeat and give their personal data every time again to different departments to be entitled to a specific service or payment. Therefore, in coming up with the aim of modernising government following the path of the other countries, the establishment of specialised agencies was not suitable for fulfilling the purpose of cutting superfluous administrative work.

The innovative thing about Centrelink is the ability and capacity to deliver completely different payments and services originating from completely different departments and therefore policies to a range of different customers or groups. And this is what makes

Centrelink so different and so successful, because it is what citizens expect government to be: one main contact for many different services and payments of different departments, a true one-stop-shop. To be more specific, a lot of products and services coming from various departments are being organised in a structure of life-events so that the customer is confronted just with one “queue” of products and services in one place. Centrelink invented the capability to accept all kinds of products and put them together for a customer-brokered solution. Through a “buddy-system” and a virtual training facility as well as the use of expert systems (e.g. EDGE), Centrelink has created a system- and organisation-based knowledge- and training-management instead of a personalised knowledge- and therefore training-foundation. Even if a person with expertise leaves Centrelink, the organisational capacity to fulfil the job remains intact. While other agencies in the most advanced countries would be unable to perform service delivery in an area other than their own field of expertise, Centrelink is actually achieving this collaboration with over 20 client departments or authorities. The approach in the majority of other countries is still to build structures starting from the centre and going down to the bottom; Centrelink does it differently: it asks themselves what suits a customer in a specific period of his life best and consequently develop the organisation to perform exactly the tasks needed. Centrelink is therefore not just one example in a variation of other types of agencies, it has reverted the whole concept and emerges as a completely new and different model of service delivery. It has invigorated the idea of agencies.

Other countries are now on their way to follow a similar approach of a “whole of government concept” but still with a different focus: In the UK for example the development towards a “joined-up government” is taking place, but on a departmental level regarding policy-setting. Other key-words found are “collaborative government”, “cross-cutting government”, “inter-agency approach”, “cross agency approach”, “cross government approach”. But they all have in common the focus on policy development and not dealing with delivering the outputs of their policies, Centrelink on the other hand doesn’t deal with the aspect of policy at all and is solely focused on delivery products and services.

Also, new and therefore experimental concepts at the level of service delivery can be found but Centrelink is not only the largest organisation doing so in question, it has the longest history of actually working in this set-up and it is therefore not in an experimental stage any more. Now it is going into its 5th year of existence.

Naturally, flaws, mistakes and room for further improvement will always – and should – be found, especially from within Australia, but still, the larger picture has to be taken into consideration. Because of the cutting-edge position of Centrelink in the field of modernising public administration it is not to be stopped, but to be further developed.

Therefore I would like to mention a few points which are, from my point of view, worth of consideration: Centrelink should be recognized as what it is: the largest “Department” (in numbers) of the Commonwealth. The organisation and also the CEO should have the same powers and responsibilities as other department heads have, so that negotiations can take place on the same eye-level; again it would test something completely new but it seems to be adequate for the situation and position of Centrelink. The existing framework leads to this direction already: Centrelink was placed under the “Financial Administration and Accountability Act” and the “Public Service Act” but with elements from the “Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act” (e.g. the Board, the potential of being replaced through competition etc.). It seems to be logical to take the next step: to establish Centrelink as a Commonwealth Department under the CAC Act. It would truly be a step forward towards further customer-orientation and cost-efficiencies in a negotiating if not in a potentially competitive environment.

Meanwhile the existence of two Secretaries of the two major client departments appears unusual. From my perspective this constitutes a problem of accountability but this can only be an “outsider’s” evaluation, without knowledge of the actual working situation among the Board: as Non-Executive members without voting power they can denounce responsibility for decisions of the Board; but of course, being part of every discussion and decision, they can influence these processes. Additionally, an equal bargaining- or negotiating-position (based on the game-theory) benefits the expected results the most. In the negotiation of the partnership-agreements between Centrelink and the client departments, the process can potentially be compromised with two Secretaries from a major “player” (client department) of this negotiation who already have detailed insights of the other “player”(Centrelink) of the negotiation.

I am aware that I did not really mention the problems of Job Network, but with Centrelink being part of the network I deemed it worth commenting on the concept of Centrelink as a whole; for further comments on Centrelink’s position and role regarding the Job Network I consider myself not well informed enough.