

MANAGING MORAL DILEMMA'S IN THE APS

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Biography

Dr Chris Sadleir is a lecturer and researcher in public administration and organisation at the University of Canberra ACT. His research and teaching interests builds on extensive experience as a public servant at State and national levels of government in Australia.

Presentation Overview

Do moral dilemmas faced by public servants change when forms of public administration change? This paper reflects on changing practice in the management of ethical challenges faced in public service.

Abstract

Do moral dilemmas faced by public servants change when forms of public administration change? Moral dilemmas arise when there is a necessity for action, such as in the form of a political decision, which may challenge existing ethical frameworks or codes for acceptable behaviour. A key assumption in examining the nature of work within the public sector is that responsiveness to new circumstances, whether created exogenously or endogenously, increases ambiguity for public servants as to what is an acceptable course of action. To test this assumption this paper explores contemporary dilemmas faced by those working in the Australian Public Service and contrasts that experience with moral dilemmas found in earlier eras of public administration, such as in the age of public sector mandarins and in the era of managerialism. For example, what kinds of dilemmas do public servants working in the contemporary era characterised as integrated governance face and does this suggest a necessarily more politicised and ethically ambiguous public service experience for practitioners than found in earlier forms of public administration?

Data collected from case law, public inquiries and reports over the period from the mid 1950s to the late 2000s is used to identify and analyse moral dilemmas faced by public servants at the national level of government in Australia. In doing so, the paper highlights differences and commonalities across the different eras of public administration and generates observations on both change and stability in addressing moral dilemmas faced by public servants. Arising from the analysis is a proposal to examine more closely the degree to which the permeability of boundaries between policy, administrative and political dimensions within executive government strengthen or weaken morally engaged public service.