OPEN LETTER
TO THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

Thursday, 9 April 2020

Dear colleagues

Since we wrote to you three weeks ago, our world has changed. So has our work.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly and radically changed Australia and challenged all of us.

Australians have lost their lives. And the crisis is having an enormous economic impact. The Commonwealth's announced economic support packages alone amount to more than $190 billion, or almost 10 per cent of GDP.

In these few weeks, we have witnessed a greater commitment to the APS working as a united team. We have seen enthusiasm, commitment and an unwavering purpose to support the Government and all Australians through this crisis, and plan for our nation to recover and rebuild.

The APS has supported the Government to implement three unprecedented economic support packages and significant healthcare, childcare and domestic violence support measures.

The Departments of Health and Industry are supporting the procurement and production of critical Personal Protective Equipment and the National Indigenous Australians Agency has helped implement remote travel restrictions.

Home Affairs has established a National Coordination Mechanism to streamline work across jurisdictions, the private sector, and regulators. DFAT has helped bring many Australians home from abroad, and Attorney-General's is ensuring the JobKeeper payment takes effect through temporary changes to the Fair Work Act 2009.

Almost 5,000 APS staff are ready to lend a hand to support the agencies Australians are relying on. More than 650 are already seconded to Services Australia, where within 24 hours of on-boarding, they were answering calls and supporting fellow Australians.

It is encouraging to hear new recruits to Service Australia's call centre report that while it had been a challenge, they were proud to be contributing, making a difference and seeing what policy delivery looks like on the ground.

All of us are still coming to terms with this big change.

Last night, the APS 200, comprising the most senior leaders from across the APS, held a virtual forum to stay connected while working apart. We discussed how our work, our responsibilities and our priorities have changed in response to this global health and economic crisis.
We are incredibly proud of the way the APS has risen to these unprecedented challenges. At a time when our people have been forced to work further apart, the APS is working more closely and collaboratively than ever to deliver the services Australians need, when they need them most.

We should recognise our jobs are secure. Many Australians are not as fortunate as us and we should not forget this as we think about the changes we are going through.

The Government has decided now is not the time for pay increases, and so while the public service continues to deliver for the country, the decision has been made to pause pay rises across the APS. These are difficult times and it is clear we need every available resource to support our communities and our economy to respond to this pandemic.

This will be a marathon, not a sprint. It will test us – personally and professionally. Many of us are balancing work with supporting our families or helping children who are learning at home. Some of us will have family and friends going through difficult times themselves.

As professionals, we are developing, implementing, delivering and regulating complex measures in record speed. As we adapt to new ways of working, maintaining our connections is vital.

It will require us to persevere and care for ourselves and others over many months.

The change that is taking place right now and the lessons of this crisis will be fundamental to the future of the APS. We are reforming in practice as we act to respond to COVID-19. We are more connected, responsive and adaptable than ever.

For this reason, together with the Secretaries Board we have agreed to pause implementation planning of the APS reform agenda.

We have an opportunity for the APS to be our best. We are at the frontline of the Government’s response and this crisis demands no less.

We are extremely proud of what professional public officials have achieved in the last few weeks. And we ask you to keep on doing on it.

Thank you for your service to Australians at this extraordinary time. Like all Australians, please stay home this Easter. Now more than ever we wish each of you a safe and restful Easter break.

Yours sincerely

Philip Gaetjens
Secretary
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Peter Woolcott AO
Australian Public Service Commissioner