

Centre for Strategy and Governance 2025 Annual Dinner

Comments by Ken Matthews AO

We have heard tonight a real tour de force of the US situation by Dr John Hart in his address on the topic *Trump v The US Constitution*.

But for those of us in Centre for Strategy and Governance or in senior APS positions listening tonight, our inner voice may also have heard a 'wall of worries'. How much of what Dr Hart described so well could happen here in Australia?

It goes almost without saying that the US and Australian Constitutions, and the US system of public administration and the Australian system of public administration, have many important differences. But the differences are not an inoculation.

There is no doubt that many of the recent US so-called 'reforms' to public administration could be attractive to some Australian political parties if adopted or adapted to Australian circumstances. We have all dealt with politically desperate or frustrated ministers seeking cut-through solutions or shortcuts around what they see as unnecessary process.

"Why must I continue to endure this auditor or Inspector-General? Why can't I appoint my preferred person to a portfolio statutory body? Why can't I simply abolish a pesky portfolio agency? Why is my portfolio agency publishing such embarrassing research? Why can't I direct grant funding to the groups I prefer? Why am I bound by a contract signed by my predecessor?"

Some of the American cut-through 'reforms' and challenges to the US Constitution will have appeal in Australia.

Many of the best qualities and past performance successes of the Australian Public Service depend on conventions and accepted norms, principles and practises with little or no

legislative backing, and few if any sanctions for non-observance. In many cases they are only that: conventions.

The APS is therefore more vulnerable to imported ideas than many Australians would recognise. It is more vulnerable still because the APS has always lacked a natural political constituency to speak up when the APS is threatened. Think of arbitrary budget and staffing cuts to the APS over the years. Think of election promises even recently to arbitrarily reduce APS numbers.

Dr John Hart's speech has brought out for me clearly tonight that the Trumpian changes to US public administration are unlikely to fully 'snap back' at the end of Trump's term. Where the US Supreme Court has spoken, unscrambling the egg will be difficult, especially while the conservative majority continues on the court. Some Trump-originating changes will therefore persist in some form as a tempting example for governments elsewhere – including Australia - to emulate.

For the last few years the CSG has undertaken a program of work on the importance of respecting and recognising the value of the APS as a great Australian national institution in its own right. More recently, the CSG has been extending that work to think about whether Trumpian developments in the US pose risks to this great Australian national institution. The APS needs friends in the public debate. And it needs friends who base their public interventions on insightful research. If the CSG decides to speak out in defence of the Australian public service - the APS that we care about – we would be confident to base our intervention on Dr Hart's high quality but very accessible research.

Canberra

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