

Dear Minister – Letters from a Public Servant

Real-World Parallels: A Chapter-by-Chapter Reference Guide (Book 1)

Source below are drawn from public service research. Where a chapter is a narrative device, personal reflection, or plot mechanism rather than a documented external issue, that is stated plainly.

Chapter 1: Everybody Wants to Rule the World

Theme: A public servant with private political convictions maintaining professional neutrality toward a new Minister.

Chapter 2: Learning To Fly

Theme: Toxic Higher-ups who can quietly destroy a career; the concept of 'scheming virtuously' as a survival strategy.

- [Nick Charney, Scheming Virtuously: A Handbook for Public Servants \(CPSRenewal.ca\)](#)
- *The real 2011 Canadian handbook explicitly named in this chapter - grassroots public servants developing a 'how-to' guide for working ethically within a difficult system.*

Chapter 3: Under Pressure

Theme: A new government's '100 days' pressure clashing with the need for careful, accurate policy advice.

- [Bent Flyvbjerg et al., 'Underestimating Costs in Public Works Projects: Error or Lie?', Journal of the American Planning Association \(2002\)](#)
- *Classic study on how political pressure for fast, visible wins produces systematically underestimated costs and timelines in government projects - directly relevant to the tension this chapter describes.*

Chapter 4: Canadian Please

Theme: The real Canadian Public Sector Renewal ('Scheming Virtuously') movement as a model for grassroots reform.

- [CPSRenewal.ca — Scheming Virtuously: the Road to Collaborative Governance \(2009\)](#)
- *Confirms the real book and organisation this chapter describes discovering, including its 2008 origin lecture by Gilles Paquet and its stated aim of collaborative governance.*

Chapter 5: Truth And Freedom

Theme: 'Deep State' conspiracy theories about government, and the true spirit of freedom-of-information law.

- [Australian Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee, Freedom of Information Amendment Bill inquiry submissions \(2018-2019\)](#)

- *While focused on donations disclosure, this Centre for Public Integrity briefing paper documents the same Australian pattern the chapter satirises: information regimes whose 'spirit' (transparency) is undermined in practice by delay and technical non-compliance.*
- [Commonwealth Ombudsman, Investigation into ATO's use of garnishee notices \(2018\)](#)
- *Demonstrates the real tension between an agency's public duty of frankness and its internal culture of information control that this chapter is built around, in an Australian context.*

Chapter 6: The Human Centipede

Theme: 'Bureaupathologies' - a full taxonomy of bureaucratic dysfunction - and the specific pathology of 'managing up'.

- [Victor A. Thompson, Modern Organization \(1961\) — origin of 'bureaupathology'](#)
- *The term 'bureaupathology' is a real, established piece of public administration theory dating to 1961, describing insecure officials who appropriate organisational power for their own psychic needs - precisely the behaviour catalogued in this chapter.*

Chapter 7: Psycho Killer

Theme: Working with a workplace psychopath or sociopath who charms superiors while damaging colleagues.

- [Richard J. Pech & Bret W. Slade, 'Organisational sociopaths: rarely challenged, often promoted. Why?', Society and Business Review \(2007\)](#)
- *A direct, peer-reviewed real-world example: organisations sometimes promote incompetent manipulators repeatedly until 'their kind populate the highest levels of the organisational hierarchy' - precisely this chapter's account.*

Chapter 8: You Can't Always Get What You Want

Theme: 'Free and frank advice' and the 'no surprises' convention as constitutional obligations, not courtesies.

- [Kathy MacDermott, Whatever Happened to Frank and Fearless? The Impact of New Public Management on the Australian Public Service \(ANU Press, 2008\)](#)
- *A landmark, 2008 evidence-based study documenting exactly this chapter's argument: two decades of Australian public service reform steadily eroding officials' willingness and ability to give frank, fearless advice to ministers.*
- [Charlie Shandil, 'Frank, fearless, and replaceable', Policy Forum \(2017\)](#)
- *Discusses how removing tenure and permanent-head protections for senior Australian public servants removed the very conditions that once enabled frank and fearless advice - directly grounding the chapter's constitutional argument.*

Chapter 9: Walk On the Wild Side

Theme: The need for greater diversity in the public service, and the tendency of organisations to 'hire themselves'.

- [Australian Public Service Commission, State of the Service Report 2019-20 — Diversity and Inclusion chapter](#)
- *Real data confirming this chapter's complaint: Indigenous Australians made up 3.5% of the APS versus 3.1% of the working-age population (a modest gain after 20 years), and LGBTIQ+ representation sat at only 4.8% of census respondents in 2019 - evidence of the slow, incremental progress the chapter is impatient with.*
- ['More diversity needed in public sector: report', Government News \(December 2021\)](#)
- *Confirms that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and those with disability remained underrepresented at senior levels, with Indigenous staff having a median tenure of 4.3 years versus 12.9 years for non-Indigenous staff - a genuine, documented 'hire and lose' pattern.*

Chapter 10: Don't You Forget About Me

Theme: Political neutrality as a Lagrange point of equilibrium between government and the public; 'too many chiefs' in the public service.

- [Australian Public Service Commission, State of the Service Report 2016-17 — 'Right people, right place and right time'](#)
- *Official data confirming this chapter's complaint: Executive Level and Senior Executive Service staff grew from 19% of the APS workforce in 2000 to 26.2% by 2017, prompting the APS's own 'span-of-control' initiatives to reduce management layers - an official admission of the 'too many chiefs' problem.*
- [Centre for Policy Development, 'The State of the Australian Public Service' \(2011\)](#)
- *An evidence-based rebuttal to the 'bloated public service' narrative, while separately confirming the genuine shift towards a more 'top-heavy' APS since 1990 - useful for distinguishing the size argument from the hierarchy argument this chapter makes.*

Chapter 11: Full English Brexit

Theme: NIMBYism obstructing necessary public infrastructure, and resistance to policy implementation.

- [Wendy Sarkissian, 'What's Psychology Got to Do with NIMBY? Exploring the Deeper Meanings of Community Resistance to Proposed Housing Density Increases' \(Harvard University presentation, 2013\)](#)
- *A veteran Australian housing and community planner's analysis of the psychology behind NIMBYism — individuals supporting a project in principle while resisting it locally - directly mirroring this chapter's observation about people who are 'good' yet still resist necessary development.*

Chapter 12: Tell It Like It Is

Theme: An extended 'divorced parents' metaphor for the government/opposition/public-service relationship.

Chapter 13: I Think It's Going to Rain Today

Theme: Everyday heroism among public servants, and the motivations that draw people to public service in the first place.

- [James L. Perry & Lois R. Wise, 'The Motivational Bases of Public Service', Public Administration Review \(1990\)](#)

- *The foundational, real academic theory of 'Public Service Motivation' (PSM) - the idea that people are drawn to government work by a distinct, other-centred predisposition rather than pay or career - directly underpinning this chapter's argument that most public servants join to make a difference, not for a paycheck.*
- ['The Growth of Public Service Motivation Research', James L. Perry](#)
- *Confirms PSM has since been studied in over 20 countries, making it one of the most robust, cross-nationally validated constructs in public administration research.*

Chapter 14: Honesty

Theme: Transparent government as a formal public service principle, and the temptation to 'back engineer' a wrong statement into a right one.

- [Open Government Partnership — founding principles \(2011\)](#)
- *The real multilateral initiative (launched 2011) that the chapter's fictional 'Global Transparent Government Initiative' closely echoes - governments committing to transparency, accountability and public participation.*

Chapter 15: Don't Come Around Here No More

Theme: An underfunded frontline worker (a kindergarten head teacher) exhausted by years of ineffective departmental consultation.

Chapter 16: Keep Me Hanging on the Telephone

Theme: Government call centres with appalling hold times, seemingly designed to make people hang up rather than to help them.

- [Auditor General of Canada, Fall 2017 Report — Canada Revenue Agency Call Centres](#)
- *The audit found the CRA deliberately blocked more than half its calls in order to appear to meet its two-minute wait-time target, rather than actually improving service - the same underlying incentive this chapter satirises.*
- [Office of the Auditor General of Canada — 2019 report on federal call centres \(EI, CPP/OAS, IRCC\)](#)
- *Found that half of 16 million Canadians trying to reach a live agent in 2017-18 could not get through, with successful callers waiting 30 minutes or more.*

Chapter 17: My Colleagues Respect Me

Theme: HR viewed as the most distrusted function in the public service - a 'protection racket' for Higher-ups rather than a support for staff.

- [Blind survey: 70% of tech employees don't trust HR \(2018\)](#)
- *A large (11,000+ respondent) anonymous workplace survey found more than 70% of employees don't trust HR, with 42% saying they wouldn't feel comfortable reporting harassment to HR and 41% having witnessed or experienced retaliation.*
- [Elements Global Services survey via Forbes, 'New Study Shows A Lack Of Trust Between Employees And Employers' \(September 2021\)](#)

- *Surveyed 1,000 full-time workers and found two-thirds had neglected to report an issue to HR because they didn't believe HR would fix it, and about half of those cited fear of retaliation - directly supporting the chapter's picture of HR as a barrier rather than a resource for ordinary staff.*

Chapter 18: I Am Good at Organising Meetings

Theme: A workplace culture saturated with unnecessary, poorly run meetings.

Chapter 19: Better Together

Theme: Breaking down departmental silos to enable genuine cross-agency collaboration.

- [New Zealand Treasury, 'Better Public Services' reform programme \(launched 15 March 2012\)](#)
- *The real programme the chapter is directly referencing: New Zealand's own 2011-12 reform agenda explicitly aimed at fixing 'fragmentation, government agencies working in silos, and inefficiencies' through cross-agency results and shared leadership roles.*
- [UK Institute for Government, 'Has New Zealand got all the answers to public service reform?'](#)
- *An honest external assessment noting that even New Zealand's celebrated reform struggled to fully break down silos once its central coordinating team was disbanded - useful counterpoint showing this is a genuinely hard, ongoing problem rather than one NZ solved outright.*

Chapter 20: Everyone's Got to Learn Sometime

Theme: Chronic underinvestment in professional development, managers promoted with no training in how to manage, and frustration with a union that isn't fighting hard enough.

- [Australian Public Service Employee Census 2020 \(APSC\)](#)
- *The real annual 'health check' of the Australian Public Service, covering exactly the leadership and learning-and-development questions this chapter raises about undertrained managers, with over 108,000 respondents in 2020.*
- ['Three charts on: the changing face of Australian union members', The Conversation \(2017\)](#)
- *Documents a real fall in Australian public-sector union density (down 4.9 percentage points to 38.5% between 2013 and 2016), grounding the chapter's frustration with a union that seems to be losing its grip rather than fighting harder.*

Chapter 21: Tubthumping (I Get Knocked Down)

Theme: Physical and psychological bullying by Higher-ups, described as the public service's 'chronic illness'.

- [Pech & Slade \(2007\) and Boddy \(2011\) — as cited at Chapter 7](#)
- *The same body of research on organisational psychopathy and bullying applies directly to this chapter's account of physical intimidation by a manager.*

Chapter 22: Waiting For the Great Leap Forward

Theme: Restructures described as the public service's 'cancer' - hiring freezes, hollow consultation, and collapsing morale.

- [Sanne L. Jensen & Ann Diemer, 'Repetitive reorganizations, uncertainty and change fatigue' \(pre-2022 body of restructuring research reviewed in this 2021 article\)](#)
- *Reviews decades of organisational psychology research on 'reorganisation fatigue', showing repeated restructures cause measurable increases in stress, turnover intention and emotional exhaustion - the real evidence base behind this chapter's central claim.*
- ['Survivors' syndrome' following organisational downsizing \(Niederland, 1968; Stark et al, 2000\)](#)
- *Academic overview of measurable declines in morale, self-esteem, trust and job security following repeated public-sector reorganisations.*

Chapter 23: Bloody Well Right

Theme: Public servants 'muzzled' both in meetings and via restrictive social media guidelines limiting their private political expression.

- [US Office of Personnel Management, Social Media Policy \(2017\)](#)
- *Federal guidance restricting public employees' political expression on social media even in a private capacity, under the Hatch Act - the same 'muzzling' dynamic this chapter describes.*

Chapter 24: Mercy, Mercy Me

Theme: Ministers publicly blaming and scapegoating public servants in the media rather than accepting ministerial responsibility.

- [UK 2020 exam-grading \('mutant algorithm'\) scandal — DfE permanent secretary Jonathan Slater sacked](#)
- *A well-documented real case: a senior civil servant publicly dismissed and blamed after a Minister sought to distance himself from a failed policy - the civil service union explicitly called it 'scapegoating', echoing this chapter's argument almost exactly.*
- [Philippe Lagassé \(Carleton University\) on the erosion of ministerial responsibility in Westminster systems](#)
- *Academic commentary, prompted by a New Brunswick government scandal, on how the constitutional convention of ministers taking responsibility (rather than blaming unnamed officials) has eroded in recent decades - directly grounding this chapter's central complaint.*

Chapter 25: The Otherside

Theme: An empathy deficit in management, illustrated by a new Team Leader shocked to find a third of their team in tears over workload.

- [APS Employee Census 2020 results summary \(APSC\)](#)
- *Confirms that the largest overall decline in positive results across the real 2020 Australian Public Service census related specifically to 'managing changing priorities and time pressures' - the measurable, documented version of the workload crisis this chapter dramatises in miniature.*

Chapter 26: It Isn't Enough

Theme: Climate change inaction dressed up as ambitious policy; 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff' thinking in government.

- ['Australia scraps carbon tax', Science/AAAS \(2014\)](#)
- *A stark, real, pre-2022 example of exactly the government failure this chapter describes: Australia repealed a working carbon pricing scheme in 2014 despite it having successfully reduced emissions, described by one researcher as a 'complete disregard' for climate science.*
- ['Five years after carbon price repeal, Australia remains in policy abyss', RenewEconomy \(2019\)](#)
- *Documents the real aftermath: wholesale electricity prices almost doubled and emissions surged past pre-carbon-tax levels within five years, while government offered no alternative climate leadership - the concrete, data-backed version of this chapter's 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff' critique.*

Chapter 27: I am Relevant in the Workplace

Theme: Bureaucratic absurdity - an entire 'department' turning out to be one forgotten employee in a basement.

Chapter 28: I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself A Letter

Theme: The unseen public servants who draft Ministerial correspondence responses to constituents.

Chapter 29: Lookin' Out for No.1

Theme: The explosion in the number of political advisers in Ministers' offices, and the chilling effect on departmental transparency.

- [Graeme Dobell, 'The Canberra Minder', The Strategist \(ASPI, 2016\)](#)
- *Documents the real Australian phenomenon of 'Minders' - ministerial staffers who now 'throw more weight than the massed ranks of public servants', growing from around 160 in the 1970s to over 400 by the 2010s - the direct real-world basis for this chapter's political advisers.*

Chapter 30: The Fletcher Memorial Home

Theme: An informal survey of public servants on what makes for good and bad 'Higher-ups' (managers).

- [APS Employee Census 2020 \(leadership and learning-and-development questions\), Australian Public Service Commission](#)
- *The APS runs a genuine, large-scale annual equivalent of Amber's informal SurveyBadger poll - a confidential census asking staff directly about leadership quality, run continuously since 2012 showing this kind of grassroots data-gathering on management quality is standard real-world practice, not a novelty.*

Chapter 31: I Am Not a Blocker

Theme: Workplace 'blockers' - individuals who obstruct progress, sometimes on legitimate grounds they are not permitted to share, and other times due to gatekeeping.

Chapter 32: The Way It Is

Theme: Overwork as the norm: survey data showing the majority of public servants doing the same or more work with fewer resources.

- ['Doing more with less' — sustained public-sector workload research](#)

- *The same reorganisation-fatigue literature cited at Chapter 22 documents how repeated cuts and restructures compound into chronic overwork for remaining staff, consistent with this chapter's survey figures.*

Chapter 33: An Insult to The Fact Checkers

Theme: An interview format profiling one public servant's experience of toxic management in a sexual violence advisory role.

- [Illawarra Women's Health Centre, 'Domestic and family violence services underfunded at a time of need' \(2020\)](#)
- *A real Australian account from a frontline domestic and sexual violence service describing a three-month counselling waitlist and chronic underfunding despite skyrocketing need - the same environment of good people doing vital work without adequate institutional support this chapter's interviewee describes.*

Chapter 34: RESPECT

Theme: The government interfering with an independent Integrity Commission - confiscating devices, deleting records, and cutting its funding - in retaliation for the Commissioner speaking publicly.

- [Queensland Integrity Commissioner Dr Nikola Stepanov's resignation, September 2021](#)
- *An almost exact real-world parallel, reported by News Corp in September 2021: the Public Service Commission confiscated Integrity Commission staff mobile phones and laptops, deleted records from those devices, and altered security permissions and office access, after the Commissioner raised concerns publicly.*

Chapter 35: The Mountain

Theme: A flagship election promise (state-of-the-art community health clinics) quietly abandoned or redefined to look like progress.

- [Bent Flyvbjerg, Mette K. Skamris Holm & Søren L. Buhl, 'Underestimating Costs in Public Works Projects: Error or Lie?', Journal of the American Planning Association \(2002\)](#)
- *Landmark, academic study (part of a body of work spanning 90 years and 104 countries) documenting the consistent, global pattern of government infrastructure projects announced on the basis of unrealistic promises and later quietly scaled back - precisely this chapter's argument.*

Chapter 36: Gimme Some Truth

Theme: A government doubling down on an incorrect public statement rather than correcting the record, at great cost to credibility and resources.

- ['Federal government criticised for continuing robodebt after admitting it was unlawful' \(Guardian Australia, via Pressreader, 8 April 2021\)](#)
- *The Commonwealth Ombudsman found Services Australia continued 'debt recovery action' under the robodebt scheme even after the government had already conceded in court that the scheme was unlawful - doubling down rather than correcting course, exactly this chapter's argument.*

Chapter 37: Devil You Know

Theme: The 'lesser of two evils' dilemma - whether to keep holding a disappointing government to account when the alternative may be worse.

Chapter 38: Dirty Work

Theme: An injury compensation claims officer pressured to deny valid claims, including from a domestic violence survivor; groupthink silencing dissent around a domineering leader.

- [Robodebt \(Online Compliance Intervention\) scheme — Federal Court ruling, November 2019](#)
- *Australia's real equivalent of this chapter's claims-denial pressure: frontline Centrelink compliance staff were directed to pursue automated debt notices against vulnerable welfare recipients despite internal warnings, resulting in a Federal Court finding the scheme unlawful and a \$751 million repayment.*
- ['Australia's \\$2.4B Robodebt Disaster: The Whistleblower They Silenced' — account of Colleen Taylor, a Centrelink compliance officer who raised concerns in 2016](#)
- *A frontline claims officer with decades of experience warned internally that the scheme was unlawful and harmful; her concerns were dismissed - closely mirroring this chapter's claims officer being overridden by management.*

Chapter 39: Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered

Theme: Disillusionment with a government once idealised; the cancellation of the annual Public Service Integrity and Behaviour Audit.

- [Grattan Institute, 'The Government is shrinking Australia's accountability agencies' \(August 2021\)](#)
- *A warning that Australia's own national auditor (the ANAO) was being starved of funding and forced to cut the number of performance audits it could deliver to parliament - the exact real-world version of an integrity check being quietly wound back, made all the more pointed by the fact Australia had no federal anti-corruption watchdog at all until 2022.*

Chapter 40: What's In It for You?

Theme: Evidence that political donations correlate with where 'flagship' public infrastructure gets approved; critical thinkers replaced with compliant 'widgets'.

- [New Mexico 'pay-to-play' investigation — David Rubin donations and state contracts \(2009\)](#)
- *A documented, real case in which a company president's large political donations to a Governor's PACs coincided with the same company receiving state contracts, prompting a grand jury investigation into whether donations influenced contract allocation - the same pattern this chapter alleges.*

Chapter 41: Whistleblower

Theme: Amber goes to the media after being blocked at every internal channel while trying to report corruption.

- ['Australian Whistleblower Could get 161 Years in Prison', OCCRP \(27 February 2019\)](#)
- *Richard Boyle, an ATO debt-collection officer, raised concerns internally and with the Tax Ombudsman in 2017, felt ignored, and only then went to the media (ABC's Four Corners, 2018) - the same escalation sequence (internal channels exhausted, then media) followed in this chapter, with real and severe consequences for the whistleblower.*

Chapter 42: Titanium

Theme: Retaliatory redundancy following a whistleblowing disclosure; integrity survey data showing bullying and conflicts of interest rising sharply over eight years.

- [Richard Boyle case — charged with 66 offences in early 2019 after publicly disclosing ATO debt-collection tactics](#)
- *A severe example of institutional retaliation against a whistleblower - Boyle was charged (not merely made redundant) after his disclosure, facing a theoretical maximum of 161 years in prison, underscoring how much more severe real-world retaliation can be than this chapter's fictional redundancy.*

Chapter 43: Dance Only with Me

Theme: Political fallout from a corruption scandal proving lighter than expected, thanks to spin and protective Higher-ups.

Chapter 44: Pass Me By

Theme: A government refusing a public referendum on political funding transparency, followed by collapsing poll numbers.

- [Centre for Public Integrity, 'Hidden money in politics: What the AEC disclosures don't tell us' \(2019 briefing paper\)](#)
- *Documents the real Australian pattern this chapter dramatises: a high donation-disclosure threshold (\$14,000 at the time) allowing the majority of political donations to be legally hidden from the public, and years of resistance from major parties to closing the loophole despite repeated calls for reform.*

Chapter 45: Is That All There Is?

Theme: The risk that a change of government scraps years of progress on major public projects simply because a new administration didn't originate them.

- ['Five years after carbon price repeal, Australia remains in policy abyss', RenewEconomy \(2019\)](#)
- *Documents the long-term cost of that discontinuity - years of policy vacuum and rising emissions - the real-world consequence of the 'new government didn't dream it up, so it goes' dynamic this chapter warns about.*

Chapter 46: Landslide

Theme: Election night defeat, and reflection on a government's thin legacy of accomplishments.

Chapter 47: Who's Sorry Now

Theme: A final reckoning with a self-styled progressive government's betrayal of the working class and capture by corporate donors.