

# The Whole Truth: How History can Inform Our Understanding of Ageing Workforces

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*The ageing of Australian workforces is a universally accepted truth. In recent years the increasing rate of retirements has been a significant contributor to tight labour markets and skills shortages. The ageing workforce is generally linked to the ageing population, and explained in demographic terms – declining fertility/birth-rates and increasing longevity have changed the population profile, and the number of labour market entrants is only just keeping pace with labour market exits. Policy solutions are then developed from this limited demographic explanation.*

*I argue that these demographic explanations are overly simplistic and ignore the historical context, particularly in the public sector environment. Since the 1970s, there have been extensive reforms as public sectors have embraced managerial and contractual philosophies, and radically altered both public management and public sector employment relations. These reforms have led to a double-whammy of reduced employment of younger employee cohorts and increased retention of older employee cohorts. This paper focuses on one part of the reform process related to merit and recruitment policies, in the period up until the late 1980s. I argue that the likely ageing of the workforce as a result of these policies could have been predicted beforehand, or at least identified as they occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, if public services had kept better workforce data and undertaken forecasting of workforce trends. Without understanding these historical explanations, policy solutions will be limited in scope, success and sustainability.*

The populations of Australia and many other western countries are ageing. The literature provides extensive explanation of the underlying factors. Structural ageing results from a decline in birth rates, which in turn increases the proportion of older people. Numerical ageing is occurring as a result of increasing life expectancy and increasing median age. These shifts in the demographic profile have significant implications for governments, in terms of the provision of benefits and services to citizens, the declining revenue base, and labour force participation. The changes have put pressure on the Australian labour market. As the number of people entering the labour market declines and university retention rates increase, there are simply fewer people of traditional working age (15-64 years) available to work.<sup>1</sup>

The demographic explanations for the ageing population are generally extrapolated to also explain the ageing workforce, leaving stakeholders and observers to simply resolve the effects of these demographic changes. I argue that this is overly simplistic, especially in the public sector labour market. Changing demographics are only part of the explanation and perhaps less important as an explanation than public sector reforms in recent decades. These reforms relate to changes to traditional approaches to merit and equity (such as changing recruitment patterns and removal of the marriage bar), changes in approaches to tenure (such as establishment limits imposed during economic downturns) and changes in the nature of work (such as technological innovations).

In this paper, I explore the first element being changes to merit and recruitment policies. I highlight the issues with data from the Queensland public sector, and use examples from the Australian public service to demonstrate that the research is generalisable across at least Australian public service jurisdictions. The research is historical, and focuses on the period up to the 1980s, in which policies had begun changing

but before the more far-reaching changes of the Goss Labor Governments from 1989. Data is drawn from documentary sources, including primary and subordinate legislation, archives, human resource policies, annual reports of various public service agencies and from the secondary literature. The paper is structured into separate sections that discuss the traditional youth recruitment policies, relaxation of these policies during war-time, changing education levels and evidence of the changes using workforce data.

The research demonstrates that public services traditionally focused on youth employment at entry level, and then promoted these employees in a largely internal labour market. The highly restrictive youth focus ensured a continuous stream of young people into public services. These youth recruitment policies sometimes wavered under labour market pressures during war-time, but were not formally removed until the 1970s. I conclude that it was inevitable that public sector workforces would age with the removal of the policies that kept the workforce young. Evidence from the 1980s clearly demonstrates dramatic changes in the age profile. Better policy development and workforce planning should have both forecast the impact and then tracked it using workforce data. Without properly understanding how changes in recruitment policy have escalated the age of the workforce, attempts to remedy ageing workforce issues are misdirected.

## **Public Sector Recruitment Traditions**

Career public service employment has always been different from the private sector, to meet the needs of the political environment in which public services operate.<sup>2</sup> The British Government established an inquiry to investigate the crisis in its administration, which led to the landmark Northcote-Trevelyan *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service* in 1853. Northcote and Trevelyan found that the British public service suffered in efficiency and public estimation, with appointments often made to repay personal or political claims rather than due to the potential merit or efficiency of the candidate. Northcote and Trevelyan noted that government ‘could not be carried on without the aid of an efficient body of permanent officers’, and they provided a blueprint for the transformation from a patronage system to a career service model.<sup>3</sup>

Merit was the cornerstone of the career service model. Northcote and Trevelyan recommended careful selection of young people according to their capacity and education. Competitive examinations were to be run by an independent board and open to all people, to secure candidates of general ability, subject to reference checks regarding their age, health and moral fitness. Northcote and Trevelyan envisaged higher and lower level positions, to which different standards of examination would be applied. The age of candidates was to be restricted to 19-25 years for superior offices, and 17-21 years for lower offices. Only candidates who passed the examination were to be appointed, and any appointments without examination were to be documented and reported to Parliament annually. Promotion was to be based on comparative merit amongst existing employees, and merit would be protected through appeal processes that allowed scrutiny and challenge of decisions.<sup>4</sup>

## **Youth Recruitment in Queensland**

The Queensland colony was established in 1859, and its civil service established soon after. After a number of false starts, Queensland set up a Civil Service Board in 1889 and introduced recruitment through examinations. The first regulation on admission to the ordinary division required that candidates for the examination meet a range of criteria,

including being aged 16-25 years.<sup>5</sup> This complied with the age span envisaged by Northcote and Trevelyan.

While this age span became the recruitment norm, politicians attempted to circumvent these age restrictions, as they did all aspects of recruitment policy. They introduced legislative changes in 1901 to allow unclassified and temporary employees with more than five years service to be admitted to the classified division without examination, upon a certificate of fitness from the Minister or permanent head.<sup>6</sup> This not only undermined the regulations and created resentment amongst other officers, but it also placed employees into positions where they were of little use. The Premier defended the amendment, claiming the age restrictions had unnecessarily prevented some officers from entrance – but he did not consider the more transparent solution of removing or changing the age restrictions.<sup>7</sup> Public sector unions opposed these changes which resulted in ‘largely Ministerial appointments, and usually in their manhood’, and challenged the point in having rules on age and qualifications for admission if anyone could enter by a side door.<sup>8</sup>

Labor Governments reduced the recruitment age range further. The first Queensland Labor Government, in its first year in office in 1915, reduced the recruitment age range from 16-25 years down to 15-22 years. In 1918, upon the appointment of the first Public Service Commissioner, the age range was reduced further to 15-19 years. The reasons for these decisions were unclear, and counter-intuitive given the labour market pressures during World War I (discussed later). There was some scope to overcome these age barriers, as General Division Officers under 30 years of age could sit examinations for transfer to the Professional or Clerical Division. There was also provision to accept equivalent qualifications equal to or higher than the standard senior public examination of the University of Queensland.<sup>9</sup>

When the Australian Public Service was established in 1901, it adopted similar policies to Queensland and other states. It restricted entry into the clerical and professional divisions to candidates under 21 years of age ‘so that recruits were drawn from young men who had received secondary education or studied by themselves after leaving primary school’.<sup>10</sup> The General division was open to adults possessing elementary education until age of thirty. Caiden suggests that ‘stress was placed on the young because they were more malleable and less costly than adults, and because one of the largest groups at the base grade level was messenger boys’.<sup>11</sup>

The youth policy seemed to be the best way to recruit for elementary base-grade work, with the promise of promotion through a career structure thereafter. Nobody considered the irony of ostensibly open competitive processes that imposed such limitations and equated merit with youth. In Queensland, these age restrictions, together with geographic and gender limitations, requirements for good health and character and a large fee to sit the public service entrance examination, effectively limited the pool of candidates to young, healthy, wealthy, socially acceptable, Queensland males. But once a candidate made it to this select group of potential examinees, there were very low benchmarks for admission to the service (initially only 40 per cent pass mark for the examination). Rich and dumb was no obstacle for men!<sup>12</sup>

## **Temporary Relaxation of Youth Policy Throughout War-Times**

Wars presented labour market challenges in Australia and elsewhere. As discussed earlier, the Queensland public service continued to reduce the recruitment age in 1915 and 1918. After WWI, the Queensland Government relaxed the usual recruitment processes, including age limits, to meet its social obligation to employ returned servicemen who could not gain other employment. This created a dilemma between social justice and efficiency. The

UK pursued similar policies, virtually abandoning the notion of a career service recruited at a young age from 1918 until 1927, as recruitment was closed to almost everyone but returned servicemen.<sup>13</sup> The Australian Public Service also relaxed age restrictions, due to both policies to accommodate recruitment of returned servicemen at all levels and to the difficulties attracting people to the APS.<sup>14</sup>

The age restrictions were re-instated in the period between wars, but were sorely tested again during and after WWII. The Queensland Public Service Commissioner struggled with staffing during the war, due to budget restrictions and the lack of competent personnel, as well as the requirement to hold the positions of anyone on war service. The Commissioner abandoned many traditional policies, by relaxing recruitment age to include people over military service age, and relaxing the compulsory retirement age.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, this relaxation of artificial barriers led to more open application of the merit principle.

The Commissioner faced further difficulties at the end of the war as 3000 soldiers returned to their positions. There were some bizarre outcomes, as junior officers who had joined the military at 18 years of age were promoted in their absence, and returned to positions for which they had neither the experience nor training. In Queensland, as in many other jurisdictions, governments legislated preference for the employment of ex-servicemen. By 1956, ex-servicemen comprised thirty per cent of the service. Long-term restrictions on junior recruitment had created a vacuum in the middle age ranges and a potential gap when ex-servicemen began retiring. The Board attempted to moderate the impact of this policy by balancing youth and veteran recruitment, but full employment conditions reduced the attractiveness of public service employment, and examinations became a test of minimum qualifications rather than a means of competition amongst the cream of the labour market.<sup>16</sup> War-time experiences provided a preview of the difficulties that occur with changes to public service youth recruitment policies in a largely internal labour market, but the lesson was lost.

## **Academic Changes and Increasing Education Levels**

By the 1950s in Queensland, the main source of recruitment through junior level (Grade 10) was proving problematic. In periods of prosperity and tight labour markets, it was difficult to attract entrants from junior level. For example, in 1958, over 80 per cent of candidates who passed the junior examination declined offers of appointment. As a result, much lower calibre candidates were accepted. By 1958 there was a range of recruitment methods:

- selection of young people from examinations equivalent to junior level;
- selection of candidates through public examinations equal to matriculation level, which allowed for selection of diploma holders, undergraduates and graduates;
- special department examinations which tested for specific work to be undertaken;
- advertisement of certain vacancies, when suitable appointees and/or qualifications were not available within the service.<sup>17</sup>

The Queensland Government was concerned about the reliability of using educational qualifications as a major determinant in recruitment and in 1970 it discontinued the recruitment of school-leavers through the annual junior examination. It also split the clerical role into clerical assistants and clerks, to provide a dual career path and stem the resignations of aspiring school-leavers who were dissatisfied with the traditional slow promotional rate, but this would not affect the age profile. Clerical assistants would have a

junior education, perform routine duties, and have reduced promotional opportunities. Clerks would have a senior education, and be expected to progress more quickly than in the past and perform managerial and supervisory roles while relatively young, albeit this was not as successful as expected in stemming the high level of resignations of clerks. In 1983 the Board trialled additional tests to measure ability to perform in base grade positions. Applicants also underwent detailed interviews to ascertain their interests and aspirations, and assist in their placement.<sup>18</sup>

The profile of public service recruits changed in response to several factors: changes in the general education levels in society; the increasing complexity of public administration which required higher level skills, and led to larger proportions of clerical positions being filled by graduates; and changes to the nature of public service recruitment and entrance processes. The effect on the profile of recruits is outlined in Figure 1. Junior level recruits dropped from more than 60 per cent of entrants in 1969 to around 15 per cent of entrants in 1987, with the majority of recruits being female. The recruitment of matriculants and graduates, which had already quadrupled in the ten years from 1957 to 1967, continued to escalate from 1968 to 1988. By 1979/80 approximately 10 per cent of base grade positions were filled by people with tertiary qualifications. By 1985, the decline in applications from school-leavers had resulted in an increasing number of mature-age applicants being appointed. The result is a much smaller intake of people aged less than 17 years from the usual junior route, and much greater employment of people aged over 21 years.<sup>19</sup> This would inevitably lead to a change in the age profile of the QPS.

**Figure 1. Entrance to the Queensland Public Service 30 June 1968 - 30 June 1988**

| Year       | Grade 10 |        |       | Grade 12 |        |       | Graduate |        |       | Other<br>29 | Total |
|------------|----------|--------|-------|----------|--------|-------|----------|--------|-------|-------------|-------|
|            | Male     | Female | Total | Male     | Female | Total | Male     | Female | Total |             |       |
| 30/06/1969 | 516      | 756    | 1272  | 129      | 24     | 153   | 193      | 64     | 257   | 417         | 2099  |
| 30/06/1970 | 471      | 858    | 1329  | 218      | 23     | 241   | 189      | 67     | 256   | 308         | 2134  |
| 30/06/1971 | 387      | 610    | 997   | 362      | 34     | 396   | 193      | 71     | 264   | 312         | 1969  |
| 30/06/1972 | 224      | 792    | 1016  | 249      | 52     | 301   | 196      | 94     | 290   | 534         | 2141  |
| 30/06/1973 | 125      | 1026   | 1151  | 454      | 42     | 496   | 178      | 49     | 227   | 596         | 2470  |
| 30/06/1974 | 146      | 663    | 809   | 815      | 280    | 1095  | 175      | 90     | 265   | 531         | 2700  |
| 30/06/1975 | 160      | 798    | 958   | 743      | 435    | 1178  | 227      | 128    | 355   | 526         | 3017  |
| 30/06/1976 | 140      | 803    | 943   | 681      | 579    | 1260  | 281      | 179    | 460   | 503         | 3166  |
| 30/06/1977 | 101      | 448    | 549   | 493      | 386    | 879   | 267      | 198    | 465   | 362         | 2251  |
| 30/06/1978 | 68       | 403    | 471   | 421      | 315    | 736   | 245      | 195    | 440   | 380         | 2027  |
| 30/06/1979 | 71       | 363    | 434   | 312      | 193    | 505   | 219      | 171    | 390   | 380         | 1709  |
| 30/06/1980 | 34       | 302    | 336   | 294      | 243    | 537   | 236      | 213    | 449   | 720         | 2042  |
| 30/06/1981 | 59       | 442    | 501   | 286      | 349    | 635   | 273      | 211    | 484   | 764         | 2384  |
| 30/06/1982 | 84       | 568    | 652   | 357      | 444    | 801   | 289      | 177    | 466   | 834         | 2753  |
| 30/06/1983 | 36       | 426    | 462   | 293      | 359    | 652   | 313      | 201    | 514   | 695         | 2323  |
| 30/06/1984 | 30       | 406    | 436   | 237      | 336    | 573   | 282      | 250    | 532   | 752         | 2293  |
| 30/06/1985 | 45       | 575    | 620   | 354      | 419    | 773   | 426      | 297    | 723   | 1117        | 3239  |
| 30/06/1986 | 19       | 499    | 518   | 270      | 394    | 664   | 251      | 249    | 500   | 722         | 2404  |
| 30/06/1987 | 17       | 284    | 301   | 205      | 312    | 517   | 235      | 213    | 448   | 728         | 1994  |
| 30/06/1988 | 41       | 291    | 332   | 187      | 250    | 437   | 132      | 106    | 238   | 588         | 1595  |

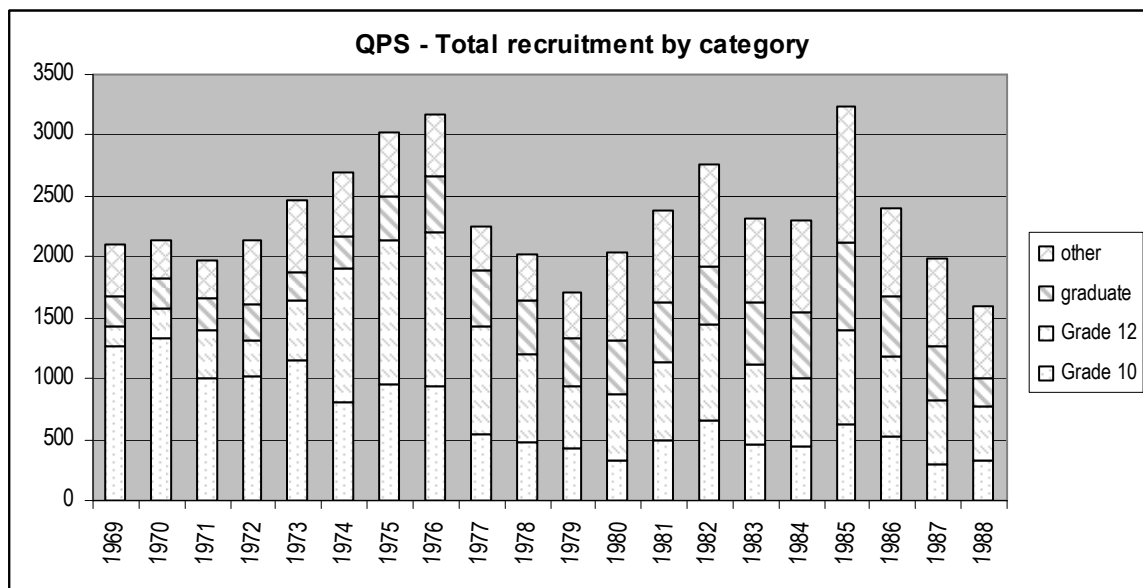
Source: *Public Service Board Annual Reports 1968-87*; *Office of Public Service Personnel Management Statistics Report 1988*

## Recruitment Freezes During Economic Downturns

Given the tendency toward recruitment of younger people, the age profile of public services was also affected by recruitment freezes. The tight labour market of the early 1970s was soon replaced by an economic downturn in 1978. During this downturn, the Government wanted to control financial and human resources, and reversed the trend towards devolution. From the 1940s to 1988, the Queensland Government had a policy that officers would not be retrenched, and reductions in staff numbers had to be achieved through natural attrition and through containment of recruitment. In the late 1970s, the Public Service Board imposed control on staff establishment, and contained and reduced staff numbers through strategies such as reallocation of positions between departments toward higher priority programs, and weeding out all unused positions (e.g. surplus or long-term vacancies) held in departments. Further staff restrictions were implemented from 1981, when the only additional positions approved were to meet legislative changes or new Cabinet-approved initiatives. From 1983 the tight staffing policy was jointly managed by the Public Service Board and Treasury. This was gradually relaxed in 1984/85, but reimposed again from 1986.<sup>20</sup>

The effects on overall recruitment can be seen in Figure 2. Given the general youth of recruits and the continued focus on base-grade recruitment, such recruitment freezes reduce the intake of young people and naturally lead to an increase in the age profile of the workforce.

**Figure 2. Entrance to the Queensland Public Service 30 June 1968 - 30 June 1988**



Source: *Public Service Board Annual Reports 1968-87, Office of Public Service Personnel Management Statistics Report 1988*

## Changing Age Profile by the 1980s

The combined effect of these changes in the 1970s and 1980s had far-reaching effects on the age profile of the workforce. Little workforce data is publicly available until the 1980s, when the data began to be reported in the Public Service Board annual reports. (On a methodological note, there is no explanation why the numbers of staff underpinning this data was significantly lower than the whole public service, but the numbers are used for

indicative purposes.) The Board did not make any comment on the changes to the age profile, which were either unnoticed or considered unimportant. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the proportion of employees aged less than 30 years of age was more than 54 per cent in 1980, but reduced consistently each year to only 38.7 per cent by 1988. The 25-29 year age cohort remained relatively stable, with the younger age cohorts declining and the older cohorts increasing each year.

**Figure 3. Age Profile Queensland Public Service, 1980-88**

| Year | 15-19  | 20-24  | 25-29  | 30-34  | 35-39  | 40-44  | 45-49 | 50-54 | 55-59 | 60-64 | 65+   | Total |
|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1980 | 11.91% | 25.43% | 17.35% | 12.62% | 8.37%  | 6.20%  | 5.39% | 5.76% | 5.25% | 1.70% | 0.01% | 100%  |
| 1981 | 11.30% | 24.00% | 17.47% | 13.33% | 8.88%  | 6.52%  | 5.47% | 5.72% | 5.54% | 1.75% | 0.02% | 100%  |
| 1982 | 11.53% | 21.82% | 17.47% | 13.61% | 9.35%  | 7.30%  | 6.12% | 5.61% | 5.57% | 1.62% | 0.01% | 100%  |
| 1983 | 13.88% | 21.67% | 17.09% | 13.75% | 9.70%  | 7.39%  | 5.82% | 5.40% | 4.50% | 0.78% | 0.00% | 100%  |
| 1984 | 9.36%  | 19.84% | 18.50% | 14.49% | 11.52% | 8.29%  | 6.10% | 5.46% | 5.12% | 1.32% | 0.01% | 100%  |
| 1985 | 8.50%  | 19.21% | 18.57% | 14.62% | 12.07% | 8.80%  | 6.48% | 5.34% | 5.00% | 1.39% | 0.04% | 100%  |
| 1986 | 7.73%  | 17.65% | 18.29% | 14.75% | 13.11% | 9.56%  | 7.09% | 5.38% | 5.01% | 1.37% | 0.04% | 100%  |
| 1987 | 6.39%  | 16.80% | 17.77% | 15.09% | 13.66% | 10.44% | 7.60% | 5.56% | 5.08% | 1.51% | 0.09% | 100%  |
| 1988 | 5.07%  | 16.25% | 17.35% | 15.58% | 14.62% | 11.95% | 8.34% | 5.96% | 3.54% | 1.25% | 0.07% | 100%  |

Source: Public Service Board Annual Reports 1980-87; Office of Public Service Personnel Management Statistics Report 1988.

Note from Figure 3 that the proportion of employees aged 55 years and over decreased dramatically from 1988. The government introduced legislative amendments that provided for earlier retirement from age 55 years, effective from 1 January 1988, as part of a broader set of measures to allow more flexibility in staffing.<sup>21</sup> This led to some immediate departures of older employees.

## Analysis and Conclusions

This paper has canvassed the changes in recruitment policies in the Queensland public service, which have underpinned the ageing of its workforce. The research supports several conclusions. First, traditional public service recruitment methods favoured young recruits. Severe limitations on the age of recruits ensured that large proportions of entrants aged less than 25 (and later 22 and 19) years of age were recruited into base-grade roles, to feed an internal labour market. Second, these policies endured for a century. They were strained during wars, but subsequently re-instated. At the end of WWII, the Queensland Government had had a taste of the effect of departing from youth recruitment, and the impact on the profile of its workforce, but it soon forgot this lesson. Third, by the 1970s, governments were questioning the longstanding of equating merit with academic results. The recruitment of school-leavers straight from external public junior and senior examination results was replaced with recruitment of any applicant that held these qualifications and passed job-related tests. Fourth, the increasing complexity of public administration called for higher calibre recruits, and governments increased the recruitment of graduates, although this most likely supported the recruitment of younger people. Fifth, the economic downturns and recruitment freezes in the 1980s escalated the ageing of public service workforces.

However, this review of recruitment policies up until the 1980s is only part of the story. This chapter of the story ends on the eve of major Queensland public service reforms from 1990 (which occurred earlier in other states). Future research will explore: changing recruitment patterns from 1990, as the internal labour market is opened up to competition at all classification levels and as a result increased the average age of recruitment; equity policies and maternity leave policies, which enhanced the workforce participation of women; attraction and retention policies, designed to encourage all employees to stay; and ongoing image problems, where public service employment does not appeal to school-leavers.

In light of this research, I argue that public services need to re-frame the question or problem. As long as they define the ageing public service workforce as being a result of changing population demographics, they may rely on short-term solutions such as retaining older workers until there is population growth. They need to recognise that they have both reduced their focus on youth employment, and retained their existing workforces for longer, and design policy solutions that overcome these factors or accept that they will always have older workforces.

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## Endnotes

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