

Submission on Australia's first Open Government National Action Plan

I commend the government's initiatives for Open Government as exemplified by the Open Government National Action Plan. It is heartening to see Australia join our nearest neighbours, Indonesia and New Zealand, and many other countries who have already completed their first Action Plan Cycle.

As a first Action Plan I also see it addresses the commitments of the OGP towards availability of information about government activities, support of civic participation, highest standards of professional integrity and access to new technologies for openness and accountability. I fully support all fourteen commitments but will only comment on a number I feel most strongly about.

Commitments 1.1 and 1.2: (i. Transparency and accountability in business)

I support the prevention of tax evasion or avoidance, corruption, waste and fraud. This area is especially problematic in a global world where multi-national companies can "manipulate their books" to minimise the tax they pay in any one country, hence maximising the return to their shareholders. Maximising the return to shareholders needs to be balanced with the social good of the countries they operate in.

One area that overlaps many of the commitments concerns the ASIC Registers:

1. There are costs associated with accessing some of the information available in these registers which discourages corporate scrutiny and transparency. In countries like New Zealand and the United Kingdom this information is free. I believe the Corporations (Fees) Act needs to be examined, perhaps even abolished, to minimise what parts of ASIC information incur a fee
2. The proposal to privatise the ASIC registry completely contradicts the move towards Open Government. The data should be held by government and not a private corporation as any private "ownership" opens up the possibility for manipulation or corruption of the data

Commitment 2.1: ... enable data-driven innovation

I support this commitment especially including the not-for-profit sector, but do see a challenge in quantifying what are considered high-value datasets ("one man's meat is another man's poison").

Another thing to consider is fees charged for some datasets and the possibility of reducing or removing those fees when the data becomes less current. As an example, I work with a not-for-profit using weather/climate data to model potential for renewable energy. In the past they purchased recent weather data from the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) to assist with their modelling but more recently have used free NASA datasets for the same purpose. The BOM data has finer granularity and if was available for free it would enhance the modelling process and perhaps extend it's applicability to other applications and research. Perhaps the fee could be removed once the data was less current (i.e. less useful for immediate forecasting).

I would be keen to be involved in Milestone No. 4 (Round-table discussion with the not-for-profit sector). Over recent years "citizen science" has become increasingly important to scientific

investigations. The availability of these datasets to this section of the public is also to be encouraged.

Commitment 2.3: Digitally transform the delivery of government services

I fully support this initiative but it needs to ensure that members of the public who are not comfortable or competent with (new) digital technologies are not disadvantaged. As people age they are more likely to require government services (pensions, health care, ...) so it is important that they can access these services in a more traditional manner.

Commitment 3.3: Improve the discover-ability and accessibility of government data and information

I commend the growing availability of data on data.gov.au and look forward to how access to a growing set of data can be simplified.

I especially support the proposed improvements for online access to the 2017 State of the Environment report and its underlying data. Of the seventeen UN Sustainable Development Goals one of the most significant is Climate Action. Providing valid unbiased and "uninfluenced" information on the impacts of non-conventional fossil fuels is an important message to provide.

Commitment 4.1: Confidence in the electoral system and political parties

Forty years ago I worked in IT with the TAB. We used to discuss back then how much more convenient it would be if we could vote by entering our preferences on a marked card and feeding it through one of the TAB mark sense readers. Election results would be available as soon as the polls closed. It could be that easy. As an interim step the electoral office could use similar technology, or perhaps OCR (Optical Character Recognition), to register peoples votes. The voting slip would still be the valid record of a person's vote and subject to scrutiny as is currently the case, however, a preliminary result could be made available in a much shorter time frame (If you're a political / electoral commentator you might well be unhappy with this approach).

Exposure of donations to political parties along with lobbying activity are also important indicators as to the influences our parliamentarians are subject to.

Over the last several decades the relationship between the parliament and the public service seems to have diverted away from the Westminster model of an independent public service towards a more American model where senior appointments within the public service are more political in nature. The recent "public brawl" between the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General is perhaps a reflection of this change in the relationship. These trends make it more difficult for the public service to give independent and impartial advice.

Commitment 5.2: Enhance public participation in government decision making

Yes.

Angus King
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