The Dominant culture

The dominant culture in areas of public administration remains “male” – this is the defining observation from four leading women interviewed by Virginia Haussegger at the National Press Club in August 2011.

This is despite that fact the Governor General her Excellency Quentin Bryce, Australia’s first female head of state, opened the event (see transcript), and the panel of discussants was comprised of the Chief Minister of the ACT, Katy Gallagher, former Chief Police Commissioner for Victoria Christine Nixon, former Chancellor of the University of Canberra Wendy McCarthy, and past Leader of the Australian Democrats, former Senator, Natasha Stott-Despoja, all women who have reached the highest office in their area of public administration.

All women recounted being counselled at times to be “more male” in their approach so to become more respected and effective in leadership roles. Christine Nixon was told to go on the beat with male police officers and do “blokey” things to gain the respect of the Victoria police. Katy Gallagher, after once being mistaken for the tea lady when entering a meeting of other state first Ministers, was continually questioned as to whether she had the toughness to be a chief minister (– did she have the “balls”).

Each however resisted this advice and survived and rose to the top of their fields. In fact, the discussion revealed that their authenticity and personal integrity were the characteristics that gave them the strength to be their “own man” (more bias) and rightfully gain the respect and
authority of the positions they held. The women cautioned however that it was difficult at
times on a personal level, and that a network of support was a necessary part of their capacity
to cope with the male dominant culture they experienced. Christine also noted that while
remaining true to your own style and personality was fundamental to authentic leadership, the
full consequences of how that will be perceived and interpreted by others, and how those
perceptions may be used against you, needed to be understood and appreciated.

The notion that leadership characteristics are virtually exclusively described and perceived in
male terms (as clearly demonstrated by the intentional and fully conscious choice by the male
author of this document of terms in quote marks in the preceding paragraphs) was discussed.
Clearly female leadership is not yet engrained in cultural mores.

From the opening by the Governor General, all acknowledged that overt discrimination and
blatantly expressed misogyny of the past generations may well have been largely overcome,
but that this did not mean discrimination no longer occurred, or that a non-sexist culture
existed.

Natasha recounted that the figure of 30% women representation in any area was perceived as
equal representation and lead to the conviction, despite the absurdity of the logic, that there
was no longer an issue of representation. She observed that decision making bodies such as
Boards acted differently as the proportion of women members increased. There may well be a
“tipping point” at 1/3, but that was not a satisfactory reflection of social values and attitudes.
Nor was it appropriate in decision making where the accommodation of interests, reflections
on acceptability of decisions and understanding of their impact was essential.

That there was not equal representation of women at all levels and in all roles in public
administration was a clear indicator that bias continued to be part of Australian culture despite
the presence of more women in some leadership positions and the often asserted view that
discrimination no longer existed.

From the discussion, a number of issues can be identified:

(1) The need for articulating and communicating differing leadership styles other than
having 'balls' and what that implies, so a wider range of styles become seen as the
“norm”;

(2) The need for increased awareness that a minimum proportion of women is needed in
any group to gain behavioural change and widen perspectives in decision making;

(3) the recognition of the Importance for those in leadership[p positions acting
authentically and with integrity (being oneself) as the basis of all leadership styles ;
the need for a network of support and mentoring (previous discussion suggested that informal is as important as formal mechanisms) in the nurturing of future leaders;

To take these findings forward, and have an impact on the culture of the public sector in Australia, a suite of strategies needs to be developed and deployed to redress the continued male orientation (disorientation) in public administration and its leadership milieu.

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