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Louise Thornthwaite

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# The origins of personnel management: reasserting the public sector experience

Louise Thornthwaite

*Faculty of Law, University of Western Sydney, Penrith, Australia*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – With their focus on private companies, histories of personnel management and human resource management have neglected the much earlier development of these practices in public sector organisations. The purpose of this paper is to examine the origins and development of modern personnel management in the Australian colonial public services between 1856 and 1901 in order to set the record straight about when, why and how integrated and formal sets of personnel management practices were adopted in organisations to manage employees.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research is based on close examination of public service legislation enacted between 1856 and 1901 in the Australian colonies, the reports of Royal Commissions and Inquiries on the public services and the evidence they gathered, and published histories on public service organisations.

**Findings** – This paper finds that a clear model of systematic personnel management evolved in Australia's colonial public services between 1856 and 1901. While the development and diffusion of personnel management techniques in the public sector varied considerably among the colonies in scope, nature, effectiveness and longevity, there were integrated, coherent sets of personnel policies and practices in place in several colonies several decades before their emergence in private firms.

**Originality/value** – In tracing the origins of personnel management in Australia to the colonial public services in the years following the granting of responsible government in 1856, this paper challenges the conventional understanding of personnel management as a twentieth century phenomenon of private companies.

**Keywords** Personnel management, Human resource management, Public administration, Public sector, Management history, Australia

**Paper type** Research paper

The object of this paper is to reassess the commonly accepted historical account of the origins of the specialist managerial field of human resource management (HRM), and its progenitor, personnel management, as a twentieth century phenomenon in employing organisations. This reassessment is based on a reassertion of the importance of earlier developments in personnel management in public sector organisations from the 1850s. While the emergence and growing sophistication of a bureaucratic management model in the public services and other government organisations, such as railways and utilities, in the UK, Australia and other western countries from the 1850s has been well documented, HRM texts continue to claim that personnel management, and by extension HRM, originated in industrial organisations, their evolution resulting from particular twentieth century pressures and influences. Arguably, the key reason why public sector management history is neglected in these accounts is that scholarly discussion on public sector employment has resided largely in the public administration field rather than in employment relations and labour history. However, this neglect has led to a flawed chronology of developments in the



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personnel management and HRM field, which potentially inhibits understanding of how and why public and private sector employers developed more integrated and coherent forms of labour management at different times.

This paper sets out to examine the development of sophisticated personnel management in public sector employment by focusing on the public services in each of the Australian colonies between 1856 and 1901. This focus on Australia's colonies allows for an analysis of the evolution of management practices in multiple public service jurisdictions during the same period, while an emphasis on the public services, rather than the entire range of government agencies, enables close analysis of organisations with a service rather than industrial function. The research involved an examination of all public service legislation enacted in each of the six colonies – New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and West Australia – during the studied period. In addition, a review was conducted of the reports of all colonial government inquiries into the public services as well as the reported evidence they gathered. The analysis also draws on an extensive review of scholarly articles and books on public sector employment, including classic works published between 1940 and 1970, as well as contemporary analyses. The early history of the government “career service” had been well documented in Australia by the 1970s (Caiden, 1965; Parker, 1942), and more recent studies have shed more focused lenses on specific aspects of management policy and practice, including career structures and appeal systems (Thornthwaite, 1995, 1996), the merit system (Deacon, 1989; Colley, 2006) and job security (Sheldon, 1989; Colley, 2005). Finally, the research rests on a review of current HRM textbooks and published accounts of personnel management and HRM history in Australia, the US and the UK.

The paper begins with a discussion of the dominant perspective concerning the origins of personnel management and HRM and explores the reasons for the neglect of the public sector experience within this view. The paper then examines the development of a standard personnel management model in the colonial public services from the 1850s, before exploring particular elements of this model, including the establishment of personnel specialists and detailed formal policies and practices regarding classification, appointments and appeals. The content of policies is given detailed consideration in order to establish that these developments in management practice did constitute the elements that scholars now associate with modern personnel management. The paper concludes that, although there were variations in the timing and pace of change, and notable failures in design, implementation and managerial commitment, a clear model of systematic personnel management evolved in Australia's colonial public services between the granting of responsible government in 1856, and federation in 1901, well before the reported emergence and diffusion of such practices in the private sector.

### **The traditional view of the evolution of PM and HRM**

The origins of personnel management became a focus of historical analysis in the 1980s. In that decade, interest in labour process theory focused many labour historians on the origins and functions of labour management practice, at the same time as HRM rose to subsume and overtake personnel management as the specialist occupation concerned with managing people in employing organisations. Increasingly, scholars examined the origins of personnel management not only to explore the development

and roles of this field, which faced supersedure, but to explain the roots of HRM. Research in Australia, the United States and Britain concentrated on developments in the personnel function in industrial organisations, dating its emergence to the twentieth century and attributing the diffusion of personnel management to specific external and internal pressures on organisations roughly between 1915 and 1960 (Eilbert, 1959; Gospel, 1983; Jacoby, 1984; Kochan and Capelli, 1984; Wright, 1995). With their focus on private sector management, contributions generally ignored the far longer history of personnel management in government employment. Contemporary accounts of the history of HRM commonly now are based on a view of personnel management as a twentieth century phenomenon (Tyson, 2006; Gospel, 2009; Kaufman, 2008, 2010).

Historians have associated the origins of modern personnel management with the emergence of formalised, standardised and integrated sets of policies and practices for managing people in work organisations. Typical elements include the establishment of a dedicated unit with personnel specialists engaged in the discrete function of managing employees, along with the adoption of coordinated approaches to recruitment, selection, induction, training, promotion and discipline, as well as reporting and appeal mechanisms (Harris, 1982, pp. 159-75; Legge, 1995, pp. 1-14). Accounts of the history of HRM then founded its emergence in organisational needs for people management practices to perform a more normative and strategic role than that associated with personnel management. Among practitioners and scholars the view developed that personnel management involved “disassociated personnel programs and practices” inadequate to deliver the necessary strategic approach (Ruona and Gibson, 2004, p. 54). Thus, from the 1980s, personnel management increasingly “gave way” to HRM against the backdrop of various environmental forces including intensified international competition and pressures for organisations to find a better fit between management policies and business strategies (Legge, 62-76). In the process, matters traditionally the preserve of personnel practice became sub-functions of “micro HRM” (Boxall *et al.*, 2007, pp. 2-3).

Until recently, the scholarly consensus in the UK and the USA has been that the personnel function first emerged in major firms between 1912-1915, with the most dramatic diffusion taking place from the 1930s and especially during and after WW2. Writers have argued that, in particular, the personnel management function grew out of the industrial welfare movement as well as the employment management movement associated with the development of systematic and scientific management (Jacoby, 1984, Legge, 1995; Tyson, 2006; Gospel, 2009). As a specialist occupation with the field of management, personnel management emerged as part of general developments in management which were explored in the classic writings of Fayol, Urwick, Weber and other management theorists (Tyson, 2006).

For Cochrane (1985) and Wright (1995), personnel management emerged somewhat later in Australia, but nonetheless spread rapidly from the mid-1940s. In reassessing this history, Kaufman (2007, 2008) has argued that, in at least some cases, labour management innovations from the beginning of the twentieth century actually constituted the roots of a modern HRM function, rather than its more primitive variant, personnel management. Further, Kaufman and Gospel have both observed that some organisations pioneered HRM practices in the US and several advanced western European countries late in the nineteenth century, much earlier than conventional

accounts suggest. Gospel (2009, p. 24) notes, for instance, that the railways, heavy industry and assembly-type industries introduced more bureaucratic systems of management from the late nineteenth century, but he appears to distinguish these early forms of “labour management” from personnel management. For his part, Kaufman (2010, p. 17) concludes that, in relation to American organisations, before 1900, the function of HRM “was almost wholly lacking any kind of formal policy, program or practice, even though some of these firms employed many thousands of employees”.

Writers largely identify common reasons for the emergence of personnel management in different western countries in the early twentieth century, including the shift to bureaucratised control and internal labour market strategies to facilitate more efficient employer coordination and control of employees as organisations grew in size and complexity. Both Australian and American accounts emphasise also the importance of tight labour markets in post-WW2 period (Wright, 1995; Jacoby, 1984). However, some of the drivers for change also varied between countries. Most American accounts, for instance, emphasise the importance of product market changes, growing union strength and activism, and growing state regulation of individual employment relationships (Kochan and Capelli, 1984, pp. 133-61; Jacoby, 1984, pp. 24-69; Baron *et al.*, 1986, pp. 250-83). More recently, Kaufman (2008) notes the crucial influence in the US of reform movements associated with systematic management, the civil service, industrial safety, vocational guidance, industrial democracy and military personnel management. In contrast, Wright (1995) traces the emergence of modern personnel management in Australia to the Commonwealth government’s establishment, during WW2, of factory welfare work to improve morale and reduce absenteeism among the largely female munitions workforce. Subsequently, some welfare officers expanded their roles by introducing formal procedures for employment, induction and training. The continued expansion of formalised personnel work in post-war decades owed to labour supply problems and the influence of developments in management education, professional organisations and multinational firms which imported personnel techniques (Wright, 1995).

Most research on the development of modern personnel management has concentrated on the private sector experience, in particular that of manufacturing industry. Historians have charted the advent of personnel functions in steel and heavy engineering, automobile, rubber and glass manufacturing, transportation and in firms producing clothing, paper, pharmaceuticals and other manufactured goods (Eilbert, 1959; Baron *et al.*, 1986; Wright, 1995; Gospel, 2009). In comparison, research has scantily examined white collar work, and virtually ignored public sector organisations. The notable exception has been scholarly interest in the railroads, which while largely industrial in character, were government funded in many countries (Chandler, 1977; Patmore, 1988, Gospel, 2009, pp. 12-30). Contemporary HRM texts also commonly include references to railway management, and in particular, their development of bureaucratic management practices in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. However, these practices generally emerged from the 1870s, postdating the development of personnel management in the public services. However, as railways were privately owned in the US, their inclusion in US histories of personnel management provide an example of developments in industry, rather than the public sector (Kaufman, 2010, pp. 25-37). Moreover, in British accounts, railways are generally included somewhat as a public sector exception, because scholars considered them

essentially to be industrial rather than service organisations (Gospel, 2009, pp. 16-17). Thus, histories of personnel management in railroad organisations, while coterminous with public service developments, have not served to challenge the view of personnel management as a twentieth century phenomenon.

Given that the purpose of personnel management histories has been to explain the rise of modern personnel management in “industry”, this neglect of the public sector experience is perhaps not surprising. However, the implication is then easily drawn that the origins of modern personnel management and its emergence in industry are the same thing. This belies the much earlier origins of personnel functions and specialists in the public sector. Even where government organisations are mentioned in histories of personnel management and HRM, their role tends to be cast as an influence on subsequent private sector innovations rather than the pacesetter in the emergence of modern personnel practices. Kaufman (2008, pp. 55-6) for instance, identified the US government’s regulation of public sector salaries, pensions, dismissals and job analysis following the Civil Service (Pendleton) Act 1883 US as one of 14 pioneering influences on the development of a formalised HR function in American industry. In contrast to the UK and Australia, however, the neglect of public sector management developments in the US also is partly explicable because public sector reform occurred relatively later there. While change began in Britain in 1853, with the inauguration of Macauley’s reforms of recruitment to the Indian Civil Service, and in the Australian colonies following the granting of responsible government in 1856, in the US it was not until the assassination of President Garfield by a disappointed office seeker in 1881, that comprehensive reform was undertaken, resulting in the Pendleton Act (Gladden, 1945, p. 45; Kaufman, 2008, p. 73).

In most western countries, personnel management practices have a long history in public sector organisations. In Australia, their origins date from the 1850s, although the pace and nature of development varied considerably between colonies. While early experiments with personnel methods were of limited longevity, by the 1880s a clear model of personnel administration had been instituted in half the colonial public services, typically through sector-wide legislation. By federation, the remaining states had also largely adopted this model. The neglect in personnel management histories of public sector developments arguably reflects the common, largely unstated assumptions in labour and management history that the public and private sectors are distinct and different and that interchanges of opinion between them either did not take place or were insignificant. That public services have been regulated in part by separate public sector employment legislation and public service boards seemed to support these assumptions. As a result, analysis of management practices in these sectors has proceeded largely within different academic disciplines, with scholarly discussion on public sector employment residing largely in the public administration field rather than labour and industrial relations history (Sheldon and Thornthwaite, 2011).

Moreover, most empirical research on the public sector concentrates on a particular jurisdiction, rather than drawing out patterns across different jurisdictions. In Australia, for instance, research on early public sector management practices has tended to focus on one colony’s experience, with notable examples being the work of Bland (1923) and Parker (1942) on the NSW government. Many other studies have focused even more specifically on particular management practices within single

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jurisdictions: for instance, Thornthwaite's (1995, 1996) research on career structures and appeal systems in the NSW public service, and Colley's (2005, 2006) research on the merit system and job security in the Queensland public sector.

In labour process and general management discussions about the bureaucratic model, public sector organisations have also received little attention, despite the fact that discussions about the bureaucratic form are deeply rooted in Weber's work which continually emphasises the development of bureaucratic principles and practices to regulate employment practices in government organisations. There have been exceptions to this neglect, with some labour historians examining the public bureaucracy from that theoretical lens (e.g. McDonald, 1986; Patmore, 1988). However, such studies have tended nonetheless to explain the occurrence of similar phenomenon in public organisations in terms of the public sector borrowing from the private sector rather than the reverse, a tendency which may owe heavily to the relative lack of interest previously shown in public sector employment (Sheldon and Thornthwaite, 2011). For the most part, however, "HRM in the public and private sectors appear almost as the proverbial two ships passing in the night" (Kaufman, 2008, p. 71). As a result, accounts of HRM history continue to date the origins of personnel practices primarily to private sector organisations in the early twentieth century.

Reassessing these accounts is important because a flawed chronology potentially inhibits understanding of how and why employers developed such systematic forms of labour management at different times. Thus if, as this paper argues, personnel management emerged much earlier in government organisations than in private sector industry, we might ask different questions about the evolution of change in management thought and practice. In the US, Kaufman (2008, p. 72) argues that there is inferential evidence "that private sector employers were keenly aware of and influenced by labour developments in the public sector". If such transfers of knowledge were indeed widespread, then, for instance, instead of focusing on why HRM emerged when it did in private sector organisations, we might ask why it took so long for private sector employers to develop a coherent strategic approach to managing people, given the pacesetting public sector models to which they were exposed.

### **The emergence of personnel practices in the colonial public services**

With the establishment of responsible government in 1856, Australia's colonial legislatures inherited public services regulated almost entirely by master and servant laws and the internal patronage system. Employment conditions varied between departments and arbitrariness, unequal treatment and injustices were common. Yet by the 1880s, all but two colonies had implemented systematic personnel management practices and the last two, Tasmania and Western Australia followed suit in 1900. Typically informed by public service inquiries, governments introduced these practices by legislation and established central personnel offices, the Public Service Boards, to administer them. Like the later private sector experience, these early personnel management developments were diverse in timing, nature and scope, and often limited in effectiveness and longevity.

In Australia, three waves of change had flowed through the colonies by 1901. The colonial governments legislated for these management reforms for three main reasons: first, periodic economic pressures on governments for stringency in public expenditure; second, increasing employee agitation for action to eliminate arbitrary

and inconsistent employment conditions and provide secure merit-based career opportunities; and third, Ministerial desires for relief from the day-to-day pressures of managing growing departments. Underpinning these pressures for change, as well as strong resistance by many stakeholders, was the traditional patronage system through which Ministers distributed employment opportunities to family, friends, and followers (Deacon, 1989; Caiden, 1965).

*The first wave of reforms*

The first wave of personnel innovations in the colonial public services followed closely the publication of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report on Britain's Civil Service in 1854. For its time, the Report provided a remarkably sophisticated blueprint for managing public sector employment, one which outlines and justifies a coherent, integrated package of policies and practices to improve organisational effectiveness. The Report recommended establishment of a central examiners' board to conduct qualifying examinations for civil service appointments, merit-based promotion, salary increments based on satisfactory service, and the establishment of a central personnel agency to oversee the merit system (1954, reprint, pp. 1-16). Perhaps as significant as the recommendations themselves, however, was the Report's extensive discussion of concerning the management problems which then prevailed. Stafford Northcote and Charles Trevelyan explored how the patronage system and limited career opportunities for many in government employment stifled motivation, ambition and performance. They observed, for example, that:

Each man's experience, interests, hopes and fears are limited to the special branch of service in which he is himself engaged. The effect naturally is, to cramp the energies of the whole body, to encourage the growth of narrow views and departmental prejudices, to limit the acquisition of experience, and to repress and almost extinguish the spirit of emulation and competition (1954, reprint, para 18).

Northcote and Trevelyan proposed the establishment of uniform policies across the public service, to regulate and distribute appointment, promotion and other opportunities beyond single departments. They wrote of the need not only to recruit persons of high ability through competitive examinations, but subsequently to develop and motivate them to high performance, partly through merit-based and inter-departmental promotion opportunities. As well, the Report argued the need for a central personnel agency in the form of a Board, to administer service-wide policies and monitor individual managerial decision-making. Such a Board was necessary because departmental heads lacked the time and expertise consistently to implement policies, while retaining vested interests in the patronage system. Thus, the Report observed that: "Men feel, and not unreasonably, that the recognition of their merits, even within their own departments, is extremely uncertain [ . . . ]" (1954 reprint, para 19).

As an additional precaution, the Report recommended that, given the difficulties involved in determining "merit", promotion recommendations should be accompanied not only by records of the recommended person's employment history, but also the "notes of all reports made on him from time to time". While the Report does not discuss performance assessment, this arguably implies that formal and regular performance assessments were anticipated.

Caiden (1965, p. 36) observes that, on reaching Australia, the Northcote-Trevelyan Report aroused speculation about whether local inquiries would reveal the same state

of affairs. The Report arrived just prior to the granting of responsible government. The gold rushes of the early 1850s had altered the labour market, increasing both demand for public servants and labour turnover. When the boom subsided, colonial governments retrenched staff, reduced salaries and abolished pensions. The dissatisfaction and resentment this sparked among public servants led several governments to hold public inquiries, followed by legislative reform.

Between 1856 and 1863, five public service inquiries sat in Victoria and Tasmania alone (Wettenhall, 1978). In considering how to improve efficiency and economy in public administration, these inquiries focused on policies concerning selection, classification, superannuation, security of tenure and leave of absence (Bourke, 1960, pp. 300-2) The Tasmanian government, which had already classified its public service in 1851, implemented legislative reforms between 1857 and 1860, but a policy of strict economy reversed these changes in 1863 (Caiden, 1965, p. 38). The Victorian and Queensland governments passed Civil Service Acts in 1862 and 1863 respectively, to classify their public services and regulate salaries, appointments, promotions and dismissals. The object of the Civil Service Act (1863) Qld, for example, was “to establish therein an equitable and uniform system of appointment promotion and dismissal.” Reflecting both welfare concerns and a substantial reach into personnel management, the Act also introduced long service leave, and provisions for continuity of service, leave of absence, sick pay, widows’ gratuities, retirement allowances and pensions. By the end of the decade, however, both these experiments in personnel regulation had faltered due to public and political opposition. Queensland repealed its statute in 1869, after which personal influence once again governed employment opportunities (The Civil Service Acts Repeal Act (1869) Qld; Caiden, 1965).

*The second wave*

The next major wave of reform began during the economic recession of the early 1870s. Responding to public servants’ and community calls for more economy and efficiency in public administration, the NSW, Victorian and South Australian governments commissioned inquiries. The NSW and Victorian governments ignored the 1873 recommendations of their inquiries (Wettenhall, 1978, p. 31; Caiden, 1965, p. 38). However, the South Australian government implemented many of its Inquiry’s recommendations, in the Civil Service Act 1874, including regulating classification, salaries and recruitment, dismissal, leave of absence and retirement allowances. The Act went further than previous Victorian and Queensland legislation in regulating management practice: for example, section 23 required that every Head of Department furnish annual reports to the relevant Minister on every employee’s conduct and efficiency, which, as with the Northcote-Trevelyan Report, presumes some level of performance assessment exists. Further, the Act required the Governor to conduct job analysis and human resource planning of staffing requirements for each Division and Class to improve each department’s efficiency (s12).

During the 1870s, public servants increasingly pressed governments for uniform statutory rules, merit-based appointment and promotion, pensions, safeguards against dismissal and remuneration based on work value. According to Loveday (1959) and Deacon (1989), Ministers generally failed to respond to these claims until the burden of managing organisations began to outweigh the benefits of the patronage system. As organisations grew, Ministers found the demands of nepotism and workforce

coordination increasingly onerous and tiresome. Attempts to reduce this burden by delegation resulted in mistakes, injustices and anomalies causing employee resentment and Ministerial embarrassment. Nonetheless, because patronage was often crucial to electoral success, Ministerial support for public service regulation remained uneven and changeable.

The legislative attempts in Queensland and Victoria to regulate government employment in the 1860s failed partly because there was no unifying agency to integrate and enforce implementation across departments. Subsequently, calls to establish independent, centralised personnel authorities thus became a key plank of reform proposals. The A'Beckett Royal Commission (1873) in Victoria was the first to promote such an agency "to stand between the service and the Ministers and to provide for some more continuous oversight than busy politicians had the time, mood or talent to enforce" (Bourke, 1960, pp. 300-1). However, the Victorian Government delayed acting on these recommendations for a decade.

#### *The third wave*

In the 1880s, with the third wave of reforms, Public Service Boards became a characteristic feature of colonial public administration and more rigorous regulation of management practices emerged. Victoria led the way when a series of scandals, dismissals and railway accidents, escalated demands for reform (Caiden, 1965, p. 40). The incoming Berry-Service Government passed the Public Service Act 1883 which "embodied most of the main principles of modern public service recruitment and control" (Bourke, 1960, p. 302). Like the 1874 South Australian legislation, the Victorian Act provided for a full-time Board of three Commissioners to conduct open competitive examinations for all positions, maintain employment records, enforce compulsory life insurance, publish annual staff lists and administer disciplinary appeal rights. Detailed statutory provisions gave the Board wide powers over staffing levels and selection, while constructing detailed internal labour market rules (Bourke, 1960, pp. 302-3). The NSW government soon followed Victoria's lead, passing the Civil Service Act 1884, but this only established a part-time Board which had fewer powers than its Victorian counterpart, particularly over appointments.

However, both the Victorian and NSW legislation proved insufficient in the longer-term. While the NSW Civil Service Board's part-time status rendered it virtually powerless, the concerted resistance of Ministers, departmental managers and some public servants undermined the Boards of both colonies. Ministers and Departmental Heads were reluctant to relinquish their discretionary power, especially over appointments and staffing levels, and public servants quickly grew dissatisfied with Board reclassifications which reduced salaries and career opportunities. Within the decade, the government transferred the functions of the diminished Victorian Board to a Board of Auditors (Caiden, 1965, pp. 40-4).

In Queensland, the Royal Commission on the General Working of the Civil Service (1888, 1889) recommended personnel management reforms modelled on Victoria's provisions. The Queensland government had established the inquiry in a climate of economic recession to address both cost pressures and staff campaigns for stronger regulation of employment conditions. The Civil Service Act 1889 provided for a full-time, three member Civil Service Board to administer appointments, promotions and salaries. However, Ministers retained final authority over promotions and

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discipline and during the 1890s increasingly overruled Board decisions. In 1901, the Board was abolished (Queensland Royal Commission, 1889, p. xxiv; S.A. Public Service Commission, 1891, p. 4).

In contrast, however, the NSW Board was replaced with a more powerful Public Service Board in 1895. The economic depression of the early 1890s engendered public demands for governmental economies. Colonial governments responded by reducing salaries, increasing working hours, retrenching employees and abolishing superannuation schemes. This generated widespread resentment and bitterness among public servants (Sheldon, 1989). Within this context, the NSW Government appointed a Royal Commission on the public service in 1894. The Commission's Report (1895) recommended establishment of a full-time Public Service Board, considerably more powerful than its predecessor, with ultimate control over classification, salaries, staffing levels and appointments. In subsequent years, the Board standardised employment conditions and improved management practices across the sector. The Victorian and South Australian governments established Boards to reclassify their public services in the late 1890s. Further, in Victoria, a single Public Service Commissioner was appointed in 1901 to replace the Board of Auditors (Knight, 1961; Caiden, 1965, pp. 43-4).

The Tasmanian and West Australian governments were slower to embrace reform than the other colonies. Since 1863, the Tasmanian public service had been almost entirely free of statutory regulation, while West Australia's public service had remained subject to British Colonial Office Regulations until 1890. In both jurisdictions, patronage and seniority governed employment opportunities and salaries. Both governments were stable and public servants' representations for reform had invariably failed even to stimulate government inquiries (Caiden, 1965, p. 40).

However, in 1900 both the Tasmanian and West Australian governments hastily passed rudimentary public service legislation. This haste was partly a response to union growth and activism in lobbying for management reforms, but also due to political pressures to standardise public service conditions across the colonies prior to federation, to facilitate the transfer of many employees to Commonwealth employment. The Tasmanian Civil Service Act 1900 provided for independent Public Service Commissioners to centralise public sector management generally. The West Australian Civil Service Act 1900, bitterly contested in the Legislative Council, was narrower in scope and while regulating classifications or salaries, failed to centralise control over these matters (Parker, 1942, p. 30).

By 1901, therefore, a standard model of personnel management prevailed in each states' public services, although the extent and effectiveness of regulation varied. In the eastern seaboard states of NSW, Queensland and Victoria, public sector management exhibited a common set of characteristics. First, a Public Service Board exercised central control over the personnel function. Second, statutory regulations had formalised and standardised policies on job classification, appointment, promotion, discipline, salary determination, superannuation, internal grievance handling and appeals. These regulations constituted the framework of a "career service", an internal labour market system characterised by security of tenure and advancement. (Bourke, 1960, p. 306) While the South Australian government did not establish a Board until 1916, the detailed regulation of personnel practices which that colony's Civil Service Act 1874 had introduced well before the other colonies, remained largely in place.

A common feature of the political landscape in the nineteenth century, public service inquiries played a significant role in shaping these developments in personnel management. They were a means by which governments responded to pressures for public service reform and economy. Inquiries also provided a forum for governments to collect, exchange and analyse existing knowledge on management practices. As Table I indicates, before federation, 14 colonial public service inquiries reported their findings. Few were followed immediately by legislative reforms. Wettenhall (1978) considered it debatable whether they actually persuaded or simply focused existing views. However, even those which failed to produce immediate statutory change may have contributed to a climate of opinion supporting change. Certainly the personnel structures and policies that inquiries recommended were gradually adopted in the colonies.

This brief historical outline points to three primary tendencies in the early history of public service personnel management. First, in terms of the timing and pace of change,

Legislature	Report, type of inquiry	Year, publication details
The UK	The Northcote-Trevelyan Report	1854, Paper 1713, reprinted in Public Administration (London) XXXII (1954) pp. 1-16.
Victoria	Civil Service of the Colony of Victoria, Board of Inquiry	1856, Parl. Paper, No. 23 ("Hearn Inquiry")
Tasmania	State of the Public Service, Royal Commission	1857, Parl. Paper, No. 2
Victoria	Victoria, Civil Service Commission, Royal Commission	1859, Parl. Paper No. 19
Tasmania	Accounts and Departments of Government (South Side) Royal Commission	1863, Parl. Paper No. 11.
Tasmania	Working of Departments (North Side) Royal Commission	1863, Parl. Paper No 18.
NSW	Select Committee on the Civil Service	1873, Parl. Paper No. 115
Victoria	The State of the Public Service and Working of Civil Service Act, Royal Commission	1873, Parl. Paper No. 10
South Australia	Report on the Civil Service Bill, Select Committee	1874, Parl. Paper No. 97
Queensland	General Working of the Civil Service and the Mode of Keeping the Public Accounts of the Colony, Royal Commission	1st Progress Report, 1888, No. 48 and 2nd Progress Report, 1889 No. 19
NSW	Civil Service Inquiry Commission, Royal Commission	1887-1892, No report delivered
South Australia	Public Service Commission, Royal Commission	1891, Ninth and Final Report, Parl. Paper 30B.
NSW	Royal Commission on the Civil Service	1895, Parl. Paper 348.
Western Australia	Civil Service Commission, Royal Commission	1894, Parl. Paper No 21 & 1896, Paper No. 15
South Australia	Public Service Commission, Royal Commission	1900, 2nd Progress Report, Parl. Paper No. 20

**Table I.**  
Public Service Inquiries,  
1854-1900

**Source:** adapted from Wettenhall (1978)

there was no uniform development of personnel management in government organisations. While reform was somewhat *ad hoc*, larger colonies instituted changes more readily than smaller ones, arguably because of the sheer size of their organisations and consequent pressures on public finances. Second, implementation of personnel management was fraught with difficulties, in part because of Ministerial and managerial resistance to relinquishing the patronage system, and also because this was a new field of management practice. The parties appear to have learnt the appropriate mix of structures and practices partly through trial and error. Third, public service inquiries were crucial to this learning process, because they provided a forum for the detailed consideration of managing thinking and strategic options.

**Public Service Boards and the rise of personnel specialists**

A key element in the emergence of modern personnel management is the creation of a personnel department and employment of specialists with the discrete function of managing employees. In the larger colonial public services, Public Service Boards became an entrenched feature of personnel administration from the early 1880s. In establishing them, parliaments delegated authority for labour management to a central agency theoretically independent of any particular organisation. The Board members can be characterised as personnel managers. Their function lay in centrally implementing and enforcing the service-wide personnel policies and practices laid down in legislation.

Governments generally established Boards when pressed both to achieve economies in public expenditure and to reduce patronage and favouritism in appointments, promotions, salaries and discipline. A principal means by which Boards cut labour costs was through their roles in position classification and salary setting. The classification process involved detailed job analysis which, when combined with work value assessments, formed the basis of wage determination and also early human resource planning.

The purposes that Boards served were also the source of resistance to them. In practice, the intentions and expectations of Ministers and public servants were often extremely limited. While employees resented the retrenchments and salary reductions they imposed, they nonetheless envisaged Departmental Heads retaining some discretion over employment matters. For their part, Ministers and Departmental Heads remained anxious to retain at least some of their patronage powers. For this reason, the prospective powers of the Boards were often extensively debated in parliament and early legislation left large loopholes for Ministers and Departmental Heads. The South Australian Civil Service Act 1874 and NSW Civil Service Act 1884, for instance, placed no restrictions on temporary appointments by Ministers, enabling the extensive, largely unfettered appointment of temporary employees to continue.

Colonial public service inquiries first recommended building a centralised, service-wide personnel function in the 1870s. For the 1873 Victorian Royal Commission, early legislative attempts to stem patronage, injustices and inter-departmental anomalies had failed partly because no central enforcement mechanism existed. The Victorian Commission recommended the establishment of a Board “as required by the Executive” to “inquire into all such matters relating to the Public Service as the Governor in Council might refer to it” (pp. xxxiii, xxix). Other proposed functions included providing annual reports to parliament on the “condition

of the public service” and monitoring managerial compliance with new service-wide regulations. While the Commissioners were hesitant to recommend a permanent board, they suggested that this might subsequently prove desirable (Victorian Royal Commission, 1873, p. xxix).

Within less than two decades, permanent Boards had become a politically acceptable instrument of personnel management, although opinion remained divided on their necessity. The Queensland Royal Commission (1889, p. xxv), displaying none of the hesitancy of Victoria’s 1873 Commission, endorsed “the united and earnest request that all matters regulating the Public Service should be placed in the hands of a Board entirely free from political influence”. Observing that “the present want of system leads to much dissatisfaction in the Service”, the Commission recommended establishing a permanent three-member Board with authority over appointments, promotions, and classifications, and responsibility for maintaining service-wide personnel records. (Queensland Royal Commission, 1889, pp. xxiv-xxv) Similarly, in its 1884 civil service legislation, the Stuart Government in NSW assigned only part-time status to the Board as well as leaving substantial discretion with Departmental managers. Thus, as Deacon (1989) observed:

Although it gave the illusion of transferring authority over personnel matters to an independent board [...] it was, in fact, an ill-conceived, half-hearted and elitist measure (p. 87).

Inquiries in South Australia also illustrate the ambivalence that existed. The 1891 South Australian Royal Commission, for instance, rejected proposals for a permanent body. After investigating the operation of Boards in Queensland, Victoria and NSW and hearing witnesses testify to their effectiveness in reducing both political patronage and staffing levels, the Commission noted the almost complete absence of allegations or evidence of patronage in South Australia, as well as the Public Service Association’s lack of interest in a permanent Board. Ultimately, the Commission recommended a temporary Board to reclassify the Service, with additional advisory duties (South Australian Public Service Commission 1891, pp. 3-8). The 1900 Report of another South Australian Inquiry made similar recommendations, noting that evidence on the efficacy of Boards was inconclusive (pp. vi-vii). South Australia was the last state to establish a permanent Public Service Board, in 1916.

### **Developments in personnel management practice**

Like the emergence of public service boards, the development of personnel practices in the colonial public services was uneven, diverse and often experimental. Yet, well before federation, a coherent set of management practices formed a discernible model of personnel management, at least in the eastern seaboard colonies. Developments in public sector classification, selection, appointment and promotion practices illustrate the transition from *ad hoc*, simple forms of labour management to personnel management.

#### *Classification*

A key area of early public service regulation was position classifications, which constituted the early government approach to job analysis, description and evaluation and underpinned all other personnel functions. Tasmania was the first colonial government to implement a rudimentary classification system in 1851. Subsequent

legislation established more sophisticated systems in Queensland and Victoria in the early 1860s, South Australia in 1874 and NSW a decade later.

Early classification systems tended to establish two employee divisions, for ordinary and professional employees, with the ordinary division subdivided into five or six classes, salary ranges attached to each level, and annual increments paid according to satisfactory work and conduct. Later systems provided for greater differentiation in the division of labour. The Victorian Public Service Act 1883, for instance, established four divisions: general, clerical, professional and heads of department, and subdivided the clerical division into five classes (s9,14). Later Victorian legislation, the Public Service Act 1890, further distinguished among clerical officers, between the “lower” and “higher classes” (s20). The NSW Public Service Act 1895 established five divisions, replicating Victoria’s four divisions, but adding an educational division.

Classification involved assessments of work value, the principles of which were increasingly refined through the deliberations of 19th century public service inquiries. The 1873 Victorian Royal Commission, for instance, asserted that work value should be based on the importance of work performed (183: xxvii). The NSW Public Service Act 1895 specified that classifications be made also according to “fitness” and the “character” of the work”. The Public Service Classification Board Act 1900 (South Australia) based classifications on the character and importance of the work (as in NSW) and also the duties of each position.

Appeal mechanisms emerged early to accompany classification systems. These were a key demand of public servants, seeking protection against the regrading, salary reductions and retrenchments often associated with reclassifications. For governments, appeal systems were a crucial means of assuaging employee resentments. Thus, the Queensland *Civil Service Act 1863* gave public servants the right to appeal classification and salary decisions to an appeal board comprising five departmental heads, established by the Governor on an *ad hoc* basis. The South Australian Civil Service Act 1874 set up a similarly ad hoc, three-member appeals board. In NSW, the Civil Service Act 1884 gave public servants rights to appeal to the responsible Minister, until 1895 when the NSW Public Service Board assumed responsibility for appeals (Thorntwaite, 1995).

When governments vested responsibility for classification in the hands of nascent Public Service Boards, they generally also attached record-keeping requirements. At first, these requirements were minimal: for example, the NSW Civil Service Act 1884 required the Board to publish annually a classification list of all public servants, and periodically, notices of appointments, retirements and employee “removals” (s16, 61). Later legislation, including South Australian and Victorian statutes in 1990, expanded the role of Boards in compiling personnel data. Both Acts required the relevant Boards to maintain records on the duties, length of service, salaries and other particulars of all employees. In relation to clerical officers, Boards also had to record deaths, dismissals, resignations, promotions and reductions. Thus, the Boards became responsible for developing and maintaining service-wide personnel records. In institutionalising processes of job analysis, job evaluation, position classification, appeals and the keeping of personnel records, the classification systems which emerged prior to federation therefore provided the foundation for sophisticated HRM in the public sector.

*Appointments: selection and promotion*

By federation, systematic appointment procedures were also common to most public services. The introduction of uniform, regular principles and processes governing selection and promotion across departments largely was aimed at eliminating patronage, enforcing the merit system, and increasing management control over labour costs and efficiency. While colonial governments had no difficulty attracting recruits, ensuring appointment of the most efficient and qualified applicants was more problematic with patronage so dominant. The earliest public service statutes only minimally intervened in appointments, and were largely confined to establishing selection testing and probation periods.

The first selection tests introduced by statute were qualifying rather than competitive examinations. Tests commonly assessed candidates on language and mathematical aptitude and agencies placed successful candidates on appointment lists. However, statutory loopholes tended to undermine these provisions by leaving Ministers and Departmental Heads free to make temporary appointments. For example, the Victorian Civil Service Act 1862 gave Ministers the authority to hire those with "known ability" without examination. Under South Australia's Civil Service Act 1874, qualifying examinations applied only to 16 to 18 year old cadets, giving Ministers virtually a free rein over temporary appointments (s15). With such loopholes, temporary employment levels rose dramatically. In the 20 years following passage of Victoria's 1862 Act, for example, while the number of permanent employees dropped 25 per cent, the temporary workforce experienced 65 per cent growth (Parker, 1942, p. 22)

The earliest public service legislation generally made permanent appointments subject to probationary periods of between three and six months. In 1862, both the Victorian and Queensland governments legislated for every public servant to be employed on probation, subject to summary dismissal without cause, and entitled to permanency only on their Departmental Head's recommendation to the Governor. Provisions in subsequent legislation concerning the length and compulsory nature of probation deviated little from this standard.

Not until ultimate control of selection processes was centralised with the Public Service Boards, however, were appointments consistently regulated in most jurisdictions. The public service acts typically gave Boards responsibility for monitoring appointment needs and decisions as well as holding service-wide competitive selection tests. The Victorian Public Service Act 1883, for instance, established a competitive examination for entry to lower classes of the clerical and non-clerical divisions, and a qualifying examination for promotion from the lower to higher classes. Further, new internal appointments were subject to the Board approving their necessity, while external appointments were conditional on the Board certifying that no public servant currently fit the position. The Queensland Civil Service Act 1889 and NSW Public Service Act 1895 established similar processes in those colonies.

While these statutes effectively constrained temporary appointments, they also regulated temporary work in other ways. The Victorian Public Service Act 1889, for example, required the Board to maintain lists of potential temporary employees and regulated the duration and termination of appointments. The subsequent Victorian Public Service Act 1890 made the Board responsible for keeping a register of persons

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“fit and proper” for employment, approving temporary appointments, and guarding against temporary appointments becoming permanent by stealth. Thus, initial temporary appointments could not exceed three months, and while reappointments were possible, total engagements could not extend beyond nine months, with a six month exclusion applying after that (s38). In NSW, the Public Service Act 1895 empowered the Board to transform existing temporary positions into permanent ones under certain conditions. Other colonies were slower to regulate appointment processes. The Tasmanian and West Australian governments only introduced competitive examinations for entry to clerical divisions in 1900, while Departmental Heads and Ministers controlled recruitment to South Australia’s public service until 1916.

In relation to promotion, early public service legislation specified service-wide promotion criteria. The 1862 Victorian Act, for instance, provided for promotions within the ordinary division of the “officer most deserving” and within the professional division, on a competency basis. In South Australia the Civil Service Act 1874 prescribed broadly similar promotion criteria to those in the earlier Victorian Act, but added a seniority criterion, defined in terms of placement on formal lists of those qualified and deserving of promotion in each agency. Nonetheless, in this period, because Ministers in each jurisdiction, retained the capacity to make external appointments without examination to fill promotion positions, internal promotion opportunities remained limited (Victorian Royal Commission, 1973, p. xvii; SA Public Service Commission Report, 1891, pp. 1-6).

From the 1880s, however, promotions were more tightly regulated. Legislation in Victoria, NSW and Queensland established the guiding criteria of seniority and merit, while making Boards more responsible for final decisions. For example, the Victorian Public Service Act 1890 provided that, in filling vacancies in most employee classes and divisions, the Governor, through the Board, would have regard to “seniority combined with fitness”. The Act defined fitness as “special qualifications and aptitude for the discharge of the duties of the office to be filled” (s47). Tension concerning the application of these principles grew when it became apparent that seniority continued to predominate over merit in practice, an issue which continued to plague governments for many decades.

Ultimately, the prominence of patronage declined only once more powerful public service boards were established immediately prior to federation. Nonetheless, in the nineteenth century, there was a substantial shift in the management of public service appointments towards the formalisation and centralised control of decision-making, with merit-based qualifying conditions increasingly attached.

### **Conclusion**

Between the granting of responsible government and federation, a clear model of systematic personnel management evolved in Australia’s colonial public services. This evolution began with attempts to formalise and standardise management practices in relation to classification, selection, appointment, promotion, discipline and pensions. The establishment of public service boards with central responsibility for the personnel function generally proved crucial to the further refinement and entrenchment of personnel management practices. Mirroring the later private sector experience, the development and diffusion of personnel management techniques in the

public sector varied considerably among the colonies in scope, nature, effectiveness and longevity. In every jurisdiction, the personnel function evolved through trial and error, as much as through the careful consideration of public service inquiries. However, despite the sometimes haphazard diffusion of personnel practices, the government inquiries and legislatures involved in their inception clearly were motivated by strategic concerns to improve organisational efficiency and effectiveness through changes in the ways employees were managed. They focused in particular on policies and practices for improving workforce quality and performance, along with employee morale and performance.

While it concentrates on developments in personnel management in each of the Australian colonies, this paper is not contending that these developments were exclusive to this part of the world. There is considerable published research attesting to the diffusion of such practices in a number of western countries in the nineteenth century (Gladden, 1945; Gospel, 2009). However, in tracing the origins of personnel management in Australia to the colonial public services in the years following the granting of responsible government in 1856, this analysis challenges the prevailing account in HRM literature of personnel management as a twentieth century phenomenon. It also raises questions for further research concerning the development of private sector management practices. That government organisations were experimenting with and increasingly relying on integrated personnel practices apparently well before their genesis in private firms, for example, suggests a need for research to uncover whether and how public sector personnel practices later influenced private firms and why industry took so much longer to develop a comparably coherent approach to managing people. To the extent that management practices in the colonial public services were also strategic in character, this analysis also points to a need to consider further the roots of strategic HRM.

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### Corresponding author

Louise Thornthwaite can be contacted at: [l.thornthwaite@uws.edu.au](mailto:l.thornthwaite@uws.edu.au)

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