

**Keynote address by Western Australian Ombudsman Chris Field to the PSM Program Graduation  
30 April 2008**

I am delighted to be here this afternoon to deliver the keynote address for the PSM Program Graduation. Can I express my thanks to Gavin Mackay, Manager of the Public Sector Management Program, for his kind invitation to speak - I consider it a privilege to have been asked to attend.

The conferral of your degree is a recognition of your intellect, hard work and commitment. This is a well-deserved opportunity for you, and those who have supported you, to celebrate your significant achievement.

Gavin has asked me to speak for twenty minutes and in that time I want to discuss five things that I think are important to your role as public servants.

First, as you would know, Australia has enjoyed unprecedented levels of prosperity over the last decade as we have reaped the rewards of a micro-economic reform program that has brought with it significant structural reforms to our economy. Our prosperity has been enhanced, of course, by favourable international circumstances for our great natural wealth. Indeed, we have experienced one of the longest sustained periods of economic growth in Australia's history – and, of course, Western Australia has been a very significant contributor to that national success.

This ceremony is an opportunity for you to reflect upon what you have learned and how you might use that knowledge in ways that will contribute to the continuing growth and success of Western Australia. All of you in this room will play a role in shaping and administering this State's economic and public policy - policy that will help to define our success in the future.

Great challenges, however, face us in our endeavours to create an efficient, effective and fair Australia. We cannot afford complacency. Before us is Australia's next wave of productivity reform, and doubtless beyond that, further reform again. This reform, much of it removal of protectionist policies and opening of markets, is critical to our long-term national interest, and it follows, the welfare of every Western Australian. I believe each of you have a critical role to play in ensuring the continuation of our prosperity.

Second, as a public servant it is your responsibility to never succumb to superficially attractive arguments – you should always be in the business of rational, evidenced-based public policy. Similarly, while it will almost always be right to listen, you should never be captured by vested interests. Making decisions that appease a vocal lobby, making decisions in haste or based on insufficient analysis are, in public life, often the easier things to do. When you are involved in making these policy choices, as many of you in this room no doubt already are or will, challenge yourself, and test those around you, to make decisions which are solely dedicated to one, and only one, purpose - advancing the long-term interests of the Western Australian community. These may often be the harder policy choices, but they will be the right ones.

Much regulation, for example, will have an obvious benefit to the community. But it will also often have a cost. When we give advice about our laws we must of course weigh both the costs and benefits, and do so wherever possible, based on independent qualitative and quantitative evidence. We need to ask, no matter how valuable the expenditure of public money appears to be in one area – what is the opportunity cost of this money to something that society may value more highly? We might also ask properly, is this something that regulation itself can solve – it is the case that there are things that are best addressed by the exercise of free markets, individual choice and responsibility, and the not the intervention of governments.

Here, your PSM degree will serve you well. Clear and compelling arguments, founded on research and reason, will, almost always, be the path to successful decision-making. Ultimately, well informed decisions are likely to be much more credible, effective and sustainable than those made with little or no basis. Your training values, and utilises, rational, evidence-based analysis of the problems that are presented to you. Use your intellectual skills, and the knowledge of theoretical frameworks that you have gained in your studies, to structure and underpin the decisions that you make throughout your public service careers.

Third, you should never lose sight of the fact that when you are making decisions that cost money you are spending someone else's money – taxpayer's money. While I believe it is the right of every individual to spend their own money poorly, it is never our right to do so with other people's money. Many of you in this room will make decisions that shape how people spend their money, exercise their property rights and, in fact, restrict ways in which they may wish to live their lives.

When we have these powers we must exercise them with great caution and the utmost of humility. Here I am reminded of a quote from Adam Smith's famous work, *The Wealth of Nations*:

The statesman who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals, would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could safely be trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it.

Some of you more familiar with the writing of Smith might think it is somewhat ironic, in a speech to a group of public servants, to quote approvingly a thinker so strongly connected to free markets and limited government. For anyone particularly concerned about this, I do note that Adam Smith spent the latter part of his career in the Scottish bureaucracy.

Fourth, I consider myself deeply fortunate to be given the opportunity to pursue a career of public service and you too, I suggest, should not ever doubt your career choice as one of the greatest of purpose. We live in one of the greatest parliamentary

democracies in the world, and your role as public servants in providing advice about proposed laws, and administering the laws of that parliament, is a great privilege, enormous responsibility and of the highest value to the citizens of this State. I firmly believe the people of this State value the work you do.

As the Western Australian Ombudsman, I consider that a strong and positive relationship with the public sector is something that is fundamental to the work that I and my staff do. It is the case, however, that sometimes, the importance of what public administrators do, and how well they do it, can be lost when agencies like the Ombudsman necessarily spend time focused on things that have gone wrong.

Let me take this opportunity tonight to reinforce strongly with you that the overwhelming majority of public administration in this State is done very well, by people of great integrity who are committed to doing it very well. I will continue to recognise and reinforce this message throughout my term as Ombudsman, in part to ensure that the community continues to have the confidence in the public sector that I think they are right to have.

Fifth, and finally, while your PSM degree will have given you significant new knowledge and skills, do not let its completion be the end of your journey of learning. Indeed, you should, in my view, consider that journey to be a lifelong one – the value of challenging yourself, your frameworks to approach issues, your ideas and principles, is one that should never stop. Necessity, humility and the promise of a nice graduation ceremony will all be natural motivators to this end – but most importantly, your desire to innovate and grow, and thus to contribute to a dynamic, innovative and ever-evolving public sector, should be motivation alone.

What I have said here tonight is intended to assist, albeit modestly, in the way that you see the work that you do in the future. In the end, you are the public sector leaders and innovators of tomorrow, and it really only falls to me to congratulate you on all that you have achieved so far and to wish you every great success in the future.