Research and Evaluation

# Preventing Dysfunction and Improving Policy Advice: The Role of Intra-Departmental Boundary Spanners

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*It is well established in the public management literature that boundary spanners – people or groups that work across departments or sectors – are critical to the success of whole of government and joined-up working. In studying recent unprecedented change to central government agencies in the Australian context, our research identified that intra-departmental boundary spanners also play a critical role in the functioning of government departments, particularly during restructuring. Although most contemporary literature in public management concentrates on boundaries across formal organisational entities (departments, agencies, sectors), boundaries also exist within departments. Our research has found that without dedicated intra-departmental boundary spanners, significant role confusion and dysfunctional practices arise. In turn, this has serious implications for the quality of policy advice given to Cabinet. Further research needs to be undertaken into both the role of intra-departmental boundary spanners and how to nurture and manage the practice of intra-departmental boundary spanners. This is especially the case if changes in Australia represent a fundamental shift more broadly in the way central government agencies operate.*

**Key words:** *boundaries, structural change, whole of government*

## Introduction

Central government agencies tend to exist in a state of flux, dependant on political and policy demands of the day (6 1997; Buckley 2006). In Australia, for example, special task forces are frequently assembled and then disassembled within central agencies such as the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C; and, to a lesser extent, Treasury and Finance) to action policy decisions. Similarly, machinery of government changes are common in the

public sector. Although these changes frequently involve the merging and de-merging of functional departments, they can also impact central agencies. For example, whole units can be integrated or extracted from agencies/departments such as PM&C. In Australia, this has been the case with the Office for Women which has been moved in and out of PM&C for some time (Bacchi and Eveline 2010). This trend is reflected in other OECD countries, particularly the United Kingdom (UK; Buckley 2006).

As Perri 6 (1997: 18) argues, reflecting broadly on changes to the organisation of bureaucracies, 'functions have been put together and pulled apart many times during the 20th century in the name of "rationalisation." But the particular rationales have often had less to do with synergies of functions or the disappearance of old needs and the emergence of new ones than with the need to give or deny power to particular politicians of Cabinet rank'. Recent changes to Australian central agencies, particularly PM&C, exemplify this practice, yet are unprecedented in their scope and potential impact for the operation of government (Boston and Halligan 2012; Buckley 2006). These changes may very well represent a fundamental shift in the way central agencies operate, and what is thought to be their purpose and function (Commonwealth Government 2016).

Traditionally, central agencies have played an oversight and coordination role – overseeing other departments whose primary responsibility is to deliver, manage, or contract service functions (6 1997; Blackman et al. 2010; Boston and Halligan 2012; Buckley 2006). In addition, more power has been concentrated in central agencies in Westminster systems (Aucoin 2012; Boston and Halligan 2012). In 2013, when the conservative Abbott government came to power, they fundamentally changed the nature of PM&C. In order to signal his intent for making inroads into the intractable problem of Indigenous inequality and gender inequality, Abbott appointed himself the Minister for Indigenous Affairs and the Minister for Women (Commonwealth Government 2016; Senate Estimates 2013; Strakosch

2013). This act triggered a major restructure of government departments. Functions related to these ministerial roles were brought into PM&C. Although the Office for Women (under various guises) has come and gone from PM&C, never in the history of the Australian Government has a large service-delivery, or line, agency such as Indigenous Affairs been moved into a central agency (Commonwealth Government 2016). This change – triggered by a political decision – resulted in over 800 staff being moved into PM&C (Senate Estimates 2013). This change has meant that service-delivery staff across Australia (including remote areas) are now overseen by PM&C, representing a fundamental shift in the role of this central agency (Senate Estimates 2013). This is further supported by recent changes whereby responsibility for the implementation of the Australian National Disability Insurance Scheme in the Victorian Government has been placed in the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC 2013).

In this paper, we explore how this change affected both the functioning of PM&C and Indigenous Affairs. Although this case raises a range of issues which warrant investigation, including the changing nature of central agencies and their ability to fulfil the coordination and whole of government functions subscribed to them, in this paper we focus exclusively on the role of boundary spanners. It is well established in the public management literature that boundary spanners – people or groups that work across departments or sectors – are critical to the success of whole of government and joined-up working within a networked policy environment (de Bruijn and Heuvelhof 1997; Dickinson and Carey 2016; Keast 2011; Osborne 2010; Williams 2010, 2002). In this paper, we explore the role of *intra*-departmental boundary spanners specifically, due to their central role in bridging across the considerable cultural differences that now exist within PM&C.

Although boundaries are generally conceptualised as existing between formal organisational entities (departments, agencies, sectors) these are, in fact, structural boundaries (6 1997; de Bruijn and Heuvelhof 1997; Klijn 1997;

O'Flynn 2011; Pollitt 2003). Cultural, and other forms of boundaries, can exist within a single organisational or departmental unit. These typically form due to the emergence of subcultures within organisations and may result in challenges communicating and cooperating across intra-organisational boundaries (Martin 1992; Schein 1996). Yet the increasing need to cross boundaries has left scholars with a range of unanswered questions, including what boundaries exist, the extent to which they are movable and the driving forces behind crossing boundaries (O'Flynn 2014). In this paper, we aim to advance this literature by examining *intra*-departmental boundary spanners. We found that significant role confusion and dysfunctional practices can arise when these individuals are removed from organisational structures. In turn, this has negative flow on effects for quality policy advice and action.

**Background**

As Osborne (2010) notes, 'the reality of contemporary public service management is that it is an inter-organisational and collaborative activity, and requires the governance of complex systems and inter-organisational processes' (p. 421). Even within governments, since the 1990s there has been an emphasis on inter-departmental working. That is, that silos exist within governments and need to be bridged. Although, arguably this has been a longstanding concern of governments (6 1997; O'Flynn 2011).

With regard to inter-departmental working, O'Flynn (2014, 2011) has suggested that there are many ways to organise bureaucracies, including by purpose, function, clientele, and geography. Recent experiences in Australia demonstrate that politics can also dictate differentiation. What is challenging, O'Flynn (2011) contends, about how bureaucracies are organised and structured is that 'any task naturally contains pieces of each' (p. 3). In other words, no matter which way you organise, boundaries will be created and these will require coordination and bridging. A wide range of instruments have been developed to achieve this, including inter-departmental working groups, skill and

knowledge development, collaborative working parties, and shared leadership (Carey et al. 2014; Carey and Crammond 2015). Despite this, the challenges of working across boundaries remain and, as O'Flynn (2014) has suggested, continue to be a fundamental question in public management.

Governments in liberal welfare states such as Australia and the UK have implemented continual iterations of structural change as a means to overcome boundary issues (Keast 2011; O'Flynn 2014). As noted by the Australian Public Service Commission (2007) 'existing public sector institutions and structures were, by and large, not designed with a primary goal of supporting collaborative inter-organisational work' (p. 17). Somewhat paradoxically, because we know that structures matter for the creation of boundaries and that 'most current structural arrangements act as barriers' (O'Flynn 2014: 29), we presume there is a structural answer to the boundary problem. This is underpinned by the assumption that seeking the right structural form will circumvent issues of coordination and cultural differences. This is evident in the numerous structural arrangements evident in joining-up, including the establishment of project and working groups (Christensen et al. 2016; Christensen and Laegreid 2007, 2006), one-stop shops and joint teams, through to the more extreme machinery of government changes that merge different functional areas together (Talbot and Talbot 2014). Structural change may assist in some instances, but it can also lead to boundaries being moved rather than crossed (Klaster, Wilderom and Muntslag 2014). We will explore these issues in this paper, and the interplay between structure and agency in practice (Dickinson and Sullivan 2014).

The emergence and increased complexity of policy networks, along with the rising demand for inter-departmental working, has given way to the concept, and analysis, of 'boundary spanners'. Although often discussed in conjunction with the growing complexity of policy networks since the 1990s, the importance of boundary spanners was noted as far back as the 1970s (Aldrich and Herker 1977;

Tushman and Scanlan 1981). Since this time, boundary spanners have been referred to as linking pins (Leifer and Delbecq 1978), strategic brokers (Craig 2004), and entrepreneurs of power (Degeling 1995; Dickinson and Carey 2016). Boundary spanners are individuals or groups who work across organisational and sectoral boundaries to broker relationships, cultures and so forth (Williams 2002). They are increasingly seen as critical to overcoming structural boundaries (LeRoux 2013; Williams 2002). Williams (2002) argues there are two major categories of boundary spanners. The first group are individuals who have a dedicated role and mandate for working in multi-organisational/multi-sector settings. This group is small in number in the context of the overall public service workforce (Dickinson and Carey 2016). The second group are individuals who naturally undertake boundary spanning activities in the course of doing their work (i.e. it is not a specified or delineated role). To be classified as a boundary spanner, individuals in both categories should act to:

- Build sustainable and effective relationships and networks;
- Communicate and listen 'deeply';
- Understand, empathise with multiple perspectives and resolve conflict;
- Build trust and broker solutions between different parties;
- Manage through influence and negotiation (Williams 2002).

This set of skills makes boundary spanners indispensable for overcoming structural barriers, supporting coordination and brokering cultural differences. To date, boundary spanners have been thought to be important for interdepartmental working and cross-sectoral working. In this paper, we explore the importance for boundary spanners in *intra*-departmental settings, particularly in the wake of structural change.

## Methods

The aim of the study was to investigate the changing nature of central government agen-

cies and the implications for addressing complex policy problems. This included implications for: cross-government working, service delivery, policy design, and implementation. The study utilised a case study research design to because it enabled us to investigate these changes in-depth and in their real-life contexts (Yin 2014). We specifically focused on the changing role of the PM&C due to its recent large-scale change involving bringing together PM&C, Indigenous Affairs, the Office for Women, and Regulatory Reform and Finance. The research adopted an interpretivist approach; seeking an understanding of how structural changes were experienced in the context of large central agency mergers and acquisitions.

We began with purposive sampling of key individuals within PM&C areas affected by the change. This sample comprised the senior managers in affected areas. Snowball sampling was then conducted to identify participants within PM&C. Individuals were sought who: (1) had been brought into PM&C under recent restructuring or (2) had worked in PM&C prior to (and were present for) recent structural changes. Snowball sampling continued until participants were unable to suggest other potential participants or began to nominate individuals already interviewed. In total, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted across PM&C, including 'legacy' (i.e. original PM&C employees), Indigenous Affairs, the Office for Women and Regulatory Reform and Finance. Participants ranged from deputy departmental secretaries to directors of sections (see Table 1). Interviewing was ceased when participants began to nominate individuals who had already taken part in the study and saturation was reached (i.e. no new themes were emerging).

Semi-structured interviews were recorded (with the exception of participant 2, on request) and transcribed verbatim. Themes covered in the interviews included: the rationale for central agency changes, the experiences of implementing the change, organisational planning and change management, and implications for policy design, implementation, and outcomes. Data were analysed by three of the authors using a thematic approach (Blaikie 2010). 'Like' data were grouped together to form

**Table 1. Participants**

| Code | Position |
| --- | --- |
| P1 | PM&C Legacy & Office for Women[*] |
| P2 | PM&C Legacy |
| P3 | Indigenous Affairs |
| P4 | Regulatory Reform |
| P5 | Office for Women |
| P6 | Regulatory Reform |
| P7 | PM&C Legacy |
| P8 | Indigenous Affairs |
| P9 | PM&C Legacy |
| P10 | Indigenous Affairs |
| P11 | Indigenous Affairs |
| P12 | Indigenous Affairs |
| P13 | Indigenous Affairs |
| P14 | Indigenous Affairs |
| P15 | Indigenous Affairs |
| P16 | Indigenous Affairs |

*Participant changed roles.

categories and subcategories. These categories were developed into more substantive themes, by linking and drawing connections between initial categories and hypothesising about consequences and likely explanations for the appearance of certain phenomena (Strauss 1987). This was done through discussion between the team. In the refining of themes for publication, selective coding was carried out, whereby transcripts were revisited with the explicit intent of finding further linkages and connections between the central issue being explored and other themes.

## Findings

Traditionally, PM&C has had policy 'shadow teams' for each portfolio and policy area across government. The role of these teams was to coordinate briefings, advice and so forth from different line agencies and portfolios with consideration for the needs of the government as a whole, and generate briefs for the Prime Minister accordingly. Additionally, according to our participants, the shadow teams also managed relationships and spanned the different cultures between PM&C as a central coordinating agency and line agencies that delivered services. This was a necessary function because central agencies are driven by the Cabinet and

politics and need to be fast-paced and responsive to government. They also need to be able to play a coordination and oversight function to ensure the advice provided is accurate and in line with the government's broader agenda. In contrast, line agencies manage implementation; as such, they operate at a different pace and are concerned with different matters, such as contract management and program design and delivery. In addition, they tend to have a more narrow orientation, focused on their particular functional area. As explained by one participant:

> Line agencies work in days and weeks. PM&C works in hours. [In PM&C] you have to be able to ring somebody up and say 'I'm sending out a Cabinet [brief]' ... Because of the timeframes involved in the Cabinet processes ... Whereas a lot of the guideline work, or a lot of the program implementation work [done by line agencies], is iterative. It's developing a series of products whether it be guidelines, whether it be help manuals for the providers ... (P1)

The shadow teams in PM&C fulfilled a boundary-spanning role between these divergent worlds: 'PM&C has a central policy team that shadows a portfolio and looks at independently, drawing together everyone's perspectives' (P10). Hence, these teams dealt with differences in perspective, culture, and needs between line agencies and the central agencies, particularly PM&C:

> PM&C, the 'Legacy PM&C' [i.e. PM&C prior to the introduction of the new units] involves the act of shadowing. ... So previously there'd be an area that would oversight the Deregulation, Area of Finance or the Women's area or the Indigenous Affairs area.... The Prime Minister and the Secretary [of PM&C] might want something different from your Portfolio Minister or your Secretary. [Their role was] to be able to understand ... points where the relationship may break down. Points where there will be differences of understanding or differences of approach. Points where there'll be policy differences or implementation differences or differences in outcomes. (P1)

Despite their integral boundary spanning role, these 'shadow teams' were removed following the integration of Indigenous Af-

fairs, the Office for Women and the Regulatory Group in PM&C. One participant noted: 'It was interesting the way in which the act of shadowing was then dissolved for those areas that got brought into PM&C' (P1). It was presumed that once the structural boundary (i.e. the existence of separate departments) was removed, shadow teams – or boundary spanners – were redundant. A participant from Indigenous Affairs explained:

The shadow unit was removed for Indigenous Affairs. There is no independent advice going to PM&C, no team of people whose job it is to interrogate what we do. The decision was taken that you wouldn't have a sort of 'secret spy unit' shadowing within the same department. (P10)

This issue was exacerbated by the lack of investment in addressing the skill and knowledge gaps created by the removal of the shadow teams. For example, little guidance was given to those moving into PM&C on how the cultures, timelines, and demands differed between line agencies and central agencies. In effect, staff moving into PM&C took up the responsibilities of the shadow teams, in addition to their line agency roles:

So the oversight areas were removed. So also there was no kind of an institutional memory to guide [those coming into PM&C from line agencies] with . . . how you'd do these things in PM&C but they were then expected to fulfil dual roles. So it was you're being a line agency but you're also being a central agency. I think someone may have sent them a couple of our briefings as an example. But there was no PM&C person that kind of walked them through (P01)

We didn't put enough resources into the move at the start. We didn't realise how big an organisational change it would be . . . managing changes in culture, the functions, the role. No we didn't do that well, I don't think we invested in it. (P10)

The act of removing shadow teams suggests that once the structural barriers between departments had been removed, it was presumed that staff would adjust and have the capabilities necessary to both work together and bridge the central and line agency worlds. However, a clear articulation of shared outcomes was lacking, which has been identified as an important enabler for effective cross-organisational and cross-governmental working (Blackman 2014; Blackman et al. 2010).

These issues were further exacerbated by the new PM&C being geographically dispersed across the country, thus impeding knowledge transfer within the new agency:

. . . because Indigenous Affairs also had a number of [offices]. It had a whole network. So even if [the Central office] got . . . all the information, how do you get that to the people in Melbourne office? Or the Thursday Island office? Or the Broome office? (P1)

This supports our observation from the literature that boundaries are perceived to be primarily structural (that can, in turn, lead to cultural boundaries) and therefore can be overcome by structural change alone (i.e. merging departments together). As one participant noted, however, 'You can bring in certain functions together but the mindset at the top doesn't change from "we're a central agency"' (P10). As noted above, the challenges associated with cultural adjustment for incoming agencies was amplified by the dispersed geographical locations of Indigenous Affairs across the country.

The removal of the shadow teams created unusual departmental briefing arrangements. The shadow teams acted as official boundary spanners between PM&C and line agencies. Yet, when these functions were brought into PM&C, retaining these boundary spanners was seen as unnecessary and potentially dysfunctional, as represented in them being referred to as a 'secret spy unit' (P10) within PM&C. In contrast, we argue that this group's role needed to be formally re-shaped as an intra-departmental boundary spanning group who performed an important bridging function. By failing to retain and re-shape these boundary-spanning roles, far more dysfunctional practices emerged. For example, the absence of these roles meant that staff from line agencies were required to prepare briefs for both their Portfolio Ministers and the Prime Minister. In doing so, they had to generate a line agency perspective, then critique their own work from a central agency perspective. This was an issue because Ministers and the Prime

Minister were said to have different briefing needs:

> They've just got completely different needs. And [the Minister for Indigenous Affairs] has ... spent all his life living in northern Australia, and he understands Indigenous Affairs through daily contact with remote communities. The Prime Minister's dealing with constitutional recognition. So we have to be able to support two conversations. Both of them have to be authentic, and they are important conversations ... [this requires] the bureaucratic skill of being able to condense something right down. And produce two very different products. Because what Nigel Scullion [Minister for Indigenous Affairs] wants is practical stuff, on the ground, happening now. What the Prime Minister needs is more in the upper echelon of the public policy world. (P2)

Participants used the metaphor of changing hats to explain the experience of meeting these different briefing demands:

> So it's a very high level approach and you're asking people who never had to do that for somebody to put on a very different hat for half their day, to switch hats constantly and take very different perspectives in their work. (P1)

> So we, and to sort of illustrate that, for example, if the Minister for Women is bringing forward a submission to Cabinet we prepare that submission, we do the briefing for the Minister to speak at Cabinet and then we put our hat as Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet [on] to provide briefing to the Prime Minister which may be critical of the Minister for Women's submission ... strengthened or where the risks are for the Prime Minister or government particularly ... I imagine actually doing that 'hat thing' because that helps you get into the mindset of that. And also being very clear and articulating that with the staff about this bifurcated role. So if you understand that's what you're doing it makes it easier then to identify where the conflict or tension might emerge ... having worked in the sort of environment where you have to have a Chinese wall sometimes, I find then that it's easier for me to manage ... [and] envisage that, it doesn't mean that it's necessarily easy each time to deal with the particular tensions. Sometimes I have to go hang on I'm not looking at this like PM&C. (P5)

Another participant used the metaphor of contagion:

> It's a bit odd sometimes if Minister Scullion has an idea, you know the idea's drafted by Indigenous Affairs group. Sometimes in social policy we'll do the brief for the Prime Minister to sort of get that separation of contagion and we do that now more from a social policy perspective because we no longer have a discrete Indigenous Affairs [shadow] unit. (P9)

Scharpf (1989) referred to this situation as a misfit between the empirical structure of an organisational and the prescriptive task structure. Applied to PM&C, this meant that the organisation was no longer fit-for-purpose in the sense that the primary role of PM&C is to coordinate and ensure the quality of policy advice at the centre of government. The inclusion of service-delivery and other functional areas, and the procedural loss of the official boundary spanners in the form of the shadow teams, diminished the ability for PM&C to fulfil this role.

In addition to creating odd, and potentially dysfunctional, work practices we found that the difficulties involved in briefing both to Ministers and the Prime Minister was potentially detrimental to the quality and robustness of the policy advice being given to the Prime Minister's Office. The dual role of staff meant that they were required to simultaneously deliver policy advice and critique it. This was identified as problematic because our participants recognised that staff with line agency responsibilities could not critique their own work with the same level of independence and impartiality as the former shadow units. Regardless of their ability to 'swap hats', 'prevent contagion' or 'keep Chinese walls', in critiquing the briefs and advice they create to serve the needs of their Minister they risk damaging relationships and their career advancement (i.e. by potentially being seen as undermining the aims of the Minister). As Perri 6 (1997: 22) argues, 'Few gain in career terms from questioning the interests of their department ... [or are] promoted for cutting their own budgets ... [or] thanked by their ministers for negotiating away any of their power'. This highlights the integral role that the previous shadow team played as being

able to enhance the quality of policy advice provided by line agencies. Their role as boundary spanners meant that they could mitigate poor policy advice in ways that staff in line agencies could not. This point was well articulated by a senior staff member in Indigenous Affairs:

Occasionally central agency intervention is welcome. It's hard for a line agency to argue with a Minister . . . If they want to do something stupid you're out of options for how you influence him [sic]. PM&C was an influencer, they were a central body but we've blunted that instrument . . . The beauty of the central agencies are that they are nimble . . . have oversight and can present alternatives. The merger has certainly compromised this in the Indigenous Affairs space. (P10)

Ministers, as Perri 6 (2007: 39) suggests, speak from their departmental or portfolio perspective:

defending their departmental turf and, over time, come to regard coordination as a game of winners and losers. In the executive, the Treasury and the central policy staff are expected to coordinate but they often find themselves fighting departments.

Bringing the portfolio of another minister into PM&C has the potential to heighten this tension: 'By bringing it together in PM&C you then bring the Minister into PM&C and that relationship . . . the dynamics of that can get pretty ugly' (P10). As suggested by this observation, the removal of intra-organisational boundary spanners could potentially have negative effects on the quality of advice that is provided to the top of government. These issues highlight the important role that boundary spanners play, not only in bridging departmental or functional boundaries, but in upholding the quality of policy advice provided to government. Despite the general view that eradicating the shadow teams diminished effectiveness, we did find an exemplar where boundary spanning was evident and enhancing effectiveness in some areas.

In our study we found one example of effective intra- and inter-departmental boundary spanning. One participant, who was a senior manager towards the end of their career in Indigenous Affairs, had formulated their own role. This role, and the participant's practice, encapsulates William's (2002) characteristics of a competent boundary spanner. This participant described the role they created within the newly merged Indigenous Affairs PM&C unit:

So, what's happened is in the department we have each of the divisions and – I didn't want to do a division; I have no interest in being caught up in administration just because I'm towards the end of my career and I'm thinking about, 'How do you tweak systems?' . . . So, I am completely respectful of my colleagues running their own business and then I only come in as it intersects if an issue arises that could be politically sensitive and embarrassing to the PM or undermining the PM or the government. And then the same with how we're rolling out that agenda, if it's going to hit on an agency. So, I build the relationships to know who all the key people are and then I keep those relationships up. (P8)

This individual performed the functions of an effective boundary spanner in a networked policy environment – building relationships, communication, brokering trust and solutions, and resolving real or potential conflict:

So, mostly I problem solve. I think about things that are happening and if I see gaps, I kind of stick my nose in. So, if you're an old soft-baller, like I am, in softball you'd call the position a sweeper . . . And so, in softball I have a position, everyone on the field has got a position . . . But we . . . have a position that's called a sweeper and we can put that person out, you just need to have nine people on the ground, and that person can play anywhere. So, if the short-stop needs backing, you drop in behind there. If you need some extra work in the outfield, you can drop in there.

So, I keep an eye on that. Also, I do lots around relationship building up at Parliament; across the service and externally, so with critical stakeholders, that kind of stuff. And so, I do a lot of linking where I see those gaps. And I bring my judgement on both policy and those relationship things to how we do our business. (P8)

In the following quote, the participant gives examples of what this 'sweeping' role looks like in practice:

So, last week PM's delivering the Close the Gap Report[1]; he wants to do the acknowledgement to the traditional owners in Noongar (language), so facilitate the relationship between, as you know – I don't know if you know – then tensions around Canberra around the traditional owner stuff, so it can work those relationships. Set that stuff up, set it up with the PM, work right through that and then the PM's office sets some stuff up which antagonise the traditional owner groups; I was able to deal with that straight away in the office. So, build critical stakeholder relationships

I did a lot of time translating across the service. So, I would have reckoned my first 18 months I did lots of presentations in the department, outside the department to our colleagues in other agencies and to Indigenous organisations and to others who work in Indigenous Affairs. So, I had a standard one-pager that I developed around the political landscape, the administrative landscape and the key policy things. And I did it pictorially, so people can see who's the Prime Minister, who's the minister, who's the head of the department and who's the head of Indigenous Affairs; so literally did that stuff . . . So, really basic things on a one-pager and I spent 18 months going out lots just to communicate stuff so that people could have some sense of knowing what was going on. (P8)

Hence, this individual fulfilled a critical role working as both an inter- and intra-departmental boundary spanner, while also managing relationships across much greater divides (i.e. politicians and community groups). With regard to the explicit aims of this paper, what is particularly interesting about this case is that it only emerged because one individual with the power and authority to design their own role saw the need. Although clearly fundamental to the smooth functioning of the newly expanded PM&C, it is a fragile arrangement. Once this individual leaves, as they are intending to do so in the near future, the position will likely dissolve. We found no indication of succession planning to support this role. This is indicative of a lack of strategic investment in boundary spanners within government, dependent instead on ad hoc arrangements.

## Discussion and Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this paper, there appears to be an enduring belief that structural change can fix perennial 'boundary' problems. Yet, boundaries are not merely structural – they are also cultural and functional (i.e. people perform different jobs or functions). Placing individuals in the same organisational or departmental unit does not mean that boundaries evaporate – rather they endure and even potentially cement cultural differences as individuals become increasingly defensive. As Shields (2006) suggests, boundaries contain physical infrastructure, institutional practices, and socially constructed meanings. Often, we know boundaries through their effects – as can be seen in the statements of participants in this study.

In this research we found that within the context of structural change, intra-departmental boundary spanners play an essential role, particularly in preventing dysfunctional work practices. Intra-departmental boundary spanners, in the context of PM&C, play a delicate role – they are both mechanisms of collaboration and leaders within government (Williams 2010). In the case of central agencies, it appears that boundary spanners contribute to high-quality policy advice, organisational functioning, and effective government. Hence, intra-departmental boundary spanners need to be nurtured and not removed during restructuring.

If boundary spanners are essential to effective working (Williams 2013), we need to find ways to better support and nurture them. This may include the creation of dedicated roles for boundary spanners (Williams 2013), such as the previous shadow teams that acted as a bridge between the central and line agencies. In addition, the fact that boundary spanners have unique skill sets and competencies mean that these need to be explicitly nurtured, particularly when the achievement of outcomes relies on the ability to work across structural, cultural and/or functional boundaries. This ought to occur not just through informal mechanisms, but also formal training, mentoring, and resources. Mentoring is particularly important because dealing with conflicts and working in

contested cultural spaces means that bound-ary spanners must frequently act beyond the bounds of their formally specified role (Perrone et al. 2003). Similarly, the literature on *inter*-organisational boundary spanners recognises that boundary spanners face numerous com-plexities and role ambiguity (O'Flynn 2011; Perrone et al. 2003; Williams 2013, 2002). Sim-ilarly, intra-organisational boundary spanners also operate within a context of complexity and ambiguity. Importantly, the management of intra-departmental boundary spanners presents an interesting challenge given the high degrees of trust and autonomy involved (Perrone et al. 2003). Further research is needed into both the role of intra-departmental boundary spanners and how to nurture and manage their practice.

Although the literature on working across boundaries within policy networks provides some clues as to how to manage boundary span-ners, this is a fundamentally different context to the intra-departmental roles explored in this paper. This is critical because as we note at the outset of the paper the current changes in the Australian context point to what is poten-tially a fundamental shift in the role of central agencies. If this is not well-managed, there will be detrimental affects for the functioning of central agencies and policy advice provided to Cabinet. Moreover, the focus on the man-agement of policy networks has drawn our eye away from the 'centre' over the last two or so decades. Our findings indicate that in studying policy networks, we cannot afford to neglect the dynamics of internal government arrangements and processes.

**Endnote**

1. Closing The Gap is a major initiative to ad-dress inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

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