

Public pressure leads to review of mandarins’ excessive salaries

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Public pressure has now caused the Remuneration Tribunal to review how it sets salaries for our top bureaucrats. Former senator **Rex Patrick** reports on the warts smothering the review.

Irresponsible conduct by the Remuneration Review Tribunal has led to a much-needed review, not because the tribunal members have had an epiphany.

MWM, the bureaucracy-focused *The Mandarin* and *The Canberra Times* have led the charge in exposing the outrageous salaries of our Departmental Secretaries. So too has Senator Jacqui Lambie with her Remuneration Tribunal Amendment (There For Public Service, Not Profit) [Bill 2025](#). All of this has contributed to public outrage.

The announcement of the review came 15 days after *MWM* published a scathing article revealing the Tribunal, on its own evidence to a Senate inquiry, was setting secretaries' salaries without reference to comparable positions in State bureaucracies, or comparable positions overseas.

“ They were doing no due diligence. „



Fat cat salaries. Public service chiefs in a world of their own

Salaries for our best-paid Federal public servants are set without reference to private sector salaries, comparable positions in State bureaucracies, or what other countries pay.

M Michael West



Caesar judging Caesar (in secret)

There is a need for a reset on Secretaries' salaries. When the man running the country, the Prime Minister, gets a salary of \$622K and departmental Secretaries get much more, something is wrong.

Department	Remuneration Note
Prime Minister and Cabinet	\$ 1,086,842 *2023-24 as the 2024-25 number is split between Glynn Davis (old) and Steve Kennedy (new)
Home Affairs	\$1,084,638
Foreign Affairs and Trade	\$1,033,596
Defence	\$1,022,766
Attorney-General	\$987,911
Health, Disability and Ageing	\$972,552
Treasury	\$959,257 *2023-24 as the 2024-25 number is split between Steve Kennedy (old) and Jenny Wilkinson (new)
Industry	\$917,102
Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water	\$920,905

Secretaries' Remuneration 2024-26 (Source: Annual Reports)

There are two fundamental problems with the review.

First, it's Caesar judging Caesar. The Remuneration Tribunal, over time, has simply engaged in incompetence and will be keen to come up with new numbers that might suggest they only had it slightly wrong.

Secondly, and closely related, the Tribunal has decided that all submissions are to be secret. The guidelines for submissions say that nothing will be public, "Responses to consultation will be treated as confidential and will not be published with attribution or in full."

“ This is self-protectionism by the Tribunal. „

There will be no visibility to the good ideas of contributors, good ideas that may conflict with the Tribunal's final position.

We will not get to see the submissions of people who think that the Tribunal should increase Secretaries' salaries, the submissions of those who think the current arrangements are fine, and the submissions of those who challenge the generosity of the current salaries. If the Secretaries get together and argue their case, you won't get to criticise or endorse their arguments.

The default should be openness, with an ability for the Tribunal, on request, to make submissions confidential only where it is proper to do so.

When Senator Lambie tabled her contribution to the Senate inquiry into her Bill, she wrote, "Substantial work is required to improve the transparency of the Tribunal's operations". Contacted about the secrecy approach being taken in the review, Senator Lambie called it "a sham process".

Way too high

The Tribunal ought not pretend that Government need to attract the right people to Secretary roles. The reality is that Secretaries' jobs are not subject to competition.

- The current head of Prime Minister and Cabinet is Steve Kennedy, plucked from his role as Treasury Secretary.
- The current head of Home Affairs is Stephanie Foster. She started her Public Service career in 1987 and was promoted to Secretary from within Home Affairs.
- The current head of Foreign Affairs and Trade is Jan Adams. She was a ministerial advisor from 1993 to 1996 and moved to Foreign Affairs and Trade, where she stayed until shifted from Ambassador to Japan to Secretary.
- The current Secretary of Defence is Megan Quinn, straight from another Secretary role in the Department of Industry.
- The current head of the Attorney-General's Department is Kathryn Jones. She's a 25-year veteran of the Public Service. Prior to her appointment as Secretary, she was Associate Secretary of the Department of Defence, Deputy Secretary in the Department of Finance and Deputy Secretary in the Attorney-General's Department

The pattern is clear.

Being a secretary is rarely the result of a competition; it turns on having done a reasonable job (no reason to move away from cautious approaches) and being politically responsive.

Secretaries' roles cannot be compared with the CEO of a company, as some like to suggest. One of the keys skills of a CEO is the ability to bring in income and then make careful choices on how to spend that income to achieve a company's current and future objectives, all whilst returning a profit.

Secretaries know little about generating money. Their money simply arrives on their doorstep every May in the form of a budget. And unlike in the commercial world, there is often very little feedback on whether the money spent achieves current objectives.

The United States have got it right. US Government Department Secretaries, who head up much larger agencies with much bigger budgets, under US law get less than half those salaries. They are limited to \$US250,000 or around \$403,000.

Their Secretary of War runs a department with a larger annual budget than the entire Australian Government, but he gets less than half the salary of our Defence Department Secretary.

Have your say (we will)

Everyone can [make a submission](#) to the Tribunal, but they just need to be aware of the sham; they're marking their own homework in total secrecy.

MWM encourages everyone to do so – you've got until 10 June 2026, but also encourages you to insist that your ideas and views are published by them.

MWM will be submitting this article and granting permission for them to publish it. But we won't be holding our breath waiting for them to do so.



Fat Cat bureaucrats. Rem Tribunal out of touch, out of sight

While top bureaucrats are now earning one million a year, the tribunal that decides who gets what is doing its best to keep its decisions secret.

M Michael West



Rex Patrick

Rex Patrick is a former Senator for South Australia and, earlier, a submariner in the armed forces. Best known as an anti-corruption and transparency crusader, Rex is also known as the ["Transparency Warrior."](#)