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DAMON JOHNSTON

'Dan had same number of private staff as PM and NSW premier combined'



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For all the ombudsman's warnings about "[creeping politicisation](#)" and a culture of secrecy and fear in Victoria's public sector, it's this astounding finding that will be remembered; [Daniel Andrews' private office](#) had roughly as many staff as the Prime Minister and NSW Premier combined.

In a [landmark report tabled in parliament](#) on Wednesday, integrity watchdog Deborah Glass notes the "growth and influence of the [Premier's Private Office](#) was raised by some as a worrying concentration of decision-making outside of specialist Departments".

The Ombudsman found the Premier's Private office had more than 80 staff members, compared with just over 50 in the Prime Minister's office, and under 35 in NSW.

Glass, who finishes her 10-year reign as the state's ombudsman early next year, has been a constant thorn in the thick hide of Andrews, holding him to account for a series of dodgy decisions during his time as leader of the Victorian ALP.

While he's now moved on, [Glass didn't miss him on her way out](#), revealing that in 2022 his private office employed as many taxpayer-funded advisers as the leader of the nation and the leader of the nation's biggest state put together.

Remarkably, Glass was refused access to an organisational chart of the [Andrews' PPO](#) so the report was unable to determine exactly what all of these staff were actually employed to do.

And what was the return on investment for Victorian taxpayers from this bloated private office? The Ombudsman doesn't directly answer this, but it's a valid question.

And one valid answer is this; not much, other than a financial catastrophe headlined by budget deficits and state debt soaring to \$250bn within a few years.

In the report entitled "Alleged politicisation of the public sector", Glass warns this unhealthy culture of creeping politicisation, secrecy and fear carries real world risks for taxpayers, most significantly in infrastructure projects like the Suburban Rail Loop where it has placed public funds at "obvious risk".

The integrity watchdog finds the "marginalisation" of departments has eroded a key plank of the Westminster principle of an independent public service providing frank and fearless advice to government.

While Glass did not substantiate complaints the public service had been "stacked" with ALP operatives, she did uncover a public sector "politicised in other, equally pervasive ways".

She describes it as "creeping politicisation".

Disturbingly, the ombudsman's 18-month investigation hit road blocks. While 180 submissions were made, and 45 senior public officials were interviewed, other potential whistleblowers backed off after initially indicating they were willing to spill the beans. As one source close to the inquiry told The Australian; ["The fear factor was very strong, and very limiting."](#)

In her foreword, Glass speaks to this culture of fear:

“We were also deeply troubled by the number of people who were afraid to speak to us.

“Two sentiments stood out – concern and fear. Concern about what people saw as the quickening corrosion of longstanding Westminster principles of responsible government. Fear that if they spoke up, if they were in any way identifiable as having done so, their careers would be finished.”

Aside from criticising the broad culture in the Victorian public sector, Glass reserved some her strongest criticisms for the Andrews’ signature election promise of the Suburban Rail Loop.

She concluded that “excessive secrecy” around mega-builds like the SRL — which latest estimates have costed at least at \$125bn — which she confirmed was “proved up” by consultants rather than developed by public servants. Glass noted that the election announcement was a closely guarded secret and “blindsided” the agency established by Andrews to “remove short-term politics from infrastructure” planning.

The report also cites “shoddy recruitment practices and notes that the investigation uncovered frequent direct appointments of former ministerial advisers into the public sector.

New Premier Jacinta Allan may claim that the ombudsman has cleared Labor of stacking Labor mates into plum roles in the public service, but overall this report is a devastating and overdue critique about how Victoria has been run for decades, mostly on Labor’s watch.

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Damon Johnston has been a journalist for more than 35 years. Before joining The Australian as Victoria Editor in February 2020, Johnston was the editor of the Herald Sun - Australia's biggest selling daily newspaper... [Read more](#)



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