

THE COOMBS COMMISSION

Putting aside paperwork and dealing with people

GOVERNMENT

by BRUCE JUDDERY

FROM the vantage point of Canberra, it is very easy sometimes to overlook the detail that the Public Service pyramids — most of which have their apexes in this city — also have bases.

Any discussion of public administration in Canberra inevitably revolves around that magical word "policy". Departments manoeuvre against one another to determine which shall have control of what policy "area". Individuals within departments, commissions and so on, fight one another and on behalf of their agency to see that such and such a vision of the appropriate policy is effected.

At the other end of the line, the Public Service really is more about the manners, and sympathy, of the young man or girl on the other side of the counter — in the Social Security office, the Commonwealth Employment Service or wherever — than the visions splendid (or squalid) of the national capital.

Not surprisingly, there is a very distinct shift in style, tone and preoccupation between hearings by Dr Coombs's Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration at

Commission on Australian Government Administration at its Northbourne Avenue headquarters, and those held in the States.

To generalise, witnesses in Canberra are concerned with the "big picture", with the distribution of power between departments, and between departments and the Public Service Board, with the role of permanent heads, and whether

ministers should be allowed to sack them.

At the State level, witnesses either talk about the morale and organisation within their own, individual section, branch or division of the service, or about the direct relationship between individual (often quite junior) public servants and the people they are supposed to serve — the public.

Canberra submissions are about Public Service efficiency, which is usually to be achieved by giving greater authority to the department or permanent head before the commission at a given time, or perhaps by the introduction of some grand design or another. At the grass roots, the chief preoccupation is social justice.

Thus in Sydney one day last week, for instance, the Coombs Commission found itself confronted in its eyrie on the 20th floor of the Westfield Towers, with two representatives of Women's Liberation, Barbara Callcott and Sandra Mackay.

Not much was initially expected of the pair (who con-

not much was initially expected of the pair (who confessed surprise at finding a member of their gender, Professor Enid Campbell, on what they had believed to be an all-male, chauvinist commission). To start with, indeed, their

remarks went along predictably ideological lines. But it was another matter when they got down to the nuts and bolts of how things are — and how the Government delivers its welfare policies — in the less affluent parts of Sydney.

Discrimination existed throughout the system, the commission was told. For instance, a woman who had sought retraining under the NEAT scheme as a motor mechanic had been told she could be retrained only as a receptionist. Welfare workers, imposing their own moral judgments, removed the benefits of women if they were having an affair with a man.

But one of the strongest points made concerned a more impersonal form of discrimination. "Women are not well enough educated to negotiate the masses of unnecessary paper work" when dealing with the Public Service, averred Sandra Mackay.

"How can women ever hope to cope with the Australian bureaucracy anyway"? demanded Barbara Callcott. No help was provided in accumulating the "mountains of statistics and

was provided in accumulating the "mountains of statistics and

data" required for submissions to departments.

"The way the Public Service works, asking people to make submissions means that the people in real need don't get heard . . . Most working class women aren't organised. Most working-class men aren't organised either, but they do have trade unions and things".

Dr Coombs suggested that the establishment of a bureau on women's issues, as in Canada, might be an appropriate response to the situation. "If a women's department is set up", retorted Barbara Callcott, "other departments would opt out . . . as they did when the Department of Aboriginal Affairs was set up". Instead, every department should set up a committee to continually review the situation of women in the area they covered.

A more intimate view of the bureaucracy was provided by the following witnesses — a team of five, including one policeman, led by a social worker Suzanne Hayes, of the Social Security Department's Sydney office. She was, without much question, one of the stars of the Royal Commission's hearing so far.

Her lengthy submission, substantiated by departmental documents, amounted to a dis-

section and severe criticism of the department's across-the-counter operations in Sydney, and of co-ordination with other authorities (including State departments and the police).

Yesterday, I understand, Suzanne Hayes was carpeted in Sydney by her superior as a result of her submission.

Not that she accused her department of any wilful failings. Rather, it suffered from pressure of work. People who sought pensions, she explained were interviewed by a pensions officer. But he or she had insufficient time to sit down and really explain what it was all about. "You've got to get them in, get them out . . . keep up your statistics", she said.

The notice sent recipients of benefits explaining their obligations was couched in terms that were "all very well if you are fairly well educated or a clued person . . . but not for migrants and others". There was no explanation, for instance, of the term "gross income", which many believed was what they got in their pay packets — until they ran into trouble with the department for earning above the means-tested level.

There was no interpreter at Social Security's head office in Sydney, or at Marrickville, she added. "Informal arrangements", by which interpreters working in other sections could be made available, often broke down because their superiors were reluctant to upset the work of their own sections. Basic social-security forms were not available in languages other than English.

There was, she added, "no aggressive attempt" to implement the policies of the Minister for Social Security. Public contact — by telephone, in the interviewing room or over the counter — was "the lowest, the least important part of the department".

Contemptuous, racist expressions were common in parts of the department. "It's common in a certain age group — the old diggers. I think it's a bias from pe-war or World War II days — an attitude lag".

To go by the questions that were asked by members of the Coombs Commission, Suzanne Hayes' evidence — and other testimony like it from the "grass roots" — has inspired some thought.

As well it might. For if any substantive changes are to be wrought within the Public Service, they will need to reach well beyond Canberra. Abolition of the Public Service Board, say, would be seen as a bloody revolution here, but it probably would make very little

difference in Brunswick or Marrickville. In any reconstruction job, the superstructure is much easier to tackle than the foundations, but it is the foundations that ultimately count most.