



Institute of Public
Administration Australia

The Nationwide Professional
Association of the Public Sector

Leading through change, learning to power share



In this article, Greg Johannes, the Deputy Secretary (Policy) in the Tasmanian Department of Premier and Cabinet and the President of IPAA Tasmania, reflects on the 2011 IPAA National Conference in Hobart and considers what minority government means for public servants.

Leaders across Australia's public sectors, at all levels of their organisational hierarchies and in all tiers of government, are facing an extraordinary new set of challenges. Changing public expectations, emerging communications technologies and shifting balances of Parliamentary power all demand new and more flexible approaches.

As we lead our teams to address these new challenges and opportunities, we find that the power above us is much more finely balanced. While minority governments are nothing new – from Western Europe to local government at home, there are numerous examples – they have blossomed all over Australia in the past decade or so. Minority government partners are bringing new stakeholders to the table and agendas to the cabinet room, causing public servants throughout the country to ask how best to support decision-making when the lines of influence are more opaque.

Minority government and its implications were at the heart of the Institute of Public Administration Australia's 2011 National Conference in Hobart on 25 and 26 August. Bureaucrats and politicians from all three levels of government in Australia were joined by authorities from overseas and other expert commentators to look at the challenges and opportunities posed by minority government.

The conference provided a fantastic balance between keynote addresses, 'Yes Minister' hypotheticals, and expert Q&A panels. Prime Minister Julia Gillard delivered the annual Garran Oration – an oration named in honour of Australia's first public servant and longest-serving Commonwealth department head, Sir Robert Garran.

Whilst a range of papers and videos are now available online (including the Prime Minister's address and the subsequent Q&A session where she opened up to remarkably frank questioning), I would like to share with you my key takeouts from the conference.

1. Power sharing in government is not new – local government has been doing it for years.
2. Different agendas around the table aren't confined to minority governments – the same issue of difference of opinion needs to be managed in any majority Cabinet too.
3. We need to invest more in the professional development of our politicians so that when they become Ministers they are better able to manage their power.
4. Identifying, understanding and managing networks of influence and personal relationships in minority government can be much more challenging, because an even broader range of stakeholders is represented at the table.
5. Poor government performance is a shared responsibility of the Executive, the Parliament and the public service, not just of the Executive Government itself.
6. Minority government may actually allow the public service to be less politicised and less informal and to return to 'proper process'.
7. Smaller lobby and interest groups potentially will become much more powerful and this can be both a bad thing and a good thing.
8. The media is not taking on the role of promoting robust debate of public policy, instead focusing on any disagreement between minority government parties as a sign of instability.
9. The mechanics we put in place to support minority governments will be fundamental to their success, and there is a key role for the public service here.
10. You have to understand the nuance of the politics to direct your resources in the public service accordingly, and this can be more difficult in minority government.

**Conference papers and videos can be found at
www.ipaanationalconference.org.au.**



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