

COVER STORY

# To respect and to serve

The UN is warning of hostility against a struggling minority – our public service. **Sue White** reports.

Complaining about the public service is commonplace for many Australians. We're used to hearing commercial operators, employees and politicians whingeing about our public institutions. But like the popular habit of referring to "Canberra" when we really mean "the federal government", complaints about the public service are often misplaced.

"We not only take the public service for granted, we often demean its significance," the executive director of the Australia Institute, Richard Denniss, says. Today, the United Nations is asking us to spare a moment to thank those who work in service of the broader public good, through the annual observance of Public Service Day. As Denniss says, the role played by public servants is diverse.

"He or she may be a fireman or nurse, someone employed to ensure people receive the benefits they are entitled to, or even someone who is researching better ways to deliver health services," he says.

The Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, says governments and good governance have a central role in addressing some of the world's more complex challenges, such as unemployment, health pandemics and poverty eradication. So why all the criticism?

"English-speaking countries have led the world in the growing hostility towards the importance of the public service," Denniss says. "There is now an excessive

emphasis on reducing the cost and size of the public sector, rather than improving its efficiency or effectiveness."

Events manager Elisa Limburg can see both sides of the argument. As a private consultant with experience running events for government agencies, she has learnt to juggle the different approaches between government and the private sector.

"Government processes are often very different to those in the private sector," she says. "Time frames can be longer, but that is largely due to the approvals processes behind them."

For a worker coming from the commercial world, this may sometimes feel like a "go-slow" button, but Limburg says it's important to look at the big picture.

"People need to bear in mind that government agencies are essentially funded by taxpayers. That means they need to carefully consider every decision and spending decision, as these need to be justified to the public," she says.

And the much-maligned workers? Denniss says Australians are, somewhat inexplicably, more supportive of individual public servants than they are of the role of the public service in general.

"If you ask them, 'Do nurses play an important role?', they say yes. 'Do teachers play an important role?' They say yes," he says.

Limburg says the system might not be perfect, but there are plenty of people inside our public



Spare a thought ... events manager Elisa Limburg says government workers' efforts are overlooked. Photo: Fiona Morris

organisations working hard to make a difference. "I don't think it's fair to assume anyone inside the public service is lazy or doesn't care. With so much administrative activity going on ... often the hard workers' efforts get overlooked," she says.

While we're sparing a thought for those working on everyone's behalf, it

might also pay to consider a world without our public institutions.

"Individuals might not always be entirely satisfied with the service they receive from a government agency, but I think Australians need to reflect on the fact that unlike private corporations, the public service is actually accountable to

them as citizens," Denniss says.

"When your bank or insurance company treats you badly, there's little you can do about it. But if you believe that Centrelink or Medicare have treated you badly, then your local member of parliament and the minister are usually quite responsive to your concerns."