

Rot in the Civil Service: Farewelling Mike Pezzullo

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*There was no better example of Australia's politicised public service than its Home Affairs Secretary, **Mike Pezzullo**. In most other countries, he would have been the ideal conspirator in a coup, a tattletattler in the ranks and bound to brief against those he did not like. Give him a dagger, and he was bound to use it.*

His rise to power paralleled that of the emergence of that super amalgam of a ministry that arose during the Turnbull government. Falling for the fatal error that centralising power assures the consolidation of efficiency, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was swayed by arguments that a broader ministry of home affairs was just the sort of thing Australia needed. What the Commonwealth got in 2017, instead, was a monster run by the twin-headed beast of Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, and Secretary Pezzullo.

The extent of Pezzullo's involvement in the machinations of government, and, it followed, party policy, was revealed by [texts](#) sent to Liberal Party lobbyist and former vice president of the NSW Liberals, Scott Briggs. These became the subject of a joint investigation mounted by *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *60 Minutes*.

In August 2018, when the nation's capital was privy to yet another potential palace coup against a sitting Prime Minister, Pezzullo was opening up to Briggs with indiscreet relish. In one [message](#) he longed to be part of history. "I don't want to interfere but you won't be surprised to hear that in the event of Scomo [Scott Morrison] getting up I would like to see [Peter] Dutton come back to HA [Home Affairs]. No reason for him to stay on the backbench that I can see." Briggs does not demur.

Pezzullo's targets in the government varied. Defence Minister Marise Payne was deemed "completely ineffectual" and a poor fit for office. Former Liberal Attorney-General George Brandis was excoriated for befuddling public servants, though Pezzullo's reasons for doing so are clear: it was Brandis, as Australia's top legal officer, who expressed concerns that Canberra did not need a ministry of such size.

While the Coalition was in power, Pezzullo was coarsely candid about his feelings on war and conflict. Fancying himself as something of a historian, he told gathered staff in his 2021 [ANZAC Day address](#) that Australians best prepare for war.

“Today, as free nations again hear the beating drums and watch worryingly the militarisation of issues that we had, until recent years, thought unlikely to be catalysts for war, let us continue to search unceasingly for the chance for peace while bracing again, yet again, for the curse of war”.

The speech is marked by a blatant misuse and misunderstanding of the legacies left by two US generals: Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Fittingly, Pezzullo ignores one vital aspect of MacArthur: his sacking for being a bit too defiant of the commander-in-chief of the time, President Harry S. Truman.

Australia’s much more modest version of that commander, **Prime Minister Anthony Albanese**, has now received the findings of an independent inquiry into Pezzullo’s conduct conducted by Lynnelle Briggs. In a short statement untroubled by any fuss, Albanese revealed that Pezzullo’s position as department secretary had been terminated.

We have little to go on regarding the substance of the findings. But [press reports note](#) that the now former secretary used his duty, power, status or authority to gain benefits and advantages for himself; engaged in gossip and disrespectful critique of ministers and public servants; failed to keep sensitive government information confidential; failed to remain apolitical in his office and failed to disclose any relevant conflicts of interest.

Unfortunately, the report itself will not be made public, an unsatisfactory state of affairs that does little to restore confidence in the civil service. The argument advanced in this case is that publication will lead to the disclosure of personal information. But what of it? The insinuation here is hard to avoid: keeping such an investigation buried suggests a closed shop, with officials keen to keep matters out of the public glare. Given that Pezzullo was the most notable panjandrum in Canberra’s bureaucratic tangle, the rot is hardly likely to have remained at the head. Who else, the question must be asked, breached protocol? The list is likely to be ugly and long,

As **former Senator Rex Patrick** [stated](#), Albanese “has done the right and necessary thing in terminating Mike Pezzullo’s appointment as Home Affairs Secretary. But in the interests of transparency and accountability he must also table Lynnelle Briggs’s report in Parliament today.”

PM [@AlboMP](#) has done the right and necessary thing in terminating Mike Pezzullo’s appointment as Home Affairs Secretary. But in the interests of transparency and accountability he must also table Lynnelle Briggs’s report in Parliament today. [#auspol](#) <https://t.co/fVNCBs7U20>

— Rex Patrick (@MrRexPatrick) [November 26, 2023](#)

Having left the Australian Public Service Code in tatters, Pezzullo will undoubtedly find himself on the board of a defence or security company and take his place in the military-industrial complex. He might finally get a chance to join a thinktank. His sacking, however, was the culmination of a culture long in the making. Over the decades, the major parties

have made political appointments a matter of course, subordinating expertise and fearless advice to party loyalties. Perversely enough, Pezzullo was a perfect exponent of that tendency: a political civil servant. The result: Canberra is awash and sinking with officialdom terrified to take a different stance to the political agenda of the day. Agree with those in government, or risk languishing, demotion or worse.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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