The Mandarin Live: Future Ready Public Service Western Australia

Speech delivered by Bevan Warner, Ombudsman WA

Perth, 29 October 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge that we meet on Whadjuk Boodjar, on land that was never ceded or freely given, and I thank all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for their continuing care for the land and waterways that we all get to live on, work on and enjoy.

Introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to what a Future Ready public service looks like.

Much of my career has involved working in service systems overwhelmed by demand, between public institutions and people facing vulnerability and unequal power. I've worked within service systems that did good yet also caused harm. In legal aid, community housing and homelessness settings. As WA Ombudsman I must be impartial, but **impartiality does not mean indifference**. One of my tasks is to identify what is not working and to describe what better public administration should look like.

I bring frontline experience to the role and deep respect for staff striving to make a difference in their communities. I will discuss how rigorous evaluation and independent scrutiny can support that work.

I want to offer two key messages as context for my remarks. Firstly, that overengineering assurance activities may in fact make things works and not better; and secondly, that trust is an administrative challenge not just a political or democratic one because trust is tied to the experience people have of government services.

Pace of change

Established in 1972 as a check on government power, the WA Ombudsman was Australia's first parliamentary Ombudsman office, predating freedom of information,

equal opportunity laws and the Racial Discrimination Act, checks and balances we now take for granted.

50 years later, the pace of change in society is only accelerating. Artificial intelligence, algorithms and online influencers are reshaping how people receive information, **form communities and experience government**.

There is enormous promise in these developments. They can empower people and help government deliver more responsive services. But they can also mislead, divide and entrench inequality because technology has no morality of its own.

Declining trust and growing inequality

We know that when trust falls and inequality grows, divisions deepen.

We can already see the warning signs of declining trust in our institutions. Earlier this year only 53 per cent of Australians reported trusting government to do what is right.[1] 68 per cent, in a different survey, believe politics is more concerned with short-term gains than addressing long-term challenges, and many are sceptical that parliaments are effective at tackling the country's major challenges.[2]

There is also increasing division. Lower-income Australians are much less likely to perceive government as competent and ethical.[3] People in regional and remote areas are less satisfied with public services and demonstrate lower trust in government and democracy more broadly.[4] Surveys of young people also indicate that a lack of trust in public institutions is influencing their goals and attitudes, including towards having children.[5]

People are more likely to trust government institutions when they believe those institutions are effective. Yet less than half of Australians consider state and territory governments to be effective, and less than one third perceive state and territory public servants as **honest, empathetic and delivering on their commitments**.[6]

These are **sobering** figures. They tell us that too many people no longer believe our institutions are working for them.

At the same time, we see growing social inequity. A Bankwest Curtin Economics study found that West Australians living in poverty increased by 25% from 11.8 per cent of the population in 2021 to 15.1 per cent in 2025.[7] . Children in single-parent households are most at risk: over one in three live in poverty, and over one in ten in deep poverty.[8] More families are rationing essentials, and children start life with fewer opportunities than their peers.

Complaints to our office reflect these pressures, rising 61 per cent over two years.

At the same time, we are seeing increasingly challenging complainant behaviour. Complainants are more willing to make unreasonable demands or reject the legitimacy of our public institutions altogether. While this behaviour needs to be managed, it does not mean their grievances are unfounded. Often, beneath the behaviour is frustration, vulnerability or a deep belief that institutions have not listened.

So, when we speak about a future-ready public service, we cannot mean only faster and better technology, more digital channels, or use of artificial intelligence.

Those things matter, but they will not by themselves, sustain public trust or address fundamental inequalities.

Challenges faced by frontline staff

These challenges show why an effective, apolitical public service, that initiates and acts decisively in the public interest, is so important. So, what can get in the way?

Most public servants are talented and committed but many are expected to operate under greater scrutiny without the tools, authority or support they need to succeed.

Matters that should be resolved close to the front line are often escalated because people are not trusted to exercise judgment. Delegations become narrower. Guidelines become rules. Risk aversion becomes the default setting. When public sector systems become too process-driven and impersonal, they become slower, more complex and less responsive to individual needs.

Systems also tend to reward reaction, while early intervention is often the hardest work to fund. Although the public overwhelmingly wants governments to solve problems,[9] senior leaders and middle managers often have limited practical room, to stop what is no longer working, try new approaches, take sensible risks or invest in prevention. Decisions require approval from the top. New requirements and pilot programs are added but not much gets subtracted.

Frontline staff must also navigate agency boundaries without the authority or systems needed to coordinate an effective whole-of-government response. These pressures are greatest in regional and remote communities, where staff and specialist services are harder to secure. The recent appointment of a Senior Coordinator for the Pilbara illustrates this point.[10]

Against that backdrop, it is understandable that trust declines when the community experience public services as slow, impersonal or ineffective.

The role of the Ombudsman

This is where my office has a small but important role of turning scrutiny into learning, greater transparency and more public trust.

The Ombudsman's office was established to safeguard people against error. History shows that large institutions can come to equate their own interests with the public interest and regard their actions as inherently justified. The Ombudsman provides an independent check on that power.

That role was important when the office was established. At a time of declining trust in public institutions, it is even more important today.

The Victorian Ombudsman described Ombudsmen and other integrity agencies as contributing to the "democratic dialectic".[11] Put simply, we connect people's experience of government with the continuing improvement of public administration. We listen, test those experiences against standards of fairness and feed the lessons back into the system.

We have very strong powers to do that work best used sparingly. We can investigate and report to Parliament. We can enter premises and inspect records, require people to answer questions and compel the production of documents.

The strength of the Ombudsman model lies not only in its powers but in the flexibility of our processes. We can design investigative methods and reporting routines to suit the situation, whereas must observe (and are perhaps at times hemmed in) by formal procedures and legal rules. As the Victorian Ombudsman also observed, a process may be technically lawful, but it may be unfair in practice.[12] Put another way, compliance does not always equate to fairness.

Our role is not about finding fault, nor do we claim to have superior knowledge. But we can speak independently. We can bring uncomfortable facts into the open. And we can say clearly what public administrators may find difficult to say.

In this way, Ombudsmen help turn individual complaints and systemic scrutiny into broader public learning. That is how trust is earned.

Our new agenda

As Ombudsman, I recognise that my office has likely contributed to additional layers of process and complexity in the past, meaning we've been part of the problem.

Oversight can strengthen transparency, accountability and fairness. But it can also impose significant costs when interventions are impractical, disproportionate or not

targeted at root causes. Indeed, research tells us that regulation has the potential to stifle creativity, divert staff from the front line and affect their wellbeing.[13]

Corruption inquiries have shown that increased compliance requirements and layers of approval can paradoxically reduce assurance because heavy workloads mean they become tick-and-flick exercises with individual accountability diluted. [14]

Similar issues have emerged in reviews of early childhood education in Australia and internationally. Staff can become overloaded with administrative demands spending less time with children and keeping them safe.[15]. Systems can end up focussing on 'doing things right' rather than 'doing the right thing'.[16] We need to avoid 'compliance theatre' where systems reward visible compliance activities over the outcomes we actually need.[17]

That is why my office wants to move away from adding more speculative process controls, which increase bureaucracy without clear and tangible benefit. We want to be part of the solution of helping public servants to make better decisions, with greater **efficiency, clarity and humanity**.

Earlier, I described some of the challenges facing public sector staff. These observations were informed by discussions with current and former Directors General, and by qualitative and quantitative data from various reviews and past public sector surveys. Next month, we plan to publish guidance on the issues we are likely to investigate in coming years. Any recommendation making from those investigations **will be anchored in the real-world challenges faced by front line staff.**

The aim is to be constructive and tell people in advance the issues that concern us and that we are likely to examine. If that prompts an agency to get a head start on reviewing its practices that is a good outcome too.

As part of our commitment to greater transparency, we have also published investigation standards so people can understand how we go about our work.

Our investigation standards make clear that we will consistently ask four questions:

- First, do program staff have clear guidance about risk?
- Second, do they know what success looks like?
- Third, are people receiving a fair service wherever they live?
- And fourth, are agencies working together when an issue crosses agency boundaries?

The first two questions help us understand how day-to-day decisions are made and the parameters staff have to anchor individual judgement.

The third question requires us to consider the extent of any service disparity between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Western Australia is the nation's largest state and the most heavily urbanised. We appreciate that this produces real challenges government organisations trying to deliver comparable services outside the metropolitan area. When we examine public administrators' efforts we will ask a fundamental question: if people are receiving a poorer service because of where they live, is that fair and reasonable?

The final question requires us to examine whether government agencies are working in a joined-up way to achieve shared outcomes. Agencies sharing information and working collaboratively should be straightforward. It is what the public expects. Yet it remains a significant challenge. We see this in almost every investigation we conduct and report we write.

By providing forward guidance and being clear about the questions we will ask, we are providing greater certainty about our approach. Which brings me to what a future-ready public service looks like.

A future-ready public service

A future-ready public service does three things well: it empowers people close to service delivery to make decisions, knows whether its programs are working, and is genuinely transparent, especially when choices are difficult.

Decisions should be made as close as possible to the people they affect. Public services cannot respond well if every decision is tested or pushed upward. Staff need clear authority, sound guidance and confidence to exercise judgment. Technology may improve responsiveness, but this can be a false economy, if middle managers don't believe and experience senior leaders as supportive of their roles, that they have their backs.

A future-ready public service must also know whether it is succeeding. It is not enough to believe that a program is working. Agencies need to consider what constitutes success. The complaints your agencies receive are particularly useful intelligence and should be fed back into service design, guidance and training. Without evaluation, problems can remain hidden or avoided, and policy intent can drift away from service users' actual experience.

Lastly, a future-ready public service should demonstrate a genuine commitment to transparency and to taking the community into its confidence, particularly when decisions are difficult and resources are constrained. Transparency is not the sole responsibility of elected governments, nor should it be left to political processes. There is a role for public sector stewardship, especially in this 24/7 information age we live in. Stewarding the public service means ensuring access to information, listening to the community and involving people in choice-making. After all, public servants exist to serve the public and the government, and people are more likely to accept difficult decisions when they understand the reasons and feel their views have been heard.

I acknowledge that governments today operate in an environment of intense scrutiny, rapid media cycles and heightened political pressure. In this environment, openness can feel risky. It can make the task of governing harder. But transparency, together with effective public services, is essential for earning and sustaining trust. We want to turn scrutiny into practical system learning and better public administration.

Put simply, **trust is an administrative challenge** not just a democratic or political one because trust is tied to service experience.

In closing, we live in uncertain and rapidly changing times. None of us can predict every challenge the future will bring. But we do need to build public institutions that are ready to respond: institutions that listen, learn, adapt and act decisively.

My office has a small but important role to play in that endeavour, but you are the heroes. As a check on power, we are here to help public institutions learn, improve and sustain the trust of the people we all serve and I look forward to working with all of you in that task.

End

[1] Edelman Trust Institute. 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer - Trust amid insularity – Australia report, March 2026, p. 43.

[2] Curtis Moore, Mara Hammerle & Maria Cardoso, *Purpose of Government Pulse 2026: Australian attitudes towards government and democracy*, 2026, Centre for Policy Development, p. 5.

[3] Edelman Trust Institute. *2026 Edelman Trust Barometer - Trust amid insularity – Australia report, March 2026, p. 8*

[4] McKinnon, *2025 McKinnon Index: Detailed findings, November 2025, pp. 42-43.*

[5] Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Young Australians' concerns and trust are related to their family formation goals: Growing Up in Australia Snapshot Series – Issue 16, June 2026, p. 18.*

[6] McKinnon, findings, November 2025, pp. 17, 21.

[7] Duncan A & Twomey C, '2026 Poverty Snapshot: The changing face of poverty in WA', Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, October 2026, pp. 11, 22.

[8] ibid.

[9] Curtis Moore, Mara Hammerle & Maria Cardoso, *Purpose of Government Pulse 2026: Australian attitudes towards government and democracy*, 2026, Centre for Policy Development, p. 4.

[10] Government of Western Australia, Media Release - Senior Coordinator for Child Protection appointed in the Pilbara, 10 October 2026.

[11] Marlo Baragwanath, Keynote Address, Australian Public Sector Anti-Corruption Conference 2026, Canberra, 9 September 2026.

[12] ibid

[13] Mannion H, Minshall D, Tarn M, Tracy DK, Brooks SK, Greenberg N. Why regulation hurts: balancing the need to maintain standards with the mental health impact on public sector professionals. BJPsych Bull. 2025 Jun;49(3):178-181. doi: 10.1192/bjb.2024.90.

[14] NSW Independent Commission against Corruption, To sign or not to sign; that is the question, Corruption Matters, June 2015, Issue 45.

[15] Eilleen Munro, The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report – A child centred system, May 2011, p. 6; Public Service Association of New South Wales, Inquiry into Child Protection, Submission no. 66, July 2016, p. 18; Audit Office of New South Wales, Report snapshot: Oversight of the child protection system, June 2024, Accessed 14 October 2026; The University of Sydney, Childcare educators spend less than 30 percent of time in focused interaction with children, 16 July 2025, Accessed 14 October 2026; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, Shifting the balance: Increasing the focus on teaching and learning by reducing the burden of compliance and administration: Review to reduce red tape for teachers and school leaders, December 2020, p. 3.

[16] Eilleen Munro, The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report – A child centred system, May 2011, p. 6.

[17] International Compliance Association, The theatre of compliance, January 2026. Accessed 14 October 2026.