

# *Traditional approaches to the merit principle in the Queensland public service from 1859 to 1959*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The traditional career public service model of employment was ostensibly based on the merit principle. It was considered that merit criteria would ensure employment based on what you knew rather than who you knew, and remove patronage. This paper challenges this claim through an historical review of Queensland public employment. It finds that although the merit principle was often enshrined in legislation, subsequent regulations, policies and practices subverted this legislative intention. Merit was balanced against social values including gender and class discrimination, and against circumstances such as wars. This had implications for the skill levels and quality of public employees, and therefore for public policy and public services.

## ***Introduction***

The merit principle was supposed to be the cornerstone of public service employment. The most efficient public workforce was to be identified through competitive examinations, open to everyone, and the highest achievers at those examinations were to have first claim on public appointments. This paper reviews the extent to which this intention was realised. It begins with a discussion of the rationale for the merit principle, as laid down in the original career service model in 1853. Then it considers how the merit principle was implemented through a case study of the Queensland public service. The paper demonstrates that merit was far from an objective guiding principle. It was defined and interpreted in ways that restricted the pool of applicants for permanent positions, on irrelevant grounds such as age, gender and class. There were also ample means to bypass merit through special entrance processes and unregulated temporary employment subject to little merit consideration. It is perhaps little wonder that, by the 1960s, public services were considered deficient and in need of reform.

## ***Merit as the cornerstone of the traditional career service model of employment***

In the 1850s, Britain developed a career service system of employment to address problems of inefficiency and politicisation. The landmark Northcote-Trevelyan Report noted:

... the Government of the country could not be carried on without the aid of an efficient body of permanent officers, occupying a position duly subordinate to that of the Ministers who are directly responsible to the Crown and to Parliament, yet possessing sufficient independence, character, ability, and experience to be able to advise, assist, and to some extent, influence, those who are from time to time set over them. (Northcote and Trevelyan 1853)

Notwithstanding this important role, the organisation of the civil service was found deficient, and the public service suffered in internal efficiency and public estimation. One difficulty was the lack of care taken by those entrusted with the distribution of patronage. Department heads often made appointments to unimportant junior posts in order to repay personal or political claims, often without any inquiry into the appointee's merits, and subject to dubious examination and probation tests. They recruited young and untested people into base-grade positions, gave them boring and depressing work, and provided advancement without regard to service or qualifications. When more important senior vacancies arose, this internal pool of clerks was often considered unsuitable and a "stranger" would be appointed. The Report accepted that external appointments might be required in some instances to engage people of the highest abilities, but considered that the "system of appointing strangers has been carried far beyond this" and many external appointees had no greater merit than internal candidates. This was disheartening, as clerks realised that hard work would not necessarily help them advance, and idleness would not necessarily keep them back (Northcote and Trevelyan 1853).

Northcote and Trevelyan (1853) recommended methods for ensuring a supply of “good men”. The general principle was to carefully select young people according to their capacity and education, and constantly make them feel that promotion depended entirely on the industry and ability they displayed. The first step was the establishment of a system of examination before appointment, run by an independent board. Competitive examinations were to be open to all people, subject to reference checks regarding their age, health and moral fitness. The examination was to include numerous subjects and some practical elements, to secure candidates of general ability. Only candidates who passed the examination were to be appointed. Appointments without examination could be made where warranted by the position and the person’s pre-eminence in that field, but such decisions were to be documented and reported to Parliament annually.

Under the career service model, a politically neutral public service was recruited on merit, and given tenure to encourage frank and fearless advice and protect it from electoral whims. This enabled it to serve a government of any political persuasion. Australia emulated many British traditions, and adopted and adapted the British model into its state and federal public services. The career service model endured relatively unchanged from the 1850s until the 1980s. However, by the 1970s, public services were perceived as unresponsive. To a large extent, this was the result of the employment framework that enabled public servants to be relatively independent from their political masters. Historical factors of corruption and politicisation had led to the development of civil services based on negative protections rather than positive duties and systems (Hecllo 1977). Public services often had insular, internal labour markets (Gardner 1993:137), and conventions such as merit had been “re-interpreted” in inflexible and inefficient ways. Since the 1980s, there have been significant changes to the traditional career service model in an attempt to improve efficiency and responsiveness. Why had the merit principle failed to ensure the recruitment and promotion of efficient officers?

This paper tests whether merit was genuinely the cornerstone of public employment, through a case study of the Queensland public service in its first 100 years. The Queensland public service employment framework is reviewed in regard to merit in recruitment for the ordinary division of employees (i.e. clerical rather than professional staff). This employment framework generally applied to public service departments, although at times it was also extended to broader public sector agencies. Data is drawn from primary legislation (public service acts) and subordinate legislation (regulations). Further information is drawn from parliamentary debates, annual reports, Commissions and Inquiries, and secondary sources. The analysis begins with the origin of Queensland as a separate colony in 1859, and progresses through a review of chronological periods representing changes in policy.

### ***A false start 1859 - 1889***

Governor Bowen established the fledgling Queensland Civil Service in line with the Northcote-Trevelyan principles, and in January 1860, established a system of competitive examinations for appointments based on merit rather than patronage (Hughes 1980; PSC 1959:1). He advised the British Secretary of State:

the patronage of all the public departments was placed at my disposal on my first arrival. I have prescribed to myself as an inviolable rule, to appoint to public employment here only persons possessing a claim on this colony, either from long residence within its limits, or from services directly rendered to it, or to the Colony of New South Wales, before the recent separation. My own relatives and private friends come under none of these categories, and are, therefore, necessarily excluded from my consideration. (Bowen 1860)

However, subsequent legislation did not enhance merit consideration. The first legislation – *the Civil Service Act 1863* – was a retrograde step from Bowen’s 1860 system. It contained no guiding definition of the new concept of merit, and no requirement that recruitment be based upon entrance examinations, with merit being gauged through a probation period (ss9-11). Premier Herbert was quite dissatisfied with this early workforce, and in 1863 noted that:

there are few clerks in the service who have either brains or steadiness, and if anything, even in ordinary matters of detail, is trusted to them, it is infallibly blundered. (Scott *et al.*, 2001:31).

The Select Committee on the Working and Organisation of the Civil Service in 1866 confirmed many of Parliament's suspicions that the 1863 Act was unsatisfactory. The legislation gave governments the option to act or not act as they pleased, and this resulted in poor implementation. Many ministers considered that patronage was acceptable, and that their responsibility to Parliament should be complemented by powers of appointment. Public servants also criticised the Act, as they resented people being brought in from outside and placed in positions above them (Select Committee 1866).

The Act soon became a "dead letter" as a result of many factors, including patronage, lateral recruitment, inappropriate use of temporary employment, and public complaints about mediocrity (Caiden 1965:38), and was repealed in 1869. Personal contact once again controlled personnel decisions (Caiden 1965:48), and the quality of the public service declined further, as patronage led to the appointment of unfit people and subsequent gross misconduct (Scott *et al.*, 2001:26). In 1889, after 20 years of such a system, a Royal Commission into the public service condemned the ad hoc system of political influence in appointments, and recommended new legislation (Royal Commission 1889:24). There were no formal public sector unions at this time, and this research did not locate any information from informal staff associations.

### ***The personnel institutions and legislative framework from 1889-1959***

From 1889, Queensland public service employment was managed by a central personnel agency, and the institutional changes are described briefly in Table 1. The first personnel institution was the Civil Service Board established under new legislation in 1889. Minor legislative amendments in 1896 led to it being renamed the Public Service Board, but it comprised the same members as before, and oversaw largely similar legislation as that of 1896. More radical institutional changes were made in 1901, when the management of the Public Service Board was handed over to politicians – this was the antithesis of the career service convention of removing personnel decisions from the hands of politicians. Notwithstanding these institutional changes, there was little change to the merit framework. From 1920, a Public Service Commissioner was established, and from 1922 that Commissioner oversaw new legislation that generally enhanced the career service conventions. Despite these various institutional changes, there were some distinct similarities in the legislative provisions for merit consideration, as well as a general undermining of the primary legislation by subordinate regulations and policies and a prepared-ness to breach the rules in practice.

**TABLE 1**  
*Personnel institutions in Queensland Public Service 1889-1959*

<i>Period</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Legislation</i>	<i>Government</i>
1889-1895	Civil Service Board	Civil Service Act 1889	Conservative
1896-1901	Public Service Board, managed by bureaucrats	Public Service Act 1896	Conservative
1901-1918	Public Service Board, managed by politicians	Public Service Act Amendment Act 1901	1901-1915 Conservative 1915-1918 Labor
1920-1959	Public Service Commissioner	Public Service Act 1922	1920-1929 Labor 1929-1932 Conservative 1932-1957 Labor 1957-1959 Conservative

Public sector union membership grew significantly, once the new Labor Government's *Industrial Arbitration Act 1916* removed restrictions on government employees forming trade unions, and the Government removed threats of dismissal or exclusion from promotion for union participation (Fitzgerald and Thornton 1989:27; Murphy 1983:35-40). Public service unions were instrumental in broad changes to wages and classification structures, and active in their agitation for union inclusion in decision-making processes. However, they were conspicuously silent on many of the distortions of merit.

### ***Legislative intentions for a strict order of merit***

The *Civil Service Act 1889* contained relatively strict provisions regarding merit. Every eligible applicant was entitled to sit an examination for entrance (ss.21-22), only those who had passed the examination were to be admitted to the service (s.20), and appointments were to be made from a strict order of merit list based on examination performance (s.23). However the Act left the remaining detail to the Civil Service Board, which could make regulations for admission to the service that:

prescribe a preliminary examination as to the health of the candidates, the period of residence in Queensland before examination, and the subjects for examination in each Division, and may also prescribe a maximum or minimum age of candidates for admission. A copy of such regulations shall be laid before Parliament within fourteen days from publication thereof if Parliament is then sitting, and if it is not sitting, within fourteen days from the commencement of the next session. (s.18).

{There were some dangers in this, as Parliament had not taken root in Queensland: before 1885 it only sat from May to August and for few days at that, and in 1922 the Upper House was abolished. This resulted in Parliamentary power largely being transferred to the bureaucracy and executive government.}

These broad legislative intentions were narrowed through subordinate legislation, proposed by the Board and accepted by the Government, which narrowed the pool of candidates, and allowed for exemptions to this process.

### ***An ever-shallower pool of candidates for examination***

Open merit competition was impinged upon by the prescription of age limits – effectively defining merit as equating to youth. Northcote and Trevelyan had recommended that recruitment be focused on young people, who had not failed in other occupations, which was not consistent with genuinely open competition. The Board whole-heartedly adopted this recommendation, and continued to narrow the age requirements in subsequent regulations (for reasons undiscovered). Age requirements were set at 16-25 years in 1889, amended to 15-22 years in 1915, and further narrowed to 15-19 years in 1918 (various regulations). Such age restrictions were sorely tested by world wars, and there was some relaxation during World War II to include people over military age (PSC 1943:5; PSC 1944:2).

The pool of candidates was further narrowed by health and character considerations (1890 Regulation r.6), effectively defining merit as including good health and good character. The requirement for a health certificate, while possibly valid for the purposes of joining a superannuation fund, should not have been valid in merit considerations unless it impeded the candidate's ability to carry out the work. The requirement to be of good character was not limited to any form of criminal record, and could be interpreted as subjectively as desired.

In the initial phase from 1889-1902, females were prevented from being part of the pool of candidates. While neither the legislation nor the regulations precluded female employment, an administrative decision was taken to prohibit women from sitting the examination. This was considered justifiable, as many positions were deemed unsuitable for women, and they were therefore unable to fully participate in a strict order of merit process (CSB 1890:6).

The pool of candidates was further narrowed on geographical considerations, as candidates were required to have been resident in the colony for at least 12 months (1890 Regulation r.4) and this was continued in subsequent regulations. This seemed acceptable under the separate colonies before Australia became a federal system.

Even further restrictions were placed on this limited pool. While it was intended that public service employment be open to everyone, the Regulations imposed a fee of thirty shillings to sit the examination (r.5). Given that the commencing salary in 1889 was less than £50 per year, this fee may have been prohibitive for all but those from wealthy backgrounds. Also, while the examinations contained an emphasis on English and mathematics (1890 Regulation), the examinations were criticised in Parliament as “ridiculously hard”, and including some subjects

(such as Latin) that were not offered in state schools (QPD 5/11/1896:1397). Together with the examination fee, this fostered class and wealth barriers rather than open competition.

These subordinate regulations and policies effectively limited the pool of examination candidates to young, healthy, wealthy, socially acceptable, Queensland males. But once a candidate made it to this select group, there were only low benchmarks to be met for admission. In 1889, anybody who had scored at least 40 percent was deemed to have passed. The pass mark was gradually increased, to 50 percent in 1908 and to 60 percent in 1909.

Candidates with the greatest aggregate marks, up to the declared number of vacancies, were placed on an order of merit register (1890 Regulation r.15), and vacancies offered in order to qualified candidates (1890 Regulation r.21). The *Public Service Act 1922* continued this requirement of no admission unless qualified as prescribed in the regulations (s.18.1).

Despite the legislative intention of attracting candidates of the highest ability, these various exclusions and restrictions meant that recruits were young, healthy and wealthy males with possibly little ability - rich and dumb was no obstacle for men!

### ***Strict order of merit from examination... unless you use one of the loopholes***

The strict requirement to appoint from the order of merit list had a number of exceptions. The first exception was that preference could be given to local candidates for country vacancies (GOA Feb 1922:10). This balanced merit with geographical considerations, but still required the candidates to have passed the examination.

The second exception bypassed the examination process altogether, and provided an enormous loophole for central decisions. The Governor-in-Council could appoint any person to any class without examination, if the Board issued a special certificate that no person in the service was qualified for such appointment (1889 Act s.29). In contrast to the strict requirements for base-grade entry, this allowed people to be appointed more freely at higher levels. This loophole was continued under the new 1922 Act.

Table 2 outlines the use of such special certificates in the period from 1889-1950. There are some correlations between personnel institution and political party, and to economic circumstances, although other variations are unexplained. Special certificate appointments were low in the initial years under the Civil Service Board (QPD 22/10/1896:1264), representing only 2.9 percent of appointments. Patronage escalated in ensuing periods (Scott *et al.*, 2001:55), and special certificates escalated to 11.9 percent under the bureaucrat-managed Public Service Board. Patronage worsened again from 1901-1918, when personnel decisions were placed directly into political hands under the executive-managed Public Service Board – special certificates escalated to 22.4 percent of appointments under conservative government management of this Board, but reduced to 11% when a new Labor Government managed the same institution. There are no documented political or institutional explanations for the escalation to 37.3 percent under the first Public Service Commissioner, although it may have been due to external recruitment under a new classification system. Special certificates dropped during the depression years from 1929-1932. The higher number of special certificates from 1932-1949 was largely due to peaks during the staff shortages and recruitment difficulties during and after WWII. The sudden drop from 1950 cannot be explained by any discovered policy or by economic circumstances, and appears to be a change in recording rather than a change in practices. For example, it came to be accepted that, if there was not an examination prescribed for a particular class, a person could be admitted and appointed without examination *and* without a special certificate (Howatson 1988:9). Public service unions periodically objected to the use of special entrance, which often interfered with their members promotion opportunities (QSSU various).

**TABLE 2**  
*Personnel institutions in Queensland Public Service 1889-1959*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Govt</i>	<i>Special Certificate Appointments</i>	<i>Total appointments</i>	<i>Average %</i>
1890-1895	<b>Civil Service Board</b>	Cons	13	456	2.9%
1896-1900	<b>Public Service Board</b> Managed by public servants	Cons	98	876	11.19%
1901-1915	<b>Public Service Board</b> Managed by politicians	Cons	334	1492	22.49%
1915-1918		Labor	552	61	11%
1920-1929	<b>Public Service Commissioner</b>	Labor	547	204	37.3%
1929-1932		Cons	47	2	4.3%
1932-1950		Labor	2948	596	20.2%

Sources: CSB Annual Reports 1889-1895, PSB Annual Reports 1896 – 1915, PSC Annual Reports 1921-1950.

Notwithstanding these variations, it is of interest how many recruits entered through special certificates, despite the strict legislative requirements for entry to be through examination. From raw data not included in this paper, in most years more than 10 percent of entrants and often more than 20% of entrants did not sit the usual examination process, and it is questionable whether there were genuinely such a shortage of qualified internal candidates.

The third exception to these merit processes also bypassed the examination process, providing an enormous loophole through temporary employment. Permanent employment was strictly managed at a central level, except for those who entered through the loophole described above. In contrast, from 1889 to 1922, temporary employment was not subject to any rules and was managed at department level, and therefore a prime avenue for dispensing patronage. The 1922 Act did attempt to regulate the use of temporary employees, providing that the Commissioner would decide at a central level whether temporary assistance was necessary, and select an appropriate person for the work (s18.3.v). However subsequent assignments of power allowed permanent heads to make temporary appointments, putting such decisions back closer to political interference.

It is difficult to gauge the extent of temporary employment, given that it was managed at department level through unregulated processes. However, there is evidence that excessive temporary employment was a recurring problem. Temporary employment was low during the depression of the early 1890s (QPD 22/10/1896:1263), but escalated in the late 1890s (PSB 1899:3), and there were repeated peaks through the first half of the 20th century. At times, this was remedied through schemes to convert temporary employees to permanent status without examination. The *Public Service Act Amendment Act 1901* provided for conversion of all temporary employees with more than five years service, upon a certificate of fitness from the Minister or permanent head (s.6). The 1922 Act provided a conversion scheme for temporary officers with more than three years status, without examination (s.18.3.i-ii). Other schemes occurred after peak periods of temporary employment (PSC 1940:4). Such schemes undermined other regulations regarding entry to the service, probably lowered the overall standard of recruits, created resentment amongst existing officers at the different standards for entry, and potentially placed employees into positions where they were of little use.

### ***Merit and gender***

As discussed, women were prevented from even applying to sit the initial public service examinations. The Ministerial Board changed this (for reasons not disclosed in the Minutes). From 1902 females were allowed to compete at entrance examinations on an equal footing with men (Coulter 1962:13), although the strict order of merit list could be departed from if a vacancy was considered unsuitable (1902 Regulations). However, the unexpected success of women at the 1903 examinations led the Board to apply restrictions, and from 1904 a separate

number of vacancies was declared for females and males (1904 Regulations). Significantly fewer positions were designated as female, which resulted in fewer female entrants. It also meant different entrance standards that required females to have greater merit - in 1906 and 1907, the lowest male entry scores were 59.6 percent and 50.6 percent respectively, compared to the lowest female entrance scores of 74.2 percent and 71.8 percent (PSB 1906:3; 1907:5). The continued success of females led to discontent amongst male employees, and further rule changes. The 1909 regulation provided that males and females could be appointed to current declared vacancies, but only male candidates could be placed on the order of merit list awaiting future vacancies (Coulter 1962:14-18; PSB 1907; PSB 1909). These discriminatory policies had far-reaching effects. Table 3 shows that women qualified for 28.5 percent of appointments, but were only appointed to 8.4 percent of positions.

**TABLE 3**  
Comparison  
of Actual  
and Projected  
Recruitment for  
females  
1903-1920

Exam date	Vacancies declared			Actual success			Projected success if no gender distinction in vacancies		
	Male	Fem	Total	Male	Fem	Total	Male	Fem	Total
1903			50	32	18(36%)	50	32	18(36%)	50
1904-1907	100	22	122	97	22(18.5%)	119	75	47(38.5%)	122
1909-1915	331	40	371	400	39(8.9%)	439	313	126(28.7%)	439
1916-1920	690	45	735	831	45(5.1%)	876	643	233(26.6%)	876
<b>Total</b>	<b>1121</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>1278</b>	<b>1360</b>	<b>124(8.4%)</b>	<b>1484</b>	<b>1063</b>	<b>424(28.5%)</b>	<b>1487</b>

Source: Summary of tables in Coulter (1962:16-20).

Women fared poorly under the Public Service Commissioner, who continued the previous discriminatory policies and added new ones. While women sat the same examinations as men, they were streamed into general branches where they had limited career prospects. Such positions and salaries were perceived as sufficient for women, but not for men who needed access to higher positions that suited their life, career and prospective family responsibilities (Royal Commission 1918:xxvi). This informal segregation of women into dead-end jobs was formalised into a caste system, when a 1932 Regulation provided that only males would be able to sit the professional and clerical examinations, and females would be restricted to appointments as clerk-typists. There was little public outcry, as the depression exacerbated existing gender stereotypes and perceptions regarding the career and income requirements of men and women (Coulter 1962:21,60; PSC 1933). At that time, the major public service union did not object to these rules (or the marriage bar), to protect opportunities for men, and due to perceptions of the appropriate role for women (QSSU various editions 1953).

The effects of these policies are outlined in Table 4. While the total number of female employees steadily increased, disaggregation of those numbers demonstrates their occupational segregation. In the first decade of female recruitment, 48.78 percent were recruited as clerks. This number declined in the following decades as policies began to restrict the number of female clerical vacancies, and plummeted to less than 1 percent by the end of the period under the policy of segregating females as clerk-typists rather than clerks.

Merit was also over-ridden by broader social circumstances. Preference for ex-servicemen was made statutory by the *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Acts (War Service Preference in Employment) Act 1944* (Lack 1961:231). Base-grade recruitment was virtually closed to other people between WWI and WWII, and merit standards were greatly reduced.

**TABLE 4**

Gendered  
Composition of  
the Queensland  
Public Service  
1899-1959 #

		1889	1899	1909	1919	1929	1939	1949	1959
Whole work-force	Total Workforce	2061	2519	1593	2752	3982	4769	6503	9129
	Number of Female	0	5	82	330	634	756	1379	2331
	Females as % of total		0.2%	5.15%	12.0%	15.9%	15.9%	21.2%	25.5%
Typists/ Clerk Typists	Number of females	0	4	41	180	408	569	1217	1854
	As % total employees	0	0.16%	2.57%	6.53%	10.3%	11.9%	18.7%	20.31%
	As % female employees	0	80.0%	50.0%	54.5%	64.4%	75.3%	88.3%	*79.5%
Female Clerks	Number	0	0	40	121	150	98	57	15
	As % total employees	0	0	2.51%	4.40%	3.77%	2.05%	0.88%	0.16%
	As % female employees	0	0	48.8%	36.7%	23.7%	13.0%	4.1%	0.64%
Females in Classif'd Positions	Number	0	0	0	6	10	14	12	26
	As % total employees	0	0%	0%	0.22%	0.25%	0.29%	0.18%	0.28%
	As % female employees	0	0%	0%	1.82%	1.58%	1.85%	0.87%	1.12%
Females on Scale Salaries		0	0	0	6	5	5	14	79
Female Assistants		0	0	0	0	44	64	62	337
Others		0	1	1	17	17	6	17	20

Source - Summary of various tables in Coulter (1962 pp. 8-9)

# Excluding certain employees from railways, day labour, nursing, domestic work, police, prisons and printing

\* decrease due to inclusion of Main Roads Department Staff, not previously included

### ***Analysis and Conclusion***

Merit was ostensibly the cornerstone of the career service model, designed to enhance efficiency, and remove the inefficiency and corruption that occurred under the patronage system. Recruitment was to be based on *competitive merit*, open to everyone, rather than only the friends of politicians and officials, and assessed through examinations designed to assess general ability. Only candidates who passed the examination were to be appointed.

As demonstrated in this paper, these admirable intentions were not very effectively translated into action. Most legislation required that merit be tested through examinations open to all citizens, but was undermined by supporting regulations. Rather than identify the most meritorious candidates, these recruitment processes first identified a socially acceptable group that met gender, age, health, class and character restrictions, and then set comparatively low benchmarks for merit amongst that group. Various restrictions were placed on women entering the service - initially they were precluded altogether, and once they were allowed to compete, ever-tougher restrictions were placed on how many and which positions they could obtain. As a result, there were lower entrance standards for men than women. There was a preparedness to moderate merit to meet other circumstances including social values (e.g. preference for male employees), geographic considerations (e.g. preference for Queensland school-leavers), or national and social requirements (e.g. preference to returned soldiers).

Strict legislative processes were not only undermined by subordinate policies and practices, but also by large loopholes that provided exemptions to the circumstances in which the merit principle had to be applied. The issue of special certificates, to bypass entry through examination, was generally in excess of 10 percent, often in excess of 20 percent, and sometimes as many as one-third of all new entrants. The extent to which these loopholes were used depended on the strength of the central agency and the preparedness of the government to use them. Politicians could enjoy the best of both worlds, using weak personnel boards as a buffer when they wanted to avoid the burden of patronage, or pressuring boards into issuing such certificates when they wanted to dispense patronage.

Merit processes were also circumvented through temporary employment, which did not require the same stringent merit selection processes as permanent employment. This was undertaken at departmental rather than central level, and used so extensively at various times that schemes were enacted to convert these temporary employees to permanent status. This contradicted the convention of open competitive merit in order to gain the most efficient workforce, and had consequences for the skill level and quality of employees and services.

What were public service unions doing? Public service unions were active in many areas, including wages, classifications, and enforcement of regulations. They did object to the use of special entrance certificates, which potentially disadvantaged their male members. However they were conspicuously silent on many of the distortions of merit, most likely due to their support for general for social values that favoured male employment. Public service unions did not see their role as protecting the strict application of the merit principle, but rather to ensure that merit was applied in a way that benefited their members.

From my broader research, it is evident that the Queensland experience in this period bears many similarities to other Australian federal and state public services. This is due to many of the distortions of merit stemmed from broader societal values, rather than localised decisions. It is perhaps little wonder that, by the 1960s and 1970s, politicians were dissatisfied with many aspects of public services, and sought to reform public employment.

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