Stirring up the status quo

With his honeymoon period almost over, *CU* talks to Australia's first Chief Government Information Officer, Canadian **Andy Macdonald**, about changing Canberra's IT culture.

CU: **Now that you've had almost six months in the position, could you explain the job?**

AM: About a year ago, the Minister for Finance, Kim Beazley commissioned an IT review group to take a look at the state of information technology in government. Its mandate was to assess the state of IT or to 'take the temperature of IT' across the government. In February this year the review group reported and made a number of recommendations on areas that could be improved.

What they found was that while all departments have grown their own IT systems, adopting an across government perspective, there were real opportunities to take advantage of the inter-departmental synergies.

They recommended a 'whole-of Government' approach that focussed first on delivery of services to the client through single points of access. They then made 46 recommendations including the appointment of a chief information officer.

I had a one hour television interview with the review group during their study/research phase. I had held a similar position in Canada - as their first Chief Information Officer.

When I was approached by the Commonwealth Government about this position I suggested for the Australian context, they needed to appoint someone from the inside because a large part of the job is cultural change which is best done by someone from within. However the Government felt differently and appointed me. So here I am.

CU: **What is your mandate?**

AM: My mandate is to bring a 'whole-of-Government' approach to IT while respecting the way in which departments do their business. I chair a senior level committee made up of 16 senior departmental representatives. We all participate in the setting of IT policies for the internal operations of Government. I report directly to Kim Beazley, the Minister for Finance and the deputy prime minister.
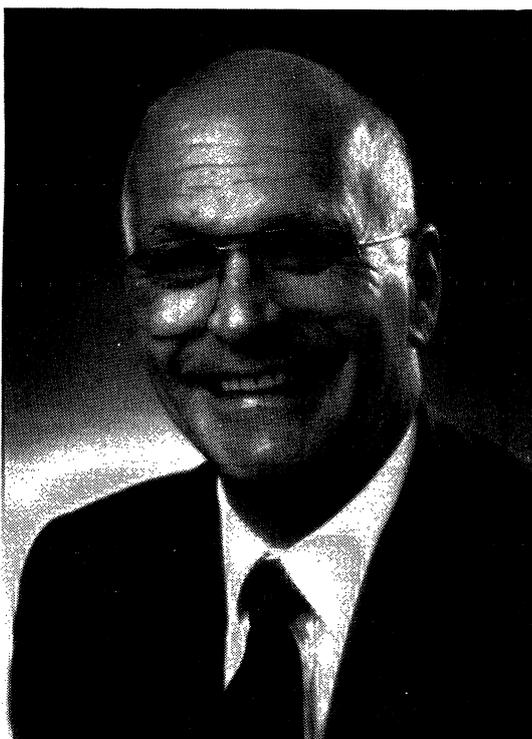
CU: **What has been your major focus so far?**

AM: Currently the Australian Government spends over $2 billion a year in information technology across all of its services - for new equipment; systems upgrades; bandwidth; new computers etc. The issue is: is that money being well spent? The IT Review Group identified a number of opportunities where we could do a better job - for example, consolidating small data centres, rationalising administrative systems. There are 11 different personnel systems, more than 20 different finance systems and 27 different e-mail systems in use across government as well as many different software packages.

The group's recommendations were aimed at supporting better service to clients and at a lower cost to the taxpayer. Their view was that any technology strategy needed to support the government's program delivery strategy. They elucidated the concept of 'one-stop shopping' where a client should be able to have access to a reasonable range of government services - social-related services such as health, social security, education as one example - through a common service window.

This model has profound implications for IT. For example, wide area networks will have to inter-operate. That's quite a profoundly different model from the current model where each department provides its own service directly to their clients in a vertical, integrated process.

So, its goals were two-fold:

1) a better service to the client;
2) at lower cost to the taxpayer.

CU: **Is $2bn a year excessive?**

AM: No. $2 billion a year is not out of line given the size of government in Australia. By comparison, Canada
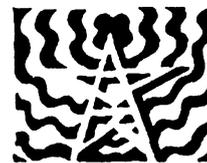
spends $3.25 billion, in relative proportion, about the same.

CU: What experience did you bring to this position?

AM: I was the controller general for the federal government in Canada. As we started renewing financial systems, that led us into analysing other administrative systems that had to interface (personnel, procurement, asset management systems and the like). I suggested creating a single focus on government IT. In a sense, I wrote my own job. We set up a strategic, technology plan that focussed on supporting single-window service delivery. The implementation of that plan was underway as I was leaving. Canada was one of the first national governments to pull it all together under one office - Australia is one of the few others.

CU: Have you encountered resistance in Australia?

AM: Oh yes, it's inevitable that you encounter some resistance because it's running counter to the status quo. The status quo is always difficult to dislodge. But we've already started to show results and I have been pleasantly surprised at the degree of support we are receiving from departments.

CU: Are the issues different in Australia?

AM: The issues are almost the same although the context of government is very different to the private sector. The main difference in Australia is that the country is more technologically literate - including Ministers and the Prime Minister. The PM can articulate an industry strategy that is in part technology-based. I was very impressed when the PM addressed

the first meeting of the National Information Services Council (NISC). He spoke for half an hour on technology's assistance to the economy and the strategic strengths of Australia in the Asia-Pacific region and the opportunities to compete abroad. It was a nice overview and he spoke without notes. As well, Australians have a much greater awareness of the opportunities that technology can have for the economy in this region.

CU: How long do you have to prove yourself?

AM: I have a three-year review period initially. So I guess I have three years to show solid results.

CU: What do you see as your greatest challenge?

AM: Well, you have a honeymoon period of 6-9 months. In that time you need to show that you can add value to what departments undertake. In this initial period, we have had to get established and build a unit from nothing. Next, you have to get a product. So, the biggest challenge is to get the first couple of projects underway. We have 20-odd people with a small budget and that's by design. We need to get departments to take on individual projects and commit resources to them. In so doing, you build consensus and commitment to the final product.

CU: What are the first projects you're working on?

AM: We're rationalising the personnel and financial systems that the government uses. Over the next few years there'll be a significant reduction in system diversity. Secondly,

we're developing an IT strategic plan which will be ready for Ministers next year. An issues paper (open for public comment) will be ready by Christmas. Finally, we are having a hard look at an overall network situation to see if we can get a rationalised result that meets departmental needs at lower cost.

CU: Describe the culture you see now and the type of culture you hope to achieve.

AM: The 'now' culture is largely vertically integrated from the department to its clients. The resources are met within the department. But if we're successful, the culture will be to look at it the way the client would. Work to provide a broader range of services to a client from a common service point, to share solutions to common problems - to go for the 80 per cent you have in common. It's a more lateral culture. There's tremendous horizontal synergy between departments that I believe can be tapped.

I view my job as providing ideas for synergy (between departments) and cost-effectiveness. We put an idea out and see if departments are willing to fund it. So, it's really a marketplace of ideas. For those ideas that garner support, the participating departments have ownership and ideas can be propagated through government. In many cases, the ideas come from departments themselves.

CU: Are you excited by the job?

AM: Absolutely. I look forward to coming to work every day. The enormity of the task is sometimes overwhelming but I have a lot of support. We are making progress - not as quickly as I would have liked. But we'll be able to make a difference. ❏