

# Introducing the *Moral Disengagement Handbook*

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Author, *Moral Disengagement Handbook*, 2023.

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## THE NEED FOR A MORAL DISENGAGEMENT HANDBOOK IN AUSTRALIA

In 2023 I led an interactive project with concerned colleagues from a variety of backgrounds that culminated in the production of the *Moral Disengagement Handbook* (the Handbook). The Handbook started life as article. In the course of many conversations, it has morphed into a handbook. That was driven by many factors, but the five key ones were:

- People are not stupid, and most people are good.
- Throughout human history story telling has been a powerful tool for change and, as much as elements within the Australian Government and Australian Public Service might not like it, they cannot stop stories.
- It is absolutely beyond doubt that moral disengagement has literally infected the Australian Public Service. Over the past decade that infection has been normalised and escalated.
- It is practically and strategically completely wrong of the Australian Public Service to continue with its focus on culture and leadership while ignoring what is driving the many problems that beset it. In short, without directly addressing moral disengagement.
- Silence, denial and deflection in the face of moral disengagement (be it conscious or unconscious), is not an option.

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The foundation of this handbook is the lifelong work of Professor Albert Bandura.<sup>2</sup> There is also a strong connection to Chris Argyris's renowned work on organisational defensiveness and taboos.<sup>3</sup>

We know that moral disengagement is learned, infectious, rewarded and normalised in the Australian Government. We also know that the typical response to having conversations about matters that show all is far from well ranges from silence through to outright denial, aggression and abuses of power.

The Albanese Government often says that we have a *Public Interest Disclosure Act 2013* (Cth) and a National Anti-Corruption Commission. All well and good on the face of it. However, neither is sufficient to address the morally disengaged behaviours and practices that have been adopted and normalised in our institutions.

Whistleblowers Richard Boyle and David McBride are clear proof of that insufficiency. Then there's the thousands of public servants who remain silent as they are well aware of that people who raise issues within APS agencies are stigmatised and victimised.

The Robodebt Royal Commission starkly revealed that. The tip of the iceberg.

The Australian Public Service Commission, well intentioned as it is, obviously thinks that focussing on public service culture and leadership is the solution. With all due respect to them that approach has proved to be a failure.

The Commission's positive focus on the APS Code of Conduct must also ensure it cannot be misused and abused. Also, the Code of Conduct is necessary, but clearly not sufficient. That can be addressed by underpinning it with the mechanisms of moral disengagement.

So, what are we all to do (and that includes senior officials and politicians), to reveal and describe what is really going on? Whether that be concerns about government policies, the design and delivery of services or the behaviours and practices of departments and politicians?

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<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3, 193-209.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Argyris, C. (1964) *Integrating the Individual and the Organization*, New York: Wiley.

Telling and sharing the stories that reflect and capture what is really going on is essential to restoring the self-efficacy of public servants individually and collectively.

Professor Bandura's mechanisms of moral disengagement provide a lens through which to write such stories.<sup>4</sup> More than that such stories can be shared and talked about. Sharing and talking about those stories would go a long way to ridding the public service and government of moral disengagement.

Certainly, there will be some politicians who find the content of the handbook confronting. That being said I think the health of the parliament and all of our public institutions is well and truly at a critical point. For this reason, I look forward to sharing the Handbook with the readers of the *Australasian Parliamentary Review* and the broader community.

## **ACCESSING THE HANDBOOK ONLINE**

A full copy of the *Moral Disengagement Handbook* is available on the Rights Resource Network SA website for free download.

Visit

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