



17 July 2019

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of State Services
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

Dear Minister

Inland Revenue survey and political neutrality

In early February 2019 Inland Revenue Department (IR) published an online survey containing a question about the political leanings of respondents. The question was inappropriate. It had the potential to undermine the principle of political neutrality. On 11 February, you asked Peter Hughes, State Services Commissioner, to examine the circumstances that led to IR commissioning the survey and to provide you with assurance that the principle of political neutrality is well-understood and will be observed by IR going forward.

The Commissioner asked me to look into this matter. IR engaged an independent contractor to review what happened and why, and to make recommendations for improvement. I reviewed that report and have spoken to the chief executive. I am confident that she understands the ongoing expectations. Accordingly I am comfortable that we can provide you with the assurance that the principle of political neutrality is well-understood and will be observed by IR going forward.

I also decided to look across the wider public service, to see if other agencies had asked survey questions like IR, that had the potential to be perceived as being politically motivated. I asked the departments to review their surveys, polls and equivalent research over the last five years.

I am disappointed to have to report that I identified two other inappropriate questions.

1. In an online survey in September 2017, the Department of Conservation (DOC) asked a very similar question to the one asked by IR: "Please indicate where on the political spectrum you perceive yourself to be on a scale ranging from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative)." The survey was part a collaboration between DOC, Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research and three New Zealand universities, which looked at attitudes towards novel forms of pest control.
2. In a phone and online survey run in November 2017 and March 2018, run to understand the public's trust and therefore willingness to share data with government and government agencies, Statistics New Zealand (Stats NZ) asked: "How would you describe your current level of positivity towards the Government?"

(Extremely positive, positive, indifferent, negative or extremely negative).” The survey was designed to assist Stats NZ in designing a marketing campaign for the 2018 census.

DOC and Stats NZ have also conducted investigations into how these questions came to be included in their surveys. Again, I have reviewed the reports and spoken to the chief executives. It is important to note that the findings of the review do not relate to Stats NZ’s statistical surveys, which go through a much more rigorous review process.

I am satisfied that in all three cases there was no political motivation in including the questions in the surveys. In each case, New Zealand or international research suggested that the questions should be included to obtain academically robust, complete and actionable results. IR wanted to understand how best to maximise trust in the tax system. DOC wanted to better understand opinions on pest control. Stats NZ wanted to understand public trust in government to help develop an effective marketing campaign for the 2018 census.

The public servants approving these survey questions were motivated by academic rigour and their desire to achieve their departments’ legitimate objectives. They either did not identify or did not sufficiently mitigate against the risk of creating a perception of partisanship. These were errors of judgments that the agencies’ checks and balances failed to prevent.

These appear to be isolated incidents and the implicated departments have already responded to improve their policies and procedures. Nonetheless we are leaning in with more support for the system. The Commissioner has written to:

- Public Service chief executives, requiring them to ensure all public surveys undergo a specific check for political neutrality
- The Government Chief Data Steward, Ms Liz MacPherson, to ask her to use the findings of this work to inform data community practice.
- The Government Procurement Functional Lead, Ms Carolyn Tremain, to ask her to work with agencies to improve procurement and ensure the principle of political neutrality is part of any discussion or engagement with businesses who provide survey design services to government. This is significant because in all three cases, the departments engaged external contractors to deliver the surveys. The contractors either drafted, or were heavily involved in drafting, the original questions.

As you know the Public Service reforms will also result in the principle of political neutrality being enshrined in statute.

Your sincerely



John Ombler
Deputy Commissioner