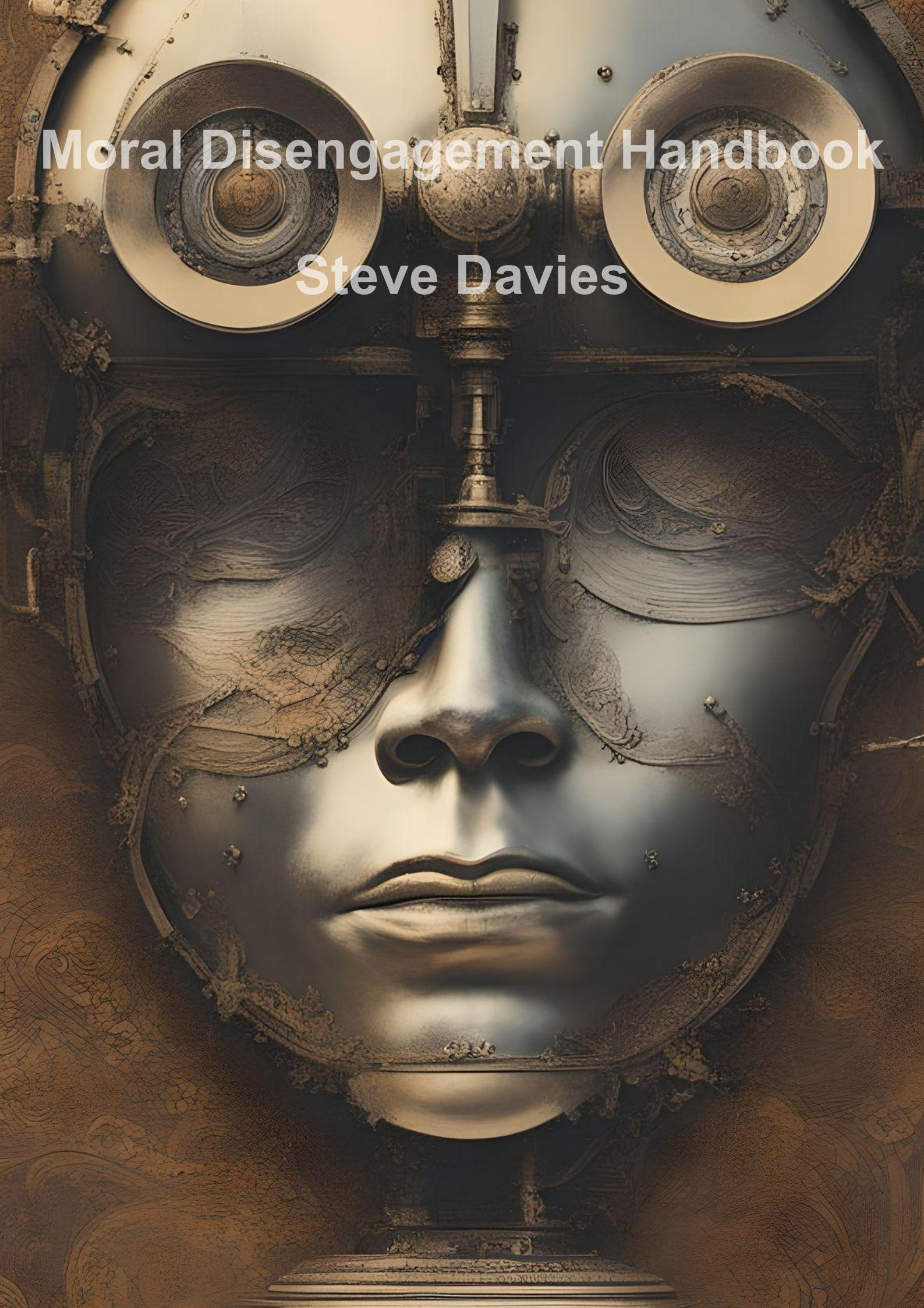# Moral Disengagement Handbook

Steve Davies

About this handbook

This 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:

1. People are not stupid, and most people are good.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. Silence, denial and deflection in the face of moral disengagement (be it conscious or unconscious), is not an option.

The foundation of this handbook is the lifelong work of Professor Albert Bandura. There is also a strong connection to Chris Argyris's renowned work on organisational defensiveness and taboos. Rendering certain conversations undiscussable is a huge problem in the Australian Public Service.

Instead of wasting taxpayers' money on consulting companies and focusing on the sacred cows of culture and leadership the Australian Public Service should focus on freeing the voice of its own employees. It should harness the stories of employees and the community.

Professor Bandura's mechanisms of moral disengagement provide a lens through which to write such stories. 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. My message for the culture industry buffs - That's how you get culture change.

My heartfelt thanks to close friends and colleagues for keeping me on my toes with forthright feedback and brilliant suggestions.

Cheers

Steve D.

Moral Disengagement Handbook

The Bandura Legacy : Future Journal

Steve Davies

The Bandura Legacy

Professor Albert Bandura (1925 - 2021). **Albert "Al" Bandura**, the David Starr Jordan Professor of Social Science in Psychology, Emeritus, in the **School of Humanities and Sciences** Internationally recognised as the most influential psychologist of the twentieth century.

For his extraordinary contributions Professor Bandura was presented with the National Medal of Science at the White House by President Obama on May 19, 2016.

Without Albert Bandura the understanding of the importance of social learning, social modelling, observational learning and how people come to accept and repeat behaviours would be a shadow of what it is today.

Fast track to 2016. The publication of Albert Bandura's book "Moral disengagement: How people do harm and live with themselves" is a powerful legacy. A practical tool to empower people in Australia and elsewhere to remove and prevent moral disengagement. To restore the health of government, all our institutions and our democracy.

> ". . . people in all walks of life behave harmfully and still maintain positive self-regard and live in peace with themselves. They do so by disengaging moral self-sanctions from their harmful practices. These psychosocial mechanisms of moral disengagement operate at both the individual and social system levels".
>
> Albert Bandura

Tragically, within the Australian Government the moral compasses of public servants and politicians have been switched off and, indeed, are expected to be switched off. As a result, great harm is done to people, society and the land we live on. To all of our institutions and democracy itself.

Here we are in 2023 and, even with the election of the Albanese Government, we see a government that is fearful of dealing with the fact that moral disengagement has been normalised in government and, to varying degrees, all of our institutions.

Despite the fact that Professor Bandura's work offers practical solutions to deal with the problem the Albanese Government and the Australian Public Service persists

with a tried and failed focus - Culture change and leadership. Over decades millions of dollars has been wasted on culture change programmes and leadership development in the Australian Public Service. They have failed dismally. It is the wrong solution for what is the actual problem - the normalisation of moral disengagement.

2023. The Albanese Government and the Australian Public Service continues to waste taxpayers' money on tried, failed and wrong approaches despite the very real threats moral disengagement poses to the lives and future of the Australian people. To the health of the public service, government, society and democracy.

In 2008 Professor Bandura was asked,

> "What do you consider to be your crowning achievement, and what are you most proud of in your professional life?" the Professor replied, "The crowning achievement is what you do next. That is the challenge that assures continual self-renewal. To hang around a place for over half a century requires a high capacity for self-renewal."

Politician's and senior public servants need to reflect on that advice.

What we can we all do

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 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 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 behaviour and practices of departments and politicians.

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. Thousands of public servants have been systematically robbed of the belief that they can safely speak out on issues that may disturb those further up the hierarchy (and more).

Bandura's mechanisms of moral disengagement provide a powerful lens and tool to empower public servants and the public and, in the process, guide and restore the organisational health of the public service and government.

Getting started

Story telling is a powerful instrument. Whatever your preference - be it science fiction, drama, fantasy or whatever. For centuries people have used stories to reveal truths. The utility and beauty of stories is that you can weave them around facts. Be creative.

Organisational story telling is a thing. Informally people talk and share stories about the toxic state of government and the Australian Public Service all the time. Imagine if they were all recorded by people and shared with one another.

The questions people most often ask in these conversations is, "What drives the madness, lies and stupidity we are seeing. What's happened to all the good people".

That's where Bandura's lifelong work on moral disengagement comes in. It provides the rock-solid research and tools needed to make sense of it all .Hence it is a powerful tool to help people write and tell powerful stories.

Let me share with you what Verity Emmet and I explored together. Our journey so to speak.

Our conversation about moral disengagement surprised us both. Why? It was remarkably easy. We put that down to two points we comfortably agreed on as they helped make sense of what has happened to the Australian Public Service:

1. It has robbed public servants of the belief that they can safely speak out on questions of morality and humanity. That it is safer to stay quiet. Irrational risk aversion and a siege mentality about reputation play a huge role in that.

2. The carving out of questions of morality and humanity is deliberate and systemic. That is clear evidence that moral disengagement had been normalised.

Then we dived into the detail. The precise mechanisms of moral disengagement. Naturally, we shared a few experiences and observations along the way.
Verity felt the mechanisms of moral disengagement helped her to sort her thoughts out and write her story. She decided to frame her story a few years ahead of time.

Naturally I left her alone to write his story. Afterall it was not mine.

During our journey Verity and I talked periodically. A couple of important points to note from those conversations.

1. At an individual level these mechanisms may operate together or independently. My observation is that the more hierarchical and siloed an organisation is the more likely it is the mechanisms operate together. This is especially the case with corporate functions across the Australian Public Service and would certainly be amplified by the autocratic government Australia has had over the past decade.

2. Invariably, the Australian Public Service treats whistleblowers and staff who raise serious matters as individual cases. As problems. They treat what people say or report as attacks against 'the system' and a threat to reputation. Paranoid risk aversion has been a problem for a long time.

What are your experiences and observations? What story are you going to tell?
Verity told me it was enlightening, almost therapeutic, to take a look at what's going on through the fresh set of glasses provided by the mechanisms of moral disengagement.

Start by thinking about something disturbing, dangerous, harmful, immoral you have personally experienced or observed in the Australian Public Service and Government.

Look at the behaviours and practices of the public servants, politicians and departments through the lens of moral disengagement. When writing your story choose a genre that best fits the circumstances and your preference.

There is no need to use the real name of the department involved or, indeed, the individuals involved. Neither do you need to use your real name. Again, be creative.

Alternatively, you could start by looking at each of mechanisms and listing what you have experienced or observed and where.

Whichever way you choose to start it will help you frame your story. When starting to write your story it is important to note that what you are doing is holding up a mirror.

Why take this approach? Story telling is a very human and effective way of approaching and confronting issues and realities. Moral disengagement is the key driver of most that is wrong in government and its public service.

Moral disengagement has infected government and the public service. It has literally infected and harmed people. It enables dehumanising behaviour, practices and abuses. It twists decision making and more.

We don't need any more reports. What is needed are stories to help free us all from the moral disengagement that has infected the Australian Government and the Australian Public Service.

That I suggest, is the job of us all. A shared obligation that's in all our interests. The proof of that? Just consider the stories captured and told by the Robodebt Royal Commission. So, let's all get writing.

The Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Whether your story concerns government policy, the actions of a government department or the behaviours and practices of politicians and officials these mechanisms can be used to judge the form and extent of moral disengagement.

That will help everyone to write their stories and, if they wish, share them and talk about them together. Even use them to frame complaints, inform politicians and journalists or brief lawyers and medical professionals.

Advantageous comparison	Making something appear better or less harmful than it is by pointing to something far worse.
Attribution of blame	Blaming the victims or targets that have been harmed by immoral behaviours and practices for bringing it on themselves.
Dehumanization	Portraying people who will be harmed by behaviours and practices as less than human. As case numbers in a system or process.
Diffusion of responsibility	Minimising personal responsibility for any harm caused to people by claiming they are only responsible for a small part of the process.

Displacement of responsibility	Superficially acknowledging the harm caused to people by behaviours and practices, while claiming it's the result of decisions made at a higher level.
Disregard, distortion, and denial of consequences	Ignoring, minimising and denying the harm (including evidence of harm), caused to people.
Euphemistic language	Using sanitised language and jargon to mask the hurt and harm caused to people.
Moral justification	Claiming behaviours and practices that cause harm to people serve a higher social and moral purpose.

The Verity Emmet Futures Journal - Australia 2025

Welcome to my future journal.

I am a former employee of the Australian Public Service. I was a specialist researcher. Well, I still am really.

Afterall, after spending decades doing something you love, it becomes part of your identity. It's who I am.

I'm also very lucky as much of my work had a future focus. Being trapped by the present and thinking short term is anathema to me.

Ignoring the deep and confronting problems in the present that threaten the future itself is a massive threat to us all. Understanding what drives that ignorance, what it means for people and the world is more crucial than ever.

Hence my future journal is grounded in realities of the present. Especially the realities that are treated as being undiscussable.

I left the public service early. I planned to do so as I could not stomach the immorality. Remaining silenced, ending up burnt out and embittered and going silently into the night is so not me.

So, strap yourselves in.

Verity E

13 May 2025 – Climate betrayal

Climate change was no more. Australia was facing a climate catastrophe. Election day was rapidly approaching. Some were calling for a Government of National Unity and the suspension of the Federal Election.

Food rationing, abortion rates and suicide were increasing as living standards collapsed. The reality is that people's lives and futures are being endangered and lost due to the actions and inactions by the Australian Government.

Where to start? How did we get here? What was the journey? Where will it end?

It looks like this.

The Australian Government and Australian Public Service had betrayed the trust of the Australian people. Successive governments had dragged the chain on climate change for decades. People rightly expected better from Albanese Government.

The political games would fuel a climate time bomb. It has now exploded. As a result, food supply was unreliable, weather disasters more frequent and social inequality more extreme than ever before.

Think about that. Ask yourself what plunged government and the public service to the very depths that are destroying people's lives and the futures.

What got us to the point where you, your family, your community, the planet no longer really mattered. That they were gambling chips on a very sick board game of power?

The answer? Politicians and senior bureaucrats had switched off their moral compass. Government and its institutions were infected with moral disengagement. It had been normalised. They had been warned and did not listen. We have been betrayed.

I agonised over this day and night. I should never have allowed myself to be silenced and intimated in my younger years.

20 May 2025 - The silence

My fellow traveller Steve Davies and I have spoken extensively about the damage done to public servants and the public service itself as a result of the behaviours, practices and processes used to engineer and enforce blind compliance and silence.

Professor Bandura's lifelong work on moral disengagement helped me make even more sense about what I experienced and witnessed.

The deep inhumanity of what is done and fully resourced to bury truths about issues and deny problems is appalling. It goes as far as advising employees they are entitled to counselling if they find the abuses inflicted on them cause them stress.

As if that's not enough when confronted with what these abusive systems do to people, the perpetrators pretend it's not happening, that it's just the process.

No thought is given to what isolating, stigmatising and administratively mobbing people actually does to them. The tears, the psychological trauma and the physical illnesses that result from that. No thought is given to imposing systems and processes on people that cause post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the Australian Public Service the threshold for becoming a whistle blower, a threat, of 'not being one of us' is so low it verges on institutionalised paranoia.

On top of that when people are captured by what amounts to an organisational meat grinder the impact on relationships, partners and children is not even thought about.

To the engineers and enforcers it's just the system. Regardless of truth, justice and morality. Regardless of the expense to the public service itself.

All with no thought to the world that such morally disengaged systems create.

27 May 2025 – A heartless world

I've always been an optimist. Someone who sees the beautiful side of life and people. Most people are great. The few are not.

What does the world of government and the public service look like in 2025? Anything but like the world I previously lived in and loved.

A dehumanised and dehumanising world where:

- data and technology are used to disempower and manipulate the people. Listening to the people is now entirely about power and containing threats.

- People are used as data milking cows. The marriage of granular behavioural marketing and political control is complete courtesy of Artificial Intelligence.

- Government risk aversion is now institutionalised paranoia. Great for the security industry. Bad for society, people and democracy.

- Self-censorship and silence are the order of the day. The political class only wants what it wants. Whistleblowers are trapped by systems that are nothing but administrative and legal show trials.

- At the slightest hint of questioning and doubt public servants are monitored and a troubled psychometric identity built for them. They are then herded like

cattle ready for the slaughter. Such is the power of AI driven human resources".

We are being forced to live in a cold and heartless world on a burning planet. Public servants are forced to serve that dark world.

22 June 2025 – The people

Those closest to me often ask me to sum up what I think this means for people today and further in the future.

It means they live in a world of illusion where ticking every bureaucratic box is a measure of success and putting people last is normalised. Where everyone is expendable.

A world where Generation Expendable has been deliberately created and grown. GE is a marketing and control segment that enables the exploitation of fear, uncertainty and doubt to maintain the comfort and power of those who have given us a broken and heartless world.

"Historically, the 'Canberra bubble' had always been a bit of a party joke. Not so in 2025. Parliament House is a fortified shop front posing as a democracy. The engine room where truths, futures and people are lost. Where the Australian people are treated as subjects and data and technology used to disempower and control them.

1 August 2025 – My moral sadness

As with other dark periods of history people ask, "How did we get here?" What caused and drove this deep moral decline in government and the Australian Public Service?

How best to put this?

In 2025 moral disengagement is deeply ingrained in the Australian Government and the Australian Public Service.

Even with the election of the Albanese Labor government in 2022 both institutions remain silent on the ugly reality of moral disengagement. They did so despite the facts and its toxic impact on the people of Australia. They forgot that silence gives consent.

I should have spoken out years earlier. As should have my colleagues.
Senior officials put 'the system' first at the expense of people and see open questioning, criticism and discussion as a threat. They lost sight of the people.

What do I think today? Our silence and denials, the regime we imposed on public servants and the people has brought us all, the planet, to the brink.

At the very least we were fools for thinking and behaving as if openness and facing up to moral disengagement would bring entire systems and institutions crashing down.

At the very worse we were driven by our own comfort and power. To be honest I think this is the case. The Albanese government should have taken the moral disengagement bull by the horns from day one.

It was and is beyond doubt that a morally engaged Australian Government and Australian Public Service is essential for the well-being and life of all Australians.
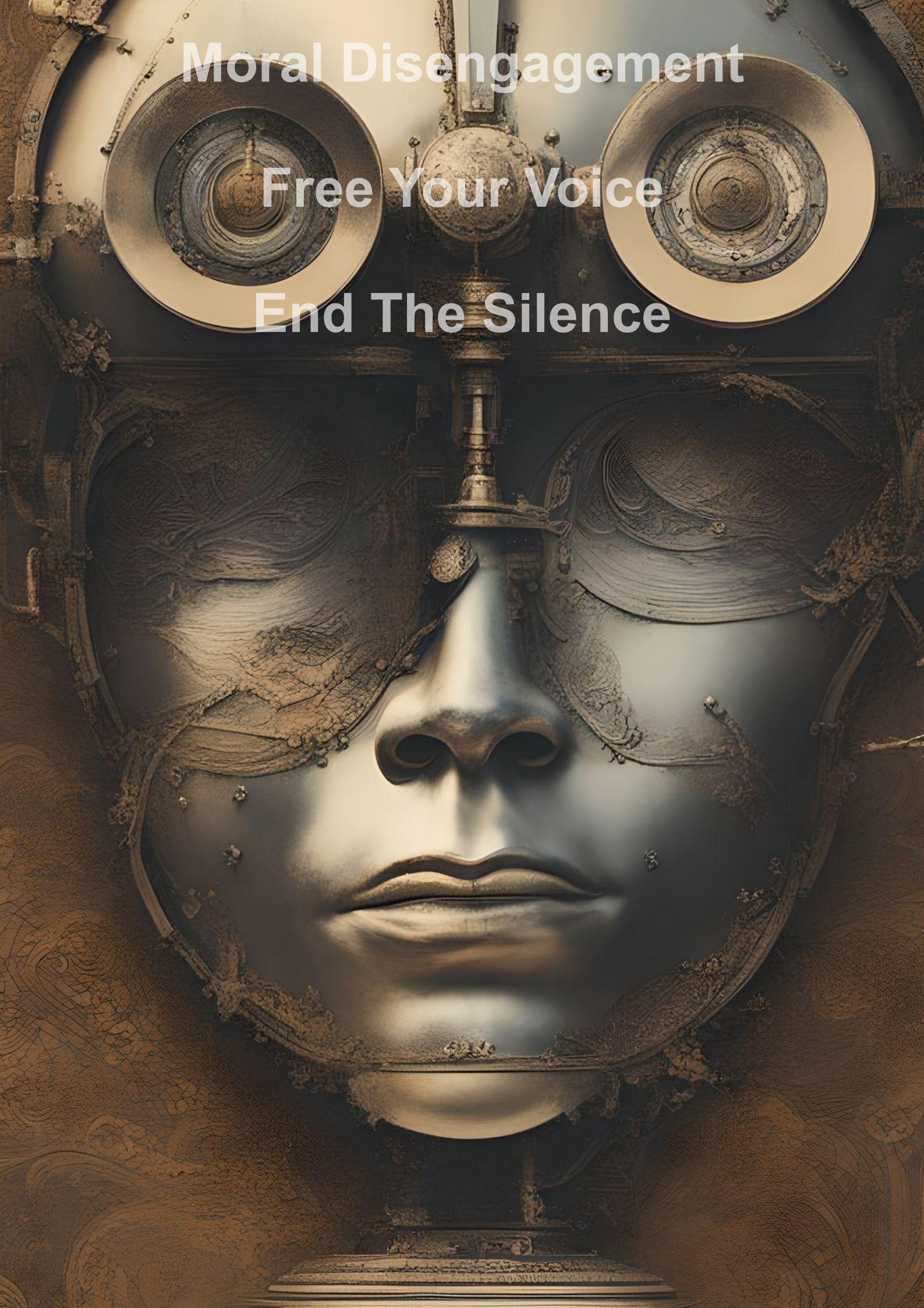
Putting an end to all morally disengaged behaviours, practices, processes and systems within the Australian Public Service is essential to giving the Australian people a healthy government and democracy. Essential to the lives of every Australian

THE HELL WE ARE LIVING THROUGH NOW NEED NOT HAVE HAPPENED

Moral Disengagement

Free Your Voice

End The Silence

Preparing to write your story

Preparation is key. Write a focussed general description of what your story is about. Reflecting on your experiences, knowledge, research, evidence and observations is your story about:

- A particular public service agency

- A number of public service agencies

- The Australian Public Service as a whole

- A government minister

- A particular policy or programme

- A particular administrative process

- The behaviours and practices of public servants

- The behaviours and practices of politicians

- The management of staff within a public service agency

Once you have done that write a summary statement saying what your story is about. Ideally set yourself a limit of 500 words. When doing so just imagine you are the reader. Test it with a trusted person.

Don't treat your summary statement as being carved in stone. Regard it as a working snapshot to help you get started on the building blocks of your story. Review and update your summary statement as you shape your building blocks.

About the building blocks

The building blocks that will help you with your story are, you guessed it, Professor Albert Bandura's mechanisms of moral disengagement. How do they help?

Bandura's mechanisms of moral disengagement provide a reliable means of identifying the behaviours and practices that drive every dysfunctional, harmful, deviant, corrupt, abusive, immoral act or process imaginable. They help us to understand the 'Why' and clarify the 'What' of, well, 'Bad stuff'.

Using them will not only help individuals. Using them together, as it were a template, will improve group and wider social understanding, conversation and provide a platform for action.

When considering the impact of events, practices and behaviours associated with your story, along with your experiences and observations, ask yourself whether they are reflected each one of the mechanisms.

The next eight pages introduce you to each of the mechanisms of moral disengagement. *Underneath each mechanism comment on your experiences, knowledge, research, evidence and observations that reveal, provides evidence of the operation of that mechanism.

*Important: When doing so also note whose actions, advice, instructions and/or words, be it those of a section of a government agency, individual officials or politician, that reveal the operation of that mechanism. Doing that is important as it tells you that it is seen as normal despite that fact it fuels moral disengagement.

One point before you start. Many people prefer to write stories alone. However, there is nothing to stop people with similar, experiences, interests or backgrounds from writing a group story.

Events could even be organised to write a large group story. Yep. That's something I'll be working on in what remains of 2023.

Key resources

Professor Albert Bandura 1925-2021

"an informed public can actually neutralise a lot of this stuff"

Dr. Peter Senge

"… bureaucracy development to the extent it is dehumanised… so in many ways we've worked to drive out the empathy, the intuition, the artistry."

Professor Shoshana Zuboff

"Wonderland. Herding people. Behaviour modification. The age of conquest."

The thread that joins the work of Albert Bandura, Peter Senge and Shoshana Zuboff is people. All of us.

Albert Bandura's life long and world-renowned work shows us what drives the dehumanisation and corruption of organisations and institutions. It provides us with the tools for us to make judgments about the health of organisations. To do so individually and together.

Peter Senge's work provides deep insights into the dehumanisation of bureaucracy. He long warned of the tragic consequences of organisations failing to listen and learn. A telling connection to the work of Albert Bandura is his observation that,

> "Very good people are routinely, systematically destroying other very good people, in a way that replicates itself from generation to generation of managers".

The insightful thread that joins Shoshana Zuboff's work to all of this started with her book 'Work in the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of work and Power'. One of the big hopes of the time was that technology would result in less hierarchical organisations, greater creative opportunities and, as it were, more humane organisations and workplaces.

A few short years later and the great hope was that the internet would empower people, improve democracy and usher in a 21st century renaissance. Instead, what has been done is that our data is being used herd, manipulate and control.

Then there's the common interest of surveillance capitalism and government. Australia's RoboDebt disaster was a graphic illustration of that. It's the tip of a toxic mindset and iceberg. Rendered all the more toxic by the normalisation of moral disengagement.

Story telling tool

During the months of work on this handbook I also experimented with tools that could help with storytelling and presentations. The pleasures of my geek side of life.

In particular I have been experimenting with Tome AI is. It is a generative story tool and is certainly more rounded and user friendly than many other AI tools.

To illustrate the point to you. I pasted my good colleague Verity Emmet's 22 June 2025 journal entry into Tome and selected the option to create a presentation. Tome then generated the presentation with options for the design. Importantly it then created and enhanced the story.

Total amount of time taken? Under ten minutes. [Verity Emmet on 2025](#) Should I edited the presentation along with the story and images generated then obviously that will take additional time.

You can access Tome here >>> https://tome.app/

Once you have prepared your story and its building blocks Tome will help you further develop and present it. The Tome free plan is ideal to start with.

All in all I have found that with some good planning Tome saves a lot of time. Time that can be used to further enhance your story and be creative.

Our near future

Enabling, sharing and harnessing stories framed around moral disengagement, to put an end to the moral disengagement that is poisoning democracy and harming people and society, is essential to restoring well-being and ensuring progress.

The use of generative AI to help people build and shape these stories is to be welcomed and embraced. Going down this path is consistent with the intent of the Collective Intelligence Project.

Reframing the mechanisms of moral disengagement to guide and ensure AI serves people and democracy is essential. The very real prospect of AI being rendered a carrier of moral disengagement can and must be addressed with urgency.

We are all in this together. We can do so much better together.
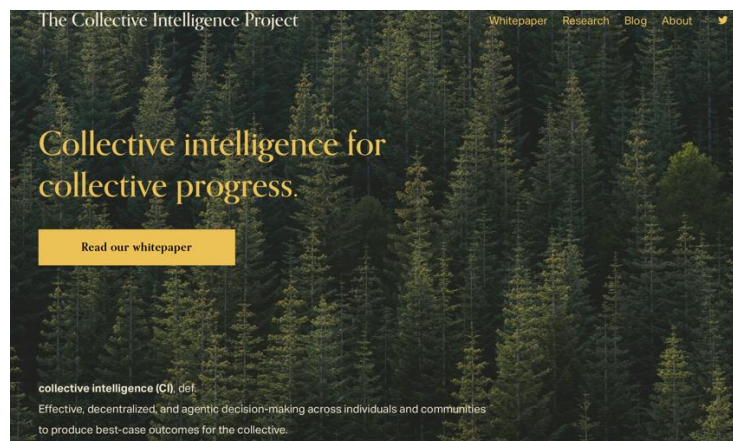
The Moral Disengagement Handbook

The building blocks of your story

Advantageous comparison

Making something appear better or less harmful than it is by pointing to something far worse.

Attribution of blame

Blaming the victims or targets that have been harmed by immoral behaviours and practices for bringing it on themselves.

Dehumanization

Portraying people who will be harmed by behaviours and practices as less than human. As case numbers in a system or process.

Diffusion of responsibility

Minimising personal responsibility for any harm caused to people by claiming they are only responsible for a small part of the process.

Displacement of responsibility

Superficially acknowledging the harm caused to people by behaviours and practices, while claiming it's the result of decisions made at a higher level.

Disregard, distortion, and denial of consequences

Ignoring, minimising and denying the harm (including evidence of harm), caused to people.

Euphemistic language

Using sanitised language and jargon to mask the hurt and harm caused to people.

Moral justification

Claiming behaviours and practices that cause harm to people serve a higher social and moral purpose.

Copyright

Important

Individuals, small to medium enterprises, APS agencies and community groups are most welcome contact me to discuss being provided with permission to produce derivatives to help address the problem of moral disengagement.

Conversations within the media and Australia's Parliament, coupled with my own knowledge and expertise, have led me to the firm view that major consultancy companies and conglomerates are, by the very nature of their business model and culture, are unsuited to undertake work in this sphere.

Consequently, such entities should not contact me.