InTransition Episode 51 – Sean Larkins

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen. Welcome once again to InTransition, the Podcast that deals with the practice of content marketing in the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Wherever you are in this big wild world of ours, thank you for giving up some of your very valuable time. Today we have a very special guest. They are all special guests, but today we're really going to learn from someone who has been right at the middle of probably the biggest transformation of government communications that we tend to refer to. We'll come to that in a moment. As we do each week we start with a definition of exactly what it is that we're talking about when we refer to content marketing and the public sector. Content marketing is an evidence-based strategic, measurable, and accountable business process that relies on the creation, curation, and distribution of useful relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action.

My guest today is Sean Larkins, the director of consulting and capability for the government and public sector practice of WPP, the world's largest communications services group. Sean was previously Deputy Director of the UK government communication service where he led part of the reorganization of the UK government's approach to building a centralized communication strategy. Sean was responsible for almost 4,000 government communicators, and helped to lead the UK government to embrace what was then a bit of a taboo with politicians and officials, that is the role of new media. I'm really looking forward to talking to him about that. Sean is currently in Australia and New Zealand this month to talk about his experiences in setting up and running the UK government services. He joins me now in the studio. Sean, welcome to Canberra. Welcome to Australia. Welcome to InTransition.

Sean Larkins: Thank you. Thank you very much for having me.

David Pembroke: Sean, it's the great case study in public sector communications, the UK government driven by the crisis that you genuinely had. Can you take us back to those earliest days about what happened and what you did to respond to that change?

Sean Larkins: Yeah. There is a saying which is "never waste a good crisis."

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: I think that's something that we had to deal with very much as a government issue in 2010. As you'll be aware, the financial crisis hit in late 2008. Governments around the world found that they didn't have the money that they had expected to have in terms of tax income and various other recent pieces. We had a change of government. It was the first coalition since Winston Churchill. They wanted to do things in a very, very different way. The previous government had a reputation, rightly or wrongly, for communicating too much. One of the first things that the incoming administration asked us were three very simple questions. How much do

you spend on government communications? How many people do it? Is it any good? Purely just because of the way governments are structured, we didn't know. There was no central body that added up everything that constituted communications.

In fact, there wasn't really a definition of what communications was, how far do we push the boundaries of that, for example. Citizen engagement, dealing with journalist obviously is communications, but how about some of the stuff that we do online, and what about digital publishing? There was no concept of what communications really kind of stood for. In terms of how many people did it, there was no sense of government communications being a profession. We didn't know who was doing communications. We didn't know where they were, what they were working on. In terms of evaluation, we certainly did some great stuff. The example I always talk about is the London 2012 Olympics. Communications around that were done very successfully by government communicators.

We didn't evaluate much of what we did, or maybe just one or two of the very, very big programs. We couldn't answer those questions. We did a bit of routing around and a bit of research. We started counting and we pretty much relatively quickly found a figure of about two and a half billion dollars a year being spent on communications, probably more. That put us up in European terms in terms of people like Procter & Gamble and Unilever. We slowly started to find all of these people within communications functions and communications teams, and people embedded in policy. There were probably around about 7,000 people working in government communications. That excluded local government. It excluded the emergency services. It excluded the health service, for example. As I said, as to the question of "is it any good?" some of it genuinely I think was world-leading. It's just that we couldn't demonstrate which of the bits we were doing was world-leading.

David Pembroke: As you've unpacked this and you've got it all sitting around in all these different pieces everywhere else, how did you go about putting it back in together around this government communications service? How did you make decisions around what was in, what was out, what was important, what wasn't important?

Sean Larkins: Firstly we had to ask the government, "What do you want to be? You're a new government. You're a new administration. It's 2010. What do you want to be known for by the time 2015 comes? Where are your priorities and what do you want to achieve?" From that it gave us some kind of very clear steers about what the government wanted to achieve, but also some very clear challenges in terms of how to functionally deliver that. There was no what I would term a head office function for government communications. The buck never seemed to stop with anybody. There was a lack of accountability. Ministers and their departments pretty much set their own agenda rather than working to a government agenda. The first issue for us was to create that kind of sense of, probably the word I most overuse over the last four or five years, it's about that sense of discipline.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: We need to run government communications less as a kind of free for all and more as a kind of business, and so putting in some kind of business measures around that. We needed someone to be ultimately responsible, so we recruited a new executive director of government communications that had a hotline right into number 10. We looked at the governance model, so that we could work to a single cross-government agenda. We started to rigorously pull apart the priorities that each department said they had so we were focusing on fewer issues and doing them better rather than communicating about the opening of an envelope. At one stage we were talking to ministers about their communications priorities and we came with a list of 186. With the best will in the world 186 is not a list of priorities. It's just a list. Really, let's be honest. It's just a list. There were some structural things that we needed to put right, that sense of high-level leadership.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: We needed to demonstrate to our political and policy colleagues that communications when done well is an investment, not an expense. We need to get much better at bringing consistency across government communications and looking at how we evaluate, how we develop strategy. Also at the same time, to take a look outside of government and realize fundamentally the world has changed, huge changes in citizen behaviours and expectations. The rise of the smartphone is game-changing. Australia is one of the top four countries in terms of smartphone use. The idea that we can broadcast messages and people listen to them. The idea that in 2010, or even today in 2015 governments are the most trusted voice in society of course is completely gone. Levels of trust have changed. How people consume media has changed.

Technology has changed and it's continuing to change at a very fast rate, and yet the vast majority of people in government communications issue press releases. I remember speaking at a conference in London and saying that press release is dead. I barely thought I'd make it alive out the door because most people have great skills in managing journalists and engaging with journalists. Hang on a minute, getting on the front page of the daily newspaper might get you 40,000 readers. As in many countries our newspapers tend to be the left of centre or right of centre. You're either preaching to people that will never take on your message, or you're preaching to the converted. How about all of these people like bloggers and vloggers that have hundreds of thousands of followers, and they are incredibly influential because they don't have a set agenda, and yet we shy away from them?

That doesn't make sense. Our reform program really was I suppose kind of two-fold. One is to look at the structure and the processes and the skills we needed within government. Secondly, to identify and acknowledge society has changed, and adapt and respond to that. There is something that we all, particularly all of us in communications, kind of know by osmosis and yet we forget about. Which is we have seen over the last 20 years the biggest change in human communication for over 14,000 years. 14,000 years give or take a decade or two is when humans first

started living in communities and in central groups of people. Since that time there's always been a better and an elder who was our village elder, if you like, or our shaman, or our priest, or our rabbi, or our imam. Over the last 200 years, national, governments. Over the last 60, 70, 80 years organizations like the ABC and the BBC.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: We looked to them. We trusted them. We listened to them. That doesn't happen anymore. We listen to bloggers and vloggers. We listen to celebrities. We go online to a website like Trip Advisor and we trust people that we have never met that are writing something independently that we're interested in. That authority, that sense of being at the centre of national life and a national debate that governments once had has been swept aside.

David Pembroke: It is obvious that these changes have taken place, but governments are notoriously risk-averse. They are notoriously hierarchical, bureaucratic. How do you get the message across that it's time to change and it's time to change to a better way that will enable you to spend less money, possibly, but to be more effective? To reach citizens and stakeholders?

Sean Larkins: I think as with any major change program there's a healthy mix, I have to say, between carrot and stick. We know that politicians, most of them understand the digital agenda, but not all of them. For some of those we just have to demonstrate what works. We have to be much better at looking at both outputs, outtakes, and outcomes so we can get the evidence to demonstrate that our new ways of engaging with people work. You're absolutely right about bureaucracies. I have spent the vast majority of my career in public service. I don't mean this in a demeaning way at all, but sometimes bureaucracies and big structured organizations engender a spirit of what you might call job's worth-ness, "We've always done it like this" and a fear of change.

I think in countries like Australia with a very, very short electoral cycle, just three years at federal level. If you want to avoid change there will be somewhere probably in the public service we can keep your head down until the next big idea comes along. We had to make it very clear. This is something that the Prime Minister has endorsed. This is something that the cabinet wants. This isn't something that's being imposed or instituted by communications experts. This is a fundamentally different way of government engaging with the public.

David Pembroke: You really do need the Prime Minister and the cabinet to say, "This is a priority. Get on with it?"

Sean Larkins: Yeah, and of course that gets delegated. Cabinets I'm sure and Prime Ministers and premieres are very, very busy people but yeah, the buck needs to stop with someone. You need a figurehead at the top of the communications profession. You need absolutely someone at the most senior levels of government to say, "I want

this change." Yes, of course we can provide all of those carrots around support and guidance and training, but actually we need to see change. One of the biggest things that we did in the early days was change the reporting lines for directors of communications. If I'm in a government department in the UK, historically I've been recognized, rewarded, judged on the contribution I make to that department. If my work for that department absolutely upsets the apple cart for the rest of government, there was no sanction. There was no incentive for me to support government as a whole, so we introduced things like matrix management.

You couldn't do a great job within your own department and a useless job for government as a whole and still pass. That was almost a kind of a symbol, if you like, or an emblem of a greater cultural shift which is to get people working in government communications to realize "I am working for government. I'm working on behalf of the Prime Minister's priorities. I may be based in the Foreign Affairs Ministry, or the Health Ministry, or the Communities Ministry, but at the end of the day I am here to support the government deliver its policy priorities. I'm not here to deliver vanity projects. I'm not here to undermine another department, or another part of government. We are working together as a single service."

David Pembroke: With that single strategy I plan to see that document where you have all those heads of communications all signing off, in the UK they all signed off on that one plan.

Sean Larkins: Yeah, dipping hands in the blood. I'm afraid it's a kind of blunt saying, but everybody needs to be accountable and responsible.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: That really was the thinking behind setting up the government communications service. Beforehand you didn't need any kind of qualifications in communications to work in communications. I firmly believe government communications are important, and they are important for all manner of reasons. Not at least the fact that no government policy priority has ever been delivered successfully without successful communications. We are not just a press release. We are not just the people deciding whether something should be designed in green or in pink. We are fundamentally at the heart of a policy-making process. If that's the case, we need the discipline of being a professional profession. We shouldn't have jobbing amateurs doing government communications task. Frankly, it's just too damn important to leave it to people that don't have the skill or amateurs.

David Pembroke: That's true, but the important policy people often see the communications as the colouring in department, the guys who ... How do you change that? How have you been able to change that in the UK, to put it at that central fundamentally strategic role that communications really has to be?

Sean Larkins: In some areas it's a slow birth. There is a saying that we use in the UK which I'm not quite sure it translates into Australia vernacular. I'll kind of explain it, which is

about cobblers kids. In the UK cobblers kids are always the ones with the worst shoes because their parents are making shoes for everybody else. Government communicators never communicate about what they can do.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: We had to absolutely focus on evidence. We absolutely had to go out and talk to the policy community. We had to go out and talk to permanent secretaries. We had to go out and talk to politicians. We had to be seen to be visible. We had to look at where we could find allies and work on projects right from the very beginning of policy development, and then communicate the changes that we had made. Frankly we had to have some open and honest conversations with some policymakers, increasingly in developed countries. Increasingly in countries like the United Kingdom and also places like Australia, and New Zealand. We cannot afford for everybody to access a government service.

A lot of what we do is around demand minimization. In some respects then the policy becomes communication. I think the other point I would make, and it is a truism, and that is governments are hugely complex structures. At the end of the day what are the key things that government can do? Well, it can introduce legislation. We can see from some of the dialogue that's come out of federal and State politics over the last couple of weeks, getting legislation right is difficult. We can regulate. I've never met a single citizen that likes to be told what to do in that level of detail. We can tax, not very popular, or we can communicate. Sometimes communication is not just the cheapest and most effective thing. Actually it becomes a policy in itself. We can see that in all manner of debates.

We've had a debate on and off in the UK for a long time around should there be a soda tax, or a sugar tax introduced. Over time you and I buy a can of coke we charge an extra ten cents or whatever it is. There is great evidence from around the world that shows that legislating, or regulating, or taxing on issues like that do not work. They don't engage the public. They are easy to avoid. Actually looking at things like communications, looking at things like nudge techniques and behavioural psychology is absolutely where communications should be leading. We have to work hand in hand with policy colleagues. We are not the people to colour in at the end.

David Pembroke: With that the UK has made great progress, continues to make great progress not only in standardizing methodologies and processes that are then templated across the organization training. We have a global audience for this podcast and I do speak to a number of people. It's the first bit and you have alluded to it that it is getting that buy-in from the very, very, very top. What else can be done if you don't have that buy-in? What are the simple steps and the simple wins that could people start to make progress to transition from where we've been to where we need to go?

Sean Larkins: In some respects it's around asking yourself, asking your colleagues, asking your civil service and your government political colleagues, six key questions. Firstly, why

do we lionize the people that work in press office? Press office has an immediate engagement media management is incredibly important, but they are only one channel. Why in so many governments across the world do we see the best office as the Bastian of importance for communications? Why do we not just see it as one channel? Secondly, why is most of our engagement with the public through journalists? There are community organizations, civil society. There are bloggers. There are vloggers that are much closer to the public than journalists. The posh word instantly is disintermediation of the media.

David Pembroke: Yes.

Sean Larkins: Which basically means cutting out the middleman. But why does press office always take priority? Why do we focus on journalists to the expense of other civil groups? Why are our communications primarily one way when we know from survey after survey after survey in all paths the people want meaningful dialogue. Why do we still broadcast messages? We know one of the biggest trends, and you will know this from a content perspective is making communications visual. I have yet to find a minister or a civil servant that is as comfortable communicating visually or through graphics or through pictures as they are with words, which kind of brings us back to points one and two, the journalist and the press office. We are uncomfortable in content. Most organizations I think now realize that digital is just key to everything. My experience of working in Europe and Africa is governments in particular say, “Yeah, we get it. Digital is really important so we’re going to make this person here the digital expert.” They’ll sit in the corner rather than developing digital skills.

Finally we really, really struggle in integrating our communications so that the touch points and the tone and the style and the language that we have across all levels of government don't match. It confuses the public. Yes, that's senior level buy-in, but I would be suggesting to people these are the six questions they should probably be asking themselves, and probably their bosses, and probably their bosses’ bosses, and then trying to find out how to come to an agreement that things have to change. Asking the right questions I think is absolutely key. Having that senior level buy-in is absolutely key, and being externally focused. The world has changed. Get over it, we need to deal with it.

David Pembroke: Let's just say we've asked those questions efficiently, effectively. I think that's a really nice model that people can quickly take away and implement tomorrow. Once we've got that buy-in, what are the steps that then happen for us to start to move to this more effective agile modern way to communicate?

Sean Larkins: What we found in the UK is that there is almost a kind of knee-jerk when there's a crisis or there is a big issue. Great, well we need a new organizational chart. We need a new organigram. How do we move the people around?

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: Actually that's probably the last thing you want to do. The first thing you want to do is start that process of winning over hearts and minds. How do you excite people? How do you empower people? How do you get people to enjoy taking risks? That is a challenge within not just the public sector, within many organizations and many sectors. You have to start with that kind of hearts and minds thing. We spend a great deal of time going out and talking to people face to face, on one in small groups listening to people's fears and concerns. Listening to people's fears and concerns doesn't mean that you agree to everything, but you can understand their point of view.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: Going out there and being visible and talking to your colleagues is absolutely key. I think the second one is around looking at the processes you use. We had no consistency in process. We had no clear government's model. We had 17 different ways of developing a campaign. We didn't have a single approach to evaluation. Try and bring some consistency to your processes. If you have a fantastic approach to evaluation in one department, then roll it out across everybody. Make it very clear that the good ideas don't necessarily need to come from the centre. They can come from any ... I'm happy to steal great practice wherever I see it.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: Try and win people's hearts and minds. Try and find some consistency in that process and only after that look at structural change. Structural change is the stuff that kind of slaves you down and bogs you down and saps the energy out of you. Regardless of the stage you're at you need to back that up by investing in your colleagues, in your staffing, communicators. Investing in training and development. Investing in just opening their eyes to possibilities given them a little bit of kind of free reign so they can try new ideas. We found that difficult at first because if you are getting people to do new things there is an element of risk. Politicians in particular are risk adverse. If you don't get people out of that mindset where only safe things happen, then you get people doing things that they've tried ten years ago and eight years ago and six years ago and four years ago rather than thinking, "Actually what should we be doing now, and should that change next year and the year after?"

David Pembroke: Yeah, I'm intrigued by the training program. I'm very impressed by it that it's not a one off you're done. It's you're educated and then you get so many units and then see you later. It's a rolling program that you can jump in and jump out of. What were the areas that you focused on that you felt you need to improve the skills of the government communicator to become more effective?

Sean Larkins: We did a series of capability reviews. We reviewed how every department across government communicated. It's important to note this wasn't a review of the communications director. It was a review of how each government department or ministry communicated. It doesn't matter how good your communications director

is. If you've got an organization that doesn't value or doesn't understand communications, they are always going to struggle. We did a warts-and-all under the bonnet look at how each ministry communicated. That was great because we could have an action plan for each individual ministry or department. It gave us, of course, when you look at everything pulled together a sense of where we're strong and where we're weak across government as a whole.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: As I've already mentioned, we lionize the press office. As important as they are, they are not the only game in town. We found that we were tactically strong but strategically weak so we weren't very good at developing strategy. We did some really great marketing but it was inconsistently applied so we did some good stuff, we did some poor stuff. Internal communications were in the main and with one or two notable exceptions a bit of a basket case. We were lagging behind the private sector in terms of digital communication. We started to look at a number of areas where we felt we needed everybody to up their game. We introduced things like compulsory continuing professional development. This is a profession. You are a professional person in which case if you don't do CPD how are you going to stay ahead of the curve? How are you going to develop new skills? We made everybody do a minimum of four pieces of continuing professional development a year.

We developed a training program that looked at a kind of beginners' level. How do we get everybody to a minimum benchmark? And then how do we take people to a higher level and practitioner and an expert level? You might come and do some digital training in year one and year two you'll come and do some more which is of a higher technique. Year three you might be doing something which is profession-leading. If you're doing stuff which is profession leading, then we'll co-opt you to help do some of the training next year as well. We made this a profession-wide approach. That thing about CPD actually is the grade level from the executive director of government communications to the most junior member of government communications. Everybody has to develop this.

David Pembroke: Everyone is on a journey.

Sean Larkins: Absolutely, we are all on a journey.

David Pembroke: What sort of impact has that had on the morale of the communication worker in the UK government? They must be motivated and the retention rates must be higher.

Sean Larkins: Yeah. You have to remember that during this time we were also looking at "we can't afford 7,000 people in government communications."

David Pembroke: No.

Sean Larkins: We were sadly saying goodbye to not just people that didn't have the skills but to

people that had very good skills that perhaps we didn't need anymore, or people that had very good skills in areas where we needed skills but we just had too many people. That was really difficult, reducing headcount, but yes you're absolutely right. Once you start to say to people, "Here is a profession. We're on this journey with you. That our ultimate aim is to make sure the government communicators are the most respected profession within government." How do we do that? We do that by giving you the skills that you need. We do that by operating in a disciplined and consistent way. We do that by promoting your successes inside and outside of government. We do that by creating partnerships with great organizations like Facebook and Google, for example, so that you start to mix and learn from the best there is, not just in government but in the private sector as well. At the start of that process we identified about 20 key indicators from the nation-wide survey of civil servants that happens each year.

They look at things like how engaged they are, how motivated they are, whether they trust the leadership, whether they give them the freedom to experiment. On each of those 20 indicters over the course of the four-year program those indicators rose every single year. During a time a great change and during a time when many people were seeing some of their long-standing colleagues leave the profession, actually confidence rose. It rose because people were saying, "Well, I'm now in a profession where actually I'm respected. I'm doing more interesting things. I'm getting called into policy meeting. Get this, me! I'm seeing in the trade press and in some of our national press really good things about what government is achieving through communication.

Hey, I want to be part. I feel proud to be part of that." One of the other things which we do which is a really good almost kind of benchmark for us is that we took control of entry-level recruitment so we could actually go out and get the best and the brightest into government. We could give them a really great induction. We could put them on that kind of fast track journey that we want every young person to be on in terms of government communications. Actually by doing that you start to see some really great young people the kind of digital natives that we would talk about who are bringing ...

David Pembroke: They are motivated by doing good ...

Sean Larkins: Absolutely, bringing in skills that perhaps some of us who are slightly more long in the tooth didn't have. At the start of that process we were probably getting somewhere around four or five applicants per job. Within about three years we were getting kind of 50, 60, 70, 80, sometimes 100 applicants for each job at a time when the economy was growing. People weren't coming it to government communications as a last resort. People were coming in as a first resort. That energy and that sense of "there's nothing we can't achieve" is very, very infectious. We started to see that across very many parts of government. It was a joy to see people proud of what they were doing and respected by their peers elsewhere in government and in the private sector.

David Pembroke: As an Australian, it kills me.

Sean Larkins: Why? I have to ask why.

David Pembroke: Because we need to aspire. It is such a great story. It's a simple story. It's a story that you tell. Tell you, what I'm only joking, really. I'm only joking that it kills me, but I just admire it so much. I love the way that you've gone through the process and thought about it so carefully. As you've gone along you've looked at each issue as it's gone and you've put in a very professional process and approach to improve and ...

Sean Larkins: I'm telling you the good stuff. There were things that didn't work well.

David Pembroke: Okay, we'll get to them in a minute.

Sean Larkins: What I would say I would say don't say, "Oh and it kills me," because I've been around –and very fortunate to me, a great number of government communicators over the course of the last couple of weeks when I have been in Australia and in New Zealand. You're up there in the top three in the world. This is something that I found when we were doing the UK reform. You go and talk to people overseas and the three countries that always came up in terms of being the best in government communications. The UK for which I kind of breathe a sigh of relief, thank you God, that's great, the Dutch and the Australians. Now, you have some challenges here. Of course you do. The split between federal and state makes sharing a best practice difficult because you have different administrations owned by different parties.

David Pembroke: I find that as an excuse as much as anything. I speak to a lot of people who work in government and try to introduce to them, "Look at this process that's ... Look at this case study." There is so much, "Oh yes," but the answer you get is, "Oh yeah, but we're different."

Sean Larkins: I don't think it's an excuse. I think it's a challenge.

David Pembroke: It is a challenge.

Sean Larkins: I agree with you that that we're different. I don't hold trunk with that at all. What are you trying to do? You're trying to engage with the citizen you're trying to engage with businesses to make Australia better for everybody. It doesn't matter whether you're in a territory, you're in a state, you're at federal level. It's the same game.

David Pembroke: Correct.

Sean Larkins: I think there is some great stuff that happens across Australia and New Zealand as well. I think there are areas where you are better than the UK. I think the tone of a lot of the stuff that comes out of Australia is much more suited to its audience. Sometimes we're just a little bit kind of formal and risk averse in some of our

communication. Some of the engagement work that you do really, really detailed citizen and community engagement I think is great. I think we've struggled a bit with some of that. I think some of the stuff you do around behavioural interventions and behaviour change is world-leading.

David Pembroke: Yes.

Sean Larkins: There are some great things that happen here.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: Is there a challenge at making the structural processes?

David Pembroke: We don't have that centralized "here we are. We're all in this together. Let's move forward to institutionalize the change." Which is really the issue.

Sean Larkins: What you could do is okay sometimes the sharing across the different levels of government is difficult. I can think of a dozen senior brilliant people that I've met in government communications over the last two weeks. Why don't they informally just get together? If there are reasons that stop you doing the change that you want to do, then look at different ways of doing it. Getting together, a group that even if it just kind of meets remotely over Skype or something once a quarter.

David Pembroke: You're right. The talent's there.

Sean Larkins: Yeah, it's absolutely there. As someone that's recruited a great many people into government communications in the UK, I tell you if I had a dollar for every time I recruited an Australian, I'd have about $27 more which wouldn't get me far. You export a great many brilliant communicators and you have even more here.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Sean Larkins: It's just, you're right, seizing the moment or making use of that crisis to create some fundamental change.

David Pembroke: That's again probably the issue that we haven't had a crisis. We haven't had the crisis. That that hasn't happened here.

Sean Larkins: Let's celebrate that. Try and find another way of kind of kick-starting that cage. Sometimes after an election is a good time regardless of whether it's incumbents returning or it's a new party actually that moment of taking stock. "We've just had an election. We've got our mandate from the public. What do we want to achieve and how are we going to do it?" Those are probably the two biggest questions you can ask. What do we want to achieve and how are we going to do it?

David Pembroke: I think you put your finger on it there because I think that will be the next big opportunity to think about this. "Well, hang on. How do we build that framework

and structure?" That's the thing I love is that it's that organization around the way you've gone about solving the problems and putting them in place. I was going to ask you, what surprised you along the way where you thought, "I didn't think that was going to happen," or "We tried that and it was a complete darn. It didn't work?"

Sean Larkins: What surprised me, resilience, actually. People that work in government communications and government as a whole are incredibly resilient. They are used to having things thrown at them 24/7. I think the resilience of colleagues in a time of great change was something that was really good to see. In terms of what didn't work, I think at the beginning we shied away from having a formal structure to the profession. We just thought actually there are really great motivated people. We'd just find opportunities and ways to encourage people to play nicely with each other. That kind of works, to a degree. You will know as well as I do, each minister and each department or ministry has its own agenda. If you don't find ways to bring them onto the same pitch they'll start playing different games at different points in time.

I think the rigor and the discipline of having a proper profession and a coordinated way of working together and holding people to account, we probably would have benefited from doing earlier in the process. Again, we were to a degree working blind. I think that is something that I would suggest is really important. The other thing from us that we could have done slightly different is that as part of that process we started to look at where there were policy synergies across different departments and encouraging different departments to work better together. Without that kind of clear steer from the top we found that on occasion you bring departments together that might have, for example, a shared responsibility but different objectives for things like climate change, and they start to compete against one another rather than cooperating. That kind of hubbing people together didn't really work. Those are probably the two learnings. That might be as a result of us trying to be a little too kind.

David Pembroke: Yes.

Sean Larkins: "We know what we're trying to do. Now, guys go and play nicely together." A referee always needs a good set of rules to guide the game. I think we could have possibly done that earlier.

David Pembroke: Just a couple of final ones. To regular listeners, we are going a little bit over but we don't often get the opportunity to sit in a room with Sean Larkins so we're going to take a bit more of his time. Just WPP the government and public sector practice, give us a little bit of an insight about what you're trying to achieve there.

Sean Larkins: The WPP government and public sector practices is a great idea. As you said earlier, WPP is the biggest communications services company in the world. We are in 112 countries. We work with 60 governments around the world including many federal and state level here. Actually one of the things that we want to do is to look at how

we share best practice. It doesn’t matter what the issue is. If it's kind of a beast reduction, or it's encouraging people and not to smoke, or it's tackling domestic violence. There is probably a country somewhere or a government somewhere where we've supported that approach.

One of the things that we’re very keen on and is partly behind my trip here is to look at how we can start to share that best practice. There is no point in reinventing the wheel. Obviously each country and each state and each community here have their own foibles, if you like. They are all unique but quite often there are some things that we can learn from one another. That’s really at the heart of why we set up the practice, not just to help deliver really good communications with governments and government organizations around the world, but actually to share that best practice. That’s something that's incredibly exciting.

David Pembroke: Where can people learn a little bit more about WPP and the government and public sector practice?

Sean Larkins: If they go onto Google, and at this point I should say, and of course other search engines do exist but it's normally that. Go onto a search engine. If you type into a search box WPP government practice, or government and public sector practice, you’ll go straight to our website. There are examples of case studies there that we've done around the world. If it sparks different thinking or an idea with people, then that's great, it's been worthwhile. As I said earlier on, government communications is so important because policies do not get delivered without it. If there is anything that we can do to help make that process easier, then great, we’re very happy with that.

David Pembroke: Fabulous. Sean, thank you very much for your time today.

Sean Larkins: You're very welcome.

David Pembroke: I really appreciated and I know the audience would have appreciated as well. Everyone knows that I'm a massive fan of what's happening in the UK. I think we’ll get there in Australia and I think I jokingly refer to that it kills me. It doesn’t kill me. I'm very proud of the fact that the Brits have been able to do it well although I'm equally pleased that we beat you in the rugby world cup last year.

Sean Larkins: We can too. I haven't said that we had the crisis first. There we are. That's been really pleasing.

David Pembroke: Yeah, and hopefully we won't have the crisis here, and we’ll be able to make the change without the crisis and be able to do it but to learn. It's there. The model’s there. People such as yourself and Alex Aiken, and Russell Grossman, everyone, very generous with your time. I think that's the other thing I really like about the way that the UK is going about telling this particular story is that they know there is value in it and they're happy to share time with lots of people. On behalf of all of us, thanks for that. There you go ladies and gentlemen.

A very special edition of InTransition. We will be back next week. If you are in interested, please send the links around to other people. Give us a review on iTunes, and Stitcher helps the program to get found. If you have any insights about other people who you would like us to talk to, info@contentgroup.com.au. Send it through and we will chase the people up and we can do it on Skype or here in the studio, or wherever else. Thanks again for your attention. Sorry we've gone just a little bit over time this week, but it was a great chat and I was pleased that Sean was here. I'll speak to you next week.