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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #65

WHY BE A PUBLIC SERVANT?

Hosted by Cath Ingram, Chairman of Partners Canberra, KPMG

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me.

I'd like to begin today's podcast by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land from which we broadcast today, the Ngunnawal people. And I pay my respects to their elders, past, present, and emerging. And recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of this city and region.

Today, a special episode of Work with Purpose, which is a recording of a session that took place in May of this year, where IPAA ACT's board member and Chairman of Partners at KPMG Canberra, Cath Ingram hosted a stimulating conversation with a number of senior public servants that answered the question 'Why be a public servant?'. It starts with the voice of Cath Ingram.

Cath Ingram:

Firstly, could I welcome and introduce Sean Innis, Pat Hetherington, and beaming in from New Zealand, we have Harinder Sidhu. Firstly, Sean. Sean's had a long career in the APS, formally at DSS and senior leadership positions at PM&C and the Productivity Commission. Sean, I think, will bring today that best of both worlds because he's lived and had formative experiences of leadership in the APS, but he is now a principal at Damala St Consulting. He's also an Honorary Fellow at the Australian Studies Institute at the ANU and is the Senior Fellow and Chair of the Public Policy Forum, which is an ADC Forum.

Sean's able to look from the inside and outside today, so welcome Sean. Pat Hetherington is the new Chief Operating Officer of the Department of Social Services. And I understand Pat, you only just started this job recently in the last month after being the deputy commissioner. And before that, the First Assistant Commissioner at the Australian Public Service Commission. And lastly, Harinder Sidhu is the Australian High Commissioner to New Zealand, and was previously the High Commissioner to India and the Ambassador to the Kingdom of Bhutan. And so, could you join with me in welcoming our panel today?

Well, today in exploring this topic, 'Why be a public servant?', we're going to dig into the challenges and the rewards. It's a complex, challenging environment, it's been changing rapidly over the last two years of the pandemic. And I think with the announcements from the Prime Minister who has some optimism for restoring a professional relationship with the Australian Public Service. We're going to look at purpose, impact rewards, challenges in what is a contemporary public service, and also explore some of the more gnarly issues. What does it mean to be a steward? What is ethical decision making, and how do we manage when perhaps we're challenged and also talking about the hollowing out and the building of capability for a contemporary public service.

Building on that, what I'd like to do is firstly explore the question with my panel, what drew you to the public service? And then secondly, perhaps what is the current biggest draw card or what keeps you there? Harinder, can I throw to you, what do you think is the biggest draw card, what drew you to the public service, and what keeps your passion burning?

Harinder Sidhu:

Okay. At the risk of sounding terribly shallow, what drew me to the public service was the prospect of travel. I saw the advertisements to join the Department of Foreign Affairs and as a first-generation migrant for whom this sort of thing was completely out of reach, it was this sense of adventure that I thought I could get to. And I did not really think about public service as such, but a few years later when I ended up working in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, I absolutely fell in love with the business of government. And I began to understand how government worked, the importance of the public service in making democracy work well. And right now, where I am, is I'm committed to contributing to the best public service that I can, to building capability, to delivering efficiency so things work well, and to delivering for your average Australian.

Every day, the sense that my work makes a small difference is what continues to motivate me and inspire me. And the takeout I have from my own journey, and it must be for many other people, because I was thinking about this. When you join as a graduate in the department of home affairs, very few people would do so with a burning desire to work on immigration policy, it's to find a way to harness that spirit in people who joined the public service and move that along. But that's what works for me.

Cath Ingram:

Great. Thank you, Harinder. Sean, what was your burning desire and what are you to reflect on about the public service?

Sean Innis:

Yeah. And can I start, it would've been lovely to see Harinder, but hearing her is just as lovely. And we're at PM&C together a very long time ago.

Harinder Sidhu:

Yeah.

Sean Innis:

And my story's a little bit different. I'm a Perth boy. I fundamentally believe the sun should set over the ocean. I can see the sun set from my front window. It sets over some hills. It's kind of pretty, it's just wrong. And I always felt that I was going to be a beach bum and sit under a tree and play my guitar and go swimming. What drew me to Canberra, and genuinely, it was the opportunity to make a difference to the nation as a whole. As a whole. And you can't do that anywhere else as a whole nation. That's the thing that drew me. I was actually enrolled in Architecture at UWA. And what I've discovered since is I love design. Would've been a rubbish architect, would've been an ordinary beach bum, but I would've given it a go. I love designing for human beings and I love designing for society. And that's the thing that drives me and drove me to be a public servant.

Cath Ingram:

Great. And Pat, I'm just going to change the question slightly for you. If you were writing a letter to your younger self when you were starting out your career, what would you say to that young Pat Hetherington about the career he was embarking on?

Patrick Hetherington:

Well, I accept that it's a different question, but I'm going to answer it as a good public servant would in the way that I choose to answer it. Don't join for the money and fame because it ain't there. I suppose my story in some ways is not dissimilar. I did... What I would say to my younger self is do what makes you happy, do something you love. Don't pursue dollars, don't pursue kind of self-importance and fame, do something that actually makes you feel good. And whether that's being a public servant or any other occupation, that is what I would say to my own self. I suppose I joined the... I did economics and commerce at ANU, and like everybody that does economics and commerce, I was going to be a billionaire hedge fund trader.

I haven't written it off yet, it's still there somewhere. I thought I better do some travelling, right? A bit like Harinder, I thought travel would be good. Need some money to do that. I joined the public services and non-ongoing APS three in the department of defence. And then I never left. And the reason is because, I suppose what my colleagues have said, I sort of fell in love with the mission, right? I was finance guy, I was involved in costing operations. Deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and Timor and those sorts of things. And I felt a real sense of purpose. It was something really important this country was doing for us as a nation, but for others. And I've done lots and lots of things now in my public service career, but all of them have been about how do we move our country forward, how do we contribute to this country and how do we kind of make sure that Australia remains prosperous into the future for its people? And I think for me, that's what's kept me in the public service.

Cath Ingram:

Right. Thank you. Harinder, I'm going to go to you now, just building actually on Pat's comment there about purpose, and Sean's comment about the whole of Australia, but let's talk about the professional dilemmas. At times, there's the enormous rush, I'm sure, that goes with these amazing policies and programs that you deliver and can make a difference. But sometimes we can find ourselves perhaps disagreeing or our value is not aligned, perhaps, to a government policy or program. And you talk about, you started your career at Home Affairs. Are we expected to work on that policy and program? And then, what's your advice to people here in the room about how do you manage and deal with professional dilemmas? What advice would you give to others, Harinder?

Harinder Sidhu:

Thanks for that, Cath. I didn't start in Home Affairs, actually. I started in Foreign Affairs, but in the course of my career, I have worked on a number of issues that I think you would say are either controversial or morally challenging. I worked on people smuggling way back in 2000, 2001 when it was a very big shift in government's policy. And people found that very, very challenging. In fact, there were people, I remember those early days of meetings, public servants who found they couldn't stay in the room and just found that where the policy was going was so challenging for them. I've worked in intelligence, and I've worked in the department of climate change for virtually its entire existence at a time where that was a hotly consistent policy issue. I hope it's not really as hotly contested now as was then.

And what keeps me going through all of that is remembering that I am first and foremost a servant of democracy. Governments are democratically elected by the people. We public servants serve the governments. I cannot, in my mind as a public servant, individually override the will of the people or the government. I will bring my skills to bear to serve the government. That said, I recall in those early days of the change in government policy on people smuggling when Peter Shergold was the secretary of PM&C, and he stood up at an all staff meeting one point and he said, look, I know people find this really difficult. Sean's nodding, he might even remember this, because I think you were there. He said, there are no shackles around your ankles. The public services are very, very broad church, a very big space. If you find you cannot work on a

particular policy issue, go, and apply your suit somewhere else. You're not bound to stay in this space. And I think that was also very good advice, it's one thing that I keep in mind that if I really feel I can't, nobody is holding me there.

Cath Ingram:

Thanks, Harinder. Sean, then to build on that and perhaps also extending the question to that of empowerment and having your voice in the APS and how do you find that and where do you have to hold the space and where do you contribute and share that voice?

Perhaps some perspectives from both sides of the coin where you've been with the public service.

Sean Innis:

Thanks, Cath. Terrific counsel from Harinder. And I remember that meeting well. And I think there are some realities about being a public servant. There are lots of privileges, lots of privileges. Harinder put it beautifully. We're servants of democracy. We're servants of democracy. There is a reality that comes with that, and you serve the government of the day, the government that's been elected by the people. And just like Harinder, i've got some things that I feel deep conflict about personally. I was involved in writing the cabinet documents that set up the northern territory intervention. I could see that there were good hearts involved, but I was deeply, deeply conflicted personally about elements of that policy. And the thing that got me through was we are serving the government of the day, we're servants of democracy, and we all get a vote on this later. All of us.

You do need to support decisions and implementation you don't like. That just comes with the territory. You have to support people whose philosophical bent doesn't match your own. That comes with the territory. The thing I'd say is, there's nothing wrong with having different views. In fact, the public service works by bringing together a diversity of views. We need to understand, and to a degree, reflect the whole spectrum of views we see in our nation. We need to understand them, bring them together. We do need to do that. And we ourselves are human beings and we're allowed to have our views, but the APS is no place for a crusade. Where I saw people really finding it difficult, Harinder will remember this, climate change, clearly people smuggling, indigenous affairs and home affairs. All areas where i've seen public servants really struggle, really struggle.

Cathy asked about freedom of expression. And very important to have diversity in, but also very important that you hold your voice outside. And especially as you become more senior. And I think it's becoming more difficult for people, that we live in a social media age where actually there's probably no such thing as a private conversation. John Howard a long time ago talked about the barbecue stopper. In a sense, Twitter is the barbecue of today. It's just that you're having it with everyone in society at once. There are some things you've got to give up, and your public voice is one of them. I didn't transition to my new life, which was through the Productivity Commission, ANU and then my own staff. A part of what I wanted to do was talk publicly about what i've learned, and the things i've seen and the policy issues of today much more openly than I could as a public servant. I made the choice to make a transition. That is a choice.

Cath Ingram:

Thank you. I'm going to change now, Pat.

Sean Innis:

Can I-

Cath Ingram:

Please, of course.

Patrick Hetherington:

Add one more thing to that? Just because I feel I should. I agree with everything colleagues have said. You have agency, you have choice, right? If there's something that grates against you deeply, you should think about being somewhere else, because our job as public servants are to serve the government of the day and the people. But the other side of that is we have influence. When we talk about policy development, when we talk about a position that a government might take. We can inform that position, right? You're not without power, you're not without voice. The voice piece publicly is entirely relevant and proper, but as public servants, you think about... We've just had a change of government. The first piece of advice that government is going to see, ministers are going to see, will be our igbs, right?

We, as public servants, have crafted the first piece of advice a new government is going to lay its eyes on and it's going to help set the agenda. They've got an agenda for sure, but it's going to help give them the detail that will make that agenda real. And so, think about, in your own roles, how you can influence the direction of policy, and then wherever the policy lands, something that doesn't fit with you personally, then think about how you extract yourself from that situation because ultimately the role is government.

Cath Ingram:

No, that's great. Thank you for... And building on that and let's move to stewardship, is it different from leadership? But we talk about public servants often need to take responsibility for different things, a system, a framework, a culture. What do you see the benefits and challenges of the public service performing stewardship functions? What does it mean to you to be a steward of the public service?

Patrick Hetherington:

Do you want to go to me first?

Cath Ingram:

Please, Pat. Yeah.

Patrick Hetherington:

Yeah. Happy to kick off on that one. We talk a lot about, in particular, SES officers being stewards of the public service. I actually think we're all stewards of the public service. And I think, so when I see us working at our best is when we all work together, right. Over the last couple of years and everyone's got a COVID story, and everyone has done something important in the context of COVID. I was deployed down to Services Australia from Defence into Services for about three or four months. And like so many other big problems that we grapple with as a nation, it's multi-agency. All the big problems that we're grappling with are multi-departmental, multi-agency, multi-sector. And you just can't get them done unless you kind of work together as a cohesive unit.

And I think kind of being able to do that, come together for me around the purpose of the public service is so important. And so, I... Kind of fills me with such pride, what we've been able to do as a service. And then I think about why don't we do that all the time. Why is it that it takes a crisis to do that all the time? We should all strive to leave the public service in a better place than we found it. Certainly, I'd have to think about that

pretty frequently about what am I going to do that's going to lift the public service in some way that's beyond my department, beyond me as a person. And I would challenge all of you to do that. I think part of what prevents us from thinking holistically about the service is our traditional portfolio lines, and this is a problem, I'm sure Sean can talk about it and Harinder can talk about it.

I think part of what prevents us from playing that real stewardship role across the public sector is we have ministers, they have their priorities, our secretaries have priorities in response to ministers and we do like to live within our lane. I just don't see that being the future and I think if we can break the culture down a little bit to operate more regularly, more routinely as a public service, then this notion of stewardship of the public service becomes more real to people because you see kind of all the elements of government and how they interact. It will help you to think about what are some of those things that I can do to make the service as a whole better. And I think once we can kind of grapple with some of those cultural pieces around, I guess, that stove piping in the public sector, then it's going to be easier for us to get after stewardship in a real sense. I'll stop.

Cath Ingram:

Harinder, can I go to you to comment on stewardship, and particularly in your role because you have a role facing into the world in your role as a High Commissioner as part of Foreign Affairs. Your reflections on stewardship.

Harinder Sidhu:

Yeah. There's so many dimensions and I really want to endorse everything that Pat said. And can I also just give my full endorsement to Pat's point about the early question about voice? I thought that was really powerful and an important point. I just want to make that point.

Cath Ingram:

Thank you.

Harinder Sidhu:

I see stewardship as having... There's two dimensions, right? It's what we, as the public service, are stewards of, which is kind of the institutions of government, the things that make things run. I know we sort of make a joke, I think it was the 2019 election where it took a while for the government to be finally formed. And everyone says, well, everything ran because the public service is able to run it, but that's actually a sign of the strength of the public services care for the institutions. And I think we should never lose sight of that because that then translates into what it is to be a steward of the public service.

And I'm definitely here with Pat in that it's a responsibility of everybody to contribute to that. But SES officers, I do think here, have a special responsibility. And it is about inculcating the values and public service values into everybody. We need to model them and we need to inculcate them. And the second piece of stewardship we have is to take responsibility for maintaining the strength of the public service into the future. In other words, building the next generation of public service. My personal take on that has been to work as hard as I can to support public service that mirrors the community it serves. We have gender diversity, we have cultural diversity. Those are very important elements, because unless people can see in their leaders, if they can see themselves, we will not have credibility. We will risk being distanced from the community we serve. That part of building capability is all about making sure we never lose our connection with our ultimate client. It is the government, but it's actually the actual Australian citizen.

Cath Ingram:

Right.

Harinder Sidhu:

I see that as a core part of our stewardship function.

Cath Ingram:

Harinder, you've started to touch on, and I think I'm just going to move to our fit for future. And Pat, you've explored what some of the things are that to be this contemporary public service, we've got to shift. Sean, perhaps firstly, any reflections out of how the public service responded in the pandemic that we should keep going and take forward? And then secondly, what, from your observation, is that sort of capability that we all need to invest in ourselves or in those that we grow as a team coming forward?

Sean Innis:

Thanks, Cath. And I'm going to take Pat's lead and answer the question with a little chapo as we...

Cath Ingram:

Of course.

Sean Innis:

I do want to touch on stewardship, and everything Pat and Harinder said I absolutely agree with. But I'd add a dimension that I actually think has weakened. And when I was at the Productivity Commission, we did an inquiry on human services and we looked across all of the human services world. We picked six particular services to deep dive on. One of them we wrestled with and didn't pick was age care, because we didn't think we could do a good enough job of it. We thought the problems were too deep. When we looked across human services, we saw something missing in the way, not just the Commonwealth Government, but all levels of government were approaching it. And that is, we didn't understand the human beings we're here to serve.

We didn't understand their lives, we didn't understand the connections in their lives, we didn't understand the distribution of their lives. How many different types of lives people were leading, and we weren't designing for that. We had one of two models, either a bogstandard service offering that everyone got, or a pretence that we could cure a service offering individually for every single human being in the country. That doesn't make sense. One of the stewardship things that I'd encourage you to think about, and it is the role of the public service, is that understanding of the issues and the human beings and their wellbeing and how that comes together.

Cath Ingram:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sean Innis:

One thing that policy does badly, we do lifetime policy really badly. We do all these little interventions. And when you think about how they hit a person's life, actually they stop making sense, which is why Graton and others are starting to talk about the intergenerational bargain being broken, some of that's policy. I just

wanted to say stewardship is all of the things that I mentioned, but there's a dimension more, which is you are the policy stewards of the country. You need to understand the population, the dynamics, and what's happening into the future. The pandemic, watching it from largely ANU, what a magnificent response from the public service. I had the privilege of hosting a meeting between the top tables of three departments recently. Three Secretaries and their Deputies. And what I observed at that meeting was a level of natural collaboration that I have never seen in the service. And that was born of the pandemic.

I was surprised, heartened, and I could see this building change that Pat's referred to in the way the Australian public service operates. It needs to be caught, nurtured, and never ever let go. I think departments need to have different views and bring those views together, but the traditional model of fierce competition and unhealthy competition wouldn't have worked in the pandemic. You guys shifted quickly. And I really do think it's something to embrace.

Cath Ingram:

Great. Thank you. Pat, your reflections.

Patrick Hetherington:

Yeah. I mean, so many, and I'll add a couple to that I think are really important, but by no means a kind of exhaustive list of things that I think need to be the hallmarks of our service going forward. One of the things I observed, pandemic but other events as well, is we work well when we engage with risk and step into risk. We were taking lots of risks in our response. We understood them. We did the work to understand the nature of the risk and mitigate where we could, but a crisis often empowers us to take risk that we otherwise might not. And so, I think that's an important element of our success and something that we need to grab a hold of if we can. And now that changes with time, it changes with events, it changes with governments, it changes with leadership changes, but I think there's something really in that. And then probably for me, another important element of it is, and this is relevant to the future of the service and everybody in this room, is we were learning. We were learning very rapidly. We were stopping things that weren't working. We were kind of relying on subject matter experts in ways, quite publicly, that you don't often see out of the public service. And when things kind of went off the rails, we'd come back, we'd take another look, we'd learn to do things differently, we'd unlearn the thing that didn't work. I think that's our future. I really think that our capacity to build new capabilities, to continue to build on our learning and our knowledge as a public service, as well as being able to collaborate across the system and step into risk in a well understood way will continue to kind of define how successful we are as a service. And I think we did it in a first right way throughout the pandemic. We need to grab a hold of that in some way.

Cath Ingram:

I want to ask you the question, and could you keep it to three words? I'm hoping the question comes up also on the screen. All right. What are the challenges you see in the current public service? And just a three word response, not a monologue, because it'll be a word cloud.

Caroline Walsh:

And we are getting some answers up on the screen already. One person thinks inadequate remuneration, multiple priorities, talent attraction and retaining staff, APS brand recognition. Retaining staff is trumping a few, it's coming up. Collaboration, and burnout has just been a standout in that centre as well.

Cath Ingram:

Okay. Now Harinder, I hope you were paying very keen interest to some of those words coming through. Any comments on the challenges that people in the room are feeling is facing the public service?

Harinder Sidhu:

Well, they all resonate with me. I've only been here a couple of months, so I've been through most of COVID with everyone else. And I can feel some of the feeling that sits behind that. I think that there's that piece around burnout, but it's collaboration and it's the fight for talent. And sitting here in New Zealand, it's very clear that New Zealand is facing exactly the same issues. This isn't peculiar to Australia, it's peculiar to everyone else. Could I throw in a couple more in there?

Cath Ingram:

Sure. Go for it.

Harinder Sidhu:

I think that the need for speed is very much on the agenda now. There's a real expectation on behalf of governments and the community that we will respond faster. This piece on collaboration, I think, is related to that, but I think it raises some real challenges for policy making. And the second thing that I think that we're going to be challenged by is the extent which our structures are fit for the kinds of problems we are going to have to solve into the future. We are in a world now where in every department I can think of, and I'm seeing it here in New Zealand as well, setting up task forces to deal with questions that just don't fit neatly in where we are at. And I think that's a trend for the future, but it does really raise that question about, well, should we think differently about how we pull ourselves together?

Cath Ingram:

Great. Can I draw on Pat? I think you referenced silos before and is that preventing collaboration. What's your thoughts and advice to the folk in the room here, some of which might be able to influence or control necessarily the structures they work in?

Patrick Hetherington:

I'd say that might be true, but there's always opportunity to be involved in task forces. When we set up umpteen task forces at various levels right across the public service over the last couple of years, and we talk about mobility quite a bit in the public sector and I'm a big support of that. I'd say if you have an opportunity to be involved in a task force, then you should seriously think about grabbing a hold of that. If you have an opportunity to be involved in sort of surge work, then you should seriously think about doing that for a couple of reasons. First is ordinarily, we bring together task forces because we have a narrowly problem, it's horrendous to sort of describe, that cuts across so many different areas and so many different skill sets.

Being involved in those things, you'll get to work with colleagues you may never otherwise get to work with, you'll get to learn from those people, you'll get to see how different skill sets contribute to resolving problems. And hopefully you'll get to make colleagues for life as a result of that. And I think one thing, if you haven't already worked out, much of what we do in the public service is based on relationships. And I think you can say that generally of the world. But build those strong relationships. Getting involved in task forces and those kinds of activities you may not otherwise get involved in will broaden your networks, will give you that

opportunity to, “Hey, I know a person that works in that department. I can now reach out and have a conversation with them.” And creating those linkages is just so, so important as you go through a career.

Cath Ingram:

It's a nice plug for IPAA. One of our big things is about networks and helping people promote and build a network. Couldn't miss the drive by there. Sean, just on capabilities though. What are perhaps the things, your advice, and reflections, we should all be in a continuous learning mode and investing in skills. What are the critical skills that... Harinder called out the need for speed, being agile, driving forward. Any top three that you can really think we all as a service need to focus on?

Sean Innis:

Yeah. Thanks, Cath. And a couple of reflections. And Caroline and her crew know this. I wrote a piece recently on meetings. And I'm not naturally attracted to meetings, right? They're a bit boring, but a colleague and I were walking around the lake, we're wondering what would really contribute to public service productivity, dealing with all these issues we're talking about? Actually, doing meetings better. Making that part of your craft, because I'm sure as eggs, a lot of you've gone to meetings and you're not quite sure why you're there. You're not quite sure what was decided and you all walk away and no one carries the issues forward. That's disastrous, right, because the world is accelerated. The work you do is very busy. And the reason why I think that's important is two societal level changes that are coming together.

The first is society shifted very strongly to a community-based decision-making model, a collective based decision making model, collective actions. You're all working together a lot more. And this is not just in the service, across society as a whole. Individual thinking is less valorised in all of these systems. I predict a future challenge for the public service is to get the balance of that right. I think the collective models are really powerful and we're seeking them out, but actually need some time and space for individual thinking.

Cath Ingram:

Great.

Sean Innis:

I'll leave that thought with you.

Cath Ingram:

Lovely. That is a great note to end on. That brings us to the end of our panel. I feel you've all had this sort of personal, professional, development coaching. And hopefully you're filled with richness, inspiration and ideas to take back into your careers or have different conversations within your agencies. But can you firstly, join with me in thanking our panel, Harinder Sidhu, Sean Innis, and Pat Hetherington.

David Pembroke:

And there you go. What a great conversation hosted there by Cath Ingram. And really, Cat's made such a wonderful contribution to IPAA over many many years, and that experience shown through. And certainly there, Harinder, Sean and Pat as well. It's a wonderful conversation, and again just great evidence and more proof about the why the work that the Australian public service does is so important to the health of our community and to Australia. So a big thanks to Cat for hosting this episode of Work with Purpose.

Thanks again to you, the audience for giving up some of your most valuable asset, which is your time and attention. We are really grateful that you do listen each week. And I'm also grateful to IPAA for continuing to put together such interesting content to share with you. A big thanks also to the team at contentgroup, and also to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support.

We'll be back at the same time in two weeks. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks again for tuning in, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

Work With Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.