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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #73

REVISITING 'WHAT MAKES A GREAT FIRST NATIONS  
PUBLIC SERVANT?'

Hosted by David Pembroke, Founder and CEO, contentgroup

# TRANSCRIPT

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David Pembroke :

Hello everyone and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. Today, we revisit one of the podcasts that we published earlier in the year – ‘What makes a great First Nations public servant?’.

I begin today's program 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 acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands on which people are listening to this podcast today.

The public service offers opportunity to contribute to positive outcomes for Australian communities and to pursue rewarding careers. But it also comes with challenges, obstacles, ethical dilemmas, and racism for some of our First Nations public servants.

Our conversation in this episode is an important one, with our guests exploring the push and pull factors for First Nations people inside the Australian Public Service. It was brought to our listeners in NAIDOC Week, and as we are being encouraged to stand up for change, rally around Indigenous communities and make a stand for institutional and structural reforms, we thought it was a great podcast for you to listen to once again.

The podcast features Professor Tom Calma, who is the Chancellor of the University of Canberra, Kate Thomann who at the time, was working on the Federal Department of Health, but Kate is now the Executive Director, Research and Education at AIATSIS (The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies). The final guest was Geoff Richardson PSM, a First Nations Development Consultant. They share their insights from decades of work inside the APS.

And the podcast begins with my voice.

David Pembroke :

Now, Geoff, I might start with you. And I think before we get into the push and pull factors for First Nations people, I'd love to get your answer or to find out about where you were and how you felt when the prime minister accepted the Uluru Statement of the Heart.

Geoff Richardson:

I'm assuming you're talking about the current prime minister, David?

David Pembroke :

Yes, the current prime minister. Yes, the current prime minister.

Geoff Richardson:

Most people watching it on television on election night and Prime Minister Albanese getting up, and first of all, moving the flags into the screenshot, and then having a very passionate acceptance speech of which he mentioned the statement. I thought it was a very humbling moment for the prime minister, but also a really important message that his government will do its best to bring this important policy across the line.

David Pembroke :

And Tom Calma?

Tom Calma :

Oh yeah-

David Pembroke :

What was your experience?

Tom Calma :

Yeah, I'm very happy to see at least the profiling of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people the recognition and the commitment to advance the acceptance of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and wanting to work and looking at the three elements to that, being the voice, treaty, and also truth telling. That's just the beginning of the process. It's a long process to go. But what the Prime Minister Albanese did commit to was taking the Voice to Parliament to a referendum and to get it entrenched in the constitution, which is a pretty bold step. And it's something that is welcomed, but there's a lot more to it than just getting recognised in the constitution.

David Pembroke :

All right. And Kate, your experience of that announcement.

Kate Thomann:

Look, I thought it was very impressive that the new prime minister mentioned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and First Nations as a priority area pretty well in his opening statement where he actually had his welcome speech. I agree that it's going to be a long road in terms of negotiating reform, but it is long overdue reform. And there are certainly other elements that we need to work through as a nation, such as developing treaties for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And also considering the fact that our sovereignty has never been ceded and what that actually means for a contemporary Australian society, alongside political reform, self-determination, and advancement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

David Pembroke :

So to you, Geoff, it sets a context though, doesn't it for the ongoing contribution and involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Public Service? You've been working in the APS for many, many years. What do you see at the moment are those push and pull factors for First Nations people working in the public sector?

Geoff Richardson:

There are many. Can I just recap, or sorry, go back a bit? And say that when Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people's rights are observed and granted and acknowledged, that doesn't diminish the rest of the nation. And there's always this fear of, if our people gain rights, somehow mainstream Australia loses. And that's never been the case and never will be. Everyone wins when Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people's rights are acknowledged and respected and adhered to, granted. So, there's nothing to fear from the voice or treaties. Nothing at all.

Just in relation to push pull fact, look, there's so many. People enter the public service for a whole range of reasons, like non-Indigenous people. Many of the people that I know, friends of mine and the two colleagues here on the panel, we entered into the public service to serve the public. I mean, in particular, our own people.

So there's a strong push to come in to the public service because, first of all, it's a great place to work. I recommend it for anyone and everyone. But the reasons for coming into the public service are many. For me, I relished the thought, jumped on the opportunity to work for my mob and I know plenty of the Aboriginal people in the public service, and Torres Strait Islanders, have joined for that purpose or that reason. But there are a whole range of factors behind staying in that we might explore in this discussion.

David Pembroke :

Yeah, I'm sure we will. So from your point of view, Tom, what was it that drew you into a career of public service?

Tom Calma :

Well, I suppose, and I should say, that I retired from the APS in 2010, but I'd spent 38 years in the APS prior to that. And I think it highlighted when I first started what the benefits of role models and mentors because my father was my role model who was in the APS and encouraged me to get in because he saw that that was a career opportunity, and I actually went into a mainstream department at the time. And after almost a decade, transitioned over to Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander affairs, but all the time seeing how to advance Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people. So over the years we've seen actually many different reasons why people join the APS. And it's as Geoff said, primarily many people join because they want to do good for our mob and get into a position.

I think sometimes that's not always realistic because there's a long road to be able to get in to be a policy influencer. But over the years, we've seen more and more Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people graduating from university or at least getting a tertiary experience. They come out with a multiple of professional experiences, and so that's really opened up opportunities across all departments, beyond the Indigenous affairs departments. And so I'm seeing a lot more people with professional qualifications coming in and seeing a career in the public service or an opportunity to come in and from the private sector into the public sector and move backwards and forwards. And I think that's really the way to go into the future, to broaden the whole experiences of all the public service. But we're committed to service and I think that's the prime reason why people join.

David Pembroke :

And Kate, what was your experience? What was your story? What drew you to the public service?

Kate Thomann:

So government policy has had a profound impact on the lives of all Australians, but especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And I was also motivated by the desire to work to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There are a couple of push and pull factors that I see. In terms of the push factors, a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are currently overpromised roles and impact, and it's currently difficult to achieve real impact at the lower levels of the Australian Public Service.

We have challenges with poor supervision and lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding, and supervisors don't always provide constructive or clear advice in their communication, expectations, and feedback. The cultural contribution and the lived experience and the value that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bring to the APS is not always heard, recognised, and valued. However, the pull factors far outweigh those challenges.

The pull factors are we have an ability to contribute to social policy in a way that you can only achieve in the public service. We have an ability to improve outcomes and the lived daily reality through government policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. And the other pull factor is our commitment, passion, and desire to work hard to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the nation itself. It's a fantastic place to work.

David Pembroke :

And from your experience, how's it been for you through your career? Your personal experience.

Kate Thomann:

Oh, look, it's been fantastic. I started as an Aboriginal cadet while I was still studying at university. And that program was actually a very successful program offered by the Australian Government. It doesn't exist at the moment, but there were certainly several other current Indigenous SES officers that were recruited to the public service through that. And I've been fortunate enough through my career to work across multiple Commonwealth agencies, contribute to policy in a really broad ranging and diverse way, and get immense joy and satisfaction of working on government policy to realise real lived impact for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It's incredibly rewarding.

David Pembroke :

Now, Geoff, the three of you who are on this program today are examples of senior people who have succeeded, who have got to the top of the Australian Public Service. But why is it that we see that a majority of Indigenous public servants are clustered around that APS 4 level? What's your view as to why there is that grouping at around that level?

Geoff Richardson:

Look, there are a whole range of reasons. I think Kate spelled out some of the reasons, and that is that often the skill sets and the trades and characteristics and life experience of our people aren't really recognised. Particularly for people at the lower levels coming in, it's much harder when you come in as a lower level person to express yourself and to be recognised for the skills you bring in. There's biases in the system that very much lean towards the mainstream way of doing things. We know that the mainstream way of serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has contributed or kept the gap in our life expectancy and life outcomes wider than it necessarily should be. We know that mainstream approaches... The biases in the system often go against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The lower levels don't get the opportunities. They don't get the training and skills development. And indeed, they struggle often. People at that level, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, struggle to have a voice.

So the system is inherently biased insofar as not recognising what Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people bring to the sector, to the APS. As a consequence, it's very hard for people to go up the ladder. So there needs to be more of an understanding in the system of the APS of what we bring. Tom, Kate, and I, operating at the SES level, had to do everything that the other SES officers were required to do. But something that I often say, that when we're out engaging, particularly with our own people, we're drawing on skills that aren't really often recognised. So we're doing work that only people with our skills can deliver, but often that's overlooked. And I would say that would be the same for people at the lower levels.

David Pembroke :

So, Tom, your view on this sort of inherent bias that is in the system, that Geoff talks about, how well is it being addressed, in your experience? And I know that you're not in the APS as such, but you're sort of living in the town or in Canberra, obviously, and you're heavily involved in all sorts of roles. So, I'm sure you have a view around that bias.

Tom Calma :

Yeah, I do. And I think one of the other important considerations is Geoff and I both started off working at a regional level in a state office, and only mid-career that we actually came into the national offices in Canberra. So, we've got that breadth of experience. And I think in response to that other question about people at the

lower levels, that's where a lot of the entry level 4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are at, into the service roles across agencies. And sometimes, but it's very limited, the opportunity to move up the ranks.

And so the importance, I think, within the APS is that you don't just stay in one area. That you take opportunities to move laterally and even move interstate, if necessary, to take on those opportunities and to get that experience. And not to shy away as you get a little bit more advanced, shy away from opportunities. Take them if they're presented, but also initiate some yourself. And that's a real challenge. But the biases are there and I think that hasn't changed actually over the years. That you get people in major policy levels who don't have field experience and they don't have broad experience. And this is where we try and encourage them to listen to Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people in the field who have had that lived experience, who are able to talk about whether a policy is going to succeed or not. But we've also got the challenge of senior bureaucrats moving on, politicians moving on, wanting to throw their own little influence over programs that sometimes aren't soundly based, and so there needs to be more opportunities.

And look, to the credit of the APS, we've had cultural competency training coming through and a lot more exposure in recent years, but we've also advanced. At one stage, the government had a secretary's council of equality and diversity, and I was fortunate to be appointed as an external member to that, working with all the secretaries to look at these very issues that exist and the biases. And it's the things like unconscious bias, that people rely too much on media to get an understanding about Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people and many other things. Whereas if they had the on the ground experience, it's life-changing. And those who have been out and worked with Aboriginal people in the ground to see how policies should be developed or implemented, they come back very much changed, and so we see good policy. So, there's a lot of work needs to take place. But having leadership at both the political level and the senior bureaucratic level who want to have a positive attitude towards Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people and recognition really bodes well for, I think, a good positive future.

David Pembroke :

Yeah. And Kate, your views on why people are clustered? You've heard Tom's views and Geoff's views. You agree with both of those and... Excuse me. And perhaps to that issue of biases in the system, do you see them there, and are they being adequately addressed?

Kate Thomann:

Look, I totally agree with what Tom and Geoff have both said. I think one of the challenges that we currently have is that we have our entry-level programs that we specifically recruit to at the lower levels. We don't necessarily target recruitment to the higher levels. Not to say that there hasn't been great advancements in that, but because we recruit so many Aboriginal people through the lower level programs, you can see why we've got significant challenges at the APS 4 levels. What I will say is there has been quite a lot of change, including at the senior executive levels. Once upon a time, both Tom and Geoff were in a very limited cohort of Indigenous SES officers. A couple of years ago, it reached about 25. And over the last two years, it's doubled and there's probably about 50 Indigenous SES officers across the Commonwealth.

Now, that is a fantastic and a massive achievement. However, we still need about 1,500 Indigenous SES officers to actually reach parity across the Commonwealth. So you can see why there are significant challenges for us, including in having an ability to be able to influence government outcomes at that very senior level. I mean, that's also offset. We've been talking about the election of the new government and just how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we now have in parliament, which is wonderful to see. And hopefully that will also translate through broader commitment to really listen to and privilege some of the advice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, bureaucrat some of that frank and fearless advice that

politicians get in terms of informing political decisions that they make as politicians, which can impact on our lives.

Tom Calma :

Yeah. And we've just seen with Minister Wyatt, being the first Minister for Indigenous Australians. Now, we've got Minister Burney in that role. We now have our first... Not our first. Well, it's a first for the National Indigenous Australians Agency. Headed up by a female Aboriginal. And that sends a big strong message because, at that level, she'll then be working with all the other secretaries of departments and have an influence over the way they might go about their business. Because I think one of the issues we have is that a lot of people think, and a lot of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people think they have to get into Indigenous affairs and join an Indigenous agency. But it's the responsibility of all agencies to service all people, including Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people. And the majority of money and programs actually come out of mainstream that go towards Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people.

David Pembroke :

Geoff, this is an awkward question, an awkward topic, but probably needs to be addressed, and it's racism in the APS. You've been in the APS a long time. What is your observation of the levels of racism in the APS, and what can be done to address racism in the APS?

Geoff Richardson:

Look, like anywhere, racism's a scourge on society. It's absolutely inside the public sector, but it's in all workplaces. I think first of all, there needs to be zero tolerance. And every agency, the APS would say there's a zero tolerance. I think that the zero tolerance to racism is about direct racism, more than systemic racism and indirect, so it's more about explicit racism with the zero tolerance. But when it comes to indirect and systemic racism, that's often overlooked and they're the sorts of things that... It's the three levels or the three distinct categories of racism that need to be understood. So, there needs to be more education across the APS. Obviously, there needs to be this continual commitment to zero tolerance of racism. But there needs to be mechanisms for people to call it out without fear.

And often when you're for the minorities, because we're different, we're culturally different, it's very difficult to go to a system, that you know is heavily biased, to call out racism. So, many of our people are fearful of calling it out because they don't feel that they're going to get a decent hearing. So, more effort has to be made. All agencies and departments are committed to zero tolerance, but it doesn't play out that way day to day. And often, the racism that people are subjected to are more indirect and systemic, which frustrates people and they just feel helpless in terms of calling it out. They don't have faith in the system, so they get more and more frustrated in the workplace, and that leads to a whole lot of other negative consequences and issues. So, look, I think the public sector just has to keep moving forward. More education and calling it out and showing, demonstrating this zero tolerance in a much more stronger way.

David Pembroke :

Has it been tough for you?

Geoff Richardson:

Yeah. Look, it's been tough for the three of us. But you have to work it out. You got to have a strong sense of purpose to stay in the public service for as long as the three of us have. And we know there's plenty of non-Indigenous colleagues that have also spent long careers in the public service. I should add that, for me, it was always a privilege to work in the public service. I was never embarrassed about it as an Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander person. I was very proud to be a public servant, even when my own mob said, "Why you work there?"

Why do you work in that place? And how could you stay so long?" Because my sense of purpose was, and always will be, that I was getting paid to serve the public. Now that, to me, is a privilege.

David Pembroke :

Tom, your experiences? It's such an ugly, shameful, horrible topic, but it's got to be talked about. So-

Tom Calma :

Look, it does have to be talked about. For five years, I was the National Race Discrimination Commissioner with the Human Rights Commission, and I can say quite confidently that this is not just an APS issue. It's across APS or Commonwealth agencies, as well as private sector and so forth. And it's an issue that we all have to, as public servants, really confront, and I think it's one that needs to continually be at the forefront of thinking. And it's very difficult to tease out the difference between what's racism, what's discrimination, both direct and indirect discrimination, and what's bias. I still consult to a Commonwealth agency and work with the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander staff. And I think having networks within each of the departments and agencies is so important for people to get some moral support, as well as some advice to address these issues.

I mentioned the cultural competency training, which is so important for everybody to undertake. It was, at one stage, being reported against to the secretary's group, but I'm not sure if it's so actively pursued nowadays. But it's one that I'd really encourage people to look at. The APS also ran an initiative looking at unconscious bias. That needs to be ramped up again and for people to understand why they make decisions and why their attitude towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is like it is, both positive and negative. But mainly the negative side of it is, it's a lack of understanding. And the staff that I talk to, who are experiencing difficulties at the workplace, often it's because their supervisors are not skilled enough to understand what they're doing. And so we have to invest a lot more in making sure that our line supervisors actually understand the role of supervision, as well as everything that goes with them.

So, I encourage people to really become informed. And we talk about this at our network meetings. Understand what the APS core values are and what you can expect as an APS employee. And take that back to your supervisor if you're not being felt to be treated well or racially discriminated. We now have Indigenous champions within most government departments who are there to lend support and to take up our issues. So we're getting some structural issues in place, but that doesn't mean that people don't still have their biases, and that leads to discrimination and racism. I've experienced it myself over the years, but I guess I've been in a position where I was very well informed and can call it out.

And I think that's the other important thing about networks, is that you get your support from your colleagues to be able to call out these issues, but to do it in a way that's not going to alienate you in the workplace, but to make the workplace a better one. One of the things we saw too much of was that people would have a bad experience, so they'd leave the APS, and so we're having a big drain. That's slowing down a lot now. And we have an Indigenous SES network where all the Indigenous SES get together. And Geoff and I were on it in the very early days when there's only a dozen or so SES people then. By the time Kate got on, probably just less than a decade ago, we're up to 25, 26, and now we're pretty... It's much improved, as we've said.

But I've over the time still worked with that network and with the Public Service Commissioner. And that's the good thing about it, is that we have this network here that the Public Service Commissioner and departments are seeking advice from the senior Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people on, on how to look at addressing some of these issues. So we haven't always been included in that process, but that recognition is happening.

David Pembroke :

Great. And Kate, your experience of racism in the APS?

Kate Thomann:



I think it's actually just broader than the APS. So in my view, unfortunately, racism is prevalent in our society. It ranges from casual racism, ignorance, overt racism, to structural and institutional racism. And unfortunately, it is everywhere. But I actually have great hope for this country. I mean, given the way that Australia has been founded, unfortunately there is some very bad and prevalent views around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and I think some of those are slowly changing. We've now got Aboriginal truth and Aboriginal history being taught in schools. We've now got non-Indigenous children starting to understand what nation and whose Aboriginal country they live on. They're starting to learn Aboriginal languages.

Now, maybe their parents might not be learning about the true history of Australia, but the children are, and they're actually the hope for our future. So, I think there are some things that we can do. And Geoff mentioned this, we can actually, as did Tom, privilege First Nation voices. But also, we can give over a little bit of power, which is to support Aboriginal people to make decisions, become involved in co-design of government policy and priorities, and as a nation support self-determination and Aboriginal advancement. And we have a great opportunity to really have these conversations in a open and an honest and a respectful way going forward as a country.

David Pembroke :

Very powerful answer. Now, listen, we get the opportunity to take questions from IPAA ACT's Future Leaders committee members. We do ask them to send some questions in, and we have a couple of questions here today. And the first of those questions is from Megan Aponte-Payne from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and a sometime host of Work with Purpose as well. And Kate, I'll put the question to you. Does having a seat at the majority white table mean having a voice for your Indigenous community, or compromising your values?

Kate Thomann:

No, I don't compromise my values. I do have a seat at the table, but I will say at times it has been challenging. Even as a Indigenous SES officer, there have been many, many occasions where I have been the only First Nations person at the table dealing with all of my non-Indigenous colleagues who work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, who make the decisions and may not necessarily make the same decisions or provide the same advice that a First Nations bureaucrat would. And at times, that can be really challenging, but I think it's fundamental that we do need Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation at all levels and in all tables around government decision-making policies, yeah, just across the country.

David Pembroke :

Okay. Tom, I'll put the same question to you. Does having a seat at the majority white table mean having a voice for your Indigenous community, or is it compromising your values?

Tom Calma :

Yeah. Look, I think what's got to be teased out is your Indigenous community, are we talking about our specific community? Are we talking about Indigenous affairs generally?

Geoff Richardson:

Right.

Tom Calma :

And I think what Kate said is quite right, that often we are a minority. And as you advance in the APS and you get up to the SES level, and particularly advanced within the SES level, and we have some deputy secretaries, as well as branch heads and FAS's around, so they're having a lot more authority in these meetings. But at the

lower levels, it makes it very difficult. I guess I'm fortunate now that I do have a bit of authority and people do listen to what I have to say, and that just hasn't come... We're talking 50 years of working. Not quite 50, but 45 to get to that level. So, it's not going to happen always overnight.

And I think that's what frustrates people, that people come in with a passion. And we touched on it briefly before, but there's also an expectation by the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander community that, "Oh yeah, you're a public servant. You should be looking after our mob and changing this and changing that." Well, unfortunately we can't always do that, but I don't think we ever stop trying to influence policy. So yeah, it is a challenge, and maybe this is the time to talk about it. We are seeing real big advances in the way that the public service, and I talk broadly, but particularly with a few agencies, are going about their business nowadays. And the whole notion of, what we call, co-design is now happening.

And the Indigenous health division of Department of Health was probably the leader in this working with the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander health leadership in developing the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan, which was co-designed. It was led by Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people, supported by the department and other agencies to look at a very broad approach to health and bringing in the determinants. And we've followed that through in a couple iterations of that. And that's now become the model, I think, to go about business in major Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people reforms. And we've seen that also in more recent times with the Voice to Parliament, that was under the previous government it was initiated, where we had a co-design group of 52 people who worked with the bureaucrats in the agencies to come up with a new model about going about business.

And that's still a big work in progress and that also is something that needs to be teased out because we've got at one level running the Voice to Parliament through the Uluru Statement and what they want and promoting through constitutional reform. But the other one is within bureaucracy that takes in more than just a Commonwealth, but takes in the state and territory governments, which is where a lot of the effort does happen in Indigenous affairs. Not out of the Commonwealth. It's out of the state and territories. So, that's all been done through a co-design process and what's being proposed and what's been picked up by the previous government, and we're in negotiations with the incoming government to see how that might unfold over the coming years. But we will see, I think, much more privileging of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander voices in major policy and program development. And high time too, so it's... Yeah.

David Pembroke :

Excellent. Geoff, I have a question for you. And again, a Future Leaders question. It's from Anthony Pronin of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. And Anthony asks, "What are some of the different considerations of a recruitment or retention strategy for Indigenous public servants?"

Geoff Richardson:

Thanks for the question, David. Look, I think the design of jobs, the job description, I think there has to be more thought put into the selection criteria, more effort made in looking at the skill sets needed for the positions to attract Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people to a particular department or to the APS. There's a fair bit of effort needed in the whole design of the jobs and the advertising of them and being a so-called employer of choice. So attracting people to the place, to the APS, what will make Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people interested? You got to sort of tap into the psyche of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people. Why would they come to a place that they believe isn't working in the best interest of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people?

So, you got to sort of turn the whole situation around where the APS is an attractive place and it's seen as an employer of choice, the whole service, or the individual departments in particular. I think there needs to be a recognition of what we bring and what value we bring to the public sector, rather than doing us a favour by employing us, employing our people. Yes, you're giving Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people an opportunity,

but we're bringing life experience, we're bringing cultural knowledge, we're bringing engagement skills, we're bringing a raft of skills. Even if you're employing people at the lower level, they have these skills. Some of our elders and senior people in the community are employed at the lower levels.

So when they walk outside, we all respect them for the cultural authority, even though they might be junior officers in the public sector. So it's quite complex, but with a bit of effort, recognising the skill sets that we have already and building on those, taking an assets-based approach rather than a deficit where our people don't necessarily have the whole suite of mainstream bureaucratic skills. A lot of our people do by the way. But seeing it as a deficit and not seeing the strength side of it, and that diminishes and blocks opportunities for our people to enter and to rise through the ranks because, again, of those inherent biases.

David Pembroke :

Interestingly-

Geoff Richardson:

And I think that can be turned around just with a bit of effort.

David Pembroke :

Yeah. Well, interestingly enough, you'd be please to know, Geoff and Kate and Tom, that there is an IPAA hackathon next week, which is going to explore that very question. So, people are going to get to work across the APS and I think they can take some advice from the answer that Geoff's just given us there. I think there's a lot to go on.

Tom Calma :

Yeah, very comprehensive. And I think if there's been one big benefit for the APS out of COVID is that people have realised that you can work differently. And in fact, some of the ways that we're currently going about our business are what Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people have been trying to encourage. More flexible working, understanding the purpose of cultural leave, and the need to be with family, that you can work from home and still be productive. And that just because you're working from home or out of office, it doesn't mean that you're slacking off. It just is a different way. And I think this has given the opportunity for all public servants to maybe take a fresh look at the way they go about business and having a better appreciation of some of the ways that Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people have gone.

And look, as co-chair of Reconciliation, can also put in a plug for Reconciliation Action Plans that are across many government departments. And it's really important for both the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander staff and the mainstream staff to understand what's in those RAPs and what their department's committed to and how they can work together. And for me, I get a big buzz when I go to a NAIDOC event or a Close the Gap event, National Reconciliation Week, and we see mainstream departments all celebrating these events. So, this didn't happen 20 years ago. 10 years ago, it started. But yes, it's getting much better. So, I think it's in all of our interests.

But I think one of the things we haven't picked up on here is that APS is a big family of departments. And it's both in the regional level, which is critically important for service delivery to the Canberra policy and program area, to what I had the opportunity to do, and that was to be a diplomat for seven years working in India and Vietnam. And so all of these, coming from a Darwin office starting off as a base grader and taking those opportunities... And I think it shows that you can do it. We now have had two Indigenous ambassadors placed overseas. We've got an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander consul general over there. So, we're advancing. It's always slow, but when you go back to where we were at, and you can look at it over the course of time, you'll see that we are getting there, but ever so slowly.

David Pembroke :

Now quickly, I just want to sneak a question about NAIDOC Week, which is this celebration of the history, the culture, and the achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The theme for NAIDOC Week 2022 is get up, stand up, and show up. So for our friends listening, many of them in the APS, what's your call to action for each of the people listening to it, this particular NAIDOC Week? And I'll start with you, Tom.

Tom Calma :

Look, exactly what it says. Get up, stand up, and show up. Participate in events. But also, don't be informed by some of the shock jocks or some of the cable television channels about Indigenous affairs. Go out to an event, talk to an Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander person. Go onto NITV, understand what they're talking about, SBS, in news from an Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander person's perspective. And so it's incumbent on all of us to develop our own knowledge and skills base, and we do that in an informed way from good reliable sources. So, yeah. Yeah. Be part of the process. Don't be a critic.

David Pembroke :

Okay. Geoff, to you. Get up, stand up, show up. What's your call to action to the people of the APS?

Geoff Richardson:

Look, it's a great theme for this year. It's a rallying call and it's something that we as senior public servants, or Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander public servants generally, it's something that we do daily, get up, stand up. I would encourage non-Indigenous public servants to join us, to see us as trusted colleagues, to lead the way, to call out unprofessional behaviour in the workplace, to seek to understand the true history of the nation and obviously the positive advances, but also the challenges that are still yet to be confronted in terms of the disparity in life outcomes for Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander peoples. And that is part of their job. So, to get more and more immersed into the consequences of past policies... We're currently dealing with the consequences of policies that were enacted 100 years ago. They're playing out today. It's often ignored, but the reality is actions and policies that were enacted in the 1800s and early 1900s, we're trying to deal with the consequences over 100 years later.

That is the gravity of the work and the magnitude of the challenge until people own the true history, as Kate was talking. How you've got to own the reality and the history to understand how to respond with Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people, with the support of our people positively in the APS. But unfortunately, there's still a fair deal of ignorance and denial, and an expectation that the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people in the departments are going to educate their colleagues. Well, I think that's unfair. They need to try and educate themselves and seek guidance from the very people that... Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, their colleagues. But it's not the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander colleagues' responsibility for educating them. There's a lot of goodwill, but we need that to be accelerated and brought home in real action.

David Pembroke :

Thanks, Geoff. And Kate, the final word is yours.

Kate Thomann:

Oh, thank you. So we're the oldest living continuous culture on earth, and we've been here since time immemorial. We have such an incredible depth, beauty, and interconnection in our culture, country, spirituality, and beliefs. My call to action is multiple, but it's actually really quite simple. Understand history, including local history, and understand whose land you are living on. Care for country and support traditional fire burning practices. These practices also protect us from natural disasters, and there is much to be learned from our traditional ecological knowledge and practices. Make reconciliation everybody's business. Stand up

to racism because the behaviour that you don't call out is the behaviour that you stand by and accept. Support self-determination. Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in their careers, their development, and their work aspirations. Provide mentoring, advice, and opportunities. Put your money where your mouth is. Support Aboriginal people and small businesses. This can make a world of difference, not only to an individual, a business, a family, or a community. And finally ask, listen, learn, and act with integrity and respect.

Geoff Richardson:

Hear, hear.

David Pembroke :

Fine words to sum up this conversation for NAIDOC Week in 2022. So a very big thanks to Professor Tom Calma, to Kate Thomann, and to Geoff Richardson. Thank you all so much for sharing your wisdom and sharing your knowledge with the audience here at Work with Purpose. We are certainly very grateful for your time to celebrate NAIDOC Week.

Work with Purpose is a part of the GovComms podcast network and we are very grateful for your ongoing support. A big thanks as always to IPAA and to the Australian Public Service Commission for their support of the program, and also to the team at contentgroup for getting the program to air each week. This brings this episode of Work with Purpose to a close. My name is David Pembroke. I'll be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

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