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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE | A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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GORDON DE BROUWER Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to a special episode of Work with Purpose, a podcast about public service in Australia. For those of you who are regular listeners, you'll realise that I'm not your regular host, David Pembroke. My name is Gordon de Brouwer and I'm the National President of IPAA. I'll be helping to broaden the conversation for this podcast series over coming weeks by talking with state and territory public service leaders. And today, I'm delighted to be talking with Chris Eccles AO the secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet Victoria about the Victorian response to the pandemic.

GORDON DE BROUWER Chris has been leading the Premier's Department in that role since December 2014. And interestingly, he held the same role for both New South Wales and South Australian governments before that. Chris's career has been within state Public Services. My own has been in the Federal Public Service as Secretary of Environment and Energy, and we've worked in Prime Minister and Cabinet. And there I had the genuine pleasure of working at various times with Chris. So, Chris, welcome to Work with Purpose | National Perspectives.

CHRIS ECCLES Fantastic. Good to be with you Gordon.

GORDON DE BROUWER Thanks. I'd like to start the conversation by just looking at how the pandemic emerged in Victoria, and can you recount for us briefly, sort of how you saw the pandemic evolving and when you recognised its significance?

CHRIS ECCLES Our general awareness emerged from probably late January with the formation of the incident management team within our Health Department and I must say at the time, I was preoccupied with bushfire recovery. So there were a few things happening at one time.

CHRIS ECCLES February then saw a series of updated case definitions with testing expanded to an increasing number of arrivals from different countries. And then it hit home again to me in mid-February when we launched a campaign to support Victoria's Chinese community 'stronger together'. It became apparent to me that the impact was being felt generally within society.

CHRIS ECCLES And then the intensity really, really cranked up in the week commencing the 8th of March, which paradoxically, at one level, the beginning of that week had the women's T20 final at the MCG — and I was one of 83,000 attendees at the MCG — and it just seems in hindsight and, in looking back, just to be extraordinary that in that week — and I'll come to what finished off that week — that I was amongst 83,000 people at the G.

CHRIS ECCLES That week then saw the release of our pandemic plan. We activated the Emergency Management State Control Centre, and then on the 13th — a signature day the 13th of March — we had the Formula One cancelled, COAG met, the National Cabinet was formed and met on the 15th of March, and Victoria declared a state of emergency on the 16th of March. And I have to say that from that moment we were sprinting and I was in the office for the next 25 days dealing with the response.

- GORDON DE BROUWER Thanks, Chris. — that's a really nice scene setter. Maybe we'll just talk through three broad impacts of the pandemic that's relevant for public service. The first is going to be around impact on service delivery to the public. And then we'll talk about impact on workplaces and in the public service. And then finally, around relationships that the service has with ministers, the community and business, and really other governments in the federation.
- GORDON DE BROUWER So we might start then with the impact on service delivery to the public. Can you talk through how the pandemic affected or changed service delivery to the Victorian people?
- CHRIS ECCLES Yeah. The last week of March saw a progressive escalation of restrictions, culminating in the stage three restrictions requiring people to stay at home unless for the purpose of going and accessing food and supplies, medical care, exercise at work and education. So that, if you like, was the centre of gravity from which service delivery had to be conceptualised and executed.
- CHRIS ECCLES And the impact on service delivery was immediate, wholesale and profound. School education system moved to remote and flexible learning knowledge. Non-urgent elective surgery was suspended. Emergency department presentations and admissions, including for mental health, were substantially reduced. And across our justice and social service portfolios — including the courts, corrections, youth justice, family violence, child protection, disability, housing, homelessness and drug and alcohol — all were impacted by the imperative in relation to the maintenance of the health and well-being of our citizens and our own workforce.
- CHRIS ECCLES So at the most general level, the service delivery modifications broadly included limiting face-to-face contact with clients where possible and expanding the remote nodes of service delivery: whether it was via the phone or email or video conference and web chat contact. There was also the prioritisation of service access for clients with high risk and immediate need, which had the inevitable consequence that we are dealing with now, and will continue to deal with, which is the backlog of service.
- GORDON DE BROUWER Can I ask you, within that, where there any particular behavioural, or organisational, or technological changes, that you had to make, particularly... people talk a lot about digital, and how you use digital as a way to provide services.
- CHRIS ECCLES Digital was particularly critical and with some examples of the digital enablement is the use of audio-visual links to hear a higher volume of core matters remotely. Another example is the remote supervision of people who were subject to community-based orders, and a third might be the expanded telehealth options. So they are all the creative use of technology to support engagement with clients.
- CHRIS ECCLES There'll be a bunch of other changes which are less immediate and probably will require further analysis and development. Less to do with technology and more to do with the substance of how we change the behaviour or influence the behaviour of people. And that might include things like staggered school start times. It might include embedding modal shifts in transport. And it might include the extension of in-home medical treatment.

- CHRIS ECCLES So there are two categories of response. One, where we were able to use technology, and in particular digital technology, to support the ongoing needs of citizens. And the second category are the more profound categories of behaviour change, where I'd have to say after 11 weeks, we've probably still got a bit of work to do to design them, let alone to activate, and roll them out.
- GORDON DE BROUWER Right. Can I ask... when you roll out digital and you're changing service delivery, it's got to be the service delivery agency or body, or the people themselves, have to want to use that technology or that approach. And then the public or the people who receive or use those services have to want to change and use those services.
- GORDON DE BROUWER Can you talk a little bit about how you, did you have to get consensus amongst public servants to change that? And how did you talk with people who were receiving those services about how you'd use digital?
- CHRIS ECCLES I think the way to convince the public service about the importance of reconfiguring the service delivery model, it's not too difficult because fundamentally they're motivated by a desire to continue to support the clients through their particular channel of service delivery. So their hearts are there. It's more providing a framework for our service providers to systematically examine their service delivery operating method and client needs.
- CHRIS ECCLES And so we've identified a method for that purpose. One is that you, if you like, build very quickly a framework for that assessment. So in the first instance, you determine the status. So you assess the benefits and risks of the service delivery approach and the user experience.
- CHRIS ECCLES You then monitor, you assess the effectiveness of the intervention and the data. You then evaluate through a live evaluation of the delivery model. You then share good practice through the dissemination of the successful alternative responses. And then you embed. So you entrench the improvements in day to day operations.
- CHRIS ECCLES So if you're providing a common analytical method to enable those on the frontline — with the support of our data people and our analysts — to make sense of their service delivery operating method and then to systematically change that, then, I think you've won their hearts, their hearts are already there. You've also won their minds by supplying them with this method.
- CHRIS ECCLES In terms of the clients themselves, we have found, again, there was little need to encourage people to adapt their engagement preferences because they were fundamentally motivated by the same thing. The clarion call to arms, the overwhelming impact on society and on their needs meant that they were wholly receptive to changes in the service delivery model. And we were, I think the first step in that framework was actually deeply understanding the user experience and designing the response, the enhanced response, to that experience so they weren't disconnected. They were fundamentally, fundamentally connected. And we were motivated by, ultimately... a totally common purpose.

GORDON DE BROUWER That's great. Can I ask... when you engage with the public servants around the service delivery, talking about how you collect data and the frameworks those things... did you use existing systems or did you have to create new systems? Also in creating an authorising environment... did you have to shift your thinking around risk appetite? How do you engage which risk and if something goes wrong, how do you deal with the political process around that?

CHRIS ECCLES Yeah... it's such a such a cliché now about a crisis sharpening the mind. But in our case it has sharpened our mind, particularly in relation to gathering and synthesising information across government and elsewhere to drive the response planning.

CHRIS ECCLES So we've created... what we call the Critical Information Unit that sits within DPC. And it's assembled the data from fifteen different data points and sources across government and beyond.

CHRIS ECCLES Put the modelists and the analysts together and you've created, if you like, a single point of reference for the intersection and complementarity of all of those data points which we now bring to our Crisis Council of Cabinet weekly. And it's, it's illuminating a whole series of... well, what were once issues in the siloed nature of the way we accumulate data. But it's also identified the opportunities for systematic response, a data driven response, based on the intelligent analysis of all of those data points.

CHRIS ECCLES So in one sense, it's been it's been totally liberating. And we are presenting that data directly to cabinet ministers. So it's not overly intermediated and it's not overly analysed. We are presenting in real time, substantial data. Whether it's about the... state of the health response. Whether it's about the state of business confidence. Whether it's about what we are discovering in the city a bit through pedestrian traffic about the challenges with people returning to more normal forms of living and moving. And we're able to calibrate our response as a government to a picture that's painted by the data in real time.

GORDON DE BROUWER Thanks. That's profound. Just on finishing up on the service delivery bit. Are there any things that you would see already that you'd want to lock in changes, maybe through the use of digital? Is it in courts, community services, education, health, that you see as being more permanent?

CHRIS ECCLES Yeah, it is an interesting one because, the rapid cadence of government in terms of the design, decision, execution, time frame, is addictive. The speed-to-outcome is totally addictive, as is the expenditure of public funding. So, I mean: how much fun is it to spend a \$6 billion to support and rebuild an economy in ten weeks?

CHRIS ECCLES But ultimately — and I can see you smiling as someone who's been guarding the nation's purse strings in a past life — but ultimately, that's not sustainable, both fiscally and in terms of good public policy. You can't continue to move at that speed.

- CHRIS ECCLES But having said all of that — and recognising that we will return to something a bit more conventional in terms of our approach to the design of good policy — there are few things that I think will endure. One is the tailoring of responses to ensure government services meet the individual needs of citizens. The second is probably the application of data in all forms and in an integrated fashion direct to decision makers. And the third is probably using our missions, because we've formed eight missions, and they deal with the immediate response, the continuity of essential services, and the restoration of public services across the missions. And using the concept of the missions as an enduring organising principle for government... They're the three things that that I don't want to lose as a result of this adventure.
- GORDON DE BROUWER Thanks. Could you explain a bit more about what those missions are, what the eight missions are, just briefly?
- CHRIS ECCLES Yeah, sure. We came up with the idea of a mission partly because it connects into a moral purpose and partly because by definition, missions crash through portfolio... conventional portfolio structures. They provide a clarity of purpose, the focused application of expertise, rapid transition from design to delivery. And the eight are in sort of three domains: there's the immediate response — that's the health emergency — the economic emergency, and the business continuity in priority industry sectors. That's three.
- CHRIS ECCLES Then we have the continuity of essential services for people: that's justice, education and social services, and then economic, which is electricity, networks, communications and transport. So that's five.
- CHRIS ECCLES Then economic recovery, which is about the recovery strategies post the crisis. And then two missions related to the restoration of public services. So people and economic, which is looking at the long run impacts and risks of a return. And now starting to design for the resumption of services... entirely, possibly in reconfigured terms based on the learnings through the crisis.
- CHRIS ECCLES And so those eight missions... each has a lead Secretary. The lead Secretary is directly accountable to the Premier, to the discharge of the mission. And they've been removed from the day-to-day administration of their departments, and we now have Associate Secretaries who are running the departments to enable the Secretaries to execute the missions. And the reporting through the Crisis Council of Cabinet and to the Premier. A totally different way of organising the business of government but we've found to be highly effective.
- GORDON DE BROUWER That's going to be a case study that everyone's going to watch.
- GORDON DE BROUWER I might just move on now to the impact to the pandemic on public service workplaces. And maybe you just talk a bit about the different ways of working within the service? And maybe also what changes you think should be retained?

- CHRIS ECCLES So, I mean, our advice to the VPS is to continue to work from home where possible and set some expectations, that this will continue for some time yet, probably the winter.
- CHRIS ECCLES So at the moment, we've got probably over 80 percent of the public service working from home. And the experience, the best way of understanding the experience of people is to survey them. So we conducted a survey of 6,000 VPS staff who usually work at an office environment. And the key findings have been really interesting.
- CHRIS ECCLES The first is that the vast majority have been able to do their jobs properly in a remote environment. The second is that they have an overall sense of being more productive and as engaged as before but the ways of collaborating can be improved. Managing people is more difficult for some managers, but most find managing the deliverables is about the same. And then most people would like to work remotely two to three days per week, on the other side.
- CHRIS ECCLES So we've got a rich data source at the moment. Having said that, I'm not Pollyanna-ish. Fifteen percent are struggling. And the longer — that's a substantial number — and the longer-term return to work arrangements will have to consider support and priority access to office-based work environments for those who are unable to take advantage of the remote working opportunities. And we formed a Remote Working Transition Working Group to develop a whole of government approach to the future of work. And we've got an extensive work programme which is looking at the priority workforce to return and health and safety considerations, workplace behaviour and supports, and really interestingly the use of suburban and regional generic office hubs so that if you're not working from home, you don't have to come into the metropolitan... the centre of Melbourne.
- CHRIS ECCLES So we, I would imagine, we will have many thousands of public servants working from home or if not from home, working from a more... distributed points of work.
- GORDON DE BROUWER Have you got any observations around the skill sets then, or the attributes that may be required for public servants that flow from different patterns or styles of work?
- CHRIS ECCLES Yeah, I think that the... skill sets — some of them were the nice prosaic... the enablement of being able to deal with technology and its various, in its various forms. So that's a, that's almost like an occ', health and safety skill set related to safely working, working from home, having the skills to engage with technology. ...It's going to change some of the... cultural settings. It's actually breathed life into the introverts. Which is fascinating, that in a physical — I've and tested this with a few folks — in the conventional work environment extroverts rule. In a remote working environment it has really let loose the capacity of the introvert to make as material a contribution as the extrovert. So I love it. I love the idea that we have those who have perhaps been a bit suppressed or repressed in their ability to contribute. This has... enabled that. And it's also compelling managers to look to their workforces a bit differently.

- CHRIS ECCLES So I'm hugely excited by the upside and really looking forward to taking hopefully taking advantage of that community or social licence to drive some really substantial reform. In relation to National Cabinet I've been so privileged to have been part of... now I think it's almost twenty meetings as of this Friday? Twenty meetings of National Cabinet where I've been in COAG over the last thirteen years. And I think there's a very real opportunity to adapt COAG and apply the positives from the operation of National Cabinet, and I know that the Prime Minister's turning his mind to that. In fact, I think the discussion's scheduled on that matter for this Friday.
- CHRIS ECCLES But I don't think it's... it's... it's something as simple as 'COAG is so yesterday', and 'National Cabinet is so today'. I think it's a blend. And there were some very real strengths in the COAG process that might not have been as visible to our political leaders. But there are also some very real strengths that have emerged from the last ten weeks of experience of national cabinet. And some of the lessons to me that have emerged from that, is the real importance of decisions accommodating differences between jurisdictions, and the recognition of difference between jurisdictions, and that is now deeply embedded in... the working of the National Cabinet.
- CHRIS ECCLES I think there's something about matters progressing quickly with record decision making. Something about robust discussion and meaningful decision making by First Ministers who have become expert in a particular matter, which means in the future a focused agenda and frequent conversation makes communication and engagement easier, and actually means that they hold more detailed knowledge... and therefore more detailed discussion. That, something too about transparency — the Prime Minister's visibility and high engagement with press conferences and expert input to decision making has been extraordinary, as have First Ministers from other jurisdictions.
- CHRIS ECCLES So it's bringing the community along with a with a real-time insight into the decision-making process and outcomes. We're never going to go back to... a more formal, structured way of communicating the outcomes of National Cabinet.
- GORDON DE BROUWER Thanks very much, Chris. I think we've come to our time. Can I just ask you this as I wrap up, just in one sentence, a personal question? What have you discovered about yourself in this crisis that you maybe didn't know before?
- CHRIS ECCLES In one sentence: I think what it has done is exaggerated my weaknesses.
- GORDON DE BROUWER Gee you have to... you have to do a sub clause now to that sentence.
- CHRIS ECCLES Because it's... it has been so intense... my weaknesses. I mean... I can get too task-focused and careless with people. And it just means that if you aware of your weakness, you can compensate for it. And so I'm being very deliberate in trying to bring myself above the day-to-day fray and to be more careful with people.

GORDON DE BROUWER Thank you so much, Chris. You've got my deep respect, frankly, as a leader, as a person. So thank you very much for this honest conversation. I think we've all really enjoyed it. And it's a really fantastic way to start this Work with Purpose... sort of a national discussion. So can I really thank you for your honesty and... your insight.

CHRIS ECCLES It's been a total delight Gordon. All the very best.

GORDON DE BROUWER Thanks. And I might just close now to the audience and say thank you for joining this special episode of Work with Purpose, National Perspectives. And I'll be back in coming weeks as your special Thursday host on a national conversation with Secretaries of other state and territory governments.

GORDON DE BROUWER Have a good day.