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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE | A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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GORDON DE BROUWER: Hello to everyone listening, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about public service in Australia. I'm Gordon de Brouwer, and I'm the president of IPAA National. I'm here in Canberra, on Ngunnawal country, and I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners past, present and future. And I think for various listeners around the country, acknowledge your Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional owners as well.

GORDON DE BROUWER: I'm really delighted to talk today in this National Perspective, with Jodie Ryan, who's Chief Executive of the Northern Territory Government's Department of the Chief Minister. Jodie was appointed CEO of the Department of the Chief Minister in December 2016. So that's a fair while in that job, and was previously the Northern Territory Under Treasurer. She began work with the Northern Territory Government as a grad in 1992, and worked mostly in treasury and as a range of other positions, including as a member of the board of ANZSOG. Welcome, Jodie.

JODIE RYAN: Thank you Gordon.

GORDON DE BROUWER: It's great to have you here. I thought we might go through some issues around public service delivery, the public sector and the importance of relationships, but we might start actually with an eight-month retrospective on the pandemic and really, what are the lessons you take out of the past eight months?

JODIE RYAN: Oh, there are probably so many lessons. One lesson is let's just get 2020 over and done with. It's been a really tough year for everybody. I think one of the lessons we've really learned is that working together, we're actually a much better, we're much better at delivering than working separately. And I'm not just talking about agencies across lines, I'm talking about agencies, non-government organisations, private sector jurisdictions. I think we've all been able to prove that as a collective, we can deliver so much more than we can individually. I think some of the other lessons I've learnt is around engaging with risk. So we've made a lot of decisions in a very short timeframe and decisions that pre-COVID might have taken months. You've had someone working up a policy and someone thinking about the policy and again cabinet, and being considered and being released, maybe consulting for a while.

What we've seen through COVID is we've had issues in front of us. We've had to make decisions, we've made the decision. Sometimes we've made mistakes, we've corrected those mistakes, and we've moved on. And I think a big lesson from that is that the public sector needs to be a lot more risk averse, noting that we've got a lot of integrity agencies, watching what we're doing. So it's not being fraudulent or behaving mischievously or, being lax about what we do. But it's about understanding that there is risk in everything we do. You can't mitigate for 100% of things that could go wrong. So what's the appropriate risk appetite we should be taking. And we're actually looking at developing a whole of government risk appetite to make sure we keep moving this forward.

I think the other thing I've learned is around people. So people who you wouldn't expect to have stepped up incredibly in the public sector and just got on with the job of getting it done, we've moved them into jobs out of their comfort zone, they've delivered. And I think what I've learned from that is people actually need a real goal and to be able to say that they're making a difference. So the goal that we have was keeping Territorians safe. You've got a very large vulnerable population and every single one of us wanted to make sure that COVID, firstly try not to let it into the territory, and if it got into the territory, how do we protect the vulnerable communities?

GORDON DE BROUWER:

That's great. And on that risk appetite Jodie, I think everyone will be really interested in seeing how you articulate that or how the government does. It's really important. Can you talk a little bit about... I mean, one thing about risk and I think the public has actually been a lot more tolerant of risk-taking and frankly expects governments and the public service to take risk, but what does it mean for recognising risk, but also when something goes wrong that you can change and you don't blame people.

JODIE RYAN:

So I think in the government it's been good. We recognised we've done things quickly. If people make a mistake, there's usually a slight reaction about what did we do it that way, or what did someone do it that way, but we've moved on very quickly and said, "Okay, we've made a mistake. How do we fix it? How we move forward?" I think there's still some in the public who are happy to slam any decisions you make, but I think generally the public have been happy that the government's just got on and made decisions, recognise that you're never going to keep all the people happy all the time, but we've been decisive. We've acted. We've kept a very clear goal. And the chief minister said this over and over again, saving lives and saving jobs, two clear goals. First of all, keep people healthy. Second of all, try and keep the economy going. But number one priority was the health. And I do think the public recognised generally, not all, but generally recognise that, that's been our goal, and we've done that to the extent that we can.

GORDON DE BROUWER:

Yeah, that's great. And I think part of that seems to be that people acknowledge if something goes wrong, is not shirking responsibility for it. It's accepting it, but it's learning really quickly and changing systems.

JODIE RYAN:

Absolutely.

GORDON DE BROUWER:

So I might start on service delivery and any reflections you've got around, what's really worked on that. I mean the whole purpose of government is actually to protect and improve people's lives. So can you talk a bit about how service delivery changed or the mechanisms by which you operated that?

JODIE RYAN:

I think, I mean with the first surge, we were obviously very lucky. We had very few cases early on. We had no community transmission, but what we did early on and we have been switching our focus and trying to change a culture to more of a customer focus culture in the public sector generally, pre-COVID.

So not just thinking about us delivering services for Territorians, but thinking about what Territorians need from us and then how do we deliver that? So we had some that work, it was going a bit, probably at a public sector pace. We ramped that up substantially with COVID, we changed our IT systems so that the front facing systems were easy to use. We cut red tape at a whole range of areas that previously would have taken months to do. We made sure that we were putting people first.

So looking at how we delivered our services, were they the right services to be delivering? And how do we make sure that we're helping people not hindering people at a time when they're already really stressed, everyone was going through a lot, whether it was worrying about their health, worrying about their business, how can we alleviate some of that stress, not add to it.

GORDON DE BROUWER: How did you talk to communities and the community in general around that change and explain and talk to them about that?

JODIE RYAN: So I think that's probably another lesson we learned. We tried to over-communicate, so we were putting out messages regularly. We set up a specific Coronavirus website within a weekend, brought back in March, and we updated that regularly, making sure that it was still easy to use. We were putting messages out. We've got to... We're somewhat ahead of the game in the territories that people used to in a disaster, they used to actually go into a particular website to check on the facts and check where things are at. So we use that website as a platform. So people are used to, they're coming and checking all the time. In this instance, it's what are the life effects on Coronavirus? So we had the website, we had the usual social media, Facebook, we had ministers out in media relatively regularly, but the thing we did do was we set up very quickly regional and remote task force because while it's easier to communicate in our big towns, we needed to communicate regularly with the Aboriginal Controlled Sector.

So help organisations, non-government organisations, and that task force has been now meeting weekly since the middle of March, and is still continuing, and it's just constant communication. It's updates on where we're at, and what we're thinking of doing, getting feedback, listening to concerns, and then trying to deal with them and recognise that we can't always resolve those concerns, but at least they know we've thought about it, considered it and come back with a response. I think we translated a lot of our messages into indigenous languages and I've been updating those messages regularly. We've been working with indigenous radio stations. So just really try to over-communicate, you'll still miss people, but I'd rather tell someone the same thing twice, than not tell someone anything.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah, it's really interesting how jurisdictions history and sometimes the recent history or its practises can really help or hinder dealing with a pandemic or this crisis, when you've got a bit of muscle memory in your system. And then frankly, when the public are engaged, that's really interesting that the history of all that constant practise of dealing with events.

JODIE RYAN: And I think we were the first jurisdiction to set up an emergency operation centre because that's how we react in any disaster situation. So we're pretty well rehearsed in terms of cyclones, and floods and to some extent bushfires, but mostly around the cyclone flood issue. So it was stepping it up, but this has been rather than just being a week or two week response, this is obviously eight months. Exactly. Yeah, it was pretty good. It was interesting. I think it's one of those lessons is that people are more resilient than they know, and they become used to a way of life. So we had, this is an example when we took on the first repatriated Australians from Wu Han, right back in February, we used what's now our centre for national resilience in Howard Springs.

And there were a lot of concern about we're bringing people into the territory that might infect other people. But as soon as they saw that we managed it well, no infection got out, it was controlled, they became trusting of us. So then we're able to use it for people off The Diamond Princess, and we're now using it... We've used it for our hotspot policy and we're now using it for repatriated Australians, and people have got used to it and trust us. So I think it's that initial reaction of being unsure and unsafe. And then recognising that actually this is okay, we're protecting all Australians, not just Territorians.

GORDON DE BROUWER: One of the features before the pandemic was a deterioration in trust especially in government, and the pandemic at least across Australia and for New Zealand has been quite a radical shifter. What's your own observation of trusting government and trusting government services?

JODIE RYAN: It's improved 100% certainly. I mean, the territory is a small place. The little Northern Territory government is the biggest employer. So we used to getting a lot of scrutiny from the public, but I do think that the trust has grown exponentially through this process. And it's a bit... They expected us to make decisions. We've made decisions, we moved on, we responded very quickly around keeping businesses, trying to keep businesses, allow businesses to survive, adapt, and then rebound. And that was well received. I think the National Cabinet process is probably one of the best things that was done. And I honestly believe that National Cabinet structure helped to keep Australia one of the safest places in the world in terms of dealing with the pandemic, responding, working together, dismissing political lines, and actually working as a team to keep Australia safe. It's been an incredible process to be part of.

GORDON DE BROUWER: That's great. We'll come back to that through the conversation as well, just on the service delivery side, just to finish this bit, what are the bits that you really clear about, you want to keep and how do you go about deciding what the changes are that you want to keep, especially around technology?

JODIE RYAN: Yes. So we've had lots of discussions around this, I think in terms of what we want to keep is on the technology side. So it's not just particularly for the territory for us to attend meeting in Canberra say it's two to three days out about work week for a two, three hour meeting. By the time you travel, get there, stay, then come back. We've been able to interact much more regularly and more often digitally now, sometimes teleconference, but often Teams meetings or whatever platform we're using. I think that's something that we'll keep.

The other really big benefit is telehealth for us. We've got 73 remote communities. Not all of them have health clinics. And even when they have health clinics, they might have nurses and they might not have the specialist doctors on hand. It's been incredible in terms of service delivery for those remote communities in terms of physical and mental health and wellbeing. And we'll absolutely keep that.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Do you have measures of the improvement to wellbeing or mental health, or physical health that come from technology? Can you actually track it?

JODIE RYAN: We don't as yet, but health are looking at it. And I think Menzies Research is doing a piece of work around... I think it's Menzies, in terms of actually looking at pre and post or pre during pandemic I guess we still are. But certainly from a health anecdotal focus is the increase in people actually contacting them to improve their mental and physical wellbeing is incredible. They're interacting with kids at school on a daily basis. So school kids are able to dial up.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. How did you deal with the spread or the diffusion of technology if it... So people talk about the digital divide. Not everyone has...

JODIE RYAN: No, and that is one of the problems. So even communities with digital capacity, don't always, it doesn't always work. Say I want to drop some, everything drops out in terms of being able to purchase at the shops, there's no cash. Sometimes there's no cash in communities, they use their card, the digital technology drops out, that's a problem. We'll be wanting to grow, work with the Commonwealth and actually grow the digital spread across the territory, but there are many parts of the territory where there's no connection.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. I might shift to the public sector and how the public sector or the public service worked throughout the pandemic. If you've got any reflections on how that changed the work practises, working from home, focus on outcomes that you mentioned.

JODIE RYAN: Yeah, just starting on the working from home, we didn't see that like other jurisdictions, we don't have the public transport system say that other people have, generally it 10, 15 minutes away from your workplace. People drive. Because we didn't have community transmission, we had a little people still coming into the office. Anyone who felt vulnerable or was living with vulnerable people stayed home, but we probably only did that for a few months. It's still there as an option, but it's there's not a lot of take up anymore. But in terms of drive and being willing to do new jobs, different jobs, additional jobs, some people kept their old job and did other things. I mean, we had people answering hotlines, who'd never been required to do that before, and getting some very irate people on phones and learning quickly on the job, how to deal with all of that thing. So I think the point around knowing that they were doing their bit to keep Territorians safe, made a real difference.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah, yeah. I think it's one of the really positive changes across many public services is that surge capacity and that direct experience with the public, especially who you're there to serve.

JODIE RYAN: Yeah and realising some of the things we do, why they keep us very busy, might not be as important as we once thought they were. I think it's re-prioritizing what we do.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yes. I wouldn't mind going back to this issue of also the role of team meetings and what that means, especially for dispersed populations. So I've heard, I think for Queensland as well, that often the people in the regional parts of a state or a territory, if they're meeting by Zoom or Teams it's face-to-face and they feel a real part of it. So it can actually change the dynamics of distributed workplaces and people's sense of belonging and participation in a big way.

JODIE RYAN: Yep. And we've found that too. We've got regional offices in all of their main centres. So we often dial them into face-to-face meetings, but they were the only one. Whereas what we're finding now, is we're actually getting more people. People are staying rather than coming to a big meeting, when you're trying to keep your physical distancing happening, they stay in their offices and use a Team meetings to dial in. So you're not the only one on the video conference. There are multitude and it actually seems to be more inclusive that way.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. It's quite different from those old days of, in the conference room where you'd be basically a pixel and you couldn't see if this is face, this is much more direct.

JODIE RYAN: Absolutely.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Can I ask, so is there anything around the public service about the impact that you'd like to change? Is it the surge capacity or the things that you're looking to lock in?

JODIE RYAN: The surge capacity as we have done before at a couple of weeks, at a time for cyclones and things. But I think the thing with this surge capacity is it's been alone a long time. I think what I'd like to lock in is dropping off some of the things that we don't need to be doing. So what are those things that people in back rooms, they work hard on, not find that they work hard and that they achieve something, but is it really the most important thing for us. I do think we need to be more explicit around people's job definitions. So what outcome are they trying to achieve, rather than just sit there, writing a policy paper, what's the end goal that you're actually going to make a difference for, and actually help, fulfil people better around knowing what they're trying to achieve.

GORDON DE BROUWER: How do you go about the dropping of things that really at the end of the day don't matter? Or you think they don't matter? Did you do that systematically? Or how do you deal with that? How do you-

JODIE RYAN: It's tricky, on the run. It's just been done naturally. We've tried many times before, we've got a tight budget situation. We've tried to say to agencies, "What can you stop doing?" So you can do this more, this higher priority thing. And always, we can't stop doing anything, but I think we've proven that we can, and what I'd like to do is take that forward and get agencies to re-examine what they dropped, and then consider whether it stays dropped.

And I think that's a piece of work that we do need to do, because otherwise things will just get picked up again, as people go back to their day jobs, or as they get more time, I think there's a risk that we'll float back to old habits.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah, yeah. Can I ask you then shift on to relationships a bit, and one of the things in COVID has been the relationship with the community in general, but can I ask you to reflect on what it meant with the ANT has a large Aboriginal population, and that's a big part of who the ANT is, how that relationship evolved, or what you maybe learnt about that relationship?

JODIE RYAN: So I think that relationship is much closer now than it was before. We've always engaged with our Aboriginal sector and I'm talking land councils, the Aboriginal medical service, the legal services, various non-government organisations, but we've done it on an issues basis. So when there's an issue we've engaged that issue is resolved. We might've fallen away from our engagement. This engagement's been much broader, and much deeper and much more regular. The regional remote task force that I spoke about was largely with Aboriginal organisations. And that was keeping people informed, hearing their concerns and being able to address those concerns where possible, I think that relationship's much stronger now than it was eight months ago. And it's one of those things we absolutely must keep.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Do we have ways of measuring that?

JODIE RYAN: Probably hadn't turned my mind to that just yet, but I think what we'll be able to demonstrate is there's some tricky things we've been dealing within the territory for very many years. And I do think with this better relationship, we're actually going to take some steps forward and resolve some of those long outstanding issues, we're making progress on a couple of those things. And I'm hoping that, that's where you'll see the outcomes is that everyone trusts everyone a bit more, recognising that, I think people recognise too that we can't always meet concerns or deal with concerns, but we can hear them and at least talk about the two perspectives. We don't all have to agree all the time, and I think that's the other part is that everyone expects to come to some agreement. Sometimes you agree to disagree, but you actually have a strong enough relationship that you can still keep moving forward and working together. That's the important part.

GORDON DE BROUWER: You mentioned National Cabinet before, so probably one of the relationships that really matters is that the relationships across the Federation, between the Commonwealth, and states, and territories, can you reflect a bit more on how that relationship evolved and what's your perceptions are around that? You said National Cabinet was one of the best things done?

JODIE RYAN: I think so. So it was done very quickly. We had our last COAG meeting mid-March in Sydney and it was formed on the back of that meeting, at that meeting. And then we all went back to our jurisdictions and had our second meeting, but virtually, the first virtual meeting on the Sunday, initially we were meeting three times a week at least, then it went back twice a week, weekly, fortnightly, so it's dropped back a bit, but that initial engagement was imperative. I built relationships between First Ministers. Everyone could hear what the others were doing, and then able to share with each other, and use what others were doing. There was not like I said, the political lines weren't there.

It was the what's in the best interest of Australians, but with robust conversations. Not everyone agreed all the time again, but at least people talked it out and came to some agreed position. The other thing for us as a small jurisdiction felt that we had an equal seat at the table, whereas in COAG, it's really those biggest states that had more capacity for developing a policy positions and making a case that got more hearing, whereas in National Cabinet, everyone's equal. So the territory can have just as much of a say as Victoria and New South Wales, and it's been really good in actually moving issues forward rapidly, as opposed to the previous COAG arrangement where issues could stay on the table for years at a time.

GORDON DE BROUWER: One of the drivers of that within National Cabinet has been access to pretty much close to real-time data, or as close to real-time as you can get, across a range of mental health, and economic indicators. Can you talk a bit about how data or information shared information, common information has driven that common understanding?

JODIE RYAN: I think it's been vital. So we've had the AHPPC [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee] meeting daily. I think they still are meeting daily since sometime in March and having that real time data where they've worked through a position and come to us with the latest health advice has helped us. So we've always stuck to the what's the health advice. We're not making decisions based on personal biases or things that would benefit one jurisdiction or another, we're actually basing it on common information that we all have. Same with the economic data, we all had that Australian economic data from the Commonwealth Treasury, and that helped us form our own policies and proposals and responses based on the data we were getting from the Commonwealth Treasury.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Have you found that it's changed the willingness even within a jurisdiction to share data between departments and then between jurisdictions for the Commonwealth to share data with the states and territories, but also states and territories to share data with the Commonwealth? Sorry, I say that because I was in, I did COAG for quite a few years too, and very hard to get information and what you can see is an outsider here, a lot more information has being shared.

JODIE RYAN: Absolutely. Absolutely. So we're getting data and information straightaway, there's much less barriers to that. I think internally in the jurisdiction, we're probably about the same. We've always been pretty good at sharing between ourselves, between jurisdiction sharing while it's always been an option again, it's happened at ad hoc basis.

You had a particular issue, you might contact a counterpart and see if they had the same issue. We're all much closer now. We're actually in pretty regular contact at my level, my colleagues, and certainly first ministers are in regular contact as well. And that it's not just the National Cabinet meetings irregularly like that, but we're actually in contact by phone, by other meetings, text messages, whatever. And I think that's actually helped us share a lot more.

GORDON DE BROUWER: How do you lock that in? And partly it's on relationships, but can you do something system-wise to lock it in?

JODIE RYAN: It's really good question. Because again, people will fall back into old habits. I think if we can keep National Cabinet, I think that will help us keep locked in because it's very agile, it's very quick when making decisions. And as a First Secretaries group, we need to be very connected to make sure that, that will actually keep working producing results. So I think if we can keep National Cabinet, everything that cascades down from that, will stay in place.

GORDON DE BROUWER: On the issue of relationships, can you reflect a bit on relationships between the public sector or the public service and government or between ministers? Say public servants and ministers and how that's changed, has that changed at all?

JODIE RYAN: Accounting for the territory, because we're so small, our interaction with ministers is always very close. You can pop down to Woollies and bump into three ministers while you're doing your weekly grocery shop, so I don't know that, that's changed a great deal for us.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. Okay. Well for you start to bring it to an end, if there's anything else you'd like to say, I've got one more question, but any other remarks or observations you'd like to make?

JODIE RYAN: No, I just think, I mean, it's been a really tough year for so many people, but I do think that we're going to take a lot of lessons out of this that can take forward and actually have a much better relationship between government and the community ongoing and hopefully not drop back to that distrust that had really grown to quite an unmanageable level pre COVID.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. Can I ask you then as a final question, your own, this is a personal question about Jodie, what you learned about yourself, what you discovered about yourself in this crisis?

JODIE RYAN: That's a very good question. I've been very lucky all my family's here. So I've had that family support when we've been working very long hours, long hours through the week, and weekends generally, no holidays, I've had that family support. So I've been lucky. A lot of my colleagues whose families are in other jurisdictions have suffered in terms of not being able to see family for 8, 9 months, 10 months. And I've been able to see that effect on people. I think for myself, just recognising that we do make mistakes and we can learn from those mistakes has been probably good practise. And also just working that much more closely with a whole range of colleagues and

recognising you don't have all the answers yourself. You can actually reach out and get some help from others.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Thank you very much. That's great insight. So thank you for your time Jodie, but can I also thank you for your service to the Northern Territory and to Australia.

JODIE RYAN: Thank you Gordon. Thanks very much for that.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Oh, it's a pleasure. And it's a real honour. So thank you for another conversation, fascinating conversation. This is the last National Perspective for the year. So to you audience, so thank you for listening and I hope you have a very nice end of year and happy Christmas and new year, and look forward to the next episode of a national perspective with another Australian public sector leader in 2021. Until then, bye for now.