

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

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HOW GOVERNMENT EXPERTS SELF-SABOTAGE

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DAVID PEMBROKE:

Hello and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. I'd like to begin today's program by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, the Ngunnawal people and 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. And indeed, I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

Well, the concept of frank and fearless advice in the Australian Public Service is a guarantee from our public servants that they will deal openly, honestly, and impartially with the best available evidence and provide advice that is politically neutral. But on occasion, after official policy advice to government is publicly released, governments can sometimes be accused of ignoring or indeed even rejecting the advice of their experts.

So how does this happen, and is there something about the official advice that makes it easy for our political leaders and their advisors to ignore? Well, in a recently released book, 'How Government Experts Self-sabotage: The Language of the Rebuffed', ANU academic Dr Christiane Gerblinger has addressed this very dilemma. Dr Gerblinger is a visiting fellow at the Centre for the Public Awareness of Science at the Australian National University. After completing a PhD in science and regeneration in gothic science fiction, back in 2000, Christiane worked in a range of public sector roles, including as senior policy advisor and a speech writer. And in her last stint as a speech writer in the treasury portfolio, she was awarded a Sir Roland Wilson scholarship to undertake a second PhD on the language of the rejected or ignored policy advice. She joins me on the line. Dr Gerblinger, welcome.

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Hi, how are you doing?

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Very well, thank you. And listen, your book asks the question whether there is something about expert policy advice that makes it easy to overlook. What prompted you to look at this particular issue and how did you go about it?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Well, I have been working, as you said in the intro in government for quite some time by that point. And my last role as a speech writer in particular made me sort of come even closer, more face-to-face than I'd previously been to the import content and advice that policy advisors wrote. It was my job as a speech writer to try and make that accessible, interesting, human, warm for a minister to say out loud to a variety of audiences.

So, as I start to scratch away at this content to find some of the meaning, I found it harder and harder to actually be able to ascertain what this input was actually saying. So, I thought, well, these are a whole lot of smart people. Here, writing in a way that really makes it hard to pinpoint meaning, argument, opinion, and so on. So, I guess that was my first, I don't know, the first thing that galvanised the idea that there was more here and that I could say a lot more about it, I guess in order to then show how this happens so that something could be done about it.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, once you started this exploration into this world of arcane, perhaps often inaccessible language that really wasn't doing what it was supposed to be doing, what did you find were the causes of such writing?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Look, I think the causes, there's a lot, and there'll be specific to an organisation as well. They'll be cultural as in cultural to the organisation and then broader public service and government work. I think one thing that looms large in the minds of public servants is freedom of information. Things are written down then things could get dicey or a bit tricky. That has a huge bearing on how things are expressed. I think also the legislative requirement to be objective and responsive is at odds. Being objective and responsive are almost diametrically opposed in a way. So it's very, very difficult to reconcile those as one.

And the whole idea of objectivity is also a difficult one. I mean, obviously, being objective is preferable to just making things up on the spot and we've seen what that's like in the US for instance. So objectivity does give you a starting point where everyone can pretty much agree, yes, this is pretty much fact, but the language of objectivity, if I can put it that way, also exerts a kind of constraining effect on how things are articulated.

So, that's just a bunch of things I found... And that are pretty... I mean these are things that we can sort of through common sense pretty much suspect of having an effect on the language of government experts.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, if we look at those two specific areas that you've identified, first of all the impacts of freedom of information, does that lead to more qualification perhaps around advice that's given?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Absolutely. One of my case studies was, I don't know if you recall, in 2016 during the election campaign. The Labour Party raised negative gearing as something that they would look to reform and that their reforms would return, I think it was up to \$6 billion over the forwards, back to government coffers. The government at the time

called this the most destructive policy ever proposed and that it wouldn't really return \$6 billion.

It looked like treasury had been asked to provide some briefing to the treasurer at the time, Scott Morrison, on the labour policy to cost it to talk about it. Basically, I guess with the view to disproving labour's claims. And that was then FOI. In 2018, those FOIs were released to the ABC, the requesting news outlet. It was quite obvious that the treasurer had rejected that advice and he claimed that he preferred to speak to his own contacts, which is what you can do that as a government minister. You don't have to accept all the advice that comes to you through your public servant experts, but it's desirable. You should want to I guess, but you don't have to.

So, in 2018 we heard that he rejected the advice and that it contradicted what he went on to say, but only less than 12 months later, another minister was able to say, "Well, that advice confirmed what we'd said all along." So, you've got the same advice written such a way as to be interpretable to both sides of the argument or more than two sides if there are. So, it carefully avoided talking about any of the context around negative gearing. It made itself so small as to become malleable and infinitely interpretable. So that's one way of doing that.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

And it's certainly a very good example of the dangers of perhaps not sort of writing or avoiding context, but also there are other case studies that you've put forward in the book. For example, central agency's advice following the state-wide blackout in South Australia, Australian intelligence advice in the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. There are two examples. Now, in your first example, you know the advice was able to be used both ways, but can you talk more about the reasons why policy advice in those other two examples was not taken up?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

So, in the blackout case study, it wasn't even so much a matter of advice not being taken up as advice pre-empting rejection. So, it's skirted around talking about anything unpleasant or controversial almost in a kind of anticipatory compliance. So, in that case study, you might recall the blackout happened within an hour or two. The minister for energy, Josh Frydenberg at the time appeared on 7:30 already almost claiming that, "Well, look, I mean wind energy is unreliable and these things can happen."

And then within 24 hours, Barnaby Joyce, a member of the coalition government said, "Well, wind energy is unreliable, and it wasn't working too well last night in South Australia. Look what's happened." And so, this then became the very strong government narrative almost within hours of the blackout. So, the advice that then followed from some of the central agencies and the

Department of Environment restricted itself to only providing status updates of repairs on the ground damage and so on.

You did see at one point in this FOI release, which was reams and reams of emails and attachments, there was one advisor who said, "I'm hearing advice that it wasn't wind energy." But I'm conscious that this is what the minister has already said, so I'm just trying not to perpetuate this ongoing incorrect information. Another department official said, "Look, we'll get back to you on that," which was kind of the silencing statement that they never returned to and agencies stuck to simply status updates as a way to be responsive and to be objective. And this was evidence.

I mean, these things were happening on the ground, but there was no talk of what does this mean in a strategic or policy sense? Is the government turning away from renewable energy altogether? Will we meet our targets? Will we be in breach of the Paris Agreement? Those are solid policy considerations. If you see that this is where the wind is blowing, then those things need to be discussed. And they may have discussed them in person, no doubt they did. But on paper there is none of that. It is simply status updates standing in as evidence.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

And that example around the Australian intelligence advice in the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, what were the qualities of that advice that led it to be perhaps not used as it might have been?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Well, look, I think it was used but in different ways, and I can come back to that. So, ONA and DIO. Well, ONA is now ONI believe, but at the time ONA and the Defence Intelligence Organisation produced... I can't remember the percentage, but under 20% of the intelligence that was being used in Australia in the lead up. The rest was from the US and UK. So, some of this was made available through parliamentary inquiry in June 2003. And the advice initially was very measured, really didn't see a case for invasion, didn't see any nuclear capability, did find evidence of chemical and biological weaponry, but probably old.

So not necessarily usable. But as the screws tightened and things became tense politically, and it became very clear what the political intentions were, the advice by ONA became far more responsive to the government, whereas DIO continued to stay very objective. I mean, so objective that we had an excess of objectivity in a way that then again, was so neutral as to, you almost don't know what to do with it. So, we had statements like the evidence of nuclear capability in Iraq is as worrying... No, sorry. It was basically what we don't know is as worrying as what we do know that kind of flavour.

I mean that's really hedging it and it's perfectly objective and it's true. But what can you do with that? Not so much. The case against Iraq is as substantial as it is insubstantial or it's something like this. I'm sorry, I don't have the exact words anymore, but it is very, very difficult to do anything with that.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So then in terms, and there are three good examples of perhaps not best practice, but how common is the problem that around advice that is not compelling or is not valuable or is not useful in how it's meant to be presented?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Well, I mean, I don't know. I don't have numbers for you, but we can see ourselves that... Well, we've ignored several tax reform reviews. We've ignored the advice that came through the home insulation program in the GFC fallout we've ignored. I mean, take your pick. Probably Robodebt if anyone was to do a case study of that. It sounds like there was a lot of ignored advice there. These are just things we know through the media and I'm not saying that this is something that happens all the time, but I think it's probably more common when the topics are difficult and perhaps not necessarily something the government wants, but hey, that's politics, so these things happen.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

But interestingly, did you come to a view around what you previously mentioned in one of your answers around this social relationship, this dynamic between senior public servants and ministers and their offices? Did you come to some view about the impacts of how people feel about these social relationships around the challenge of being frank and fearless in the advice that they are looking to give?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Well, not so much feel. So, my evidence was document led primarily. I wasn't able to do interviews on these case studies because... Well, one is intelligence and the other two were still fairly recent, so people don't really want to be on the record with this kind of stuff. So look, I can only guess at how they feel. I don't think they feel great. I mean, the people that I know in the public service join the public service because they wanted to make a difference to enabling the public interest, working for the government of the day and trying to do the best job they can.

So, I can only imagine that they might feel frustrated sometimes. And that's okay. I mean, you might think you've got the most beautiful policy in the world or the most beautiful brief in the world, and it just doesn't always grow legs. That's life and that should be fine. But I did come across some excellent research that was done in the Department of Environment just after the whole home insulation program fiasco.

People were feeling very down about it. They felt personally responsible for what had happened. The deaths that happened as a part of that, which of course doesn't happen in every policy area, nor does it happen frequently, thank God. But I guess people don't... They are not loving this situation, let's put it this way. At the same time though, there is more that can be done in how you articulate. You are serving the government of the day and through the government of the day, the public and you're not there to hold the government accountable per se, but you are there to help them implement their election commitments, for instance, which can change, but you should be able to provide the government with information it doesn't want as well. And if they reject that, well that's fine. That is up to them, but it's not up to you.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Do you have any advice around best practices as to how people might arrive and indeed improve their ability to achieve that very particular aim that you just outlined?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

I think there's some simple ways and then there's some more complex ones that would take a lot longer. So simple ones are, I've noticed then that when public servants start to write, something changes. I may have just spoken to someone and they've explained it beautifully in everyday language, but when... Well, I was going to say when pen hits paper, but that's not the case. When fingers hit keyboard, something changes and things become... There's a great phrase in German where you'd say, the language becomes swollen.

It's just excessively wordy sentences become too long. And another thing that happens is briefings can be quite long, but really the only important thing is right at the end. So, I'd often come across, say, draughts for media releases, and by the end of nearly five years as a speech writer, I would know to go to the end and just immediately take the last sentence and put it at the top. And you would probably have come across this kind of thing too, David, in your own work. There are some simple fixes right as you speak. Maybe not completely colloquially, but think about that, think about your audience. Not everybody understands this thing that you love.

And being able to say it simply doesn't mean you're dumbing it down. You are actually being quite impressive in writing about complex things in accessible ways. So, I think you need to change your mindset there. Also, having an argument. I mean, rhetoric is actually really important, but the public service thinks rhetoric is basically aligned with propaganda or advocacy, so we won't go near that. Except rhetoric is important in mounting a logical argument. So, I think that's important.

Just doing courses in plain English aren't going to do it. What's important is structure. Even if you're a beautiful writer, you need to structure your argument and your minister who has no time whatsoever, should be able to know in the first three sentences what this thing is about. So those things I think are relatively easy fixes, but the harder ones are becoming more courageous, becoming bolder.

Not trying to stifle your imagination in trying to propose new things, reforms, things that are difficult, things that could be long term, which I know don't always find a receptive audience on either side of government. There are things that we can't do anything about like three-year election cycles. So therefore, of course things have become more short term. But yeah, I think though those are sort of more cultural.

Don't be afraid of FOI. You can be clear. In fact, a situation will be diffused, I think, through clarity rather than heightened. So yeah, these are just a few things that come to mind. Yeah, I mean, I could probably give you a few more, but I don't know if you-

DAVID PEMBROKE:

No, that's useful. I think they are useful, actionable insights that you've provided for people to be able to think about really in consideration when they start to perhaps take the swelling out of the first draught.

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

That's right.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

That they've been able to put in place. Again, in an earlier answer, you did speak about that contestability. Ministers take advice from multiple sources, not just their public service experts. How does that dynamic play in terms of a role of a government expert advisor, and how should they look upon this notion of contestability?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

I think one way through that would be... Look, I mean we are right near the ANU here. Cultivate relationships with experts in your field. Draw on multiple experts in your policy advice. Be aware of the contestability, be aware of the uncertainty saying that the jury is out or that this is an uncertain situation is better than pretending it doesn't exist. So, providing several interpretations is good and it actually helps you to become more convincing. So, I think showing your awareness of contestability is the best way around it, rather than just providing one expert view.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So listen, in terms then of what you know, looking into the future, perhaps two, three, four years down the track, how could the APS perhaps look at the way that it improves the inputs? I know you provided that advice in a couple of earlier answers, but what are some of the more sort of broader contextual interventions that might

be put in place that enable public servants to be better able, better prepared, more willing to be frank and fearless in the advice that they are providing?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Look, I think it is something that needs to be done agency and service wide and I know that through the APS Reform taskforce and the APS Academy, they are looking at those sorts of things. But I think what's also needed is to... Starting from the graduate cohorts onwards, is to help people develop their judgement. And this is a really difficult one to... You can't train yourself to be better at judgement. That comes from being exposed to all sorts of situations.

So, I think moving around into different agencies, people working in ministerial offices is always hugely valuable to see how advice is actually read, what process it undergoes and how it comes to be ignored or rejected. Do different things. Go elsewhere, expose yourself to different situations, read a lot. Develop your courage, but again, you can't be what you don't see. And by that I don't mean nobody has courage in the APS, but I think it is an organisational effort where you have to feel safe to speak truth to power in particular ways.

I mean, you don't have to be confrontational about it. You'll be completely ignored then. But take the time to understand how other people understand things, complexity, and put yourself in their shoes. Think about audience. I think that's something that very few people do. Often public servants are very reactive, so there's no time to think. No time to think about audience. You just start writing, but then you do end up with these things that you haven't actually thought through where your writing is the thing that's helping you think through, and that's why you come up with the answer right at the end, but by then you have to submit your brief.

Give yourself more time to think and plan and talk to others. 70% of the time that you have really should be on that. And then the writing or the verbal presentation, it doesn't really matter, that will then actually all become a lot easier. So, some practical things, but also some longer term, I guess, culture changes are required.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

In your experience, do you find that ministerial officers are happy to give guidance to people who are preparing advice to give them a steer on just exactly how it is that they would like that advice presented to them?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

I think they do, and certainly if you engage early and well, this will depend on what level you are in the APS, but if you engage early with your specific advisor, I think that helps. But I also know that... I mean, things are always crazy in ministerial offices. So, I know that

departments have tried to include little cards on cover pages on briefs to say, "Well, how did this read? Was this accessible? Was it this? Was it that?" And these things just don't work because they don't have time.

So, feedback is really, really hard. So if that can't happen, then I mean the main thing would be to engage early and say, "Look, I'm thinking this. Is the kind of thing you were thinking. How does the minister like to read things?" And so, they know what's coming so that they'll actually be prepared for your briefing.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Well, Dr Christiane Gerblinger, thank you so much and the book, 'How Government Experts Self-Sabotage: The Language of the Rebuffed'. Where can people get access to your book?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Well, they can Google the title, or they can go to the ANU press website and download it there. I know that they have a new publisher now, so you should be able to get a hard copy as well though if you download it on the website, it's free. So go to your nearest office printer and print it out.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

How big is it? How many pages?

CHRISTIANE GERBLINGER:

Good question. It's, ooh, I don't know, 200, 230, something like that?

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Okay. Well, I think that's pretty accessible. And I'd say that it's very worthwhile for many of our public sector audience and with Work with Purpose because this is a podcast for those people and they're often preparing advice to ministerial officers, and I'm sure they'll find a lot of wisdom in your book.

And I think there's nothing like learning from case studies when you're able to see and indeed feel and understand the challenges. I'm sure there is plenty, as you have outlined, that there are plenty of other great advice there for people to help improve their performances. So a very big thank you for coming onto the program today, and to you, the audience, a big thank you once again for coming back to Listen to Work with Purpose, a great conversation there with Dr Gerblinger. Fascinating, isn't it? Great insights. And the thing I like, lots of actionable things that you'll be able to take away and to put into your daily work and lots of things to think about as you start to produce that advice for ministers and ministerial officers.

Hey, let's take the swelling out of it as much as we possibly can. So, Work with Purpose is produced in collaboration with contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia, the ACT branch, and we are also supported each week by the

Australian Public Service Commission. A big thanks to both IPAA and to the APSC. If you do have time for a rating or review of the program, that helps us to be found.

So, wherever you do listen to this podcast, be it Spotify, Apple, Stitcher, many, many other podcast apps, please a rating or a review will help. But a big thanks, first of all to Dr Gerblinger for coming on to the program today. And a big thank you to you. My name is David Pembroke. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

VOICEOVER:

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