

# TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

## WORK WITH PURPOSE EPISODE #40

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

DAVID PEMBROKE: Today I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people, on whose lands this podcast is created today. I'd like to pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of this city and region.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Today on Work with Purpose, we turn the tables. My fellow co-host, Dr Gordon de Brouwer, is this time going to be behind the microphone as he answers questions from Rachel O'Connor, who is an Assistant Secretary of the Department of Education, Skills and Employment. And the topic is all about the importance of strategic thinking in a crisis. Now, Gordon de Brouwer has a fantastic career and has had a fantastic career in the Australian Public Service. He was the Secretary of the Department of Environment from 2013 to 2017, and was also Associate Secretary at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. He's played key roles in the development of Australia's \$42 billion economic stimulus package following the global financial crisis. He gave policy advice to the Prime Minister on domestic policy, and G20 matters. He's held senior roles in Treasury and at the Reserve Bank, and he's currently an honorary professor and distinguished policy fellow at the Australian National University. It's a great conversation between Rachel and Dr Gordon de Brouwer, and I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Well, Gordon, thank you for taking the time out of what's no doubt been a busy schedule for you to meet and have this conversation today. It feels very topical to be talking about strategic thinking during crisis.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Thank you very much, Rachel. And I'm looking forward to it and great to meet you as well.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Yeah, wonderful. So it really strikes me as we're just in the midst of yet another crisis here in Australia. Thankfully today we have the sun shining, but there are many communities across Australia who are still confronting flood today. And that of course has been on the back of the pandemic and fires and other floods. So we've really witnessed an accumulative impact. So I think it's really timely today for us just to take this time, to really explore how, as public servants or former public servants, we can really draw from our own reserves and our own experiences and create that sense of certainty for our future. So I thought perhaps we could begin by sharing some of our own personal reflections around how it is we can really draw our own resilience during times like these which we're facing, unprecedented and often quite uncertain. So perhaps if you could share from that space, Gordon.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Thanks very much, Rachel. I would like to start by just saying how tremendous the public services have been through all these crises of the past year or so. Pretty outstanding actually in delivery, different ways of working and focusing on people and outcomes and the flexibilities. A real congratulations to the Public Service on that, but it's really hard. It's hard and it's really hard to sustain.

GORDON DE BROUWER What strikes me that there are two bits, one is on the personal side and the other is on systems. It's not selfish to look after yourself. It's actually necessary for you to do your job. And I think people feel that they, especially when things are bad, they've got to throw themselves in without reserve and just go for it. And that is important, and that is part of it. But you can't do that at the expense of your own physical and mental health and your own family and relationships and your own wellbeing. So really taking stock of how do you look after yourself? It's not selfish. You can't do your job unless you look after yourself. And that means having time out and that sort of relaxation. So holidays are really important. Enjoying your weekend really important.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Yeah. I think you're spot on. It is hard. And yet it's even more important at times like these, certainly for myself, I've been reflecting quite a bit on this.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: During the peak of the pandemic and the fires last year, I was in the National Indigenous Australians Agency. And when confronted with how it is that we can best support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the countries, protect remote communities. A lot of those challenges really at the forefront. And yet if we're not taking the time out to really make sure that we have our own reserves, then we're not able to do our jobs. So what I've found has been really important is the ways in which we can really take action and lead by example, and how we have those conversations with our teams, with our colleagues and make sure we create safe spaces for people to be heard and to acknowledge the challenges we're facing. And remembering that as public servants, we're still people first.

GORDON DE BROUWER Absolutely. And it's that culture then of looking after people, and people matter. So the public matters and the public are people, but public servants are people as well, as are the politicians. And you have to look after yourself and looking after others. I think some of it's taking control of your own life and thinking about the hours you're going to work, or deliberately not looking at devices, or having time out, or enjoying your weekend, going away where you can. But it's also thinking about the systems that are in place. And I don't think public servants do this well. They don't reflect on if something's going to happen for a while. And the pandemic is not a transitory thing. It's here. We've had it for a year. We're going to have it for more in different forms. It's really asking, "Are your work systems and the allocation of responsibilities, even the number of staff, is that really fit for purpose, for an ongoing set of difficulties and intense work?"

GORDON DE BROUWER I just reflect, this is going back a long way, but in the global financial crisis, I was working in PM&C. And so we had things happening overnight, internationally, and we had things happening during the day in Australia. We ran in the economics area, two shifts. We basically went to shift work. So redesign your system. And I think many places haven't thought about what actually the resource allocation is, that they just make some of the people work longer and that's not sustainable. You can do that for a while, but it's not sustainable for an ongoing crisis. And different work arrangements, but really reflecting, and I think actually doing that with people, not just imposing it on them, but really reflecting on, "Is the system fit for purpose for what you have to face over the next 12 months?"

RACHEL O'CONNOR: I think that's absolutely right. And we're absolutely at that point of looking to the future and making sure that we are positioning ourselves both collectively and individually as best as possible to be able to be prepared. And I think your point on it's not just about doing more with less. How do we ensure we've got the right people, the right numbers of people in the right places? And I think a big commentary that has received a lot of support has been the way in which the Public Service has been able to mobilise and really demonstrating our capacity to be agile. Part of what I'm, considering myself for me personally and my teams, is how do we support that going forward on a more ongoing basis when we have people who are already feeling quite overstretched, quite exhausted, where they feel like they've been very agile, so how we can create that sense of certainty for the future.

GORDON DE BROUWER Yep. People are stressed and we're not starting off with a lot of reserve. The tanks are actually low. So it even goes back to how do you work delegation? How do you work decision-making? How do you think about people's responsibilities?

GORDON DE BROUWER And frankly, it's a wonderful opportunity to empower people, to treat them like adults, let them do the job, have the governance in place, but let them also identify where the risks are, manage the risks and engage on how to manage the risks, but actually empower them to do the job.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: I think you're absolutely right. And I think it's really important to always be remembering in our roles that we're there to work together as a collective and not one individual has the answer, but it's what we can come up with together that is going to help us to identify different ways.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: And certainly I've found from my own experience during different examples, I spent about 10 years working in the Northern Territory, and so a lot of the crises that we faced throughout were often on a real on the ground experience. And so there were many times that I know I felt really challenged in that space. And I felt that the more that I could acknowledge my own fears that I was facing, and have those open conversations with staff, the more that enabled others to share. And for us then to collectively feel heard, and then we could focus on what was the pathways forward? Did we need to draw in additional resources? Did we have the right people? And was there a different way of going about it that would ensure that we're building that sense of trust and support, working with community?

GORDON DE BROUWER Yep. Teams are essential.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Teams are essential.

GORDON DE BROUWER There's no way around it. Individuals just acting by themselves, frankly, don't achieve very much. You achieve a huge amount all through teams, but that's right.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Absolutely. And I think that the other thing that's been really clear through the pandemic is the importance of our individual teams, but also how we're working as a collective right across the Public Service and with communities. And that clearly is within the Australian Government, but that importance of the relationships with our state and territory colleagues and with organisations representing communities and communities themselves.

GORDON DE BROUWER Yeah, there's probably one of the lessons of the crisis is just how important those relationships are. Probably the experience of the pandemic, as you're outlining, is certainly for the Commonwealth public servants, just how valuable that relationship with state counterparts and territory counterparts has been. The real risk is that it's lost. And especially as we go back to in a sense more normal times and the normal budget and policy processes that people lose sight of those relationships.

GORDON DE BROUWER I've always thought people can maintain a very professional relationship, represent your jurisdiction really well, but you need to be trusted by your counterparts. And that sometimes means being able to have a conversation about really what the issues are that both jurisdictions are facing, acknowledging the different interests and also sometimes the different politics that's involved, but then where would some of the solutions be? And probably some of the enduring solutions to the problems that those jurisdictions are trying to deal with. So leaning in on relationships, I just think if there's anything to take from this, people matter so much and everything that public service does is a people business, either the outcomes or how you do your business. And those relationships are primary. So your relationships in the workplace, with the public, but also with other jurisdictions. So I frankly couldn't agree more.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Absolutely, and so much of those relationships are what we're doing in the lead up to. It often has struck me that I wouldn't have been able to engage in the same way with many of the colleagues if I hadn't spent those times in advance building those relationships and then absolutely, because we've all come together so closely during this, how we maximise those relationships that have also been formed through crisis. I think that's going to be really key as we go forward. And what I'd be really interested in exploring a bit further with you is what some of your experiences, of insights have been, perhaps from some different crises that you've been involved in in the past, and how, when we're in the midst of crisis, we can really maintain that strategic foresight.

GORDON DE BROUWER So I think strategic foresight, frankly, it's a beautiful term. It's pretty fancy, but in practise, I think what it really means is that if you're designing a particular thing or you're involved in a particular action or deliverable, you really are thinking of what the next action is, and the action after that. So you're thinking of a series or a sequence of steps, rather than just the step you're currently involved in. I'll come and explain that a bit more, but it's then being aware of when you're thinking around what the next steps are, of why. And really the whole purpose of public policy is to improve and protect people's lives or the natural environment, the natural capital that we have. How do you maintain and protect that? So it's trying to think of how do you take those actions back to specific outcomes?

GORDON DE BROUWER And typically for public servants, those outcomes are defined in some form of legislation, or some form of government policy, or some international arrangement. So you've got a base for the outcome, and you try to link where those actions may be to achieve that outcome. And that you've really engaged very well with others around that. And primary there is of course, the minister and the government, and often those outcomes are defined by government.

GORDON DE BROUWER So relationships all matter in thinking about the next steps, but being strategic and having foresight is nothing more, frankly, than thinking around the series of steps that you want to achieve, or is necessary to achieve a particular outcome, often defined by others. And how do you go about doing that in terms of relationships, communication, persuasion, and changes that are necessary to get you there?

GORDON DE BROUWER I've got a couple of examples, but I'll just go back 10 years or so to the global financial crisis. I think we would have been headless chooks, frankly, if we'd just thought of a crisis as being the particular day or what was happening in a particular day. So financial markets collapse, or firms are collapsing around you. Where foresight came into that was really thinking through, if there's a financial collapse or financial problem, you have to get the tools and people to fix that, but that's also going to have economic consequences. It may cause a recession or slow down. So how do you lean in early to limit the economic consequences? If it's going to have a macro consequence, maybe it's also going to have a trade or a cross border consequence.

GORDON DE BROUWER So how do you think around where those consequences are? If you're doing lots of spending, then that's going to have a budgetary and debt impact. Well, how sustainable is that in the longer term, across particular features of economies? So do you need to lean in in a different way on some things? So it's really thinking of what starts off as a financial crisis quickly becomes a job and economic crisis, can be an international crisis and can lead to some other debt or other relationship consequences. So you want to see how things are going to unfold and think around. And how do you position for those future bits with actions now as well? So it's being aware of the context in which you're operating. I think it's the same for climate change. I worked on climate change under Prime Ministers from Rudd and Gillard to Abbott and Turnbull. Very different approaches to that.

GORDON DE BROUWER Now we started off, I think, under the Rudd and Gillard Governments with the view that you've got a big problem, and you've got an externality, climate change. So it's a little bit, the economists, it's a bit like the Beyonce song. If you really want it, you've got to put a ring on it. For economists it's if there's an externality, you've got to put a price on it. So they tried that. In practise that failed, for political reasons, but also the implementation was pretty hard. I won't go through all of that, but that system didn't work. If you needed then a different system or different way of thinking around climate change, the approach that was taken under Abbott in particular and the minister Greg Hunt, was think about it discretely. What's the series of actions over time that will address climate change? But also think around some of the economic and social consequences of it.

GORDON DE BROUWER So if you're thinking of emissions reduction fund, that was meant to be a budget reward for carbon abatement, or emissions abatement, then think around, how do you put limits on particular areas? Are there elements of technology you can also lean into? So the safeguards mechanism was designed to be a way of trying to provide structure and limits or constraints on emissions. What's the sequence of different actions that can put you on a path to emissions reduction over time and take account of technology preference changes as well?

GORDON DE BROUWER So it's really, again, trying to unbundle a complicated or complex problem into digestible parts. How do you relate those different parts to each other? How, when you've got a particular action, can you encourage the progress to the next step? And some of that I think comes down to transparency around what's going on, public debate, having an informed public debate, talking about actually what the objectives are of a policy, typically outcomes, what more can we do to achieve and strengthen those outcomes and evaluation of the current steps. Are the things we're doing working, and what could we do differently to help us?

GORDON DE BROUWER So all of those things are parts of the toolkit for public policy of encouraging informed debate and evidence that puts you on a sequence of steps to achieve a particular outcome.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: I think there's a lot there in those examples that you've shared that we could tease out in many different directions. I think that one of the key takeaways from me is how we take what can be quite complex challenges we're dealing with, and break it down and create a sequencing of actions that also strikes me, helps us to kind of come back into that place of certainties. So for our teams and those we're working with, if we're able to kind of draw the conversation to, "What are the actions we can take here?", I really think it helps us to galvanise together and to come back to that place of, "What's our role and how do we support ourselves, each other and our government and communities to work in a sequential way through a crisis situation?"

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah. I really agree. Again, the skill and I think the discussion with public servants is that you may be working on a particular action, but don't see that action in isolation. Think around what's necessary. And they may as in just be small things. If you're talking about protection of a threatened species, are there things you can do regionally as well around that affect the ecosystem, that help lock in some of that? Is there something broader down the next step as well? So it's not just being lost in the moment of delivery and getting that right, as important as that is, it's also having an eye to the sequence of actions and tying it back to outcomes. Because public policy ultimately is really all about people and the world in which they live. And if you can't relate it back to that, then there's something broken in that public policy.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Absolutely. And I think that one of the learnings I've really gained has been, if we've got that absolute clarity on what's the outcome, and what's the kind of key outcome that we're working towards, that really helps us to maintain a sense of focus and bring the collective together towards that outcome.

GORDON DE BROUWER Well, I think it's focus, but it's also a really deep sense of purpose because, again, purpose really matters. One of the distinguishing features of public servants is that they are driven by purpose. And frankly, our political process is driven by purpose, people who want to change the world. And in a difficult time where you're also stressed, it can be a source of motivation. And there's nothing stronger, actually, in wanting to do your job and actually the sense that you're achieving something, and something that matters to people's lives. And that's a very, very powerful thing. So it's kind of a going back to roots.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: It is.

GORDON DE BROUWER It's going back to origins in a way, in a crisis.



RACHEL O'CONNOR: It is. I definitely experienced that myself through the pandemic and I nominated myself to go into what was our COVID coordination group within the Indigenous Affairs Agency. And coming from that place of deep purpose, I think really is what assisted me in that time. And what I found was that we were brought together across the Australian Government, working really closely with states and territories and with communities around that common concern of, "How do we ensure we keep our remote communities across Australia as safe as possible and protected from COVID?"

RACHEL O'CONNOR: And it was a really unique and great opportunity to be able to work so closely alongside particularly communities who were taking a really strong lead role, and to be in that space within the public service of how do we listen to, and really acknowledge and honour what we're hearing from communities and how they want to keep themselves safe. And for those of us who've been working in indigenous affairs for some time, I think that one of my key learnings has certainly been from that awareness of the importance of empowerment and the ways in which we can really deliver a strong message of the importance of working in partnership, even in, and probably most importantly through crises.

GORDON DE BROUWER Yeah. That's wonderful. It's a great example, frankly, and it's a really meaningful example because it really does go to people's lives.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Exactly.

GORDON DE BROUWER: And the quality of their lives. So it's great. That's a fantastic example.

RACHEL O'CONNOR: Yeah. And as we're coming to this next stage nationally and globally, it was also really reassuring to me to hear just this week, the announcement of the rollout of vaccinations across remote communities across Australia. So we're moving to that next stage, and part of what strikes me is that we wouldn't be where we're at today as a nation, had we not had the various leaders and teams and people working together across the nation during early stages of the pandemic with that strategic foresight and that ability to look to what do we need to do immediately, as well as what those next steps are so that we can prepare ourselves for what's coming next.

GORDON DE BROUWER Yeah. No, that's great. I think it's wonderful. One of the things that came into play in this crisis, that's really quite different from other crises is just the impact of data and how that can inform decision-making. I've never seen any previous example where we've just had so much almost real time data across the economic and social health spectrum. And it's often not just sample data, it's really population data. So you know what's going on and it's not just the presentation of anecdotes, or, "I heard this, what did you hear?" It's actually can be well-informed by data. So that's one of the really nice discoveries, I think, of the power of data and we do have it. Digital technology has given us that and the public service has been well-placed to do that across those different data sets.

GORDON DE BROUWER      And also it's brought Commonwealth and states and territories together as well because they've got different data, and the private sector for that matter. I mean really powerful examples of private sector data. So part of it's, again, how do you motivate yourself going forward? Really got a lot of evidence now, and there's a lot of analytics to be done around those different data sets of what works, what doesn't, and that's really exciting for government because it means they've also got a bit of agility. They can respond to evidence and they're in control and empowered by that evidence rather than anecdote.

RACHEL O'CONNOR:      Absolutely. And it's the data that's going to support us around the decisions for the future. I also sense at this time, that it's really important for us to be taking the time out to reflect and look to some of the data to inform us in terms of what has worked, what hasn't worked and how do we take that information to inform us in the next steps we take from here. So I was just wondering, perhaps in a bit of a closing, if you could share what you've learnt or some of your insights in terms of the importance of taking that time out to reflect.

GORDON DE BROUWER      Yes, taking time out. Well, my main lesson on that one is use your devices properly. And my personal experience is don't use your smartphone too much. And certainly don't read long emails on your smartphone at night without your glasses, because you make terrible mistakes. You misread things, and that's quite embarrassing. And so it's kind of having a bit of a break from technology and also using it smartly, using it, you know? So I've read emails and I've thought I've understood it, and it's really small print and I've missed a word, maybe a word like not, and that doesn't help. That's not good. So maybe people can see better than I can. But I think the lesson I take from it is use your technology smartly.

RACHEL O'CONNOR:      Absolutely. It's quite ironic that they're called smartphones, isn't it?

GORDON DE BROUWER      Yeah. They're only smart if you use them smartly, I think.

RACHEL O'CONNOR:      Absolutely. And I think it also strikes me that as we move into more of an ongoing management versus an immediate crises, that importance of actually slowing down. I think for many of us, we have been doing work anywhere, anytime, on the run, over our phones. And I think it's really important for us to, as part of this reflection, build in more sustainable ways in which we're going to manage ourselves and others going forward.

GORDON DE BROUWER      Spot on. Spot on.

RACHEL O'CONNOR:      Well, thank you so much for your time today, Gordon. It's been really great having this conversation with you.

GORDON DE BROUWER      That's very nice. Thanks very much and great to hear your stories. They're fantastic.

RACHEL O'CONNOR:      Thanks Gordon.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So there you go. The experience and the stories that Gordon has told, it just really helps you, doesn't it, to understand just that importance of slowing down and being strategic and being thoughtful and gathering up all of those insights that you need to make good decisions. So a very big thank you to Rachel O'Connor for asking the questions this week and also for Gordon, for being behind the microphone this time and sharing his wisdom with all of us. A very big thank you as always to the team at IPAA and also to the Australian Public Service Commission. Fantastic. And thank you so much for your ongoing support.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Also important for us to recognise that Sunny Hutson has left our team at Work with Purpose. Sunny played a vital role in the success of Work with Purpose. She was there from day one and has just done such an outstanding job producing Work with Purpose, but also all these fantastic events that IPAA holds regularly. Sunny has been a ray of sunshine, so great to work with, and Sunny, best of luck to you in the important work that you're now going to be doing at Prime Minister and Cabinet, working on the APS enterprise comms project. So best of luck to you, and thank you so much for the privilege and the pleasure of working with you for so many years. That's it, ladies and gentlemen, for another episode of Work with Purpose. Thanks again for your time and attention, but for the moment it's bye for now.

Voiceover: Work with Purpose is a production of content group in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.