

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

VALEDICTORY: ANDREW METCALFE

Andrew Metcalfe AO (Keynote)

Secretary

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Katherine Jones PSM (Host)

Secretary, Attorney-General's Department

IPAA ACT President

08/08/2023

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CAROLINE WALSH:

Before we start today's valedictory address, I would just like to take a moment to pay respects to the elders of the Canberra region and thank them for the care that they take of the lands that we all work, live and play on and pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging. I'm Caroline Walsh. I'm the CEO of IPAA ACT and I am absolutely delighted that IPAA can welcome all of you here today to hear from Andrew Metcalfe as he does his valedictory for an IPAA audience and share in his reflections on his career.

Before I hand over to Katherine, I just wanted to make a few special notes and thank Andrew for his enormous contribution to IPAA over the years. Andrew was the IPAA ACT president from 2010 to 2013. He was instrumental in that time in making changes that set IPAA up for success then and into the future. He ensured that IPAA was recognised and supported by all departments and agencies across the sector.

This all happened before my time, so I'm not aware of all of the details, but I have been told that at the time, IPAA resembled something of a tennis club with meetings held in people's backyards and the offices above a pub in Belconnen.

I've spoken to Andrew about his contribution and he was reflective and incredibly modest about the work that he did. But wise counsel, some of whom are in the room with us today, assure me that it wouldn't have happened without Andrew's great leadership. So, thank you, Andrew. And I'm sure that many great things wouldn't have happened without Andrew's great leadership and I'm happy to say that we get to hear about that today.

So, I would now like to introduce our chair and host for today, Katherine Jones, PSM. Katherine has been the secretary of the Attorney-General's Department since August 2021 and IPAA ACT president since the 3rd of May, 2022. Please join me in welcoming, Katherine Jones.

KATHERINE JONES:

Thanks very much, Caroline, and welcome everyone today. Thank you for joining us and it's great to see such a large turnout to hear the words of wisdom and reflection of Andrew. I'd also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet here in the ACT, pay respects to the elders' past and present and acknowledge their ongoing connection to this country.

Before I introduce Andrew, I hope you won't mind if I pause just to acknowledge the passing in the last week of a great member of the IPAA community, Damien West. He was a member of the IPAA ACT Council, a member of IPAA National Council, a very senior leader in the ACT Public Service and

someone I think who many of us have worked with and known over the years, a passionate advocate for the public sector and I don't know, is deeply missed by ACT colleagues, IPAA colleagues and family and friends.

It is great to see so many of you here today, people who've worked with Andrew or being inspired by Andrew over the years. It's great to see so many secretary colleagues and also some former secretary colleagues. And in that vein, I'd really like to acknowledge Helen Wilson and Dennis Richardson, who've joined us here today.

There's a long list of achievements that I could note in my introduction to Andrew, but in the interest of making sure we leave plenty of time for him to talk, I'm just going to hit a few of the highlights. He has been a departmental secretary in three departments over a period of 12 years and I'm only myself becoming aware of the enormity of the resilience of doing those roles for that period of time.

He was appointed as secretary by five different prime ministers, worked directly to 15 portfolio ministers and in the more than four decades since he joined the Australian Public Service and as administrative trainee, he has worked in Central Brisbane and Melbourne Regional offices of the Department of Immigration and in senior executive roles in a number of departments in Canberra and maybe even in Hong Kong, if I gathered correctly from your speech.

In late 2012, Andrew was appointed as the secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry. As Andrew may mention in his speech, that appointment ended in 2012 or 2013 I should say. And a reminder of that we serve at the pleasure of government. From 2014 to 2020, Andrew was a partner in the global management services firm, Ernst & Young. He returned, I think, extraordinarily to the Australian Public Service in February 2020 because he had more to give, being appointed as secretary to the newly created Department of Agricultural, Water and Environment.

Following the change of government in 2022, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese confirmed Andrew in the role as secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry. I'd also like to acknowledge Andrew's influential role as a previous IPAA president and I think really set it on a foundation for its ongoing success. I thank you for that.

I think it's fair to say that many of us regard Andrew as the older statesperson of the secretary's board and perhaps of the APS. You've had an extraordinary career of impact and outcome. You've combined a career of commitment to the public good with a deep and abiding respect of the public service and a passionate commitment to upholding our values of service and integrity and to supporting and celebrating the

people who devote their careers to the public service. So, we're all looking forward to hearing from you. Please join me in welcoming, Andrew Metcalfe.

ANDREW METCALFE:

Well, thank you, Katherine, for that lovely introduction. And so, I also extend my condolence to Damien [inaudible] and friends. And can I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands of which we're meeting today and do so in their language, [foreign language]. And I also acknowledge other First Nation families in the Canberra area speakers and Ngambri people. And I very much like to warmly welcome and acknowledge any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander colleagues who are here with us today.

Thanks everyone for being here. It's great to see you here. I really appreciate it. It's the end of a very long road for me. I've a lot to talk about, so please relax, settle back, get comfortable. I'm very proud of the Australian Public Service and of being an Australian public servant. While the APS has sometimes failed, occasionally failed badly in its standards, overwhelmingly it has been a force for good, helping successive governments build our nation and provide services to our people for over 120 years.

Our public service will remain very important into the future as Australian governments navigate highly complex geopolitical, economic, environmental and societal challenges. As observed by the Thodey Review, the basic principles of the Westminster tradition of the Australian public service, first articulated in the Northcote-Trevelyan report in the UK in 1854, they still endure, "core values of integrity, propriety, objectivity and appointment on merit, able to transfer its loyalty and expertise from one elected government to the next."

My first minister when I was secretary of immigration, Amanda Vanstone, made some very apposite remarks to The Canberra Times on 20 July in an article headed, "After Robodebt, it's time we don't forget our public services heroes." Many people in this room have contributed greatly to Australia as public servants, and in my view, are public service heroes. And today, I'll talk about them and a few of the stories from my own experience along the way.

But I'd like to begin by welcoming my family and close friends who are here today, and to acknowledge those who can't be here. I particularly want to mention my wife, Jenny, who has been my best friend and companion now for 44 years. Quite simply, Jenny, you are the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. How lucky I was to meet you through mutual friends at the University of Queensland in 1979. And we fell in love, or at least I did, listening to Bob Dylan, Neil Young, the Beatles, the Eagles and dare I say it, David Gates and Bread, on your old three-in-one stereo, and looking through your many photo albums, which mainly involving pictures of your

pet sheep and poddy lambs. What an adventure we've had since then. And how fortunate I am to have walked beside you for all these years, with lots more walking together to do, even though you do walk a lot faster than me.

And I'm delighted that our daughter, Nellie, is with us today as well. We are all so proud of you Nellie, of the person that you are, and of what you've done and what you will do. You are a strong and passionate, and very articulate woman, who has worked hard and is now the chief of staff to an assistant minister. We know that you will do many good things in that role, and over many years to come.

Our son, Riley, is in Maryland, where he is a post-doctoral fellow at the United States National Institutes of Health, one of the world's most prestigious medical research bodies. Jenny and Nellie and I, and his wider family and friends are just amazed by what he does, and the medical research he's involved with. And again, he has a wonderful future ahead. We're looking forward to seeing him in the United States to celebrate his 30th birthday two weeks from now.

Colleagues, the author, LP Hartley, famously commenced his 1953 book, *The Go-Between*, with the words, "The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there," And Toowoomba, Queensland, where I was born in 1959 and grew up in the '60s and '70s, was indeed a foreign country from today's world, as indeed was the Australian Public Service that I joined over 43 years ago.

Looking back, there was a simple innocence to my early life. It was a time of long summer holidays of building tree houses, of riding pushbikes without helmets, of exploding letterboxes on cracker night, of black and white televisions and crystal radio sets, of strawberry flummery for dessert, of yo-yos and lolly cigarettes, of Skippy, the bush kangaroo, and of backyard lavatories. The flummery and the lavatories are quite often interconnected.

My dad was a World War II serviceman, who worked in the Commonwealth Employment Service, so the Australian Public Service has always been part of my life. My mum loved her five children dearly, indeed she still does, having recently attained the wonderful age of 97. I have many memories from my childhood which have shaped my adult life, and I'd like to share just two of them with you today.

One of the family's jokes was gifting me a book written by Elizabeth Guilfoyle, called *Nobody Listens to Andrew*. Well, they're wrong today, aren't they? The simple plot is that no one ever listened to Andrew, and when they eventually did, they found out that he had something worthwhile to say. This was my lived childhood experience and let me give you one example. There was one iron-clad rule in our house, and that

was, never interrupt mum when she's on the phone. The phone was her only way of really staying connected with friends, as she couldn't drive, and we only had one old car anyway, an old Ford Prefect.

One day, when I was about four years old, I had an entertaining afternoon playing with a box of matches that I had fortuitously discovered hidden in the back of a kitchen cupboard. I quite often had afternoons like that. Small fires in the backyard, extinguished by the hose, inevitably led to more adventurous undertakings with the result that I set fire to the wooden back fence, but on this occasion, I wasn't able to put out the flames. So, you can guess what happened next.

I thought I should confess to my behavior and get mum to fix the problem before things really got out of hand. So, I ran upstairs, only to find mum on the phone, involved in a long conversation with one of her great friends. I swear I tried to tell her about the developing conflagration outside, but was repelled by a stern look, an admonishing finger, and clear advice that she was not to be disturbed and that I should go away. Another attempt, a really persistent attempt, also met with stern, exasperated, rejection.

So, I did what any four-year-old would do. I ran down the road and climbed up into a leafy tree and hid. I sat there for some me, up high in that old gum tree, observing billowing smoke away up the street, and as far I can remember, the arrival of the fire brigade. Eventually hunger, darkness and fear drove me back home, where both my parents expressed relief at my survival and anger of my alleged misdeeds, and I was asked to explain what had happened, and where I'd been.

And so, I explained the mysterious circumstances of the ignition of the fire and how I had unsuccessfully tried to raise the alarm. I knew that bad news doesn't get better with age. Finally, mum realised that having not listened to Andrew, that Andrew indeed had had something important to say. I won't dwell on what happened next, but it's a painful memory, and my youthful pyromania was held in check for some weeks after.

So, one of my first observations that I would like to share with you today, and which I believe is still highly relevant, is the need to identify mistakes early on, and to fix them, and the need for persuasive and effective communication and engagement. And how, despite at sometimes it's difficult, listening is really important.

The second lesson from my early years that while I was clearly born to be an entrepreneur, fate intervened and ultimately, I was destined to become a public servant. In my early primary school years in the '60s, I constructed this most marvelous, three-story tree house up in the massive camphor laurel tree

that dominated our backyard. I soon learnt that my tree house would be wildly popular as a place to play after school for my school friends.

After some weeks of this after-school gathering and being inundated by requests from even more school friends to join us back home, I realised that I could monetize this activity. So, I introduced a levy of two cents per day for all comers. In no time at all, I made a fortune of several dollars, all stuffed into my Commonwealth Bank money box.

But alas, it was at this stage of my booming business career that my mother intervened. Having been ignorant of my business activities, one afternoon she found me quietly reading in my bedroom. I told her that I was sick of playing with the mob outside and preferred to spend my time inside with Biggles and Enid Blyton books.

But foolishly, I told mum that I wanted them to keep coming because I was making a fortune out of these small payments from them. Now this probably naturally horrified her, and I had to agree to pay back all the money, by inviting them all up to Picnic Point, the café up there, one afternoon and buying everyone ice cream. This unfortunate intervention that my mother seemed to stifle any business aspirations I might have had, but it also prepared me well for public service, for a long career of collecting and then redistributing public funds.

But, with all of that innocence and happiness, looking back at the other world, that world, that foreign country of the 1960s, I can also see that there was ignorance as well. The Toowoomba that I grew up in had no Indigenous Australians living in it, or, if there were, there were very few and certainly not known to our family or friends.

As a child I roamed far and wide over the bushland of the Toowoomba range, learning about and coming to love the extraordinary diversity of animals and plants, but never really thinking about, or learning about, the people who had been there for tens of thousands of years, at least for tens of thousands of years up until the mid-19th century.

A favorite destination of my many bushwalks was Table Top Mountain, just to the east of Toowoomba, known for its flat top. It's also known as One Tree Hill and I now know that it's known as "Meewah" in the language of the Traditional Owners. I would have climbed up its basalt sides dozens of times in the 1960s and '70s.

Now, we know and had great pride in our own family's history of Irish settlers arriving in Tasmania in 1829, of my maternal grandfather who was a stockman for Sir Sidney Kidman, the cattle baron. But we knew nothing of Australia's First Peoples apart from occasional references about the Aboriginal tribes

who met the First Fleet, or who assisted European explorers of this land.

And it is only now, so many years later, that I understand what really happened on that land where I played and lived and roamed as a child. What I now know, courtesy of a lot of research being done is that the Jagera, Giabal and Jarowair people lived on the Darling Downs for at least 40,000 years before European settlement. Estimations place the indigenous population pre-settlement from 1,500 to 2,500 people. In 1827, the Darling Downs was discovered by Allan Cunningham and 13 years later, Patrick Leslie and his party began the first wave of settlement.

The settlers brought with them diseases like smallpox, influenza and measles, which were devastating to the indigenous population. These introduced diseases, as well as social disruption, relocation, and murder, caused the indigenous population of the Darling Downs to be almost wiped out by 1870. The most famous and serious of conflicts on the Downs was the Battle of One Tree Hill, on that place where I'd climbed so many times a century or so later, in my innocence and ignorance, of what had once happened.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the Aboriginal survivors of frontier violence were under the absolute control of the Queensland government. The widespread mindset of the time was a belief in white supremacy and so the Europeans felt they knew best when it came to the lives of the indigenous people. In a move to separate the Aboriginal people from the whites, they would be removed from their traditional land, for virtually any reason, and relocated to reserves and missions set up throughout Queensland designed for their containment and control.

Arbitrary relocation could occur to any Aboriginal person but children, more so orphans and single mothers, were especially vulnerable. These removals resulted in the breakdown of many regional affiliations and families, tearing people away from their traditional values and way of life.

I won't continue to quote from the histories as they progress through the 20th century, but of course they continue to the Stolen Generation, to the landmark Mabo High Court case, the legal dismissal of the original doctrine of terra-nullius and the recognition of the native title, and of course, to the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Now, colleagues, I don't know how many people have actually read the Uluru Statement. And I won't repeat all the words here, but I do want to just read the final sentence. "We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future."

As an Australian who loves this country and is proud of my family's almost two centuries here, but one who grew up largely ignorant about the culture and civilization and sovereignty over millennia of the First Australians who lived on this land can I simply say how extraordinary that statement is. The extraordinary offer to walk together for a better future. There is still so much more for us all to do to make that happen, for it to become a reality.

Colleagues, I joined the Australian Public Service 43 years ago, as part of the Administrative Trainee Scheme run by the then Public Service Board. I was the baby of my group. I was 20 years old. For me, that year in Canberra was a wonderful learning experience, but my heart was elsewhere, in Brisbane with Jenny, who was still studying law at the University of Queensland. And it's lovely that one of my closest friends from that group, Geoff Leeper, is here with us today. Geoff went on to have a long career and a very distinguished career across several departments, with his final public service role as a second commissioner of taxation.

At the end of 1980, I worked hard to find a job back in Brisbane so that Jenny and I could be together. And I was fortunate to secure a transfer there to join the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. The past was a different country as well for the Australian Public Service, a land of typing pools, of paper forms, of large registries that were home to thousands of files, being paid in cash, tea ladies, and sometimes long lunches.

The Department of Immigration in Brisbane in 1981 was beginning a transformation from its older generation of staff, many of whom were returned World War II servicemen. There were some female staff, but not many, and almost all in junior roles. And as an aside and an extraordinary contrast to that, I was recently involved in a significant meeting on a very sensitive issue. It involved an agency head, two deputy secretaries, the minister's chief of staff, my chief of staff, three division heads and myself. And I was the only male present in the room. Things have changed a lot.

It was at Immigration's Brisbane office that I met and became lifelong friends with Laurie Duncan, my first boss in that department, who saw my potential and so in later years ended up working for me. Laurie and his wife Josie, also a great friend of Jenny's and mine, are here today. And they've come up from Melbourne to be here. It's lovely being able to book-end my career both the start and finish of my career to quote that Australian poet, Slim Dusty, "having a beer with Duncan," which we will be doing at the Kingo this evening.

Jenny's and my careers brought us back to Canberra in the mid-80s. and Jenny went on to have a long career as a senior government lawyer. I spent a few months in late 1984 working as the executive officer for the then secretary of immigration,

Mr. Bill McKinnon, who was one of the smartest people I have ever met. And even though he died long ago, I still call him Mr. Bill McKinnon.

I then spent a year working for the Office of the Status of Women in PM&C in 1985, under the leadership of Dr. Anne Summers, a person who has made an extraordinary contribution to Australian public life, and to journalism here and in the USA. And it was there that I met Jenny Francis, who's now one of our closest friends, and who went on to have a very successful career with the Australian Government Solicitor, with her last APS role as the principal of legal and policy adviser to the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

And indeed, in that year, 1985, Jenny and I became friends with many of that year's administrative trainees and their partners. And I'm delighted that several of them are here today. They all went on to serve in great roles and made very important contributions across many departments and agencies.

In the late '80s and '90s, I was clerk class 11, an EL2 in today's language, working variously for Immigration in Canberra, Melbourne and in Hong Kong, as regional migration director. And it was there that Jenny and I met many colleagues who became and remain very close friends, such as Chris and Gillian Callanan, Jenny and Peter Richards, John and Katrina Sargent, Tony Allan and Tanya Morgan, Jim and Sue Williams, Monica Siu, and Michelle Frew.

It was also in Hong Kong that I worked alongside a youthful Frances Adamson, who went on to many senior roles, including as ambassador to China, as secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and now of course as Governor of South Australia.

1993 saw us back in Canberra, with me being promoted to be an assistant secretary, and with Riley being born, and we welcomed Nellie two years later. Now, I don't want to meticulously record every step of my career, but I do want to mention the privilege I had of being appointed as chief of staff to Phillip Ruddock, the then minister for immigration and multicultural affairs in 1996 and 1997. That was part of the longstanding tradition of senior public servants working directly for ministers and then being able to return to the public service without being seen by either side as politically partisan.

It was as an assistant secretary and in other SES roles that I first started appearing as a witness before parliamentary committees. Indeed, I have now appeared before senate estimates committees close to 60 times. I learnt a very important lesson at my very first committee hearing back in 1993.

Dennis Richardson, who's here today, was the deputy secretary then, and he was our main witness. He, of course, went on to become director-general of security, the Australian ambassador to the United States of America, the secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the secretary of Defence. And now of course holds his most important role as chair of the board of the Canberra Raiders.

Dennis was always a master at the art of appearing before parliamentary committees. And during that first hearing where I appeared as a witness, I had to respond to a particularly technical question and I fell into the classic rookie's error, not only did I answer the question, but I added additional information, which was not otherwise in the public domain.

Dennis' reaction was swift and very direct. A note was passed from him to me. I have a facsimile of it here today. And I've enlarged it so that you can all see his words of clear advice to me but Dennis, since you're here, why don't you join me on stage? And everyone can see what you have to say. We'll leave the rest of it to your imagination. And Dennis, there's some question time later. I know that the media are here, so if I strain to saying too much, just stand up with the sign again.

Helen Williams was secretary of the Department of Immigration in the mid-1990s and was a great support to me, indeed she still is. And I'm delighted that Helen is also here today as well. Helen was the first woman to be appointed as either a Commonwealth deputy secretary or a departmental secretary. She served as a secretary in several departments over many years, and as the public service commissioner, and she's the second longest-serving secretary in the history of the Australian Public Service, second only to Sir Robert Garran, who was Australian's first public servant.

In the late '90s and 2000s, I was a deputy secretary, firstly at Immigration working with my good friend and colleague, Bill Farmer, and then at Prime Minister and Cabinet for several years when Dr. Peter Shergold was secretary.

And it was there that I helped establish the National Security Division, and worked with many very dedicated and talented public servants such as Dr. Wendy Southern, Miles Jordana, Duncan Lewis, Barbara Belcher, Jamie Fox who's here today, Sarah Chidgey, Ian Kemish, Gillian Bird, Kathy Klugman, Harinder Sidhu and the late Dr. Margot McCarthy. And my dear friend, Paul Tilley headed up PM&C's Economic Division at that me.

All of this all led to my being appointed as secretary of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. It was in July 2005, just over 18 years ago. And since then, I've had the great privilege of being secretary of Immigration for around eight years, and secretary of Agriculture,

Fisheries and Forestry, and for a time Environment and Water, for over four years.

And in the middle of that, courtesy of my sacking in 2013 by newly elected Prime Minister Tony Abbott, I became a partner in a major global professional services firm for six years, not PwC, you'll be pleased to hear, which partly allowed my latent business acumen to resurface, despite it having being squashed all those years ago.

Colleagues, I'm often asked about what shaped me as a public servant. And I answer by saying there are many influences, a training in and resultant deep respect for the law, particularly administrative law, a good understanding of Australian and state government institutions and public policy, a keen interest in public affairs, early exposure as a public servant to elected officials and their staff, particularly through my role as a parliamentary liaison officer in the Brisbane Office of the Department of Immigration, early and frequent involvement in direct provision of client services, particularly with visa and citizenship applicants and their families and supporters, a strong understanding of the importance of teams in working with others to deliver good results.

And I'm certainly not a micromanager, but I came to realise that intuition, that gut feeling, is important. If that little niggle is there, that something is not quite right, don't ignore it. Act on it. Find out if there is a problem. And if there is, fix it. I learnt early that people are human and humans make mistakes. And if you make a mistake, tell people about it and what you're doing to fix it. The sacking offence is not fixing mistake, or even worse, of covering it up.

And finally, I learnt that talking things over with colleagues, with friends and mentors is incredibly important. You'll always make better decisions when you've discussed them and sought other people's views about some of the issues you're facing. And diverse backgrounds make that advice richer.

One very direct and personal experience that I had was seeing the impact that decisions by public servants can have on people's lives. It occurred when I was an acting state director of the Department of Immigration in 1989 in Victoria. I won't mention the names of the people involved, but their situation was front page news over several days back then. The case involved the adoption of a baby girl from overseas. The laws that governed these arrangements were both state law and Commonwealth law, particularly the Immigration Guardianship of Children Act, which governed the status of children living in Australia under those circumstances.

Until the adoption order was finalised, adoptive children from overseas were formally wards of the immigration minister. But the minister delegated his or her powers to state officials, that

being a longstanding arrangement in relation to overseas adoption. In this particular case, there were a series of decisions by state officials that led to two different sets of parents disputing custody of a baby who had arrived from overseas under the program. And the first that we in the Department of Immigration in Australia heard about the matter was when the then minister, Senator Robert Ray, received various applications to appear before the courts.

Ultimately, Robert Ray was able to resolve the matter by appointing an expert panel to advise him on what was required to achieve the best interests of the child. The panel advised which family the baby should be placed with, and the minister acted on that advice. But he then asked me as his local representative, as the acting state director to give effect to that decision. And so I, accompanied by two senior social workers, had to go out and take the baby from one family and take it and return it to the other family.

We did this one cold afternoon back in the autumn of 1989, and I can honestly say, it's one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. I often think about that day, about what public servants do and how they do it, and how we can profoundly affect people's lives. And what a solemn duty we have to undertake our work lawfully with empathy and understanding, and in a fair and reasonable way.

Over many years, I was involved in many high-profile cases and situations, but I can say that with some very sad exceptions. The Department of Immigration always sought to operate within the law. And if circumstances required a change to the law, the department worked with the minister and the government and the parliament to do so.

And although there were many, many contentious issues, particularly in relation to the laws surrounding asylum seekers and refugee status claimants, there was a strong culture of acting within the law or seeking to amend it if necessary. The situation involving the MV Tampa, the establishment of offshore processing arrangements, and the proposed Malaysia Strategy are all examples of this.

They are all very significant matters in their own right, but time today prevents me from talking about them in detail. More details will be published in due course in one of the volumes of my successful books to be published in the far-distant future.

But the Department of Immigration was certainly not perfect, no large organisation comprising thousands of people can probably ever be completely perfect. While it did almost always have a culture of recognising and fixing mistakes, sadly that was not the case on all occasions, and most tragically in relation to a large number of immigration detention cases in the early 2000s.

The most infamous of these were in relation to Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez. I'm sure that many of you will recall these cases and the damning reports in 2005 from former police commissioners, Mick Palmer and Neil Comrie. Mick Palmer in relation to Ms. Rau and Neil Comrie in relation to Ms. Alvarez.

I won't go into all the details here today as they're very well documented, but in the view of many of us, the department's handling of Ms. Alvarez was the most egregious. Not only was she misidentified and illegally deported, but when that fact separately known to two different mid-ranking officers, they did nothing about it and indeed, they covered it up.

The Palmer report and the Comrie report led to widespread changes in the department. And I was appointed as the secretary by Prime Minister Howard and tasked to lead a reform program, 18 years and a fortnight ago. I set up a taskforce to assist me with that quite daunting task, led by Andrew Tongue, who is here today, and involving Dr. Wendy Southern and others.

Carmel McGregor joined us from Centrelink to overhaul our client services. And Sandi Logan and Susie Van Den Heuval upgraded our internal and external communication capabilities, so essential in helping drive cultural reform in a large global organisation. Many others helped, many here today, but too many to mention today.

Our work is well documented in a series of case studies published by the Australian and New Zealand School of Government. Andrew, in particular, was instrumental in setting the reform framework for the department by saying to me, "When you carefully read Mick Palmer's report and work out what the department needs to do, it all boils down to three broad areas. We must have staff who are well-trained and well-supported, we must be fair and reasonable in our services to our clients, and we must be open and accountable."

We took these as the broad themes and applied them to our work. And we put them under the tag line of "People: Our Business," a tag line suggested by Jenny and workshopped with Riley and Nellie around the kitchen table. There were many other key cultural reform measures, such as emphasising of course that it's the failure to right a wrong, to correct a mistake, that's the sacking offence.

Ladies and gentlemen, we all know George Santayana's famous quote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Whenever failures occur in public administration, some of which are deplorable and indeed wicked, I think back to the Palmer and Comrie reports, and to the report from John McMillan as Commonwealth Ombudsman in August 2007 on Lessons for Public Administration following his investigations

into dozens of immigration detention cases. And I will return to that report shortly.

I also wonder about the role and advice of the Administrative Review Council, an august and wise body, on which I must declare I served for many years. The ARC was abolished by the Abbott government under the mantra of smaller government. What a retrograde step that was. I also wonder about the Better Practice Guides published by the Australian National Audit Office, but now discontinued. Why do we not remember the lessons of the past? Why do we repeat mistakes? How can we ensure that we do remember them? And not repeat them?

Professor McMillan's 2007 advice was simple and straightforward. If remembered and applied, I believe that all sorts of errors, mistakes and wrongful decisions and schemes would have been avoided.

His 10 lessons were, one, maintain accurate, comprehensive and accessible records; two, place adequate controls on the exercise of coercive powers; three, actively manage unresolved and difficult cases; four, heed the limitations of information technology systems; five, guard against erroneous assumptions; six, control administrative drift; seven, remove unnecessary obstacles to prudent information exchange with other agencies and bodies; eight, promote effective communication within your own agency; nine, manage complexity in decision-making; and 10, check for warning signs of bigger problems.

John and I launched that report together, at an event across the lake at the Boathouse, hosted by IPAA. I added an 11th lesson, one which went to organisational culture, about ensuring positive outcomes and behaviors.

Colleagues, given all of the above and given the failures that sometimes tragically occur in public administration, I believe that all public servants frankly need better formal preparation and training for the responsibilities of senior leadership. As they advance towards the senior executive service, compulsory and formal training is essential. It should particularly focus on case study styled methodology of what's gone well in the past, and what hasn't, and why.

While well-meaning, and I hold myself to account here, I believe that the APS's efforts in this regard have often been fragmented, sometimes desultory, and heavily dependent on available departmental budget allocations.

Now, we all know that the APS plays a critical role in our society, in our economy, in the defence and protection of our country, in the lives of each and every one of us. Public servants administer programs, some of which are small and targeted, and many of which were of wide application, involving many people, millions of people and the expenditure of billions of dollars.

We regulate major areas of the economy and many aspects of people's lives and livelihoods. We provide advice and support to ministers. Our scores of departments and agencies employ many tens of thousands of people. We need the best possible leadership. The Australian government and the Australian community expect no less and deserve no less.

So, if I could respectfully suggest to my colleagues that as part of the APS Reform program, I therefore believe that we need to invest much more in preparing our future leaders for their many responsibilities and ensuring that as part of that, they benefit from the accumulated wisdom of those who have gone before, and that they are schooled in the successes and the mistakes of the past.

Colleagues, time today doesn't allow me to talk in detail about the work of the Departments of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, over recent times. But I will have the chance to do that in a speech to the Rural Press Club later in the year.

But can I just say how proud I am of the work, the resilience, the commitment to service, and the values and behavior of my staff over the last three and a half years. Their work in responding to the Black Summer bushfires, of working through the pandemic and helping keep our borders safe and goods and products moving and the department's services functioning, in relation to agriculture workforce issues, the rural innovation system, our biosecurity and our trade, to name but a few areas, their work has been exemplary.

There has been around-the-clock delivery of essential services combined with policy support for our ministers and administration to major programs. Long-term thinking and developing and nurturing partnerships with our state and territory colleagues, with other departments and universities, with industry groups, with unions and representatives of civil society has been a real feature. And we also work very closely with agriculture and biosecurity departments overseas. And I'm really delighted that my New Zealand counterpart, Ray Smith, is able to be here today as well.

This work has allowed us to support our minister, Senator Murray Watt, to finalise the National Biosecurity Strategy, the National Traceability Strategy, the National Agriculture Climate Statement and many other enduring initiatives. And there is, of course, so much more to come, as our agriculture, fishing and forestry industries continue their journey of sustainability, and profitability, with less impact on the atmosphere and on the environment.

And I am particularly proud that, earlier this week, the department launched our First Nations Platform for Shared Benefits in Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry developed in

close consultation with First Nations People, a plan to help activate the economic value of land, water and sea resource rights amongst other things.

Can I again place on the record my thanks to all the staff of the department in giving daily effect to the great purpose of the Australian Public Service, of serving the Australian community and our industries with integrity, intelligence, and commitment, through direction from and accountability to the Australian government.

Many staff of the department are here today, and I'd like to recognise your commitment to our purpose and values, your calmness in crises, in which there are a few particularly when foot and mouth disease reached Indonesia and then Bali in the middle of last year. And, on a very personal note, can I thank you all so much for your support to me in my role.

Colleagues, today, I have mentioned many senior public servants who have served Australia with a great distinction. But government departments are made up of many people, and the contribution of all staff is vital to success. And in recognition of that, there are several people here today that I'd like to especially acknowledge and thank.

Simon Leonard, who is now retired and who worked as a clerical assistant in my branch at the Department of Immigration many years ago, and who went on to be the department's courier for ministers' offices. Michael Littley and Marc Tewksbury, amongst many others from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, who helped me stay connected through technology and through weekly video messages to our staff around Australia and around the world.

Simon, Marc and Michael, you represent those thousands of Australian public servants who are the glue of our departments, who keep us together, and I'd like to recognise and thank you for your wonderful service.

Can I also recognise and sincerely thank my several executive assistants from over the years who are here with us today, Kim Nadurak, Rebecca Steffan and Sarah Maxwell. Without you, I simply couldn't have done my job. And also, to my many executive officers and deputy secretaries, some of whom are here today. And can I particularly mention my current chief of staff, Lisa Borella, who has provided such great support to me.

To all of you, can I simply say, thank you. You've been great teams over many years. We have achieved a lot together for successive governments and for the Australian community. We've worked very hard, but we've also had some fun along the way. An enduring feature of our country must always be a strong and capable Australian Public Service, and it's been my great privilege to have devoted almost 40 years of my life to it.

So, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, the past was a different country, and doubtless the future will be a different one again. We all have the ability to shape that future and to make it a better one for our children and their children and their children, for the First Australians and for all of us who have come since 1788, and for all of those who will come in the years ahead. Thank you for being here today, and thank you, everyone, for listening to Andrew.

KATHERINE JONES:

Thank you, Andrew. Thank you for sharing with us the influences on you and what contributed to you being a senior leader in the public service. I think it's something that we don't do often enough and particularly younger people coming in, having that sense of what the values and the experiences that have contributed are fantastic. So, thank you for that. And thank you for just giving us a hint of the broad sweep of an incredibly rich and diverse career.

I'm going to make sure that I leave time for questions from the audience. So, I'm going to just ask one question of you. And that does go to the concept that we talk a lot about now, that perhaps 40 years ago we weren't talking about so much, which is resilience and recognising that anyone who's had a career of your length and success is going to have had setbacks and challenges. But to achieve the longevity that you have demonstrated to us all is extraordinary. And I just want to ask you to reflect on that.

ANDREW METCALFE:

Oh, I'm a really bad example. I think, Katherine, look, I've had an extraordinary career. Yeah. I've got a wonderful family as I've said, and that is absolutely key to that support, particularly during the hard times. And I've just been really fortunate with some wonderful colleagues along the way as well. But I'm not as fit as I should be. I haven't looked after myself as well as I could and should. And so, there's a few things in retirement I need to do.

Forty years is a very long time and I painted that little picture and some of us will remember those times. But these jobs today are extraordinarily demanding. The pace of life, the pace of activity, the media cycle, what drives ministers, the relentlessness of social media, of technology just means everything's sped up. And so, I vividly recall when I worked in the Prime Minister's Department in Canberra in 1980, there was one facsimile machine. It was still a typing pool with IBM electric typewriters.

The difference between then and now is it is a different world. The difference of what the world would look like in another 40 years, I can't possibly conceive. Therefore, I think we need leaders who are resilient who do take time out. One of the probably most important things I did was through a combination of good luck and good advice, took almost a year off. Back in 2012 when I left immigration, I was burned out and before I went

to agriculture the first time. And we had an extended midlife sabbatical.

So, again, take your holidays. I've been bad. Take your holidays, use your long service leave. There's more to life than these jobs. These jobs are incredibly demanding. So, you've got to give your very best, but you need to refresh along the way as well.

KATHERINE JONES: Welcome advice there.

ANDREW METCALFE: And I'm a really bad example of that.

KATHERINE JONES: Okay. I want to give people in the audience an opportunity to ask questions. We've got a microphone, but I can see a hand that's gone up already. I think it's Melissa. So, we'll hand the mic over to her.

MELISSA COADE: Thank you. Hello, secretary. Thank you for your talk. Melissa Coade from The Mandarin. You gave us some wonderful lessons on things the public service can do to better preserve institutional memory and capability in the leadership sense. But I wanted to go back to your little quip with Mr. Richardson, which is on the record, I believe. You made reference to that joke in Senate estimates once I think recently.

ANDREW METCALFE: He still got the note, Melissa.

MELISSA COADE: My question is on that joke, because I often either at talks like this or in interviewing esteemed leaders like yourself in the public service hear discussions about the art of presenting to Senate estimates or always in the back of a public servant's mind preparing for the possibility of a royal commission. And my question to you is about how does the public service encourage pro-accountability and pro-integrity if there's also this sort of competing sense of be extremely cautious about what you say and be mindful of what's on the record and in the archives.

ANDREW METCALFE: Yeah, thanks, Melissa. Look, I don't think there's any problem at all about a pro-integrity culture sitting next to a culture that is respectful of the fact that the governments occasionally need to keep certain matters confidential. I processed the very first FOI application received by the Department of Immigration in 1982, and it was a person wanting access to their personal file. And the FOI ACT was largely designed around people getting access to know about their own situation. It was designed about ensuring that rules and policies were published and not secret.

I do believe, and I actually gave a speech about this to IPAA some years ago, that there is a risk in this desire for immediate transparency of all transactions between senior public servants and ministers, that there is a risk that that could have an impact on candour. People ask about frank and fearless advice

and that sort of thing. I've worked for 15 ministers as a secretary.

I have never had an issue with any of them in giving or them receiving what you would regard as firm advice or something that may but not be popular, because it's given with the best possible intention of ensuring that the minister works well and that the government performs well.

But when people come to write things down, knowing that that could well be the subject of an FOI request or a Senate order for production of documents or a question on notice, there is more caution because you realise that as a public servant that your advice could be weaponized in a current political debate.

Now, there's a very important protection for cabinet documents and there's a very long period before they're released 20 years. But I actually think that the removal of a provision in the original FOI Act, which provided for conclusive certificates that would exempt certain documents and particularly internal working documents from being released, I believe, while it was well intentioned, it in fact could potentially have an impact on written candour. And therefore, the risk is as that come some subsequent inquiry that things aren't written down that should have been.

Now, smart people, I'm sure many people in this room, find ways to deal with that, but I actually think there needs to be a public discussion. This is not an issue of integrity. This is an issue of governments being able to confidently have difficult discussions, workshop ideas, think about different options and do so not thinking that it's going to be in the newspapers the next day because that stifles that type of interaction.

So, I know that may well be an unpopular view amongst people who desire everything to be transparent immediately, but I do believe there's a case for at least some documents to be held back at least until beyond the current political timeframe, at least until the next parliament or something or other like that. And I encourage a public discussion about that issue.

KATHERINE JONES:

As a secretary of the department that's responsible for administering the FOI Act...

ANDREW METCALFE:

You can always change the law.

KATHERINE JONES:

... I value that. I've probably got time for two more questions.

SPEAKER 5:

Thank you, secretary, for your long service. A lot of the examples you gave were about, I mean, delivering important things within specific portfolios, but a lot of the challenges we face in our cross portfolio and working across government. What are your thoughts on what we could do better and maybe structurally to help that happen?

ANDREW METCALFE:

Yeah. Look, the government of the day will always structure itself how it wishes to. That's part of the Australian psyche. Even though having been involved in two machinery of government changes in the last three and a half years, it's a pretty painful process of time for all concern. And so, I know that there are some parts of the public service that are regularly mugged. But for us in joining together agriculture and environment and then disassembling agriculture and environment, it means that you spend a lot of time looking inward rather than actually delivering results outward. And so, that's a transactional cost.

But look, the whole of government issues or working across departments is nothing new. We've always had that. We have cabinet governance for that very reason, so that major issues are able to be taken to a group of ministers and decided with various perspectives and views coming in.

I gave the example of the fact that we work with many departments and agencies. The agriculture department and the agriculture minister have got their hands on some levers. Biosecurity is a big one and agricultural exports is a big one. But there are many things that impact agriculture that are the domain of other portfolios. Employment and workforce issues are critical. And so, our relationship with employment is a really important thing. Climate, sustainability, emissions, water, critical issues. So, working with David's department is a really important thing.

So, part of the skill of senior public servants is of course working across as well as down as well as up. And Peter Shergold famously talked about whole of government and those sorts of things 20 years ago, and I'm sure someone was 20 years before that. That's part of life. But networks, Canberra is a relatively small town. We get to know each other pretty well. And so, forums like this and institutions like IPAA are critical to provide that glue. But working productively and well across departments is part of the craft of senior public servants.

NATALIE VIKHROV:

Hi, secretary. Natalie Vikhrov from The Canberra Times. I just wanted to ask you to weigh in on something that has recently been made in the news. The government has recently appointed former, sorry, Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary Dennis Richardson, to lead a review into Department of Home Affairs. Others at the moment are calling for a royal commission into offshore detention. Given your experience as a former head of the Immigration Department, I was wondering, I was hoping you could weigh in on this and speak.

ANDREW METCALFE:

I think we all know the answer to that. Have you got yours?

Look, firstly, thank you for the question. It's absolutely inappropriate for me to comment on anything that's a matter of

current discussion. Dennis is a very fine and distinguished Australian public servant, and I'm sure will do a very good job in examining the matters that he's been asked to do. That goes without saying.

I was actually involved as immigration secretary in the wake of the Tampa in helping establish offshore processing in Nauru and then in Papua New Guinea. Some years later as a secretary of the department, I was involved in winding down offshore processing in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. And just as I was leaving in 2012, the government was reestablishing offshore processing. It has been an important part of the management of our borders. And as I've said in a media conference, that Prime Minister Gillard asked me to talk to many years ago.

We have an extraordinary thing in this country. We are built from a country that has the longest continuing culture in world history, our First Nations People. But this extraordinary culture that's been built since 1788 and more even so since World War II of people from many lands coming to this country. And so, by many measurements, we are the most multicultural society on the planet. And while we're not perfect, overwhelmingly, this is a great place to live, and people come here and get on and have great lives and their kids have great lives. And that's something wonderful that we should all cherish about Australia.

But part of the compact that the Australian people have with governments is the government's control migration. That migration is not unfettered. That does not simply anyone turns up. We very carefully check and assess relationships, employment details, backgrounds, character issues, health issues and whatever. And that's been the success of Australian migration because it has been managed well.

When immigration becomes unmanaged, community support rapidly drops. And we saw that in the late 2000s with the very large numbers of people who were paying criminals and risking their lives. And anything you can say about offshore processing, anything you can say about the approach we've taken to these issues has been motivated by a strong desire to ensure that we abide by our international obligations, a strong desire to ensure that we manage our migration to this country for the protection of the Australian community and the benefit of the Australian community, but thirdly, to ensure that people are safe.

I remember the expression on Chris Bowen's face when I was sitting with him and we were hearing the news of the vessel that founded off Christmas Island and where some 50 or people drowned. That's not the way to operate public policy is to encourage people to get on small boats, pay criminals, risk their lives, and many people die. The way to encourage public

policy is to have well-managed, orderly open programs, which is what invariably we have done.

And so, I've strayed a little bit. I'm still waiting for the note to appear, but I've strayed a little bit, strayed a little bit. But I think that any public discussion about this needs to realise that what immigration ministers, coalition and Labor have been motivated for is the best interest of the Australian community, and frankly, a desire to shut down situations where people were dying in significant numbers. That's not a way to run the public policy, but thanks for your question.

KATHERINE JONES: Well-

NATALIE VIKHROV: [inaudible] being done well, has it given the recent...

ANDREW METCALFE: I'm not going to comment on current issues. There will be a proper investigation of contracts. I would note, just as an observation, that getting facilities provided for in those situations is a very difficult thing. And originally, it was through the international organisation migration. More recently, there've been other arrangements. If there have been any issues of concern, I'm sure they'll be dealt with properly, so thanks.

KATHERINE JONES: Okay. Well, on that note, I think that line of questioning just acknowledges and recognises that Andrew has been the thick of dealing with some of the biggest challenges confronting our country, also providing some of the greatest opportunities in terms of immigration, the agriculture system, and many other areas of public policy over the years. So, on behalf of everyone in the room, I thank you. Thank you for your reflections. Thank you for your leadership. Thank you for your collegiality with many people, both senior and at all levels across the service. Please join me in thanking Andrew.

ANDREW METCALFE: Thanks, Katherine. I appreciate it. Thank you very much.