

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS: PETER WOOLCOTT AO

Peter Woolcott AO (Keynote speaker)

Former Australian Public Service Commissioner

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KATHERINE JONES:

Good morning. Thanks everyone for being here today. Welcome to the great tradition of IPAA of the valedictory speeches. There seems to be a bit of a pattern when I do these, and I note we are doing a valedictory speech and then I have to look at someone who might be also delivering a valedictory speech in the near future. I'm looking at Dr. Murphy if anyone's wondering. I don't want to start any rumours about anything. It's Dr. Murphy. Can I start by echoing Carolyn's acknowledgement of country and the traditional owners here today and acknowledge any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are joining us today. I get the honour of introducing our speaker today, Peter Woolcott. Peter himself, in his speech will indicate that he doesn't want to dwell too long on his career, but I feel I need to note a few of the highlights because it really has been quite an extraordinary career.

He commenced his role as the Australian Public Service Commissioner in 2018 but has had a distinguished career across the public service and serving in senior diplomatic posts around the world. I just want to give a few of the highlights of those. He served as Australia's High Commissioner to New Zealand from 2016 to 2017. He was the Ambassador for the Environment from 2014 to 2016. He led the negotiations to the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2016. He was a permanent representative to the UN in Geneva and Ambassador for Disarmament from 2010 to 2014, Ambassador for People Smuggling Issues in 2009. A personal favourite, Ambassador to Italy from 2004 to 2007. He was the Australian Consul-General in Honolulu and Representative to US Commander and Chief Pacific, 1998 to 2001. Peter also served as Chief of Staff to the former Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull.

He was appointed an officer in the Order of Australia in 2017 for his distinguished service to public administration in the field of international relations and as a lead negotiator in the non-proliferation and armed controls field. During his time as Public Service Commissioner, Peter has overseen some incredibly important initiatives to drive public sector innovation and capability. This includes driving the implementation of the Thodey Review, establishment and growth of the APS Academy, the introduction and development of APS professional streams, work on leadership capability through the secretary's talent council and the agenda of the future of work subcommittee to name just a few.

Peter has worked with colleagues from across the

service to develop new responses to persistent and emerging challenges for the service. His leadership of the Integrity Agency's forum and support for a range of integrity measures including the recent establishment of the Integrity Task Force in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet has laid the foundation for the significant uplift in public sector integrity that is one of the highest priorities for the service.

We cannot forget the leadership that Peter provided in overseeing and supporting the APS as it rose to one of its greatest challenges which was responding to COVID 19 over recent years. Peter's deep commitment to the service and ensuring that it is equipped to deliver for government and the community has been apparent in all that he has done and achieved over recent years. Combined with a stellar career as a diplomat driving Australia's contribution on some of the most pressing issues on the global agenda, Peter has truly made a contribution of lasting impact. On a personal note, Peter and I have sat together on more statutory and SES appointment processes than either of us care to note. What I would say from my experience is, he is astute, wise, and always has a keen eye for the future leaders of the service and therefore the future success of the service. Please join me in welcoming Peter to the stage.

PETER WOOLCOTT:

Thank you, Katherine, for those really gracious words. Let me begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians, the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people and pay my respects to elders past presence and emerging. Thank you all really for coming today.

This is it for me. I leave government on 10 May. I've done almost five years as Australian Public Service Commissioner and over 40 years in the public service, primarily in foreign policy and national security. I'll miss it. The opportunity to work in the service of the country and its people has been an enormous privilege, but it's time and I'm going to keep self-indulgence to a minimum and not meander back at least too much over my career. I'll come back to governance, the role of the commission and where I believe the Australian public service needs to go. Initially I want to talk about how the lessons I learned in the diplomatic space have underpinned my whole approach to the commissioner role.

The first is a deep appreciation of governance and that is the quality of governance and the quality of institutions that set apart the prosperity of countries and citizens. It's not resources, not iron nor gold, but the ability to organise and deliver on the social contract between the government and its people.

The second is how to use soft power and influence. The Public Service Act places the APSC at the centre of this great institution and gives it considerable independent statutory power, but its genuine influence comes from the ability to persuade through the force of ideas and through the ability to marshal support. I've always sought to work in the closest possible way with secretaries and other senior leaders in the public service to ensure that we meet the expectations of the Australian people, and this actually has been one of the real pleasures of the job.

The chance to work to a common purpose with the leadership across the APS. They're an extraordinary, talented and purpose driven group and the scale and difficulty of their work is not well understood outside an inner circle.

The third is the importance of being joined up, of being one APS. The complexity and interconnectness of issues leave little room for siloed structures and my agency first thinking. As an ambassador or high commissioner, you represent all of Australia and DFAT is just one agency in a rich mosaic of interest you need to represent.

Fourth, an appreciation of the law of unintended consequences and having a weary eye for how things might turn in unexpected directions. While I regard my career as, on balance, successful, there have been more than enough of those moments.

Finally, while changes are constant, we need to understand what is enduring and that this comes down to our values and our purpose.

I joined DFAT in the Australian Public Service in 1981. Reagan was president of the US and Fraser, Prime Minister of Australia. I had recently graduated from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy where I had specialised in nuclear strategy and was proficient at using the RAND bomb calculator to work out the single shot kill capability of a particular nuclear weapon system. No desktop computers, no internet, no mobile phones, no chat GPT. I was posted quickly to Kingston, Jamaica as the third secretary, then one of the most violent countries on the planet. At one stage, the Jamaica Telephone Company fell afoul of the local trade union movement and their central exchange was demolished in protest activity. We were cut off for a few months from all telecommunications contact with Australia. When we eventually came back online, our absence had barely been noticed.

We now live in utterly changed times. This flows from the acceleration of technology, the compression of distance and the dramatic interaction of cultures and the management of these issues keeps running up against the stubbornness of human nature. We are

navigating the stalling of globalisation, at the very least, a period which is challenging the rules-based 20th century post-war framework and driving regional competition and contest. Moreover, the array of transnational issues that cannot be addressed without cohesive and widespread cooperation inside government and internationally are confronting. Climate change, migration, refugees, terrorism, cyber, the oceans, pandemics and food and water security to name a few. The APS, like many institutions in western democracies is under challenge. Never have expectations been higher from the public, while there is a wider question as to the extent the government and the APS control all the necessary levers given the global and fractured nature of issues and shifting power relativities.

These events are reshaping many aspects of our lives and it follows that they'll reshape many aspects of public governance. All Australian governments want and need a strong public service, although there's always going to be a debate about how much it needs to pay for it and what elements are better done by civil society or the private sector. This is a time when we need to reinforce the value of a strong, trusted, and effective public service. Democratic institutions themselves need to be cherished, yet global populism, the erosion of civil discourse and the outrage pipeline that is social media makes this harder.

How do we ensure the public service is fit for purpose in this rapidly changing environment? Public sector reform is a never-ending journey which always has to be grounded in pragmatism and the big set pieces like the Coombs Royal Commission and the Thodey Review take time to take hold, but they do. I've had the privilege to be engaged with David Thodey in the review since its inception. The panel was a remarkably talented group of individuals. I was in the Prime Minister's office when the Thodey Review was set up and the APSC has played a significant role in pursuing the reform agenda since the report was published in September 2019. We worked hand in glove with PM and C and secretaries board in doing so.

You don't always get the privilege to help reap what you helped sow. I worked with three very different, but fine leaders of Prime Minister and Cabinet in this undertaking. Martin Parkinson was the brainchild of the review and much credit to him for setting it up so well. Phil Gachens was the pragmatist and saw that the COVID 19 pandemic necessitated an accelerated response to the Thodey Review and helped bring this about. Glenn Davis was one of the major forces behind the panel's work in constructing the recommendations. Glenn now, of course, occupies a pivotal position in driving the government's ambitious reform agenda.

The symbolism of his appointment along with that of Gordon de Brouwer by the Albanese government is striking and we essentially now have Thodey on steroids. The review's focus on the need for more joined up people facing data enabled capable and trusted public service, able to deliver effectively in a radically new operating context is absolutely right. The Morrison government inherited review and gave the public service licence to implement significant aspects of it. The Albanese government, for its part, has sought to drive the Thodey recommendations hard and articulate a plan for the APS based around four pillars. What has struck me in the job is a strong sense of confluence about what we need to do. The Thodey Review is built on strong foundations. If you go back and look at Terry Moran's blueprint for reform in 2010, it is striking how the panel has built on this work.

I see my role as essentially akin to a marathon runner in a continuous relay. I now pass on the baton into my successor. I hope I've done my bit in advancing the agenda. I believe we have a very clear sense of direction, but we are running over shifting ground so let's turn to what we are doing to address the issues.

The current focus on public sector integrity and trust in government underscored by the Robodebt Royal Commission and the establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Commission illustrates a real risk to the reputation and brand of the public service. There is no doubt that integrity and trust must be marbled into our approach to managing change and in every aspect of policy formulation, regulation, and implementation. We have not of course seen the Royal Commission's final report so I will be circumspect. Its hearings have already given us cause to think about our governance, our leadership behaviours, and our culture.

We need to do much better, particularly for vulnerable Australians. It has provided a shock to the system, and it will lead to further change. An integrity task force has been established to start working through the issues raised and prepare ourselves to respond fully to the findings. Moreover, the establishment of the National Anti-Corruption Commission is historic and important. A robust investigating agency to examine allegations of systemic corruption right across government is a powerful addition to the weaponry we have around integrity. It has an equally important role around education and preventative measures for we need to make sure that the business of government, particularly as it relates to procurements and grants, is best practise and risk aversion doesn't slow down or freeze up these processes. It'll also place a premium on evidence-based, data-driven decisions and advice and this will push authority back to the public service.

This brings me to culture and how fundamental is a set of values and behaviours that underpin the APS. There's much you want to preserve in the APS culture, particularly around how purpose driven it is and around the principles of merit and political impartiality but also a few things you'd like to change. Culture can be a quicksand for bold new ideas. The most important thing that leaders do is create and sustain culture and if you are to move organisational culture, you need to have a critical mass of APS leaders pushing that change. It was noteworthy that secretary's board endorsed the Cedric Review on integrity that we commissioned and its focus on the notion of institutional integrity. All 12 of his recommendations are being implemented. The proposal to further embed stewardship in the Public Service Act is welcome and important. It is fundamental to that wider sense of institutional integrity and a strong signal to APS leaders that their responsibilities are to the whole system and the concept of one APS.

The consultation process around the stewardship as a sixth value applicable to all public servants will need to be thorough as questions around how you operationalize it in terms of the code of conduct are not straightforward. Let me stay focused on leadership. I've sat on a great many panels as Katherine said for band three and agency head positions over the past five years. The talent keeps rolling through. It is marked by deep commitment to service, a focus on outcomes and an ability to manage complexity in the grey zones. It is also marked by resilience. You have got there pretty much by yourselves. Now we've tried to change that through the work of the talent councils. Five years on the secretary's talent council has assessed all our longer-term band threes and many of our agency heads to support their development and career planning.

This data provides an evidence-based to understand the health of the succession pipeline for each secretary and major agency head role and supports consideration of enterprise-wide talent deployment and mobility. Half of the current secretary's board have been through that work. In addition, at the band one and band two classifications, we now have insight into the potential of 250 high performers from across the service. The deputy secretary's talent councillors work with many of them to support their development. Around 20 percent of the core SES band three cohort are alumni of this work and many of them are now acting as coaches and mentors to develop the next group of talent. Our external benchmarking suggests that our approach is leading practise in both the public and private sectors. I've also reflected on recent events which have crystallised exactly why the way in which we deliver the how matters so much.

Firstly, while we have a strong outcomes focused culture, we have not given sufficient weight to how we achieve those outcomes. In this regard, secretaries and the COO committee are looking at ways our performance assessment system can provide proper weight to behaviours as well as outcomes.

Secondly, the need for courage. The courage to tell ministers they have it wrong or to tell bosses to widen their view. It is a crucial part of the environment that good public service leaders need to create. That said, contrary to what critics say, my general experience is that it's not often APS leaders shy away from that responsibility. I say this from seeing both sides of the fence as a prime minister's chief of staff and in my dealings with agency head colleagues. It is however about doing so using street smarts, influence and about offering appropriate alternatives. Earning trust from the Australian people is not just about the right behaviours. It is also very much about competence and delivery.

We need to ensure that within our culture there are ingrained patterns of working with the Australian people to develop and deliver services. It is here that they interact with us and here that we largely earn and maintain their trust. Thodey gave weight to the concept of an APS working in partnership with citizens and key stakeholders, from first nations people, other disadvantaged groups, industry, and peaks, through to ministers and their offices. The concept of genuine partnership is a crucial one. While the skills and techniques will vary depending upon whom you're engaging with, it does require a different mindset. Concurrently, we need to recognise that there's been a shift in the nature of power as a result of new communications technologies, powers moving to coalitions and networks. As a consequence, the APS has to engaged ever more actively with civil society and business. They have always had a stake in the outcome, but they are increasingly now players in shaping that outcome.

The APS is no longer the monopoly once was. While we have institutional authority, we are working in a much more contested environment. Our advice has to be persuasive and is open to challenge by political advisors, think tanks, lobby groups and NGOs. There's no room for nostalgia. Civil societies are often mobile, well-funded and adept at utilising social media to influence government. It is the APS that brings the wider lens to any issue, ensure that ministers have all the relevant data analysis that they need to make a decision. As such, we have to get better in engaging in policy discussion for civil society to ensure full understanding and testing of the views of stakeholders. This is a work in progress. The secretary's subcommittee on partnership has been established and

the work is well underway on the charter of partnership and engagement. The APS Academy and its teaching of craft is a further reflection of this.

Much of this is about the capabilities of public servants but it's also about the capability of some parts of civil society to work with us on these issues. In addition, there's the question of strategic patience and how you square genuine partnership and the time that can take to build with the desire of government and ministers who often want expeditious outcomes. We also need to be thinking imaginative about how the working relationship between the APS and ministerial officers can be enhanced. The APS needs to encourage its best to work in ministerial officers to give them a deeper understanding of the speed of which things move and the pressures that quickly bear down on ministers. It'll make them better public servants, but we also need to do better at assisting political staff to understand how to utilise and work with the APS. This should never undermine the apolitical nature of the APS.

The reality is that ministers' offices are an integral part of our system, and it is their work which helps keep the APS impartial. Nevertheless, an understanding of the lines between their work and ours is crucial. We set up the strengthening partnership reference panel in 2021 to develop material and training to get the relationship working at its best. This was rolled out last year for SES and it'll be cranked up this year including for ministerial staff. Sitting across all this is the complexity of our federal system. This similarly needs to be approached as a partnership and greater mobility between our respective public services would greatly help. Usefully and quietly, public service commissioners from across jurisdictions are now meeting biannually to work on what are shared challenges.

Let now me turn the concept of one APS. I spent a lot of the last five years wrestling with how we make one APS work. We still don't do whole of government as well as we need to and silos are a constant. I recognise it is hard to set up horizontal structures when accountabilities in the Westminster system are geared around vertical structures. The reality is that differences at the APS level around issues often reflect differences at the political level. That said, the ability to enable horizontal systems and quickly reconfigure around a problem is crucial. We do this in a crisis, and we do it well. I think back to the way we handled the COVID 19 pandemic. We had no roadmap, no clear view on how long an effective vaccine would take and we're staring at a pretty cold bath view of nature, to quote the biologist Steven J. Gould. There was always going to be mistakes but basically, we have much to be pleased

with in the way our governance stood up.

Crucial to this was the manner in which we worked as a joined-up enterprise. People moved in unprecedented scale both within agencies and across the service as priorities were adjusted. On an average day, over half the APS was working from home and productivity stayed strong. The chief operating office of subcommittee had been established to help manage reform and quickly pivoted to work with the APSC task force to manage whole of service issues. Data was integrated at scale from across jurisdictions and agencies as well as the private sector and overseas. It was an essential component in guiding decision making. Just think for a moment about the speed and the scope of what the APS did. In 2020, Service Australia processed 2.5 million job seeker claims in 55 days, a volume normally processed in two and a half years. Job keeper was designed, and 3.5 million people received payments.

By early May, the ATO had approved 1.3 million applications for the early release of superannuation. The national coordination mechanism was stood up to coordinate approaches to non-health sector planning. The national cabinet was supported and established. Vaccines were rolled out and underpinning our response was the extraordinary work done by so many agencies and let me single out health that allowed Australia to come out the other side in comparatively solid shape. The way we worked in addressing the pandemic needs to be more commonplace and part of a cultural shift in the APS. The task force model for policy development implementation is one established model and we are utilising others such as subcommittees set up by the secretary's board. This is one of the vehicles addressing the changing nature of work.

Let me start with technology. We know just how dynamic are the advances in computer power and data growth and we are going to be further challenged by the advances in artificial intelligence and automation. While everything we do in the APS is about people, increasingly it is about how people interact with technology, how you mix human capabilities with machine capabilities. As technological advances continue, so will the expectations of citizens in the way they engage with government services. Data be fundamental to managing expectations that policy and service delivery will be increasingly personalised. We have to be careful to build trust and social licence from the public. We need to ensure that appropriate safeguards and community consultation occur when implementing major data and digital projects.

The secretary's digital and data subcommittee is

wrestling currently with three big issues. Cybersecurity governance, maximising reuse of programmes and smarter contracting across government and establishing a longer-term view of major ICT investment to support better long-term investment planning for the government. We are seeing better outcomes but basically the APS needs to be a smarter customer. AI promises much but we will need strong guardrails against its use centering on transparency, accountability, and security.

How we integrate fully its potential is going to be quite a challenge. Look where the technology was five years ago and a good question for the tech giants and all of us is how are we going to steward this? Let me spring back to people. A central role of the APS is to help build the capability of the APS. Essentially our capability requirements can be summarised as requiring an increased demand for higher skill levels including stem, digital and data and job ready skills such as critical thinking, leadership, and communication. We need to think about learning differently, not in chunks that we completed before entering the workforce but as a continuum. We need to focus on training and in particular retraining for those in jobs which will be disrupted by technology. We set up the academy with strong secretaries' board support and I can't say this enough, but it belongs to the whole APS, not the commission.

The academy was built off a solid base. We did the foundational work with the first APS workforce strategy and the supporting APS learning and development strategy. What this provided was a forward-looking evidence base on the likely future demands for the APS and the capabilities and shape of the workforce. The academy is off to a strong start but now it needs to be embedded in the broader APS system. It needs to focus more specifically on the characteristics of excellence in public service, which essentially is about public service craft. This needs to be practical and practitioner led, combining the experience of our experts within robust learning frameworks. At the moment, our priority is on offerings in integrity and work in government craft domains including with respect to procurement and the academy must be networked through a partnership approach. It has to connect with existing expertise across the APS and with external experts and support the broader learning ecosystem as a whole.

The governance of the academy has been designed very much to this end with the learning board and the APS faculty. In thinking through capability needs, we also set up the heads of profession model. The aim was to provide specialist expertise in areas of identified high demand such as in strategic human resources and

the digital and data professional groups. I want to commend the three heads of professions for their commitment to building pathways and capability. It has included an approach to recruiting at a range of different entry points and on behalf of the wider APS and they've done so often utilising the resources of their own agency for the benefit of the system. As this work matures, we are in the process of integrating their work further with the academy and thought is now being given to expand in the professions model to include evaluation and procurement. This all leads into what the change in nature work means for our people.

The last three years have essentially shaped what comes next. We know we are in a fight for talent, and we are dealing with changed expectations from the workforce about how and where they work. These changes have created pressure on our employee value proposition. We've established the future work subcommittee of the secretary's board to look at these issues and our employee value proposition. It is a coalition of the willing driven by secretaries and agency heads. I really like the model whereby individual secretaries and agency heads have taken responsibility for driving particular aspects of this work. It has resulted already in the chart of leadership behaviours and the new whole of service principles of flexible work. As the secretary's board agreed, the concept of flexible work needs to balance considerations for the individual, the team, and the organisation. It is all about mutual benefit. Flexibility also plays into location.

The APS needs a workforce drawn from the national talent pool and from all communities, generations and professions and work as well underwear on location strategy that will attract talent closer to their home. The future work subcommittee is also looking at recognising the unique value specialists bring to the service and building the capability of managers to support dispersed and culturally diverse teams and adopting hiring practises that are more outward looking and make the APS more porous. We know that the future workforce will be more mobile and will have multiple careers. Younger people are not necessarily going to join the APS for life. If we're going to obtain and develop the capabilities we require in the APS of the future, we need to be imaginative about how we use leave without pay and how we stay connected with those who may have left. The quality of the APS and the ability to make an impact is still its most powerful attraction.

This will always be the thing that draws people into government, but we just can't take that for granted. There's also the question of the rigidity of structures in the APS. I commissioned the independent APS hierarchy classification review in 2021 to examine

structure, culture, and capability and how we can best position ourselves for the future. I'd like to acknowledge the excellent work of the review panel. We have parked the classification changes the panel proposed, but the panel's findings have informed a range of practical reforms with significant steps made on APS culture and capability development. With the chart of leadership behaviours that they recommended, work as well underway to improve our approach to developing manager capability in the APS with a particular focus on our vital EL two cohort and also to develop specialist pathways and we've done considerable foundational work to move towards flatter, more modern APS organisational structures to support the evolution of the APS.

Together, these bodies of work will take us some way towards achieving the intent of the hierarchy and classification review of a more modern and agile public service. The government also placed being a model employer as one of the central pillars of its reform programme. We need to ensure that our terms and conditions are fair and in line with community expectations and that we create a workplace environment where people can be comfortable with who they are. We are underway with a bargaining process to establish a set of common terms that will apply across all APS enterprise agreements. It will also begin to address the pay fragmentation that currently exists across the service. This is a major task, and it seeks to repair the consequences of decades of partially decentralised bargaining. At its core, commonality builds greater quality. The impact of this equality across our service will be significant and varied, particularly supporting mobility and allowing employees to consider a job on its merits rather than differences in pay and conditions.

Finally, let me turn to diversity. We need to reflect the Australian community whether that be in regard to gender, indigenous people, people with disability and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We need to redouble our commitment in this regard. The existing strategies we have are fine but like everything, it is in the implementation. We have made giant steps with women in leadership positions and if we bring the same drive and commitment from the top, we will succeed with the other group, but it will require that leadership from the top. The biggest mistake we can make is not recruiting people because they're not like us or rejecting people if we bring them in because they haven't become like us. Let me conclude. We find ourselves in a challenging and more unforgiving environment. We have to be tough-minded and joined up in pursuing our national interests.

State craft in all its manifestations is going to be crucial

if we are to secure the outcomes that reflect our values and promote the wellbeing of our citizens. I'm going to miss working on this with all of you, but in your heart, you know when it's time to make way for others. I'm going to indulge myself at the end and drop the mask a bit before I walk out the door. I've always had a passion for the environment and for the oceans. This goes right back to my work as a young DFAT officer on the UN Drift Net Resolutions and on the implementation of UNCLOS into Australian law. I feel very privileged to have led the Australian delegation to the Paris Climate Change Conference and to have played a significant role with a number of colleagues here in developing the cabinet submission, which committed Australia to the target of a 26 to 28 percent reduction in emissions by 2020 and the ratification of Kyoto.

I was also the Australian National Whaling Commissioner for a while and helped develop the Great Barrier Reef 2050 action plan. As part of the successful campaign, I helped lead Stop Endangered listing the Great Barrier Reef in 2015 by the World Heritage Committee. I also worked closely as Turnbull's chief of staff on the not to be national energy guarantee.

I'm going to finish with a poem. This poem is essentially a planetary elegy by Nazim Hikmet, a great Turkish poet who dwelled on human connections. I've always had, and I'll surprise you here, a passion for poetry over annual reports. It reads, "This earth will grow cold, a star amongst stars and one of the smallest, a gilded moat on the blue velvet. I mean, I mean this, our great earth. This earth will grow cold one day, not like a heap of ice or a dead cloud even, but like an empty walnut. It'll roll along the pitch-black space. You must grieve for this right now. You have to feel this sorrow right now, for the world must be loved this much if you're going to say I lived." It's been an honour and a pleasure to work alongside all of you and I look forward to staying in touch and thank you very much for everything you're doing.

KATHERINE JONES:

That was an incredibly broad sweep of all the key issues that we are grappling with in the service and the things that we need to do, and I think just underlines the pivotal nature of your role and the pivotal nature of your personal contribution, Peter, so thank you for that. You have set the bar for introducing poetry into valedictory speech. Brendan, I'm looking right at you.

Given the breadth of your speech, you touched on many topics, but I'd like to start at what I think is the issue that is so foundational and the whole service is reflecting on it at the moment, which is around integrity. Integrity of the service, integrity of institutions, integrity of leaders and integrity of individuals. Any further

reflections from you how you've personally sought to influence integrity in the institutions that you've worked and how you've grappled with it individually?

PETER WOOLCOTT:

Yeah, it's certainly topical.

It's about having the trust of the Australian people and the trust of government and the trust of each other. I just think transparency is a huge important part of that and the more we can be transparent in our dealings, the more we can engage with essentially the civil society and with other groups outside that First Nations people in building their trust. Social media makes it so much more complicated. It's what I keep reflecting on. It can be such a toxic environment out there and the ease with which stories can get spread around about bad behaviour or this or that. My sense is, like most organisations, 99.9 percent of public servants really want to do their best and the census we do shows very much that personal commitment to wanting to do the best but it's style and technique and we are just going to have to get better at dealing with and communicating with civil society and the groups that we are working with.

When I started in the foreign service, that really wasn't part of the game. You dealt with your colleagues. It's much more part of the game now I think if we're going to be successful because it's a much harder environment to work in. I just think governance is really hard and that's just something I reflect on quite a lot, but transparency is very good. Obviously, FOI is an issue for us and you've got to be able to provide free and frank advice to people outside of an FOI context because that's going to shape the way you do that. I noticed New Zealand for example, they put their cabinet submissions up on their website after they're dealt with, but they're written for publication and so hello, how good is that action? Are ministers getting what they really need. As I say, we need to be more transparent with Australian people. We need to be better at dealing with them, but at the same time we also need to be able to provide that really frank and rich advice that ministers want from us. It's a tough one.

KATHERINE JONES:

Thanks. Generally about the APS reform, you've noted right across the breadth of the public service, we're dealing with an ambitious reform agenda in every portfolio. I think it impacts all departments of state, all agencies. Any reflections on how do we continue to deliver for government, deliver for the community, but make sure that these big efforts around reform in the service and all the types of initiatives that you've talked about, what's the guidance advice you would give to the rest of us about how we get that balance?

PETER WOOLCOTT:

I've got to say that I've really always tried to work through the secretary's board. My sense has been, even though I have these independent statutory powers, if you're going to achieve genuine change, and a lot of this is about cultural change, the leadership of the system has got to drive that. It can't just come from a couple of individuals. I've got to say the appointment of Gordon and the reform office has been terrific and I've very much enjoyed reconnecting with Gordon and working very closely with him on the reform. It's much wider now. It's the whole secretaries board and how they are driving a concerted and cohesive view on reform which are going to get those results and government's not going to throw money at this. A lot of this is our business. They want us to perform very effectively and to deliver for them and the Australian people. We've got to be thinking about how we do this in a constrained resource environment, but also, we've got to accept that a lot of it is about cultural change and culture's hard.

KATHERINE JONES:

I'm going to open it up to the floor shortly. One last question from me. Noting the breadth of your career and noting all the challenges that you've indicated that we're all grappling with at the moment, what advice would you give to someone about making a pitch to them about why now is the time to become a public servant?

PETER WOOLCOTT:

David Fredericks used to talk about how you can have 10 careers in the public service. There is an extraordinary diversity of work and I think that's a big part of it, but it really is that sense of purpose. It's why we are all here and we're all in this room and we're all part of IPA. It's that sense of purpose. You're actually doing things that matter, that make a difference, that have an impact and my sense is young people want to do that. Our employee value proposition, we worry about, and we need to be thinking about how we stay connected in terms of salaries and also the environment we set for work. I think we still have a really good brand, but we've got to watch it. We've got work on it and I do believe we're going to have to become more porous. Younger people are going to want to move in and out a bit and we need to accept that and in fact welcome that and stay in touch with them when they go out. The consulting firms are very good at this. They have these alumni networks that they keep working on so you can always come back, and I just think we need to be thinking about that as a public service, too. There's a lot more we need to be thinking about how we stay connected with a more mobile and porous workforce.

KATHERINE JONES: Great. All right. I'm going to open it up to the floor now. Yes, I've got the timing right so anyone who wants to take the opportunity to ask a question of Peter.

SPEAKER 3: Hi Commissioner, thanks very much for your speech. My name is Andrew Pfeiffer. How do you think the APS can be an employer of choice for neurodivergent staff and harness the untapped, neuro divergent talent in the community, particularly at the SES level so that we represent the community that we serve with regard to this cohort?

PETER WOOLCOTT: The neurodivergent community. We don't at the moment collect separate data on it through our census. We're thinking about how we actually do that going forward in the future because that's a really interesting question, but on people with disability, we do have obviously extensive data on that and we have the data from the HR system, the ABSET data, which is considerably lower. It's about five percent in terms of the workforce in the APS and a bit less than that in terms of leadership from actually the census data, which is anonymous, which is almost double that. We have to ask ourselves why is that? Do people not think if they've got a disability that it's worth disclosing that they have, that there's nothing in it for them? They're real questions. In terms of the SES, you raise a really good point because except in the gender area and for women where we've done pretty well actually, whether it's First Nations, whether it's people with disabilities or neuro diverse or whether it's culturally, linguistically diverse communities.

Their numbers are fine in terms of reflecting the general community, but at the lower levels they're just not into the leadership positions. I addressed that a little bit in my speech and that's something we are really grappling with at the moment and it's what worked for women. We actually said, "We've got to fix this," and leadership said we've got to fix this so it's not about talent or anything like that, it's about determination to actually address this as an issue. As I say, it's got to come from the collective leadership by agency heads. We need to be thinking about what we did with women in terms of how we constituted panels, how we constituted the short lists, all that sort of work. There needs to be a real push on for this but as I say, you raised a real issue, which we've not cracked yet.

KATHERINE JONES: Thank you. Pat. Over there in the left-hand corner.

SPEAKER 4: What are you doing on the 11th?

PETER WOOLCOTT: It's nice to see some ex-deputies here actually, Pat and

Larry. On the 11th. Actually, I do have an answer for that. We have a house down the south coast and a couple dogs and my wife and I and Tanya's here today and she's been an extraordinary contributor to my career, and we are just going to head down there for a few days. After that I'm not so sure because I think as I've said to a few friends, poverty's not my risk factor, but boredom is, so I'll look to stay engaged, but I think I should stay away from government for a while. You need to allow a little bit of space, but really looking forward to finding other things to do. It's a big, big world out there and just a chance in other areas. Thank you for the question, Pat.

KATHERINE JONES:

Okay.

SPEAKER 5:

Thank you for your speech. I'm Miriam from the Canberra Times. You spoke about improving the relationship with ministerial staff and what the APS can do on their side, training APS staff. What do you need from ministers and ministerial staff to enhance that relationship?

PETER WOOLCOTT:

I've worked in a couple of ministerial offices and they're an incredibly talented and hardworking group of people. The issue really is the lines between what their responsibility is and what our responsibility is as a public service and how you understand those lines. That's probably more of an issue with people who've just come into ministerial offices without much experience in government and it's also a problem for senior public servants who have never worked up in minister's offices and don't necessarily have a good feel for the pace that they're subjected to and the different pressures that they're subjected to. It's a better understanding of the different environments and where those lines are and we are, at the moment, talking to PMO about rolling out some training for ministerial staff around how to work better with the public service. It's a really important relationship, absolutely crucial to the functioning of the system and I just think we can do a little bit better in terms of allowing both sides or both ends of it to understand how the other works and the context in which they can work better.

KATHERINE JONES:

Great. Probably got time for one more question. Thanks. Down there.

SPEAKER 6:

Thanks a lot for a great talk. Russell Ayers from University of Canberra. I teach a lot of young public servants and one of the things I've noticed is they don't so much ask me how do I get promoted? They ask me, how do I deal with a situation where my personal

values conflict with what I'm being asked to do in the workplace? I'm just wondering what your advice is to a young public servant asking that question?

PETER WOOLCOTT:

I think mentors can be really useful in that regard. Mentors and if they can't talk to their supervisor about that because you're working in a job that you actually, and its government, of course, that makes these decisions. If you don't agree with that policy approach and what the government is doing there, you can always ask to move to another area of work or of course, you can leave, but better you move to another area of work. The mentoring thing can be quite important here. Someone inside the system who can help guide you through that process. I would hope it's fairly rare. I'm interested in what you said, but obviously it's something that as a public service we need to be conscious of and I've always encouraged the diversity of views. I like to be challenged in terms of my own thinking and yet hope that the culture that we are inculcating will do the same.

SPEAKER 7:

Hello, my name is Leigh. I've worked in government for 20 years now across many agencies, which gives you a real good view of how government operates. One of the challenges is what you've mentioned earlier about one government. I've worked on whole government solutions; I've also worked in shared services environments, and we all run on different agendas. I think culture is part of it, but I think we also need systems to support us. One of the challenges I face is trying to maintain my networks across many agencies and it would be fantastic if we actually had one intranet, one system. When you think about MOGs, I've heard many scenarios where you've got two agencies that have merged and they're on different systems. They actually have to have two different logons. That's a real nightmare when you talk about the staff experience. I know Singapore's had one internet for a long time. I don't know if that's something that government could look at and certainly when you're trying to be one unified APS, it would massively help if we could connect with each other digitally.

PETER WOOLCOTT:

I couldn't agree with you more. Full stop. I'll leave it to my successor and Ray Giggs and Jenny to take that forward.

KATHERINE JONES:

I don't think we're going to get anything more on that one. Great question and the gauntlet have been put down for Peter's successor. On that note, on behalf of everyone here, and I think the turnout of all your senior colleagues and many people that you've worked with over the years, people from the commission and of

course your family here just reflects the respect and the regard in which you are held. Can I just ask everyone to join me in congratulating Peter and thank you.

PETER WOOLCOTT:

Thank you.