

# TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

SECRETARY SERIES: DR GORDON DE BROUWER PSM FIPPA

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Secretary

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GORDON DE BROUWER:

Thank you very much, Katherine, and it's really nice to be here. It's a very friendly group, so I'm very grateful for IPAA and for the Crawford School, so thanks to Janine. You can't get a friendlier audience in that sense.

I would like to start as well by acknowledging that we're meeting on Ngunnawal country and thank the traditional custodians of the land we're meeting on and the families with connections here. I pay my deep respect to First Nations peoples and elders past and present and welcome Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

I've been overwhelmed in my career by the warmth and generosity of First Nations peoples, and I hope that as a service we can reciprocate that, and we'll going to talk a lot about service now. I do want to say though, again, so thank you very much. Andrew, I just want to draw out and thank Andrew Metcalfe who's here and retiring from the public service. And Andrew's been a great mentor and a colleague to me for a long time. And so I just want to acknowledge Andrew and what you've contributed to the service and thank you for that.

I would like to talk to you about public service and talk to you as public servants. Now, if you're not a public servant, you can listen, but I really do want to talk to the public service. And many of you who aren't, are fellow travellers and it's really, I think how do we work with the public service?

The requirements of our job are set out in law in the Public Service Act and they're very clear. It's very nice with the background noise. They're very clear to serve the government, the parliament, and the Australian public. That law goes on to require that we incorporate and uphold specific values in our work, starting with being committed to service and committed to service to achieve the best results for the Australian community and government. And those values also encompass being ethical, respectful, accountable, and impartial.

Those values aren't optional. They are the law. They tell us how to go about our job. The values are inspirational as they should be, but when we don't live up to them, a breach can culminate in loss of pay, demotion or even dismissal from the public service.

I meet a lot of public servants and the commitment to serve is fundamental and deep among us. I originally met Chris from Services Australia, who's also one of the people doing the deliberative committee that I'll talk about later. And he works with people who leave jail to

get them back into the community, helping them through one of the most challenging transitions in their life.

There are many, many stories that I've heard from people around the nation in policy, in programmes and service delivery who are passionate, kind and committed, capable and proudly display their spirit of service every day. And I see it every day, and I hope that you see it too and that you're proud of it.

We know that we are not perfect. We've failed and we get things wrong at times, and sometimes seriously badly. There's a long history of reports and some recent ones underway, like the Robodebt Royal Commission that show big failures and mistakes. And we have a lot to learn from these events, especially leaders, not just leaders, but especially leaders and we'll need to come to grips with the consequences.

But these events do not undermine my own belief that the vast majority of public servants are good, decent people and want to do their job well. To use the words of the Prime Minister when he first came down to the Prime Minister's department about public servants, "You are honourable people in an honourable profession."

I'm deeply humbled, excited, and I'm going to say quite daunted to be appointed by the government as the Australian Public Service Commissioner. I applied for the commissioner job and I'm going to note something different. I had to apply and there was a process led by Katherine. Thank you, Katherine. And I applied from the position of secretary for Public Sector Reform because I saw being commissioner a way to further implement reform in an institution that sits at the very heart and centre of the public service.

And I saw the opportunity to build on the work of Peter Woolcott and others in establishing the APS Academy, developing the professions, deepening the APS's relationship with Parliament House and other places, and improving the way the APS operates. The breadth and depth of change in public administration that is at the heart of the government's reform priorities are likely to be at least a decade long project, and I want it to be there for at least some of that process and working with great people.

Like many of you, I wanted to be a public servant so that I could make a difference and I felt at various times I've made that contribution, including for me in the global financial crisis. What I have found over the years is just how essential institutions, culture, and people are to the success of policy programmes and service delivery, that that culminated for me recently in the review of the Reserve Bank of which I was a panel member, that the problems that we identified in

monetary policy over the past decade owed more to the decisions, the way decisions were made rather than actually the faults in the policy framework itself.

And as a former professor of economics, that was not what I expected. Ideas matter of course, but so do governance, culture, and people and at times more so. What can you expect from me as a commissioner? First, maintaining and strengthening the rule of law and systems and institutions of government matter a great deal to me. And I take very seriously the obligations on me and on you that are set out in the various acts of parliament that describe what we do in our duties. We're in a world where the rule of law and institutions are under challenge, and I will look to support the government in strengthening institutions, laws, and practises that are the foundations of our democracy and our society.

The second is that what you can expect, behaviour matters a lot in our work and the only way that we can achieve, we can sustain delivering and achieving outcomes for government and parliament is if our behaviours match our values. I have never seen delivery and behaviour as binary opposites or alternatives. Rather, the values that we are bound to by law guide us in how to achieve outcomes.

And it's not just that the law requires us to act in a certain way, but I genuinely believe that the secret to sustaining delivery in our jobs is to act consistently with our values. So you're much more likely to attract good staff and keep them if you respect, empower and back them and work professionally with them.

Third, pretty much everything in government and public administration is about people and I think that's great. I hate to say I'm people person. I love people. As a public service, our ultimate focus is the Australian people, like it is for the government and like it is for the parliament.

As commissioner and I'm speaking to public servants, my immediate focus is you, the people of the APS and the public sector and helping you create a great place to work, to be the best you can be in your job, and have the opportunities and professional development to have the impact that you want to have, that you see that we are better as a service for all the richness and wisdom that our difference and diversity bring, that we treasure diversity and that we all belong as the people we are.

And I want to hear from you and learn from you.

Please, I would like to hear from you and learn from you. I would like you to feel that you can talk to me and my colleagues at the commission and share your ideas and your experience. For that reason, I'm going to start doing monthly drop-ins where anyone in the service can join me in a safe space to catch up, and I'll let you

know more about what that means in practise in the coming weeks.

Where do we want to be as a world leading service? Well, when I started as secretary for Public Sector Reform and in talking with ministers, they said that they'd know when the public service is working really well when they saw three things. Public servants are confident, they're not cowering and they're not arrogant, they're confident. They know themselves and they're public servants know what they're doing and they're really good at it, that they can understand and explain an issue and they have great advice on how to address it in a way that will endure over time and not just create another problem down the track.

They said they wanted people to come to them and say just how great it is to deal with those public servants and their departments and agencies, that they listen well, that they help them navigate a complex system and issues, that they're respectful, and that they have integrity. My vision for a world leading service is that the APS is a great place to work where people can have a rewarding career. It truly cares about people, both the members of the APS and the people that we serve.

It's recognised for unwavering integrity and honesty. It achieves the things that matter for government and for the people. It's a place where behaviour really matters, where culture and inclusion matter. It's a place where when things go wrong, people put their hand up and say, "How can we do better?" It's a place where hierarchy means that people are empowered and enabled to do their job with clear responsibilities and clear accountabilities and not primarily as a tool of command and control as much as command and control have their place, and they do.

So I'm interested in hearing what you think constitutes a world leading public service and then how we get there, what the steps are. How are we changing? I hope you see reform as a way to strengthen our service. Reform is such a loaded word. For some, it's the opportunity to make this more effective and relevant. For some, it's exhausting, a seemingly endless call to change a never-ending pet project.

Reform is not something new and it's been going on for decades and years. When a new government comes into office with its own priorities and expectations, it forms its own story, and the government has done that. Minister Gallagher has outlined that the government's reform priorities of integrity, people at the centre, a model workplace, and building capability are really important and that they draw from a variety of different sources.

They come from the government's selection

commitments. They come from the 2019 30 independent review of the APS. They come from the experience of the pandemic and changes that we saw in how the service responds. They come from looking overseas and to the states and territories, and they come from understanding the changing needs of Australians.

It's good to know that collectively as an APS, we've progressed 37 out of the 40-30 recommendations with the remaining three under consideration. The ongoing work of reform has provided a strong foundation underpinning the 35 initiatives that we are currently implementing that have been announced by Minister Gallagher under the government's reform agenda and with more to come.

We have a structured approach to APS reform, identifying actions with clear accountabilities in governance built into the institutions, structures, and tools of state, including departments, secretaries board and corporate planning and reporting. It's on the reform website. Rachel Bacon reminds me that it's work in progress, but it's actually pretty significantly underway.

This structured approach is necessary, but it's not at all sufficient for reform to succeed. Reform only takes hold if it's personal to you, and I'd like to make it personal to you, so please take it personally. It's got to be directly relevant to your lived work experience and the impact that you want to have on our nation.

At the end of the day, the reform programme is seeking to empower, enable and support you to be the best you can be in your workplace. It's doing that in steps where one step leads as naturally as possible, hopefully seamlessly to the next step. I'm very much in that Peter Varghese's school of radical incrementalism. You know where you want to get to, and you take the steps and the sequence of steps to get there, and you help them unwind to take you on that path.

All of this is meant to be making you more effective and enjoy your workplace more and achieve the purpose of your work. You may have seen or heard of the changes happening around APS reform, but bargaining on workplace conditions and pay is well underway. The SES performance leadership system is being updated with a whole of service best practise approach to assessing both the outcomes achieved and the behaviour exhibited by an individual with equal weight on both elements.

It's relevant also for secretary performance leadership, and it will increasingly inform approaches to performance of EL and APS staff, so both outcomes and behaviour matter. The in-house consulting function starts next month. Work is underway on projects funded through the Capability Reinvestment Fund,

including evaluation, First Nations cultural safety, gender budgeting, lifting cultural diversity, lifting capability in line agencies about Asia and the Pacific and lifting strategic foresight capability.

The commission is firmly focused on improving inclusion and diversity. The data, digital and HR professions are continuing to grow and mature with the evaluation profession underway and thinking on how to strengthen procurement project and contract management capability within the service. As part of APS reform, the government's exploring where it needs to hardwire a change in legislation to make change stick. That means changing the law to make sure that the commitments and promises we make through APS reform are followed through as part of the strengthening systems that I talked about earlier.

On Wednesday, Assistant Minister Gorman started the series of legislative reform by introducing an amendment to the Public Service Act to the House of Reps to make seven substantive changes. And I'm going to talk through those. The Minister for the Public Service, Minister Gallagher announced most of these changes last October and there's been a lot of public consultation on many of them since then.

The first is adding stewardship as a value for public servants. Stewardship captures the notion of responsibility for an institution both in how it performs now and how it remains effective for the future. Stewardship is currently in the Public Service Act, but only as a responsibility for secretaries and secretaries' board.

We each have responsibility for our bit of the system to ensure that our bit of the institution, our workplace is as effective as it can be and to leave our workplace and the things we work on better when we move on to something else in the same way that Charles has done financially with that one. The reform office ran a public consultation with over 1,500 submissions received. Around 90 per cent of those, many of whom were APS and executive level staff within the public service said that they saw themselves as stewards in their workplace and they welcomed stewardship as a value.

Some of the others, the other 10 per cent or so saw it only as the responsibility of senior people or not relevant to their job. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff said that stewardship was instinctive to them like custodianship and their responsibility to country. They said that stewardship was embedded in the question that they asked themselves, of what sort of ancestor will they be to the generations that follow.

The second change in the legislation is requiring a purpose statement for the public service setting out the vision for the service over the next five years. This is

another voting review recommendation. It's quintessential David Thodey, inspire to aspire. Purpose matters to most people and it's a primary motivation of public servants and to people in public life in general.

We've seen the incredible things that we can achieve when we work together to a common goal as one APS, and we saw it in the pandemic. The first purpose statement is underway with a deliberative committee of staff from around Australia and Chris, I mentioned earlier, is one of them. It's a kind of public service citizens jury working together to design a common purpose across the APS that draws us together and helps us achieve more.

They've come up with eight options that they're now testing with staff and the public. These are available on the APS reform website for you to give feedback and rank and say which ones you prefer or not. Three final options, we'll go to a public and to a staff vote in August and they'll become part of the toolkit that guides departments and agencies. And I really encourage you to take part in that ranking and the voting process.

These two changes go to core purpose and values and the service. The next three I'm going to talk about go to governance, accountability, and transparency. The third change is to strengthen provisions that ministers cannot direct agency heads on individual staffing decisions. This affirms the APS's apolitical nature and it's taken from Graeme Head's review of appointments in New South Wales.

The fourth change is to require agencies to publish APS census results and also publish their action plans to address the findings. And that's designed to lift transparency and encourage accountability and continuous improvement in agencies. Again, it's authority recommendation and it'll be complimented by a greater opportunity to compare outcomes across the service in the state of the service report put out by the Public Service Commission.

The fifth change is to ensure decisions are made by employees at the lowest possible classification level. So the decision-making is not raised unnecessarily to higher levels or part of risk management. The point of this is about reducing unnecessary hierarchy and empowering and trusting staff to do their job. It's not about forcing work down to lower levels in a hierarchy without proper remuneration. And that change applies a similar provision in Western Australia's public sector legislation.

The next two changes that I'll talk about are guided capability and expertise in the service. The sixth change in the legislation is to require regular, independent, and transparent capability reviews of each department of state, of Services Australia and the



Australian Tax Office and required by law. This too is authority recommendation. So forward-looking strengths-based reviews with action plans are significant in how they inform and motivating improvement.

The APSC, the minister was very clear on this. APSC had to be first off, the rank and our capability review will be released soon with those for infrastructure and health to follow in the next few months. They are a device by which public servants can see and contribute to how their workplace is modernise and how they improve. So it's participatory.

The seventh change is for secretaries' board to commission long-term insights reports to explore medium and long-term issues, trends and risk and opportunities. It's a tool to build up forward-looking strategic insight and one of the series of devices to strengthen public service outreach and understanding of the community. It's an idea that we adapted from New Zealand. The pilot underway is looking at the opportunities and constraints in AI to build the trust of the community in government.

So I am coming to an end. There are some clear features of this reform programme. It focuses on institutions and on people, both the public we serve and the people, us, who form the public service. It's a stepwise approach to transformation, a big vision about the public sector and a series of steps that get us there, steps that can be implemented that change culture and behaviour and that achieved outcomes.

It seeks to embed some changes through legislation, some by the direction of the minister, some by decision of secretaries' board and some by the commissioner's direction. They're principles based. And they're intended to be hardwired into the system of public administration. They're meant to stay; they're meant to endure.

I'd like to say to my fellow public servants that I hope that you see yourself in these changes and what they mean for you and for how you do your job, your workplace, and your part in creating a world-leading APS. So please speak up, join in, and be part of the conversation and there are opportunities for you to have your say and to be heard. What I hope we can do together is step by step, build on integrity, capability, and workplace standards, strengthen the role of service that we're all committed to and support you in being the best you can be as a public servant. Thank you.

KATHERINE JONES:

I'll ask a couple of questions and then I'll leave plenty of time to open it up to the floor. You said behaviours matter a lot, delivery matters, but behaviours matter a lot. When you're talking about leadership and shaping

and promoting and developing leadership in the public service, what are your reflections on how we can ensure that we're encouraging the right behaviour?

GORDON DE BROUWER:

Thanks. I never mean that delivery is not important or that outcomes don't matter, and they really do and ultimately, that's what we're trying to achieve. But how you do it really, really does matter. And I've just seen repeatedly that often the problems of getting something delivered isn't in the policy itself or the programme, it's actually in the conduct of the people, the way decisions are made.

And I mentioned the Reserve Bank coming into the commission. I see a lot where some things go wrong in institutions and often it comes back to the behaviour and how that's then can be reinforced as, this is what people expect of you. And most people will respond to that because those matters. But also in the nature of performance management and professional development.

And that's why that focus on outcomes and behaviours in performance management, starting with the SES, is really important. It is just everywhere; you see it everywhere. It's also you just know for yourself the sort of job you like. I mean the action and behaviour in the workforce really matters to, do you like being there? Can you do it? And treating other people with that same respect is very important.

KATHERINE JONES:

Great, thank you. You talked a lot about stewardship and having stewardship as a value for the service. You gave us a bit of the flavour of what that might mean for the APS3 working in a regional part of Australia, doing the role there. Can you tease that out a little bit and how that value will be meaningful for someone in that part of the role?

GORDON DE BROUWER:

I think if you talk to an APS3 in Services Australia about what stewardship would mean for them, it's the nature of how they've kept the record. So is the system working? When the next person comes in to sit there and deal with the public, that they've got an easy accurate access to that? In terms of how you deal with the public, well, what people see of you that they see you, but they also see you as a representative of the service agency that you work for and of the public service and of the Australian government.

You really are an embodiment to them of what they think government is. The way you conduct yourself, the way you engage gives a signal to the customer or the person of the recipient of what they think of government. You're a steward of that and people are really proud of that. I mean they want to do their job

well. They want to make sure that the system works, that they can pass on the records, that they're accurate, and also that people see, the public can see in them the good of the public service.

It's your bit of the workplace, what you do, you can be a steward in that. It doesn't mean you're responsible for every possible thing that goes on, that's silly. But you are responsible for your bit, your part.

KATHERINE JONES:

I think that enthusiasm, I think we're going to send the commissioner out on a road show. We can be articulating that out to everyone. I think that will be really powerful. Flowing from that, just in terms of connection to the broader community, the public service, we focus a bit on Canberra but we're so much more than just Canberra and the role that we can play in regional, remote, rural communities. Any reflections on what more public service needs to do to make sure that it fully understands the aspirations and expectations of everyone in Australia and not just urban based?

GORDON DE BROUWER:

Yeah, so 40 per cent of the service is in Canberra, but the bulk of the service is in service delivery, programme management, and other regulatory functions. They're not in some of the policy areas. So I frankly think the best way is to get out and see people and go out and experience the different bits of the community and what people can see.

When I was in PMC, so I've got to get back to Andrew. This is one of the things that Andrew left, and this really had a big impact on me. I was a policy person in PMC in working under Prime Minister Rudd. And Andrew, when he was Secretary of Immigration, had a programme where he brought people from central agencies to experience the line, the upfront. So I went to Orange, I went to the airport. I did a raid in Redfern, a whole range of different activities I could see.

You can see what it meant for the public and how they saw the service, what it meant, and the whole range of service delivery, all the very different activities that government does with the public. You just get a sense of that. And I found that it really changed my attitude and perspective.

It was great. It was really inspirational to me. I really think getting out and seeing the world, seeing people in their lives, talking with other public servants, mixing, that's to my mind the best way. It makes it clearer that your responsibility is to people. The difficulty with someone like me from my background, a long time in Reserve Bank, Treasury, and PMC, you tend to see people as concepts. The public policy is a concept, it's an abstract concept. It's not flesh or blood. And when

you go out and you do these sorts of things, you experience the flesh and blood, and that's very powerful.

KATHERINE JONES:

We had an event last night for APS200. For those of you who don't know what APS200 is, its secretaries, deputies, and agency heads across the Australian Public Service. The focus of that meeting last night was all about integrity and talking about the challenges and the opportunities around integrity, uplift, and culture. I don't think there's a person in this room who's working in the public service at the moment that isn't reflecting on integrity. We've got the National Anti-Corruption Commission starting, but also there's various inquiries that are happening that are making us reflect on that.

It would be remiss of me not to raise that with you now. For you, thinking about all that, you've sort of referenced it in your speech. But what do you think are the two or three key things that you as public service commissioner would really like to focus on and promote around integrity in the service?

GORDON DE BROUWER:

Integrity really matters. If you think of the themes, integrity and capability, really very dominant. And the workplace conditions are the dominant bits in reform. I think that integrity, it's really that people own it including leaders, but they see that as actually a core part of their work. And that's why I was trying to talk about law. I mean, again, these things aren't functional. You have to by law go about these things with a clean conscience, that you think that you're doing things the right way, and you're proud of your own conduct in the way you engage as a public servant.

That really matters. And if you don't have that, well frankly, you become an empty shell and you're not really, and we can see you don't really achieve what you're trying to achieve because integrity is often the thing that undoes something. So people own it, and leaders own it and they talk about it, and they reinforce it as actually one of the very elementary bits of how we behave, that you want to conduct yourself well properly with a good conscience. But it's kind of odd that we have to talk about it, but it's like being a grownup adult.

More of that is what, and frankly I think where that goes is that a number of institutional changes. Clarifying how important it is, strengthening our internal government systems around that. One of the things in this job is chairing the Integrity Agency Group, making sure that system as a whole, that stewarding that system really well, that it's focused on that. And it becomes, so then reinforced in individual behaviour.

That's again why the behaviours matter for the delivery. The behaviours really matter for the delivery. And if

you're going about that with integrity, you're more likely to get things that stick rather than fall apart down the track. So I can see things in performance management, in code, and a whole range of people development, talent development, talent management, those dimensions.

KATHERINE JONES:

Thank you. I've got one more quick question then I'm going to open it up to the floor. Couple of the measures that you've talked about in your speech and that we've seen you already start to initiate both in your previous role as doing public sector reform and now in commission have a strong participative element to it. You're obviously trying to promote getting input from right across the service but also outside the service for people to shape us. Is there anything you want to expand on your vision for how you're going to go about doing that?

GORDON DE BROUWER:

Yeah. Well, I think these things like the deliberate committee being available to listen to people, the whole range of those things. I've always been really struck when you're a public servant. I grew up through a lot of the public service, but people talk about the system, and they say, "Oh, the system doesn't do this, the system doesn't do that, and if only it changed." Well, maybe there is some high-level macros, some of the structural things you can't control.

But for a lot of your workplace, you can control and influence and have an impact in that. And that's where I think of taking ownership, taking control of your own workplace really matters. And it's being an adult. It's being an adult in the workplace and being treated like an adult in the workplace.

But to my mind, I don't like cults and there's too much of the cult of the leader sometimes. And too much the people who think about their career and they want to be in SES because that's a whole lot of aspiration. The vast part of the service, of work, is done actually at the APS and EL level. And that's what really matters. That's the part of the system that to my mind really matters because that's where you get the real delivery. How do you help people and support people in that part of the system to know that they're responsible for that system and that they've got the skills, professional development that helped enable that?

So that's why the participatory, it matters there. It's not about, I mean the secretaries board really matters, but they're not the end of the story. I mean leadership matters, Katherine, but a lot of it is in the belly of the service.

KATHERINE JONES:

That's great. Thank you. I will open it up to any

questions from the floor. One there, one up there.

RUSSELL AYRES:

Thanks very much, Gordon. Russell Ayres, University of Canberra. Great talk, thank you, Gordon. It was terrific. I've been in lots of conversations recently about APS reform. And three people, a senior political journalist, a former politician, and a senior academic all said the same thing which surprised me. And I wanted, if you could respond, which was what we need is to reform the appointment and tenure of departmental secretaries. And I just wondered what your response was from that because I was surprised that this came from people outside the system but who know the system well.

GORDON DE BROUWER:

Yeah, I don't think that's the fulcrum of an effective service. I think you get the bulk of it when you got an empowered and enabled and supported APS, and you have good leadership practises and focus through all the leadership structure. I'm not saying that the appointment performance and the termination of secretary positions doesn't matter, but it can be exaggerated to my mind. I thought people when they talk about the termination was okay... If people think they're going to lose their job, then they won't say what they really think.

I've almost never seen that in practise. And through my time, most of the conversations I've had as a secretary or with secretaries was, we know that we could lose our job. So that's part of it. And actually, that doesn't stop me doing what I think I have to do. And that's by law and by culture. I've never seen it as a core driver.

At the same time, it doesn't matter that governments, ministers, prime ministers feel confident and that they can trust senior public servants. So that's part of the trade-off. If you don't have termination, then how do you ensure that you can maintain or you can have people there that you can work with as a minister that you can rely on. So that to my mind, it's overstated.

The other side though is that performance and appointments really do matter. And I think you can see if I reflect even in the short time on where some of the failures and breakdowns occur in the system, they often come down to particular behaviours or attitudes rather than the policy. And then how do you grow a service through all the levels where the good behaviours become standardised and the norm, and that becomes the reference point.

Appointments do matter and those processes do matter. To my mind, they matter more in the long run to good advice and good public administration. And can a prime minister terminate a position? Some of those things, they're egregious, I got to say. Sometimes you

look at the history, they're egregious. I'm not going to keep coming back. But for the whole service, I think those other things matter.

KATHERINE JONES: Question down the back there.

GORDON DE BROUWER: It is a good conversation to have though, Russell. People do look for very important... It's a symbol. People also take it as a symbol of what does it mean. But to my mind, it's not the fulcrum on the nature of the service.

CHRIS MCDONALD: Chris McDonald, assistant secretary at the Department of Agriculture. So thank you Gordon for the speech and the framework that you have set out for the future of the public service. And I think the framework and direction in itself is helpful in building that confidence across the service. But I'd like to take you back to the 30 review and one of the issues that were identified in the 30 reviews. And I think the language in there was the area of greatest concern for the service was around strategic policy capability, so that ability to scan the horizon and provide proactive and incisive and influential advice to government.

I'd just like to get your reflection on what you see as the key elements of an ecosystem in a department that facilitates that and perhaps particularly drawing out the aspects of leadership, culture and behaviour that creates that environment.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah, thanks. That's a big question. I feel like I've got a public administration essay that I have to write, spread on the board for you. The elements of the culture of open inquiry and challenge, that's a really important dimension to that. The element of having conversations about what's going on in the world, where things are going, what the pressure is, what trends are, where they're likely to take you, how they interact with other important elements. I'm talking a bit abstract, but it's making that conversation bigger around what are the forces at play, where are they likely to go, where could they go, and then that conversation as a normal part of culture in an organisation.

That's where setting yourself up, so you've got genuine strategy meetings. So I thought executive boards for department or agency should always have a strategic quarterly session where you're talking about that. But you take that back down to teams, and teams talk about that and that's actually how you grow people in thinking of beyond your immediate set of activities, what else is going on that maybe impinged on that and how do they interact? It's a culture of openness and exchange and pursuing and questioning.

Those things don't matter. I think we've also got a number of really great tools and devices to use for that. Some of the foresight analysis, genuine scenario analysis the way that BHP, Shell, Singaporean government, parts of our system do as well, they're very good tools to try to pick out where things may be, especially in a world of a lot of uncertainty where things can shift in quite unpredictable and unforeseen ways.

And how robust are your systems, or is your programme, or is your approach to quite different states of the world where we may find actually those states of the world happen even if we don't expect them. And you can see it repeated and repeated, I think again Reserve Bank, I'd say that the history of climate change policy and some of the things that we really just haven't thought of. If the world's a bit different, then how strong and robust is our system or our approach in that sort of world?

Encouraging people to have those conversations, having training, professional development, so it's part of the Capability Reinvestment Fund. There's a futures unit or area in PMC. Most departments or many departments are increasingly having them. They're certainly very much part of the security network. It's also working with universities and think tanks. The opportunity for partnership there is really big because there are some great activities there.

It's that broader engagement. I think there's a lot frankly you can do on those things.

KATHERINE JONES:

Probably got time for one more.

MELISSA COADE:

Hi, Gordon. Melissa Coade from the Mandarin. My question is about timelines. You mentioned radical incrementalism and you talked about this reform work being a decade at least. But obviously, if you could wave a magic wand and make the APS the best public service in the world, you'd do it today, right? This question is actually derived from a lot of great chats I've had with people at ANAO when I tell them about big aspirational mission statements and they say, "But what are the metrics and how are we going to get there?" When do you want the APS to be the best public service in the world? And what are the metrics and how do you think we'll get there?

GORDON DE BROUWER:

I did talk about the metrics, Melissa. Again, the people are confident that they know what they're talking about and they're just great to deal with. Anyway, I've kind of come to a view over time that steps iterations, you have to know where you want to get to. You have to be pretty clear. You have to know what the outcomes are, what you're trying to achieve. But there are many



different paths to get there. And sometimes when we've tried to make the jump and just jump to the end state, it's failed.

I will for 10 years under the Rudd, Gillard, Abbott and Turnbull governments on climate change and environment policy, and we had some jumps in that. The jumps didn't work. What we've seen is that what works in these areas is incrementalism. You have to know what you want but you take it in steps, and you let those steps and elements unfold and you guide them where you can. In your drawer, you've got 10 backup plans in your drawer. And so it's very intuitive and you work it through that way and a lot of engagement, a lot of listening, and bringing people along in that and a lot of uncertainty in the world, so you can find a path through that.

That strategic stepwise approach to my mind generally is going to work better, not always, but my disposition. Rather than you know it's a big change and you do everything in one fell swoop and then nothing happens. And especially when we're talking about public administration and some of those things, you're talking about deep behavioural and cultural change, that people have to experience a journey to do that. You can't just say change and then, oh, of course I'll just change.

And so it's quite a steady, repeated, ongoing process. And you lay down markers as you go, and you do some structural change in frameworks or legislation or some other pattern of change incentives. And then you talk about that for five years.

What Peter Varghese called radical incrementalism can really work. I'd say it's incremental radicalism because you're talking about a very different state of the world that you want and you're going to get there in steps. We can do it the way you want to term it.

KATHERINE JONES:

I'm going to draw the Q&A to a close there. Now would be a great pleasure to introduce Professor Janine O'Flynn, who is the director of the ANU Crawford School of Public Policy to provide a word of thanks. Janine is an expert in public administration and management having advised governments around the world on issues ranging from the design of effective performance management systems through to collaborative approaches to policy design and implementation. And I really would like to acknowledge the ANU Crawford School of Public Policy as brave and proud supporters of today's event. So, thank you and over to you.

JANINE O'FLYNN:

Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you, Katherine, for the warm welcome. The ANU Crawford

School of Public Policy are absolutely delighted to be able to support this Secretary Series event with the Commissioner, perhaps a little bit more so than usual because we can claim him as one of ours. As a professor of economics, formerly a professor of economics at the ANU, I'm really delighted to be able to do that today. And thank you to Caroline for inviting us to work with you.

As still relatively new director of the Crawford School, I'm five months in, not that I'm counting. It's wonderful to be able to be here today and I really would like to acknowledge the long and very productive collaborative relationship that we've had with IPAA ACT. I'm delighted to sit on the Council of IPAA ACT, and I'm a very proud IPAA fellow from Victoria, but I'm happy to move if I need to be on the right football team for that.

Thank you to the Commissioner for his address today and I hope you'll all indulge me perhaps just for a few seconds to make a personal reflection. On my first day, January 9th this year, the first person that I met with, or the people that I met with, it was Rachel Bacon and Gordon who generously came down to the ANU, as my office was full of notebooks and was sparse on that first day. And I was a bit shell-shocked in my position. And we had an amazing broad ranging discussion around many things with what I would call, and Gordon spoke about today, fellow travellers who care about public administration and management very deeply.

Gordon and I have had the opportunity to have several of those discussions along the way and we knew a little bit about each other, and we'd met a few times briefly before and that helped us, I think, in having that. We're both personally and professionally very committed to ensuring that Australia has a high performing, world leading public service that operates with integrity and which she's looking not just at the challenges of today, and there are many, but also over the horizon to what's coming next, able to confidently steward us through increasingly complex times today but looking at what we need to do next.

I think it's fair to say along with many people that your appointment, Gordon, made us feel that we're very much in safe hands during that process.

Your address today covered many issues, and I was struck by three important things which I'll just mention and which I'm sure resonated with people in different ways. The first one was really about this idea of values, a commitment to serve and to make a difference, and that these really are critical in ensuring we have one of the world's best public services. Ideas and policy matter and they matter profoundly, but so do people, culture, and governance, sometimes more. And the balance of those is incredibly important to get right in any journey

of reform.

And the third one, perhaps this is my own bias speaking as someone who spent the best part of 25 years looking at public sector reform. Reform is many things, and it is many things to different people. It comprises an extraordinarily complex set of actions and beliefs and visions and so on. And purpose matters. We have to have an understanding of where we're going and why it's important if we're going to ask people to undertake such incredibly large-scale change.

The Australian story of reform has been of radical incrementalism or incremental radicalism. A few years ago, I was asked to do basically a stock take of the last 40 years of reform in Australia for an international think tank. And this was my conclusion, in fact, that if we look back on the Australian public service three or four decades ago, it is radically different to where we are now. But we didn't do it through blowing it up and starting again. We've done it through a commitment to change that matters and change that makes us amongst one of the best in the world.

One of the things I really took out of your address today, Commissioner, is that reform is for the long term. It doesn't happen overnight, and it requires what, with one of my wonderful colleagues, Deborah Blackman, we've written about before supporting architecture, what you call the hard-wiring and what a good and wonderful friend of mine calls getting the plumbing right.

As I said, as someone who spent the last few days study... The last few years, decades, not days, believe me... many days studying reform, I couldn't agree more. And I often mention to people that if we look back at some of the recommendations from the Coombs Commission, we are still implementing many of those recommendations today. This is not an overnight story, but one of incredible change over time.

So thank you again, Commissioner, for your thoughts today for providing this address. And thank you very much to my wonderful friends at IPAA ACT for this event and for asking us to join with you to be able to be part of it. And Katherine, I hand back over to you to close this off today. Thank you.

KATHERINE JONES:

Just to finish off, if I could thank IPAA ACT's partners for their fantastic and ongoing support. That's KPMG, Hays, Telstra, MinterEllison, and the Commonwealth Bank of Australia. On that note, I thank you all for attending. It's great that you all could be here in person to hear the address from the Australian Public Service Commissioner. I feel both a little bit inspired and somewhat overwhelmed by the breadth and the

ambition of the reform agenda that Gordon has laid out. And I think you would all join me in saying that we look forward going on the journey with his leadership on these issues. So, thanks very much, Gordon.