



INSTITUTE OF
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
AUSTRALIA

02 6154 9800
PO Box 4349 Kingston ACT 2604
admin@act.ipaa.org.au

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

IPAA ACT SECRETARY SERIES

Simon Atkinson (keynote), Secretary, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

Michael Manthorpe PSM (host), Commonwealth Ombudsman and IPAA ACT Deputy President

24 June 2021

Enquiries should be directed to Caroline Walsh on 0413 139 427 or at caroline.walsh@act.ipaa.org.au

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Welcome to today's Secretary Series address with Simon Atkinson. It's great to see you all here. We might expect a few more people coming in, but congratulations to all of you for coming out on this pretty hideous morning. But I'm sure it's going to be worthwhile. My name's Michael Manthorpe, Commonwealth Ombudsman, but more pertinent today, I'm also the Deputy President of IPAA in the ACT, and I'll be your chair today.

I'd first like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we're meeting. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. I'd like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are attending today's event.

Now it's my pleasure to introduce our keynote speaker. Simon Atkinson was appointed Secretary of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications on the 1st of February, 2020. He's held various senior leadership roles in delivering major policy reforms, including the establishment of Infrastructure Australia in 2007, the 2009 Defence White Paper and 24, count them, Commonwealth economic updates.

Simon holds a Bachelor of Science and Law from the University of Queensland, a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice and a Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. He's a barrister and solicitor of the Federal Court and the Supreme Court of New South Wales in my experience of dealing with him also when Simon is in the room, you can be sure someone will say something sensible. So please join me in welcoming Simon to the stage.

SIMON ATKINSON: Thanks Michael, and hopefully I can say something sensible. Good morning. It's lovely to see so many familiar faces in the crowd today. I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people who are the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which we meet. I would also like to pay respect to the Elders of the Ngunnawal people - past, present and emerging - and extend that respect to any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who are with us today.

I would like to thank those in my department who assisted with my speech for today, including Richard Windeyer, Ashley Sedgwick and Louise Rawlings for their input and advice.

I would also like to thank the Institute of Public Administration Australia for the opportunity to speak to you, here in one of the amazing cultural institutions in our portfolio. My message today is simple: keep growing across your life in the service.

It fills me with joy every time I hear the public service praised for the exceptional work we do.

Many years ago, my parents gave me a book of powerful speeches throughout history. One of my favourite speeches in the collection is by Theodore Roosevelt where he talks about the Strenuous Life.

Roosevelt calls on people to embrace the values of duty, service, sacrifice and perseverance in the face of strife and adversity. He calls for courage in the service of the nation, regardless of risk or hardship - far better, he says, to dare mighty things, even if the path to triumph is checkered by failure.

Roosevelt urges care and integrity in the delivery of government services, whether at home or abroad.

And he presses the fundamental ideal of putting the needs of others, and the nation, ahead of our own.

While this speech was delivered more than 120 years ago, these characteristics and ideals still speak to my vision of Australia's modern public service.

As leaders, we must promote and reward endeavor, courage and innovation - even where the risk is failure.

Together, we need to inspire our people to see their service as a higher calling to serve the people and communities of Australia. To see that our collective commitment to the ideals and institutions of the APS underpins our liberal democracy. And that hard work and dedication to serving the Australian people makes a difference.

Many of us in the APS share this sense of pride in serving Australia and Australians as we do our work and enjoy the feeling that we are contributing something back to our great country. Not everyone understands this part of our motivations and we don't talk about it enough. We should say it publicly and to others and celebrate what we do and what we achieve for Australia even if much of it passes unknown to those that benefit.

Every one of us in the APS has both the capacity – and indeed a responsibility - to help improve the lives of the Australian people, every day.

I joined the APS as a Defence graduate. I had a thought for service – to do my bit for Australia, learned in large part from my grandfather, with his values of volunteerism, service, hard work and giving to something bigger than yourself, all wrapped up with his love of Australia, his pride in Australians and his service in the war. The intellectual curiosity and work ethic I brought with me came from my parents who never stop.

I have been privileged to have a life in the service. I have had amazing experiences, faced daunting challenges, and I like to think that I have contributed a little bit to Australia.

And most importantly I have met, worked with and been shaped by a pantheon of brilliant, thoughtful and great people.

My time in the service across so many agencies and so many experiences with so many people has grown me both professionally and personally in a way that I can never repay.

And that is my key message today, keep growing and help others to grow across the service. It is about the importance of developing and evolving across our service and helping guide others to grow. I am also focusing on systems level leadership in the modern world and what it takes for us to be good at it.

Diversity of the APS

Over the past year, the APS has shown what an exceptional institution we are.

You can only know your true mettle when tested and over the last year we have been tested, many of us beyond the limits of the endurance we thought we had. And we have not only risen to the challenge, we have been outstanding across the board.

The Australian public will never see the full extent of all that we do to serve them. They see the visible service delivery roles, particularly those they interact with like Centrelink, Medicare, the Tax Office and health services.

But they don't see the behind the scenes work that happens - across policy, program management, regulation, governance and corporate services, to name a few – to support the government, to keep the economy running and to keep Australians safe.

Like most of our service throughout our lives, much of this will go unnoticed by the public.

Within my own portfolio, one unwritten story is how we have worked with all levels of government, industry and unions to keep maritime shipping lanes open and maintained efficient road and rail freight movements throughout COVID. This enabled the continued flow of domestic freight and key exports and imports - everything from iron ore exports, to groceries and household essentials, to medical supplies.

The huge efforts we have made with stakeholders to keep bulk commodity and containerised shipping operational in a safe way ensured these critical parts of the economy, worth around \$10 billion a week, have continued through COVID.

This is just one small story amongst hundreds, across all portfolios, of the value of the APS through COVID. We should be proud of our role in assisting steward Australia through COVID in a health, social and economic sense. We are one of only five countries with an economy that is larger than it was before COVID.

The APS is an amazing and diverse institution that has been a central pillar of our Westminster system of government for more than 100 years.

We undertake functions every day that affect Australia, our society and our place in the world.

More than 240,000 Australians work directly for the Australian Government in one form or another. And many more deliver government functions through GBEs or outsourcing or contract arrangements. And even more deliver Commonwealth initiatives and partnerships through the states and territories.

There are around 80,000 people in the Australian Defence Force and another 16,000 or so in the civilian arm of the APS, providing for our nation's defence and keeping people safe.

We have around 19,000 people working in the Australian Tax Office, serving in offices right across Australia.

There are about 6,000 people administering some \$85 billion of health funding a year and managing the Commonwealth's pandemic response.

More than 5,000 lawyers, auditors and other professionals manage the Commonwealth's legal and integrity systems.

Our scientific research agencies, from CSIRO to Geoscience Australia, are staffed by around 11,000 people, undertaking cutting edge research.

With such diversity of functions and business types, what it takes is a mix of capabilities, characteristics and cultures that are fit for purpose for each of those diverse functions. These things will be different for different departments and agencies, and parts of departments as they are all designed to achieve their outcomes in the best possible way.

An aviation safety regulator needs a different business and culture to a macroeconomic policy agency, which is different again to a frontline service delivery agency or scientific research agency.

Different again to program management and those focused on Comm-State relations or bespoke commercial arrangements.

What we need is a modern, flexible, apolitical public service that is fit for purpose for myriad tasks. And we have one, as demonstrated during COVID. We are up to the task.

But we need to keep modernising and adapting the service to remain up to the evolving task of government.

In a rapidly changing world we need to evolve and develop as APS leaders, and to evolve and develop the APS as a whole. As I said earlier, keep growing and growing others.

I often say the only thing you can change is how you deploy yourself to shape the broader system. Be it your work place, government, Australia or the world.

As public servants, it is in each of us to grow across our lives and learn to have new and better impacts on the systems and people around us.

Many years ago, I was on a Leadership Program where we thought about self-articulating that big question of "who I want to be". The answer continues to evolve but that day, after much reflection, and with much meaning underneath each word, my clearly aspirational answer was: a happy and healthy leader who makes a great contribution to those around me and to Australia. (And some days I manage to be at least some of that).

As I went about trying to learn to be the best version of that, I triggered a series of 'ah ha' moments for me about systems, people, relationships and a growing understanding of myself that is still evolving.

It is this growing in the service on your own pathway to who you want to be to support Australia that I want for everyone in the service.

And it is also how we evolve and ensure the service has the capable, committed people it needs. This takes great effort and focus to ensure we are reflective, self-aware, willing to listen and really hear others. And hardest of all, be willing to change and grow.

I work with many people across the service, listening and guiding them through development, self-experiment and helping them find their own 'ah ha' moments on their journeys of self-discovery and growth. I think this guiding others in development is one of the highest responsibilities of Secretaries and all SES and APS leaders. It is how we nurture the next generation of the service.

Systems leadership

Today I also want to focus on systems leadership and how important it is to the future of the APS and Australia.

Australia, and all elements of our society and economy, exists within a series of extremely complex global systems, be they geo-political, economic or social systems, involving competing interests and diverse structures, values, relationships, priorities, hierarchies and choices.

As we have seen throughout COVID, these global issues impact significantly on domestic Australia. And when we look at our health, education, security, industry, social, economic, transport, environment, communications and infrastructure policy settings and delivery, to be good they need to be considered as complex systems within the context of broader national and global systems.

We must also look at their linkages to each other as policy settings that contribute to the fabric of the nation.

So as we move down from global systems to national systems, then to local systems, to individual workplaces, to communities, good Governments need to understand the systems they are strands of and their place and contribution to broader systems both nationally and globally.

In my view, people can be systems leaders at any level. Be it leading in an individual workplace or navigating complex international issues.

There are three key elements to being a good systems leader:

1. Having complex systems insight – completely understanding your system, how it operates, the motivations of all elements and actors, how it is influenced and the language people use to engage with it.
2. Coalition building and advocacy – the ability to coalesce groups around a direction and find pathways to success of the system.
3. Collaborative leadership skills – high-end collaboration, the ability to listen, hear and understand the perspectives of others and the wisdom behind them and bring people together for joint solutions.

If you have these systems leadership capacities, you can catalyse and empower collective and coordinated action by many others with very different viewpoints, responsibilities, levers and tools.

This is much more powerful than individuals controlling or directing action themselves.

In our federation, this is incredibly important, as often responsibilities and levers critical to Australia's national interest lie with multiple levels of government and sometimes with the private sector.

At its highest level, the National Cabinet represents a forum for national systems level leadership. It is a whole of government system of the Commonwealth, and whole of government system of the states and territories, taking collective and coordinated action.

National Cabinet has used the levers and tools available to them to manage Australia's COVID19 response in the interests of all Australians. While recognising they start with different viewpoints, leaders are empowered to coordinate collective action across health, economic, social and security issues.

In the modern complex world, for the APS to successfully support Governments we also need to be adept practitioners of systems leadership and deeply understand our operating environment.

For the APS SES cohort, the essential behaviours, capabilities and personal characteristics we expect are set out in the Integrated Leadership System and the APS Values. Building on these, I have a set of leadership qualities and behaviours that I expect to see in my team which support the growth of systems thinking and leadership. These are:

1. Empower others to succeed. We need to guide and support our people to deliver and make decisions safely.
2. Collaborate not compete to succeed as a team – this is really important to me. It's important that our SES cohort work together, bringing together the best of their talents and abilities. I don't want to see people hoarding information, trying to show each other up, or highlighting each other's mistakes.
3. Understand people well in order to lead and communicate well. It's important to get to know people and invest in relationships, and understand what matters to them.
4. Interpret and give context; don't do people's jobs for them but provide context about their operating environment and how you see things. This is one of the greatest gifts a leader can give to help people succeed.
5. Lean into others' perspectives and value the contribution of everyone. It's easy to engage with those who think like us and share our language sets. But it's actually more important to seek out and value the perspectives of those who don't think or speak like us, because there is richness and genuine diversity in their views that we will otherwise miss. It is incredibly important to understand the experiences of all Australians not just those groups with the loudest voices and the most access.
6. Build capability and networks: trust, protect and grow others; treat people with decency and respect. It's also really important for everyone in our organisation to feel valued by the people around them and their leadership team.

7. Be dynamic: have an enquiring mind and be willing to change rather than doing things the way they have always been done. We should always question conventional wisdom to make sure it is still fit for purpose.
8. Expect people to deliver and have an impact, but also to have fun. We spend a lot of time at work and it's important that we deliver everything that is required of us, and do it well. But it's also important that people enjoy what they do and feel that what they do is valued by the people around them.
9. Understand the system and the shape of yourself in it and deploy yourself to achieve the best outcome. As I tell my SES group, most of the time, your natural shape will be about right to achieve a fit for purpose outcome. But sometimes - maybe 10-20% of the time - a different shaped version of you would achieve a better outcome. So we should consciously think about how we deploy ourselves in the system to get the best outcome.
10. Practice and develop new ways of impacting others and systems to the betterment of Australia and the Australian people.

These characteristics were front and centre between our APS institutions during the depths of 2020 and they are what help us - the APS - to excel and succeed.

If we can all:

1. keep growing and guide others to grow across the service and
2. be adept at systems leadership we will improve our capacity to deal with the complexities and challenges Australia will face over the decades to come. This is particularly important as the world reopens and reshapes into a new chapter post COVID and Australia's place in that world forms.

To that end, there are a few policy challenges I would like to quickly highlight these are key to my portfolio as they will be important for determining the future shape and prosperity of Australia and will require skilled systems leadership to achieve the best outcomes for Australia and Australians.

These are:

- International reopening
- The future of global norms and regulation of the online world and
- Aligning national resources with national interest, with a focus on mega-projects.

The Australian people have been extremely well served through COVID19 with the combined efforts of Commonwealth and state governments effectively containing COVID over the past year.

Central to this was the introduction of 14 days hotel quarantine for people coming into Australia. This protection mechanism created a safe bubble and minimised the spread of COVID and the need for lockdowns.

It also decreased the flow of people into Australia from around 400,000 a week to less than 7000 a week. This is a 98% decrease.

This has had a very significant economic and social impact on Australians (particularly as we are ranked as the 13th most socially globalised nation in the world) and we are all working on reopening the flow as soon as possible.

We face a different set of reopening challenges than other countries like the UK and the US who have linear pathways to success, based on vaccinating more people thereby decreasing the numbers of people who get sick or die from COVID19 to a point where they will be open with vaccine protection.

Australia's circumstances are very different as our quarantine has served to protect Australians from the levels of disease and death experienced in these countries.

We and a few other countries like New Zealand face a different set of reopening challenges. We are accustomed to not having sustained community transmission of COVID, with a very low tolerance amongst the states for any outbreaks. Other countries who have had sustained transmission for 18 months will be much more tolerant and accepting of the inevitable transmission that will occur when borders are opened.

I don't know the timing of it as that is a matter for my health colleagues but I consider the end state for Australia to materially reopen and reintegrate with the rest of the world will most likely require us to be protected by vaccination (like most countries) not 14 days' quarantine.

The pathway to this is challenging as it will mean health officials and systems leaders will need to make more hard decisions in the public interest to reopen.

Virtual worlds

In 2013 Bill Gates said, "the internet is becoming the town square for the global village of tomorrow".

We are now in tomorrow. And social media and other platforms, including gaming platforms, seem a bit like the town squares that Bill Gates foreshadowed.

Social media offers consumers access to knowledge, services, information, communication, and communities on a scale not possible before the digital age.

The point I want to make is that, for public policy people, for believers in institutions of government and society, these virtual environments are a governance challenge and conundrum.

As we confront the growing range of harms that are perpetrated and experienced online, we have to confront difficult questions about how and who should tackle these harms, and what role can and should governments adopt.

These 'town squares' are privately owned, yet they are a forum for public debate and discussion in our society. Private companies are governing and opining on a range of harms that our citizens are exposed to.

Are we comfortable with the recourse for someone feeling seriously or dangerously harassed by someone inside a Massive Multiplayer Online Game, being the terms of service for the game? Is this a problem? Could this behaviour contravene any law or regulation – should it? If the laws of a country apply, which laws of which country?

There are less challenging questions, but the point remains, the 'world' that we are increasingly living our lives within, a world where we are interacting with strangers, consuming goods, expressing opinions, is increasingly a privately, foreign owned world – we in public policy must grapple with this.

Mega projects

Almost two decades ago I was working in Finance when I found a fascinating book in a second hand bookshop. It was on fiscal policy in England in the 1940s.

Its central thesis was that the resources of a nation generally need to be deployed consistent with its national interest at all times and that this alignment needs to be particularly good in periods of increased global competition and even stronger in times of crisis.

This thesis still holds. What changes are the national interest investment priorities at any given point in time.

One of the choices Governments have is to invest in mega projects. These are projects that have a large enough impact they change the shape of part of the nation.

This can take many forms. Some mega projects have lasting economic and social benefits, while others change settlement patterns. Others, like the Sydney Opera House, are culturally iconic, while others contribute to our nation's defence.

They are typically huge in scale, have very long delivery times and face very significant risks including:

1. technical and operational, emanating from the dynamics of the project itself
2. changes in market environments throughout the project and
3. institutional and social, related to social, political and economic settings.

These risks typically emerge and evolve over the course of the projects and are not fully foreseeable at the start.

To succeed, these projects need complex, bespoke, agile governance that reflects the dynamic characteristics of mega projects. At a minimum, they need to:

- be flexible enough to deal with changing circumstances and access new opportunities and technology
- deliver value for money
- allow commerciality
- deliver core project outcomes
- align parties' incentives and disincentives, often over very long timeframes, across multiple leadership teams and political cycles and
- have governability and capacity to deal with turbulence.

These are important and hard issues. But they should not deter leaders from undertaking projects like NBN, the Western Sydney Airport or the shipbuilding enterprise, or others in future, as they can make a huge contribution to Australia.

But what we need to recognise as an APS is that the leadership of mega projects is a specialty that needs systems leadership to bring to bear the right expertise and capabilities.

Conclusion

I'd like to leave you with this one last thought – we get the workplace and APS we create. If we all bring kindness, professionalism, respect and decency to work each day, we'll have a workplace that all of us are happy and proud to come to each day.

But above all, continue to keep growing and guiding others to grow across your life in the service.

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Thank you Simon. I thought that exceeded sensible. And in fact was a really thoughtful, authentic and personal speech. I really enjoyed listening to you. I'm just going to pick up on two or three issues that you raised and drill into them a little further. One of them was you set out a pretty compelling set of leadership behaviours and qualities that you expect to see in your team. One of those was collaboration. And I agree with you that collaborative leadership is incredibly important and indeed, over my time in the service, I think you see more collaboration in the system than might once have been the case.

But for all that, public service and public policy is by its nature a competitive and contested space. Agencies compete for scarce resources, supervisors compete for good people, leaders compete for influence, agencies compete on ideas. So how do you lead in a way that brings together collaborative effort in contested competitive spaces?

SIMON ATKINSON: At the risk of arguing against myself, I'm going to contest your question.

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Sure. Go ahead.

SIMON ATKINSON: I think we work best as a service when we can manage our instincts for competition and put the broader outcomes of the system we're operating in ahead of ourselves. And I've seen it work very well. We do it extremely well in a crisis. Everybody suspend self-interest through crisis. We saw with everybody deploying vast numbers of people to support each other. And it wasn't even a question.

When the secretary said, we need people to support services Australia, to onboard lots and lots of people, we all just jumped in and did it. I spoke to Rebecca and said, what exactly do you need? How can I shape it so I can get you the people you need? And we stopped. We stopped delivering a whole bunch of programme things. And we all took risk and in a crisis and it may just be an Australian thing or a public service thing, I'm not sure. But we all banded together. There wasn't a single thought for competitiveness at that point, we just wanted the right thing.

I think that we can fall back into what I'll call lazy competitiveness, where we're not thinking about the outcomes and we're not thinking about priorities and we're not thinking about the importance of things that other people are delivering. I think we're selling ourselves short when we do that.

I like a leadership team that can come together and say, okay, we need to deliver all of these things, let's spread our resources in a way that we can all succeed together. I don't like the contested idea particularly around agency resources. I think that agencies need to have the resources that they need sort of in the space of as much as necessary and as little as possible and be efficient.

There are natural areas of contest, I suppose, particularly in the policy realm. The one thing I would strongly advocate though is for those things that matter, that really matter, good in policymaking for me or great in policymaking for me is where we come to the table with our relative perspectives.

I might come with a macroeconomic perspective, secretary of home affairs might come with a security perspective, secretary of social services might come with a social policy perspective. Michele comes with kind of both. But when we're grappling with a complex problem to find the best outcome for the system, we need to hear each other's perspective, question the why behind it and find out the wisdom of why that person is taking that position.

And if we can all bring those perspectives, understand where everyone's coming from and why, step away from our personal perspectives and join as a group with a full understanding to work out what is actually in the best interest of the system, taking our own personal preference and perspective out of it. That's what great looks like in collaboration and that's what we should strive for.

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Yeah. Great. Thank you. I liked the concept of lazy competitiveness and working against it. Second thing I'd like to test with you or explore with you is around capability. So you mentioned some of the mega projects for which your large and very diverse portfolio has responsibility. And of course every portfolio has highly complex, challenging deliverables of one kind or another. How do you think the modern public service can access the capability it needs to deliver those projects successfully?

And that's in the context that you hear critics all the time argue that the service is somehow being hollowed out, the capability is suffered. So what's your take on where and how we get the capability we need be that internally by recruiting and developing the best people we can get or externally by partnering with external sources of expertise. What's your sort of take on that space?

SIMON ATKINSON: Firstly, I'd add subscribe to the whole idea theory. I know a lot of people who are ex-public servants want to say, usually the guy that leave. Interestingly enough, I read a speech from a secretary from about 15 years ago who had just retired and saying that the people from the generation before who said that they were hollowed out were wrong.

Yeah, there's a change in the shape of the public service. I think the public service traditions are here and the public service is strong and people like to talk us down, I don't. The capability strengths that we have we saw through COVID. The depth is there. The fact that we were able to stand up and keep great frank and field's advice on things that we'd never experienced before and help steward Australia through it, is an example of the fact of our capability.

There's different global challenges to what they were 20, 30 years ago and different policy challenges. The structures of them are different. And the size of some of the solutions is different. There's a lot of things that require lots and lots of little things to have outcomes. There's not always a big bang thing, it's easy to do. And people are often looking for a banking public polls. What's the second part again? I was just getting so focused on the [inaudible].

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Where will we find the capability to deliver the complex projects?

SIMON ATKINSON: So firstly, we grow it. We continue to grow it and we've grown at the same way we have probably for 40 or 50 years. We bring people into the service, we train people, they learn on the job. People learn the public service values, graduate programmes often help with that. We also have lots of other programmes for people who are going to take different roles.

As I went through, we're such a diverse APS that we actually have pipelines for growing the capability and they're the same sort of pipelines. So growing APS capability is important. The other thing is tapping into the things we don't have because there are some things that it's not good common sense for us to necessarily have a lot of detail on.

One of the great examples once again from COVID was setting up the FAM programme, which is a Freight Assistance Programme, which literally required us to be negotiating with freight forwarders and airlines, the movement of export freight with a subsidy arrangement inside of it, but a floating subsidy arrangement that made it to move based on commercial terms.

Do you think anyone in the service that ever run one of them before? Anyway, what we did is, we pulled together private sector expertise. We had the former CEO of Tal come in and worked with us for a year and took a leadership role. Headed the commercial negotiations and knew everything about that system. But what we successfully did is we linked him and others with that expertise into proper programme management, inside of transparent systems and proper public service property. And we actually had a very efficient, very effective programme that was based around private sector expertise.

And so I think the thing is we need to grow our core capabilities, but also shape ourselves so that we speak enough of the same languages to access external expertise when needed. The other thing is, this is my understanding various perspectives and understanding the shape of yourself in the system. You need to know what you're do and don't know. And you need to know when it's time to phone a friend and look around and go, ooh, that's the thing, oh, I don't know how to do that. And let's go and ask some people who've done it before. So that's really important in terms of type [inaudible] to capability. So we've got to grow ourselves, but also make ourselves open to the world of other opportunity.

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Sure. Thank you. And the third thing I wouldn't mind exploring is, and jumping off the fact that he knew a speech, and I must say I found it really refreshing from the point of view of a departmental secretary, who many people in the service we've got, well, you've got to the top of the tree, but you still talked about still growing, still evolving. And I thought that was really refreshing. But it begs the question that during your speech, you referenced aha moments during your career, but you didn't really elucidate what those aha moments were. Would you be able to share one or two of those moments?

SIMON ATKINSON: Yeah. Okay. Let's find some safe ones, shall we? Very frequently the aha moments are self-reflections on why something didn't go very well. So probably one of the biggest aha moments I had was in that same leadership programme that I was on as everybody does, seating up in barrel somewhere.

And we were in an exercise where everyone was talking, there's a problem solving thing. I'm not quite sure [inaudible] anyway. And there was a problem. And at that time in my self and leadership, I'd sort of been rewarded for being able to identify an issue, think through and solve a problem quickly and fix it. People like people who can do that.

And so my general mode was problem, think through, solve, fix. In this particular thing, I was like, right, I've got the answer. Now, ah, got to do collaboration, that means convincing everyone else I'm right. So I came up with an answer and then tried to convince everyone my answer was correct.

And what I did is I filled the space and I pushed out lots of other voices and all other solutions other than the one I come up with, which is fine so long as my solution was the best solution. Anyway, in the middle of one of these things, someone made a strange face at me while I was trying to convince everyone else I was right. I said, maybe I should hear what that person has to say.

And the person said something completely different to me in a completely different language that I completely didn't understand. And I listened and I was like, hmm, step back. And then I actually heard and asked why, and that was the first time I understood, sounds stupid but first time I really understood that there was a great value in diversity of views and languages because when I listened I was like, oh, I'd missed a whole part of the possible solution set because I just couldn't see it.

I was bringing my particular national security and economic framing. Oh, wait a minute, there's some people there. And so I opened, brought that in and listened and asked questions as my primary starting point. And I shifted from giving answers to asking questions is the way I approach issues now.

And it allows me to empower other people to solve things, to support them and ask questions without needing to be able to solve things myself. And it allowed me to step back into a space and to allow other people to seek, seek to the best of their ability and to collaborate and get better solutions [inaudible].

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Powerful example. Thank you for sharing that. Now we've got some time for questions from other folks.

DAVID GRUEN: Simon, you talked about mega projects. One of the things that I think makes mega projects tricky is that, there's a kind of plan and a roadmap, and then you have a change of government and the new government has different ideas about how this mega project should advance. And I guess NBN is a pretty good example of that. And I'm just wondering when one is thinking about the public service contribution to this, to what extent can you safeguard that project from the possibility that the plan is going to change materially as it's being developed?

SIMON ATKINSON: Yeah. Great question there. So if you go back to the, to that six dot points I said of what we need to make this succeed, I think three of them focused on agility. One of the risk profile pieces that we need to consider the start is the social and political piece. The alignment of, pardon me, support across the objective set of the project is important. So if the fundamentals are such that all of the competing forces are aligned that this project is necessary, then the fundamentals of the project will generally continue. You might know what the pathway looks like.

I also think we'd make a project, as it always an urge for false precision as to, hey, you're going to get to the finish line. And I think we need to be very honest with governments about that and say, here's the plan that has technology and circumstance evolve over time, so we'll wait.

And when I have discussions with the CEOs of the GBS that deliver some of these big things, that's actually one of the most important things is for them to find opportunities in using things that are happening but also to address challenges that evolve as well. And so I think the last thing I said is there is governance arrangements that are flexible enough to address turbulence.

And this is what I mean by turbulence. It's changes in your operating context of which the choices of the political class on one and genetic arrangements getting busy that those sorts of things will happen. And so we need to build in enough flexibility to the design of governance for these things to do that.

Optimally, you can get alignment across the political spectrum, but even if it's not a political thing that will change, community things change, industry things change, market conditions change. So you can't tell which of the things will evolve, but you need to put in place a plan that's flexible enough and agile enough and leadership that's agile enough that we can actually respond to those things and deliver the major project outcomes when we need to. Keeping in mind that sometimes you don't even know the shape of what that will look like.

If you're building a big technology enabled system and it's going to be delivered in 10 years time, and an element of it is a screen that looks like an iPhone 12. You can't spec an iPhone 12 because in 10 years time they'll be in a museum. So you actually need to think about how you build agility into that. And that also means the piece that I talked about, aligning incentive and disincentive so that when your partners in delivery are faced with these issues and you're faced with these issues, you're in the same boat together, resolving them together because a lot of it's unforeseeable.

And so one of the things I think that people don't get right in the mega-project world is they go, oh, we're building one of these. Let's just take a day and see contract model and just make it big. That's not going to work. We need actually much more flexible arrangements that work with the ebbs and flows of our society and systems. Sorry. That was a really geeky answer, but...

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Good answer.

JACQUI CURTIS: Hi. Thank you, Jacqui Curtis from the ATO. I noticed that you're speaking at an upcoming conference on the government's regulatory reform conference later in July. And you talked a lot about how during COVID, we'd collaborated more effectively. Also during COVID we saw a lot of I guess, easing up on regulatory issues. So distillers being out to

make hand sanitizer, for example. How can the public service best position itself to support the government's reform agenda around regulation?

SIMON ATKINSON: Okay. That's a really good question, Jacqui. I'll just reflect on COVID a little bit. One of the things with regulatory reform is that most regulations were put in place for a reason at the start. And there's a question for each regulation, particularly old ones about whether or not the balance of efficiency versus regulatory outcomes has been achieved by a particular regulation and obviously there's a vast amounts of it.

The thing with COVID is, it changed the priority equation in such a strong way that all these incentives across public services of all levels and political class levels aligned in such a way that the urge to deal with problems pushed away regulation. Now each of those choices brings risk with it because you're moving fast. And in an ordinary sense, you might not move that quickly because you're going through the unintended consequences of what might happen.

And so all of us embraced quite a bit more risk in the things we did to manage COVID and to keep Australia running. And now as we work through some of those things, some of the things we cut through as it were, we'll put back in place because in a sensible, normal, balanced society, it's appropriate.

Some other things created efficiency and when we got rid of them, we actually probably don't need them anymore. And so we'll keep that as an efficiency piece. I think the challenge for us in the regulatory space is looking, and this is what I'm going to talk about the next page, is looking at our markets as a whole and not through one lens.

So when I look at good markets, I look at them being sustainable, accessible, competitive, efficient, safe, one other thing. Anyway, and a model that talks about once again, bringing all these lenses together and making a balance of what the shape of the footprint of government on a particular market and sector is.

So that we are making sure that our policy settings are aligned and informed by each other. They don't duplicative and they're making for the best market system in interests of Australia. And once again, that is about collaboration and understanding the wisdom behind each of the things.

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: So we got time for one more. Another question. [inaudible].

KATHY LEIGH: Thank you. First I'm going to say, Simon, I loved the way your private and public service really came through as you spoke. You just mentioned false precision in mega projects, is there a similar issue that governments confront, which is a real push to show certainty about answers and outcomes and how that demand can actually sometimes undermine government objectives because of the issue of entrust in government, when that certainty doesn't play out? I just wonder if you have any comments on that.

SIMON ATKINSON: Yes. This is one of the complex soft areas of discussions with government and policy advice. And it's not just in government, it's in our discussions with the public. People always want a certain answer, they want a concrete answer. And there's sometimes an urge to give one even where there's, let's just say, an open question.

My view is to always be completely frank and honest on this stuff. If the answer is probably in a range between X and Y at an 80% probability, that's what I'm going to say. And it's important for us to sort of stick to that and not be pushed beyond. Sometimes we will be happy to give a number and sometimes that won't be right. But we just need to make judgement calls on many of those.

And I think at all levels of government, we did the same pressures, because very often someone wants a number. What day were you dealing with it? Well, there's 16 variables between now and then, and 32 different things that contribute to that. But it'll be four o'clock on next Thursday.

So words matter quite a bit in this, and we just need to make sure, one of the things I like to say is, we create a meeting of the minds of what we're doing in language. So with respect to ministers and the public, I try to engage in such a way that there's a meeting of the minds of what we mean by the words. And so that there's no surprises and that people really understand what's behind various pieces. And so that takes time and it takes engagement. And we don't always get it right. Hey, Michael, can I have one more question from a more junior person. Anyone.

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: There's one.

JACK MILNE: I'm Jack Milne from the Attorney-General's Department and also in the Future Leaders Committee, IPAA. In terms of your half verbiage, I'm more thinking about what was your 'whoopsie' moment and what did you learn from it and what can future leaders learn from 'whoopsie' moment and turn it into an 'a-ha' moment. Thank you.

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: You're glad you did that. You're really glad you did that.

SIMON ATKINSON: No. So these are the best questions though, because [inaudible]. Okay. So I've had so many whoopsie moments it's like, hmm. Probably the most formative one for me was, I'm not going to give the context too much because I think that person will be known to many of you. I was leading a group of people and I decided that we needed to change our structures and how we worked.

One of the people who worked for me care deeply about a various aspect of the work. I'd come up with a constructive, well, actually, if we reshape the thing that that person is most interested in we'll succeed a lot. But I was going to get that person to do a different job that would make that succeed well, but with different types of engagement. Anyway, it was a lot of heat and light. Telling this story without details is actually hard.

Anyway, the nub of it is, I decided on a restructure and by restructure, I'm talking like 13 or 14 people. And I was going to reshape the business model, what we're going to do. So I spent a week consulting with everybody who's there. And then I got everyone together and talked about how are we going to go forward. Great. And what I do notice is that one person was away on leave that week.

And so the next week we were like, all right, we're in a new configuration. And all of a sudden this person came to me and was really quite angry. I was like, what's going on? I didn't really understand him. Anyway, about two days into the new work model, person exploded at me in the floor in front of everyone and sort of a, this is an outrage, you don't care about the things we're doing. Ooh, okay, this is a surprise. I just did take the person away from everybody else and actually hear it out.

And the person was someone who had very strong values, connections to the things we were doing. And in her mind, I had no rationale or reason for the changes that are made and showed a disrespect for the relationships that invested in the work they were doing. And I was just flabbergasted because I'd spoken to everyone, but I hadn't spoken to her because she was on leave and she needed something from me as a leader. She needed me to deploy myself to her and hear her and care about her stuff. And when I actually ended up explaining to her, everything was fine again.

But it's one of those imprinting aha moments of people need different things from you. And they need different amounts from you. And some people wouldn't have cared at all, some [inaudible]. But one of the things that was most valuable about it was the passion that this person brought to work each day. And that passion poorly communicated with and poorly led by me, resulted in a bad explosion.

So anyway, one of the things I learned very quickly using particularly it's most teams, when you're leading people, you really need to understand what motivates people and what they need to be the best version of themselves and empowered to succeed. And sometimes it's quite different to what you need.

MICHAEL MANTHORPE: Great answer. Thank you. So someone who wants to work in the White House once said to me that in the White House, the most valuable commodity is the President's time. And I was speaking your portfolio today that the most valuable commodity is your time. So I just want to thank you very sincerely for the time and the generosity of time that you've been able to give us today. And obviously the thought and effort that went into your speech and your remarks. So thank you very much.