

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

ANNUAL ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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PHILIP GAETJENS (Keynote Address and Panellist)
Secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

PROFESSOR BRENDAN MURPHY (Panellist)
Secretary, Department of Health

REBECCA SKINNER (Panellist)
Chief Executive Officer, Services Australia

KATHERINE JONES PSM (Panellist)
Associate Secretary, Department of Defence
Councillor, IPAA ACT

PETER WOOLCOTT AO (Closing Remarks)
Commissioner, Australian Public Service Commission

Hosted by DR STEVEN KENNEDY PSM, Secretary of The Treasury and IPAA ACT
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STEVEN KENNEDY:

Good evening. We might get started, if you could take a seat, please. Thank you. Good evening, everyone, and welcome to the Annual Address to the Australian Public Service. My name is Steven Kennedy and I am the Secretary of the Treasury and President of IPAA ACT and I'll be your Chair this evening.

Before I proceed, I would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. I would like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be attending this evening's event and to the Elders of all the lands this livestreamed event reaches.

It's great to be able to bring you together for this event in person. It's fantastic to see so many people here, Phil, and a great testament to see so many of your colleagues here as well, but we are live-streaming. We have shown a lot of innovation this year and there has been a lot that has been done digitally.

We know you're going to enjoy the opportunity to network and connect but you'll be doing that, of course, in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines, and I've asked Brendan to oversee those guidelines throughout the course of the networking. No, I haven't. He's having the evening off after this. But please ensure you respect physical distancing protocols and use the hand sanitiser in the room as required. Peter will have a few more remarks to talk about how the networking will take place when he closes.

I would like to welcome our speakers, one who will be giving a speech, Philip Gaetjens, the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet; Professor Brendan Murphy, Secretary of Department of Health; Rebecca Skinner, Chief Executive Officer of Services Australia; Katherine Jones PSM, Associate Secretary of Department of Defence; and, as I just mentioned, Peter Woolcott AO, Australian Public Service Commissioner will close this evening. I would really like to welcome my Secretary colleagues, Senior Executives, members, partners and guests, and could I say to my colleagues it's so pleasing to see so many of you here after a very busy year.

IPAA has been running the Annual Address to the APS for over a decade now and it has become a tradition to hear from Secretary of PM&C as the year comes to a close. After the extraordinary year we have all experienced, we would like to thank you all for your exceptional hard work and dedication to service which has contributed to supporting the Australian community through the COVID-19 pandemic, and it's worth remembering this all began for so many of you back in late December and early January with the bushfires. It has been truly a remarkable year. The entire public sector, state and Federal, has pulled together in the face of the crisis to coordinate the unprecedented policy response. And this evening IPAA is delighted to partner with PM&C and the APSC to deliver this event.

I would also like to thank IPAA's partners for their ongoing support and they have been great support throughout the year - KPMG, Hays, Telstra, Minter Ellison, Commonwealth Bank of Australia and Microsoft.

So the format for this evening will be a keynote address from Phil followed by a panel discussion and there will be time for the panel to respond to some pre-submitted audience questions. The panel was given those pre-submitted audience questions so I've changed them to just sharpen it up a little bit. I will then invite Peter Woolcott to make some closing remarks and, as I said earlier, there will be an opportunity for networking. We are photographing and filming this evening's event, which will be available on the IPAA website soon.

Now, it's my pleasure to introduce and welcome our keynote speaker, Phil Gaetjens. Phil commenced in his role of Secretary, Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet in September 2019. I am really not sure you knew, Phil, what you were in for when you took that role on. I think you had some idea but it's been a very big year. Prior to that appointment, Phil was in my position as Secretary to The Treasury. Phil has more than 40 years experience in Commonwealth and state public sectors. And, Phil, can I thank you and your colleagues at PM&C for your exceptional leadership in this most remarkable year. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Phil Gaetjens.

PHILIP GAETJENS:

Good evening, everyone, and I'd like to say that it's great to see a lot of faces in the one room. It is almost an APS200 in here but that's another group. (He speaks in Ngunnawal language). In the language of the traditional owners, this means this is Ngunnawal country. Today we are all meeting together on this Ngunnawal Country and we acknowledge and pay our respects to the Elders. I would also like to acknowledge and welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attending today. And thank you, Steven, and for IPAA for hosting this today.

2020 has been a year like no other. It's been a year of ongoing calamities and responses. A year of swift, decisive actions from government and courage and resilience from the community. A year of stress and disruption, hardship and loss but also a year that brought out the best in the APS, a group I proudly call 'us'.

Massive bushfires had not ended before COVID-19 came ashore in January 2020. Progressive international border closures starting on 1 February leveraged our island geography and allowed the states and territories the time to make health systems ready for a COVID pandemic. We suppressed the virus and have achieved nearly no community transmission. We have checked out our health systems and now we know that they can respond quickly if there is a breakout. We have been able to lift restrictions on individual freedoms and open up state borders. We have seen some surprising upsides, like the massive uptake of technology across Australian businesses, nine in ten firms taking on new technology to get through the health-induced

economic downturn, and the upturn in regional tourism as people swap overseas holidays for exploring our own backyard. Some parts of regional Australia actually reported higher numbers of visitors in August this year compared to last year.

Thanks to a concerted effort, we have come through this year remarkably well, and a big part of that effort came from us, the Australian Public Service. The Prime Minister said as much last month to the APS 200. This year we saw the APS at its very best. For me, I have never been more proud of the APS after almost 44 years of time in the public service. For the 2020 graduates, you too should take incredible pride of your first year in the public service. Bottle the memories and draw upon them for the rest of your career. Remember the purpose, the rapid response, agility, mobility and digital savvy that you have seen this year and apply them liberally during your career.

A vital ingredient to our achievement in 2020 was our willingness to work together. We worked as one enterprise with one dominant purpose. At the very time that the Australian community demanded government action and public service, we proved to the community and to ourselves that we could step up and deliver. The results of this effort are clear. Let's look at the scoreboard.

On health, by any metric, Australia has fared exceptionally well. We have successfully suppressed the virus across the country, with community transmission remaining very low. We have the third lowest case rate and the fourth lowest death rate in the OECD. The World Health Organisation identified Australia as having one of the most well-prepared health systems in the world, stating "Australia demonstrated strong regional and global leadership and a robust capacity to prevent, prepare for, detect and respond to public health threats". That's a scorecard we can all be proud of.

Our economic scorecard is also one of the best in the developed world. Outside of the oil-producing countries, Australia's economic performance over the last nine months is among the best of the countries that have managed the virus well, including Japan and Korea. Between March and May, 870,000 jobs were lost and more than 1 million Australians had working hours cut. But 700,000 jobs were saved as a result of the Government's economic measures and about 650,000 Australians have found jobs or been re-employed since May.

The Federal Budget has been the shock absorber that has taken a big hit. The 2020 Budget saw a record \$670 billion in spending, or 34.4% of GDP, more than 10 percentage points above the balanced Budget result in 2018/19. We are fortunate as a country for the fiscal discipline before then. The starting point of a balanced Budget provided the fiscal headroom for this necessary support to keep the economy going.

The GDP figures for the September quarter showed the beginnings of recovery from recession, with 3.3% growth in the quarter. If my memory is right, we are still through the year at negative position but household disposable income is 8.1% higher through the year to September. So GDP went down. Household income went up. It shows you the size of the support that we have provided the community. The recovery has begun but it is going to be a very long road back to sustainability, with the economy being smaller than what it might have been for many years to come.

Two other measures tell us a lot about what we have achieved: one that assesses the APS during the pandemic and a second that looks at citizen experience. The Australian National Audit Office is undertaking a series of performance audits to assess the Government response to the pandemic. The first was published earlier this month and covered the management of the Australian Public Service's work force response to COVID-19. The report found that management of the APS work force was effective in implementing the Government's COVID-19 priorities. I may be biased but that audit language translates to me into a resounding endorsement of the performance of the APS this year and its ability to act on an enterprise or whole-of-government basis. The report also acknowledged the excellent work of the Chief Operating Officers Committee.

The second measure comes from the results of the Citizen Experience Survey, which after a long but necessary gestation period to allow technically rigorous testing, PM&C is releasing today. The survey measures people's trust in, and satisfaction with, the Australian Public Services that they use. From the first time the survey was undertaken, in March 2019, experts from across the APS and the academic community have been engaged in the design, delivery and analysis of the citizen survey. All up, this has meant two years of work, including an independent evaluation by the ANU and ongoing peer review by experts in the APS community, including by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

We have now got analysis of more than 15,000 responses from across Australia that provide more than half a million data cells and a rigorous and reliable picture of Australians' trust in, and satisfaction with, the Australian Public Services that they use. The results after five waves of the survey to June this year show improvement over time. To be frank, the picture was not encouraging back in March 2019. Back then, the number of people who were somewhat to wholly satisfied with the services they used was around 71%. Those inclined to trust APS services were sitting at 59%. The survey in March this year provided results that were worse. Not exactly a glowing report card but today I can share some good news.

By June this year, results had not only stopped falling; they had started climbing. Satisfaction had climbed to 78% and trust to 65%. These might seem like small changes but they are significant. They show that we have turned a corner. It's a great result and even more remarkable set against well-documented low levels of trust in institutions over many decades, not just here but around the world. These results are a credit to all of you, as the survey relates to Federal Government service provision.

But these are not just feel-good measures. An analysis of those survey results shows satisfaction builds trust, and trust in the APS and other public institutions is the foundation for a healthy, well-functioning democracy. Let's put these findings in the context of managing COVID-19. You can't effectively manage a pandemic and respond to it without public trust. You're asking people to curb freedoms, to change or sometimes up-end their lifestyles and everyday behaviours. Trust in times like this means traction. So satisfaction and trust are tracking up and now we need to keep it that way and analysis of earlier results provide some clues on where we need to focus our efforts.

The June results show that citizens were three times more likely to be satisfied if information was clear. Citizens were five times more likely to be satisfied when, after contact from the APS, we followed through on what we said we would do. And citizens were more than four times more likely to trust Public Services if they were reliable; that is, they were well-managed, dependable and adaptive to the needs of Australians. In short, this tells us that getting the little things right matter. It tells us we must make the process, the interactions between us and citizens, as simple, intuitive and seamless as we can. It's not just the outcome that matters. We have to give citizens the same kind of user experience they have in other aspects of their lives. In blunt terms, the feedback is that it's not about us; it's about citizens and their experience with us.

The results also tell us we need to do more when it comes to young Australians. Just 43% of 18- to 24-year-olds confidently report they know how to access services compared to 53% of other people in other age groups. We need to do better in helping young people understand how, when and what services they need to access. Preliminary analysis of the survey wave that was just recently undertaken in October and November gives us some confidence that the results are still tracking positively but we need to keep it that way.

So let me repeat the take-outs of the data: provide simple and clear information, do what we say we will, and deliver reliable services. These are key to the satisfaction with, and trust in, public services. They are also consistent with the Prime Minister's focus for us to be citizen-centric. In the APS, you would all know, those watching us would all know, we have been at an increased tempo for months. It's time to take a breath, to rest and digest, as the health experts say.

In 2021, we will need to lift our gaze from this year, to look up and out and over the horizon and plan for what may come next. We know that in 2021 the economy will need to continue to need support as it emerges from our first recession in nearly 30 years. To manage this and the future, our effectiveness in the APS will depend on us continuing to work together and to get things done and to provide simple and clear information, to do what we say we will, and deliver reliable services.

2020 launched the APS enterprise. Our purpose now is to maintain and improve our enterprise through good policy design, good advice, good collaboration, effective implementation and delivery, and good APS governance.

2020 has also demonstrated the importance of caring for our own selves and each other's physical and mental health. So as many of you head into a well-earned break over summer, come back refreshed and next year continue to look after yourself and your colleagues because I am sure the new year will also prove to be full-on. Thank you again for everything you have done and all the best for Christmas and the New Year. Thank you.

STEVEN KENNEDY:

Thanks, Phil. The results of that survey and the exercise that has gone into producing it is excellent. It was very pleasing to hear them and it shows how powerful evidence data and expertise can be, particularly when set next to judgment, which I think has been a key part of the success this year.

It's now my pleasure to welcome our panellists, who have been brought together to share their reflections on the year that has been and discuss some of the key learnings and innovations that inspire them for the Service to deliver priorities for 2021. I'll get you to clap at the end, if you like. Otherwise, it's a bit odd if you clap each one as they come up. We're still the public service. We don't want to get ahead of ourselves.

Let me welcome Professor Brendan Murphy, Secretary of the Department of Health, former Chief Medical Officer, and I might also note - you might want to clap this one - 2021 ACT Australian of the Year. Please join us.

Please also welcome Rebecca Skinner, CEO of Services Australia, and Katherine Jones PSM, Associate Secretary of the Department of Defence and former Chair of the COO Committee. Please join us.

Thank you, colleagues. I might start just with an opening question that I might ask all of you to answer but I'll start right down the other end and come back and then perhaps ask some individual questions as we go. Some of our colleagues are really interested in your key priorities for your organisation and agency in 2021 and the language that is used is in the post-COVID environment. I guess the quite strange thing, if we start with you, Brendan, is we're not quite in the post-COVID environment. We are still in the middle of COVID. So I would really be interested in your thoughts for your agencies, as we're still in COVID, as we go into 2021, and then how you're thinking as things evolve across the course of the year?

BRENDAN MURPHY:

Thanks, Steven. So you're absolutely right. We are not post-COVID. Just looking at the Republic of Korea, which is one of the most successful countries that has just gone wild again over the last few days, and we are in a sort of precariously wonderful position now that we have to maintain. We have become a very risk-averse nation. Our state and territory governments are very risk averse, which is probably good in some ways but it is difficult for some of other challenges like bringing Australians home.

The Department of Health, probably its biggest priority is COVID vaccination delivery at the moment. We are in a lovely position of likely to have successful vaccines. How successful they will be in terms of preventing transmission we don't know but they certainly look like they'll be successful in preventing disease. So if we don't deliver the vaccine rollout, probably the biggest logistical challenges of our time, the Prime Minister won't forgive us. He's very, very focused on that and we have got a very clear message from him.

So that is really important for us, along with making sure under our national health leadership, that the states and territories try to get some sort of semblance of not overreacting, keeping a bit of an open society, but then we do have to move into business as usual. So we have some very big reform objectives that we have to get back into and they include, in our space, aged care. This microphone seems to be dropping in and out. Aged care and mental health are probably the two biggest ones. We've got to look at what we did in the COVID environment and see if we can. So we have to then also look at what we did in the COVID environment in some of those initiatives that we brought about really quickly without any of the normal scrutiny of process, such as telehealth, many of the other initiatives, and we have got to mainstream all of those and continue to deliver the very extensive reform agenda of our highly energetic Minister. So there's a lot to be done but we can't forget that we are going to be living with this virus for at least another year, I would think.

STEVEN KENNEDY:

Katherine?

KATHERINE JONES:

Thanks, Steven. From my current Department, Defence, I think there's three perspectives that I would give. Firstly, like Health and like many other parts of the APS, we're still very much in the thick of the response to COVID. Lots of ADF people are posted around the country still in different capacities and part of the bringing Australians home effort. Ironically, quite a lot of ADF personnel are being posted in order to facilitate other people being brought home to their families, so that's part of being in Defence and the role that Defence plays.

The second aspect I think for us is around the ongoing embedding of the changes that have been brought in the way that we operate by COVID, although I try not to place so much emphasis on the fact that it's a response to COVID. I think it's better to think that COVID has facilitated a lot of positive things that we've all been talking about trying to do in the APS, whether it's flexible work, remote working, joining up collectively across government to address issues and thinking about ourselves as that one APS, that we have said a lot - I can see Mary Wiley-Smith smiling at me as I say that. But we have talked about it a lot. The event has helped us do more of that. But I think it would be a mistake for us to see that as being purely about COVID. COVID has exacerbated some trends that we were seeing happening prior to that, but it's given us a platform, I think, to take it to the next level and embed it, and that's why I am less concerned about snapback that people talk about. I think we were seeing a trend happening. COVID has been a catalyst to take things to a new level. The challenge for all of us, though, is to keep that maintained.

The third thing from a Defence perspective - and my colleague sitting to the right of me, I'm really conscious of the fact that I have my predecessor sitting right next to me - in my current role, we have just finalised a transformation strategy for the organisation that we hope will drive significant reform across every aspect of what we do. The exciting thing is Defence is an organisation that has been reviewed many, many times. We have had recommendations provided by external people or internally and we have responded. We have dealt with it. Then we've said, "We've ticked that box and we will continue on being the Department of Defence" and operating as the Department of Defence often has, although noting First Principles Review was a big change.

With the current reform, we are genuinely trying to undertake a transformation of the organisation, recognising that if you think about the fact that we're one of the larger employers, one of the larger manufacturers, we run a health system, we are, I think - Michelle might correct me - but I think we are one of the largest registered training organisations in the country. All the complexity of our responsibilities, we need to think differently about how we operate through to all the APS values and APS obligations in terms of good governance.

But I think of us as a bit more as a hybrid organisation. We operate as much in the commercial world as we do in the public sector and so we need to think about transforming ourselves in a way that enables us to perform well across those two sectors. So that's really exciting. We've got a lot of head of steam around that transformation. I know probably many people have said that before, and Rebecca can give me some pointers, but it's fantastic to be able to go into next year with a sense of actually trying to change the nature of the organisation slightly. I know that sounds a bit perhaps both ambitious and naive, but I think we can make a genuine difference next year.

STEVEN KENNEDY: Thanks. Rebecca?

REBECCA SKINNER: Steven, I'm with Brendan. We're not really in a post-COVID world yet but our priority next year will be to really take that citizen-centric focus that the Prime Minister had outlined for us. We have really been able to capitalise on that in terms of the pace with which we could access technology to bring that further forward. So for us, that idea that technology - the world moved about five years in about six weeks is something that, from a services to the citizen perspective, it's an opportunity for us to really prioritise that further rollout and that transformation. I love a bit of transformation, so Katherine can keep going with the Defence one and I'll keep ... with a Minister on transformation as well.

Our focus is on continuing to build those citizen-centric services. We have collaborated with many more partners this year and we have done services we didn't expect to do. And to do things like supporting Brendan with the rollout of the Australian Immunisation Register. We're really clear that we've got to roll that out. Brendan has got to deal with the big logistics piece. We need to deal with the register, the credential that people might need out of that, so it's a collaborative effort to deliver those sorts of things. And we think that pace will just continue for us across the year.

STEVEN KENNEDY: All quiet in your world, Phil?

PHILIP GAETJENS: In terms of all of us in this room and those watching, I think 2021 is going to be not just the year of vaccine delivery but delivery overall. Again, we won't get the economic support that we need to get out of the hole unless the money is actually spent, used on the ground. So we have to get it out; it has to be spent. So we have to talk to whoever we are dealing with - the states, the service providers - to actually get that out. I agree 100% with Katherine, I think COVID has been an accelerant of existing trends so what we have to use is the leverage off that accelerant so that we can use some of the more levers that we have so that we can do our work more flexibly. It's like riding a pushbike with derailleurs or even the old ones with brakes. You can't pedal backwards. So let's not take a step back. Let's lock in what we've got, knowing that again there will still be a bit of uncertainty for a bit but I think move on and again it's delivery and implementation.

STEVEN KENNEDY:

Phil, on that note, Katherine, I might ask you to make a comment about this. One of my reflections on why this Service worked so effectively together across the course of this year was the COO Committee, which, from our perspective, provided just an enormous amount of support, and not in a coordination sense; real strategic advice in the way it pulled the whole APS together. Of course, you had an enormous role in leading that Committee. Can you tell us a little bit about why you agree and why you thought it worked and sort of what some of your reflections on the COO Committee were?

KATHERINE JONES:

Thanks, Steven. I won't disagree with that. A couple of things and it goes with the accelerant point again. Am I getting heard OK? There had been a strong appetite from Secretaries and a lot of Deputy Secretaries to want to bring together that collective preparedness to solve things from a one APS perspective prior to COVID. I remember being in meetings with lots of COO colleagues around the table for a range of things pre 2020 where we recognised that there was a real space for us to come together and offer some solutions to Secretaries. Then I think Secretaries themselves obviously got together and recognised there was a role there, and one could make an observation about the prescience of Secretaries to have formally established the COO Committee literally in the weeks prior to COVID taking off.

The success of it, I think, to a degree, was having a clear mandate from Secretaries to crack on and make decisions, to have a genuine desire to solve issues quickly and to have consistency. We all were worried about our staff in the same way as we were dealing with the same issues around work health and safety, about work conditions, about how to support people through a really difficult time, how to reallocate resources. So I think it was drawing on an understanding and a desire to operate collectively in a one APS way prior to COVID, and because those elements were there, we were able to leap in fairly quickly.

I can see so many of the faces of the people that I worked with on the Committee sitting around here now. Really, the collective approach and the way everyone just forgot about barriers between organisations and really thought about the fact that we were custodians for the APS work force as a whole, I think that was really a key element to the approach and then being able to shift very quickly to a crisis operational mode, which we had to, and I think people have heard, we started off on a tempo of monthly meetings and then we shifted to weekly and then we shifted to daily and I think there was even a period where we were meeting twice a day to resolve things and just to ensure that all our staff across our organisations were getting the same information, the same advice. We were supporting small agencies across government because we knew that they needed that broader support, and sharing best practice. So all of us were able to support each other.

I know this is sounding a bit kumbaya, but it actually genuinely was a very positive experience, although also one that was very focused on quick decision-making and taking advantage of the support and the mandate that we had from Secretaries.

STEVEN KENNEDY:

Thank you. Brendan, you would have seen a lot of leadership behaviours in the last year and, of course, you come with great experience in other sectors, seeing leadership in the private sector, of course in the direct delivery of medicine, and you mentioned working with your state colleagues and your own Department - you and Caroline and Paul and many others and Michael. Do you have any reflections on those behaviours and perhaps not with a post-COVID mindset but with what we can really embed and take away? Has the senior team been talking about some of those issues?

BRENDAN MURPHY:

Yes, I think this year has brought out the best in a lot of leaders. The National Cabinet process, which I was privy to sit through for the first 15 or 20 meetings; Phil was there too - the abandonment of some of the party political differences, the clear unity of purpose to get things done. And we saw that internally as well. I think there was none of this, "Oh, well, I can't afford to spare that person" or "You'll have to pay for that person." It was, "What can we give you? Let's release those people." We had this huge flexible cooperation both internally within Departments - I mean, the divisions and branches almost blurred a bit as people formed task forces to do things. Some of the most unlikely people turned out in a crisis to be the best leaders and the occasional person you thought was a pretty strong leader fell over. So it was quite an interesting reflection. But the best thing I think from the APS point of view was the collaboration we saw.

I remember one of the big things, talking here with Katherine, was the ADF. I could not believe what an incredibly deployable and versatile organisation that was. We stood up - the Howard Springs Quarantine Centre. I think we decided it on two days before the first flight landed and Minister Hunt and I flew up there. There was a plane-load of soldiers. "We're setting up a quarantine" and it was, "Right, OK, off we go." Some of those things would take months to negotiate in a normal situation, so we mustn't lose some of that capacity for us to just pick up the phone to someone in another Department or within your Department and say, "Let's fix this" and rather than say "Why not?", say, "How do we make it happen?". So a crisis sometimes does bring out the best. And we were pretty terrified as a nation. But I would so proud of the way people in Health just stood up. Caroline was signing contracts in the middle of the night with people from all over the world, restoring our PPE supplies. People just did things. So I think we must bottle that and not lose it.

STEVEN KENNEDY:

Thanks, Brendan. Rebecca, Services Australia obviously did just a magnificent job, and the ATO. I acknowledge Jacqui Curtis here today. That's a big shift for Services Australia. It's a lot of systems. And it really did adjust and respond. What are your reflections there? You spoke a little in your opening remarks about how some of these things will stick and a number of us have mentioned it's accelerating pre-COVID trends, but these two institutions - but, in your case, your institution - really stood up and adjusted. What are your reflections and what do you think will stick - or what are you seeing today that has already stuck from those months in which the whole place was shifting around?

REBECCA SKINNER:

Well, I think firstly getting across the scope of Services Australia is your challenge, number one. I think for us we were really heavily focused on the need to deliver. My team are here today, a number of them, and being a really present leader was exceptionally important, and to their great credit, I was prepared to be really present but my level of understanding on the organisation was very low. So their leader was prepared to be there but was coming at the personal journey on understanding the organisation from a really low base. So we led as a team. We really collaborated. We had some tough conversations. It's not easy to move a Titanic into a different direction. We had all those same institutional things about, "Well, I've got my work to do over here. I can't necessarily get over there in the first instance." So we had those great conversations amongst us. We moved people. We then absorbed all of the good fortune from the APS 2000 into the system, and that's also both a challenge in a leadership sense for those who let them go to come to us. It's a challenge in a leadership sense for those of us to absorb those people and then those people were also on their own personal leadership journey as they stepped up to new tasks and learnt new things. But I think they are all better for that because of the opportunity to engage directly with Australian citizens.

I think the most telling thing for us as leaders was hearing the feedback from staff that came and joined us where they would get that instant reward. They have heard someone's very challenging story and they had the power to help that person in that moment go home and put food on the table or feel safe that the Government's system was able to throw out very quickly a blanket that supported social cohesion. So it's been a big leadership journey for all of us. I think the thing we will take away is that agility and the ability to know that if it happened again, we're not nearly as attached to our stove pipes and our lay-ins as a collective as we might have been at the beginning of the year when we all started out. I think that's been our collective journey.

STEVEN KENNEDY: Thank you. That's a really good point. I might ask each of you to make a comment about the lock-in of this closer collaboration. Of course, we're still in COVID, as Brendan so rightly said, and we'll be still drawn together by the nature of this crisis and, as Phil outlined, the economic recovery will take many years. So there are natural things that will join us together but there are not so natural things but things that might not see it remain perhaps as vibrant and as effective as it has.

Have you had a chance to turn your mind to what - are there systems, are there processes, are there mindset? Is it a retelling of the story? What will lock in this closer collaboration that has seen the Australian Public Service really come together? Rebecca, I'll ask you to comment first since you raised it but then I might ask the other panel members to comment after that.

REBECCA SKINNER: I think the thing that we need to lock in as part of this collaboration is the focus we have got on the Australian citizen. The Australian citizen was the beneficiary of really good collaboration across the public service, and so, from my perspective, that's got to be the essence of where we come from. A citizen shouldn't have to understand how to navigate the structure of the Australian Public Service to get their outcomes, for example. We've got to have a natural collaboration that brings together those services and presents them back, and so I sort of see - as Services Australia moves forward, it has some big capabilities. It's got people. It can do call centres. It can do payments. It can do processes. If you take that and think about how you can collaborate with Foreign Affairs, for example, to make a pile of outbound calls and do some processing or - you know, we're doing some work on the travel agents piece at the moment. So I think if we rethink what we're here to do in terms of our policy and, therefore, our service delivery, that will just help us naturally collaborate because we'll keep the citizen at the centre of what we're trying to achieve and we will be focused on delivering a better outcome for them. So that's how I think we should anchor the collaboration going forward.

STEVEN KENNEDY: Phil?

PHILIP GAETJENS: Look, I think that's right. I think what we have already begetting more things. There's more collaboration - I think we have created, if you like, more sinews between the organisations in the public service. So we had the national coordinating mechanism in Home Affairs. That was reaching out through all the bits of the public service, bringing it together, bringing states together, bringing the public service and the states and the shops together. So it was an enormous outreach.

I think one of the biggest things we can also learn - and I actually took from the way we had to re-cut APS reform - is not to have, if you like, a blue-sky conceptual outcome but to actually have a process where we're building on some successes and increasing the scale because we can either adapt successes, expand upon them or apply a process to a different area. So I think a lot of these things where we have created new levers, new processes, new engagements either external to the public service or within the public service, we can actually build on the successes that we have achieved and expand. I think that gives us some more confidence, if you like, that what we're doing, we know it's worked. So we then just have to look at its adaptability and its flexibility with respect to producing bigger and better things because that's what we are going to be more focused on and, again, all of the bits that we do behind our interactions with the citizens, it's more about not us but our interactions with the citizens. That's the bit that we need to focus on.

STEVEN KENNEDY:

Katherine, one of my reflections on being a little bit more involved these days with the national security apparatus is the sense in which its shared common purpose and objective processes binds it. Plenty of good debate, plenty of different views, but a very strong shared sense of common purpose. I think the citizen is one version of that. Sitting in Defence, newly, but also having worked in those other Departments, is this a time in which we might get a stronger sense of common purpose across the whole public service that builds out a bit more broadly than just the communities?

KATHERINE JONES:

I think the answer is simply yes. The lens that Rebecca and Phil put on it about the ultimate goal of serving the citizens is I think really powerful. But I have had heard so much feedback from staff at all levels, not just in Defence. It was in Finance when I was there earlier this year but also engaging with colleagues, and the thing that has resonated with our colleagues at all levels in the APS is that sense of purpose that we had this year. I think it's something about the fact that we, as leaders, were better and sharper at articulating that purpose to our APS community and so I think that's a lesson for all of us about to continually think about focussing on that message of purpose.

I think that the fact that we have been able to come together and collectively push through on things and make things happen quickly has been liberating for a lot of people who have worked in the public service and have had a sense of wanting to push things faster and harder but have come across a lot of those traditional barriers that we have all talked about and had to work through. So I think continuing to find ways to articulate not only an overarching purpose but a purpose that's specific to the areas that people are operating in is going to be really important for us to continue to encourage everyone in the organisation, and the fact that this year it's been the - I think scientists would use the term - we have made the evidence case.

You know, we have proven something and I think most people into the writ large have acknowledged that and so now it's a matter of just continuing to build on it.

STEVEN KENNEDY:

Brendan, just a couple of remarks from you, perhaps broadening it out a little bit, because the Federal Public Service isn't the only public service, of course. And you mentioned how easy your cooperation was with your state colleagues, at times possibly difficult, but how you really did come together and put aside differences. And, of course, we all know it can be tricky, but for all the ups and downs, it's really been quite successful in the way public services have come to support each other - not perfect but really quite successful, and that's going to remain important in the Federation. So we're getting there with the Commonwealth. What are your reflections about with the states as well?

BRENDAN MURPHY:

I think one of the things to do is to embrace the desire of the National Cabinet to destroy a lot of the bureaucratic structures that used to exist. I mean, their united purpose in getting rid of COAG was their intense dislike of it. That was the strategic direction, and so I think we've got to learn from that. Within the APS, we have got to learn not to revert to our normal bureaucratic processes, "Oh, let's set an IDC" or "Let's go through that Committee to that Committee." Why not just get on the phone and sort something out or get a small group together for a videoconference, which we can now do so easily? And that's the same with the states and territories. We had some disquiet about the vaccination program the other day, so we just got all the CEOs and the Chief Health Officers together in six hours notice and had a meeting and resolved these issues. So I think we've got to stop our tendency to go back to formalised, rigid structures, and work on the trust that we've built and the relationships that we've built, both within the APS and across government around the nation.

It's been interesting working in a Federation. I think the Federation has actually worked pretty well this year. Sure, we get a little bit of funniness at the sides and some funny games but, in the main, it's delivered well. Look at APPC which Paul is now chairing. It used to meet I think four times a year for a whole day in the city. I think it met 135 times in succession on a teleconference, and so that capacity to be flexible and responsive, we've just got to hang on to and resist that temptation to reinstate our structures that we felt comfortable with in the past but didn't serve us well.

STEVEN KENNEDY:

I think that's right, Brendan. The behaviours that drive trust are absolutely crucial. Once you get that trusted environment, it is really quite remarkable how you can collaborate.

Look, I really appreciate you all for coming today and being so frank and letting us know your stories. Could I ask everyone to join me in thanking the panel. (Applause). Please stay where you are. We have some small gifts, which Sonia will just hand out. Peter, would you like to join us up here on the stage to say farewell. Please join me in thanking the panel once again.

PETER WOOLCOTT:

Thank you, Steven, for hosting this evening's event and leading IPAA is always a privilege but it's a lot of work on top of your day job, so we have appreciated your strong leadership as both President of IPAA but also Treasury Secretary. So thank you.

IPAA always puts on a great event and today is no different. Well done to the team, not only for tonight but in adapting your program to this eventful year. I have particularly liked your podcast. That kept us all engaged. Like the panel have said, it has been a long year so I will keep this fairly brief. So thank you, Brendan, thank you, Rebecca and Katherine for all your very thoughtful comments this evening and much more significantly for your extraordinary work this year. As we know, there's no instruction manual on how to manage a crisis of the magnitude we have faced this year. All three of you were in the deep end and, to continue that analogy, it was like watching synchronised swimming at its best. The professionalism, coordination and joined-up nature of your work was something to behold.

I want to echo Phil's comments about pride. As a former DFAT officer who has ventured into some of the bad lands of the globe, I tend to go on about the importance of governance and that it is the quality of our institutions and our people that underpins the prosperity and safety of Australia, and rarely has this been truer than over the past year. The APS has much to be proud of and we should take the brief opportunity afforded to us over the break to reflect on everything that we have delivered this year. We will have more to do in 2021 and our focus on implementation will only get sharper.

My final thank you is actually reserved for Phil. At the best of times, the head of the APS is one of the toughest jobs around and then you get a year like 2020. It has been relentless. I have known Phil a long time. He's not a bloke who is out there hunting compliments or known for his flamboyance but someone utterly focused on the job at hand, always steady and always practical. His mantra has been the APS enterprise and he has driven this agenda hard both by example and with the Secretaries' Board. This was at a time when it was most needed.

My strong sense is that the Board is not going to let the APS slip back into old patterns of working at old silos, that the reformed themes around one APS will be driven hard and this will continue to be seen in greater collaboration and greater focus on delivering for the Australian people and in the greater use of integrated data to inform decision making. If we're going to deliver on the very large agenda for next year, this is going to be crucial.

I did promise I would be brief so let me just close by saying on behalf of Phil and myself, thank you to all APS staff. Thank you to all those of you in the room, those watching and perhaps those reading at a later date. It is a privilege to work in this Service which has worked so tirelessly and has often performed beyond expectation. Please have a restful break knowing that we will need to keep the momentum going into 2021.

I am mindful that I am what is standing between you and, finally, food and a drink but there are some COVIDSafe ground rules I need to run through for this networking event. We need to ensure we comply with physical distancing protocols and I ask that you please follow any direction you receive from either IPAA or Hotel Realm staff. So the general rules are: on tables, your refreshments will be brought to your table by staff here at the Hotel Realm. Mingling - now this one I don't quite understand but as long as you remain seated to consume your refreshments, that's good. If you want to stand and mingle, you're very welcome to do so but please respect physical distancing protocols and leave your drinks on the table. Hand sanitiser - there are sanitiser stations in the corners of the room for you to use as required.

Finally, if I can all Secretaries to approach the stage for a photograph before you commence your networking. And, on behalf of IPAA ACT, we look forward to seeing you at future events. So for my final, lawful and reasonable direction this year, I ask you to have a happy and safe holiday and join us for a drink and thank you very much.