

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

Annual Address to the APS by Professor Glyn Davis AC, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

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SELINA WALKER:

[Ngunnawal language] Hello, my name is Selina Walker and this is Ngunnawal country. I believe some of you were here the other day when I did the Welcome to Country, so you're going to hear it again. So, lucky you, you will love my voice by the end of it.

I just want to start by acknowledging my elders, the Ngunnawal elders, and pay respect to my elder's past, present, and future. I'd also like to acknowledge the recent passing of my grandmother, Aunty Agnes Shea, who was the most senior Ngunnawal elder here. She was a little old Black woman, but she did get around, so I'm sure many of you crossed paths. If you did, you're one of the lucky ones. I'd also like to acknowledge any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that are with us here. Welcome my brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. And I'd like to extend that to all our non-Indigenous friends that have joined us. Welcome.

The Ngunnawal community are the traditional custodians of Canberra and the region. You may not be aware that the Ngunnawal nation is made up of several family groups and not just the individuals who represent this country. Therefore, as a community, we have an elected body known as the United Ngunnawal Elders Council to represent us, along with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elected body of the ACT. This is important for you to understand and acknowledge for our identity is a collective identity. There are other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people from around the nation, the country, and the world who have come to live on Ngunnawal land. I'd like to acknowledge and welcome you all.

The tradition of welcoming the people to country is a practise that was handed down by our ancestors, old people and elders from the beginning of time. Before entering other person's country, you would first announce your arrival and not enter until the traditional owner formally welcomed you. The reason for this practise was to protect your spirit whilst in another person's country and to show respect for the country which you were entering. It's wonderful to see this practise is now recognised and respected. I suppose it's not like entering someone's home unless you're first invited.

The Ngunnawal people, as within all Aboriginal people, have a great heritage that would like to share with all Australians from every walk of life. As you're aware, Canberra means meeting place and Canberra has been a place of gathering for many Aboriginal tribes of Australia to come together to deal with important

business and for ceremonial purposes. Nggunawal ancestors believe the importance of people gathering to build relationships, share knowledge, and to celebrate the gift of heritage and history. We believe it's important for all to recognise our unique history and to gain an understanding that our land is our heritage and our loss of the lands has disconnected so many Aboriginal people from their spiritual links, cultural heritage and identity. Reconciliation is not just a word; it is an action and it's a human rights movement.

As an Aboriginal person in this country, I've only been counted as a human being for 57 years. Let me repeat that while that sinks in. I, as a beautiful Black woman in Australia, have only been counted as a human being for 57 years. I'm only 43. We are very young in our reconciliation journey here in Australia, but we're on the right path. By incorporating proper culture protocols, like welcome to country, acknowledgement of country, smoking ceremonies, etc, we are on the road to true reconciliation. It does hurt me though that my dad was born a tree. That my grandmother was a mother in this country before she was a human being. So, ask you all to take a moment and think about how old you are, how old your elders are, and how old your children are and what you are doing to contribute to that reconciliation human rights movement.

The referendum that happened last year was another huge milestone in our reconciliation journey. Not the result that we wanted, but it did bring a lot of truth telling. Helps us to identify where we must focus our efforts and what states need the most amount of help. I'm so proud to be a Canberran and I'm proud of my fellow Canberrans for the yes vote here in the ACT. Still a lot of work to be done, but it's a demonstration that the work that my grandmother did towards reconciliation can influence that change that we all want. Remember that that vote was not a vote for me to be Aboriginal, it was not a vote for me to be a traditional owner, it was a vote to edit a document, and that's what Australia said no to. So, we'll recalibrate, we'll reassess, we'll find another way forward to continue to fight for First Nations justice.

I stand on the shoulders of giants, and I want to honour those giants. Every time I mention the word referendum or vote I see people get fidgety and uncomfortable. We've got to stop it. It is a shared history so there must be shared accountability. If we continue to live in shame here in Australia, we are never going to progress forward. I don't want my boys to be standing up here in 20, 30 years' time fighting and advocating for the same things that I am today, that my grandmother's

done for the past 60 years, and my ancestors for the past 200 years. That change happens with us. So, I encourage you all to continue to have those conversations, have those awkward discussions where learning and understanding, which is what true reconciliation is, lies. It lies in a simple yarn.

So, thank you for inviting me to do welcome to country. I will point out that my grandmother taught me this speech, this official welcome to country, and I've been doing it now for about 10, 15 years, and she was doing it for many, many years prior to that. Unfortunately, the key fundamentals that I use in my welcomes, that my grandmother's done, where we educate on why we do it are still not embedded in Australia and in Canberra, which is why I keep repeating. The way that we learn is to repeat. Repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat. Especially for kids, we all know this.

So, until those key fundamentals are learnt by everybody and everyone understands it, you'll be able to recite this. Hopefully not, but you'll be able to recite my welcome very, very shortly. So, thank you for listening and I'll now finish in the words of my people, the Ngunnawal people, and then hand you back.

[Ngunnawal language]. Which means, you may leave footprints on our land now. In other words, welcome to country. Thank you very much.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC:

Well, I'm sure I join everyone in thanking Selina for her welcome to country. It's lovely that we get to share this land and we all acknowledge, of course, the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians, and we recognise the many Aboriginal people who have connections to the lands of the ACT and beyond. We are privileged to be on your country. I would like to thank Kate Driver, the IPAA ACT chief executive officer, and the entire IPAA team who've organised this. I'm slightly in awe that on a Wednesday afternoon you've decided to come and listen to a speech but thank you. I'd also like to acknowledge along with Gordon de Brouwer, Katherine Jones and several fellow secretaries in the room, including Tony Cook, David Fredericks, Jenny Wilkinson, Stephen Kennedy. I'd like to acknowledge David Gruen from the ABS, David Hazlehurst from Services Australia. Several of my former academic colleagues, it's lovely to see you, and so many other familiar faces in the room. Thank you for joining me.

So, 2024 saw some of the most fascinating elections around the world. It was the year in which a quarter of the world's population, it is said, went to the polls. And in many of those countries there was a debate, often a noisy debate, about the value of Public Service. So, this was a theme of elections. And the details varied from country to country, but I heard three familiar themes that kept coming through in the debates, and these clearly have gone around the world and they will probably be heard in Australia as well as we do our election. And their claims that government programs slow down the economy, that the Public Service is by nature inefficient and that public servants operate in their own interests, not that of the nation. Who would want such people as stewards?

Now, this is a difficult topic at IPAA given so many people in the room have dedicated their professional life to Public Service, and we may all struggle to be objective when others assert that our work is at best unnecessary and possibly even harmful. Yet, I'm sure we agree that when powerful voices offer a fundamental critique of what we do, it is important to hear what they say and to weigh the evidence. Because if accurate, these three statements pose a blunt question, does our work as public servants have value or meaning? So, that's my theme for the today, which is the challenge to public administration.

I want to start with the biggest of those pictures. The suggestion that many, if not most government agencies are a drag on prosperity. There is, of course, no right answer to the appropriate scale of government. Some argue for a minimalist state, concerned principally with law and defence, otherwise leaving citizens to make their own choices so that taxation regulation and government services are all constrained to ensure prosperity. And in this worldview, as Ronald Reagan memorably said nearly half a century ago, government is the problem not the solution.

Others see the state as carrying a responsibility to support citizens by creating programs and services which address needs from health and disability to financial security in old age. And this balance between sharing resources through taxation and minimising the call on citizens is the core debate about the role of the government. Every nation arrives at a slightly different equilibrium. In democracies, the long run trend has been toward helping those less fortunate through government actions, and it's no surprise that social services are the single largest area of expenditure, not just in Australia, but in the United Kingdom and the United States. It's ahead of both defence and health in

all these jurisdictions.

Now, in an ideal world, we get to test claims against evidence. So, are states with smaller governments more prosperous than those with large public sectors? It's a fascinating question. There's lots of macro studies and they reach slightly different conclusions, with one exception. And it depends on the variables in play, but not a single study has found a clear correlation between the size of the public sector and GDP growth. That is, this is a debate principally about what you believe rather than what the evidence says.

In fact, there's significant variation even amongst very similar nations. And overall national growth, it turns out, rests on a complex mix of policy settings, natural resources, geography, investment in research, political stability and exposure to international trade, and perhaps sheer good luck. There is, of course, a much stronger correlation between tax rates and inequality. Higher taxing nations have resources to redistribute, and they typically report a lower Gini coefficient ratio, which means a more even distribution of wealth across the society.

So, as I say, concerns about the scale of government are not driven principally by evidence. Rather, they reflect beliefs, genuine disagreements about what is the appropriate role of the state, what's legitimate, what sort of society are we looking for? And Australians have made their own choices about this balance between market and state. And I'll come back to that in a second.

So, let's turn to the claims of inherent public sector inefficiency. And these can be very hard to test. The public and private sectors rarely undertake the same task in the same way, in a way that we can do a rigorous comparison. But within that very significant caveat, there are lots of studies also. And one of the most recent is a global study commissioned for the United Nations Development Program in Singapore, it found no conclusive evidence that public, private or mixed ownership is intrinsically more efficient in delivering services. And likewise, a global survey of available data on relative productivity by the European Federation of Public Service Unions finds no inherent private sector advantage. As the report said, and I'm quoting, "Efficiency is not the same as cutting costs. Lower costs may also reflect the lower quality of service, lower paying conditions for workers, and any of assessment of efficiency really must measure results against inputs." Which tells us what we know that efficiency is not a universal, it must be gauged against

objectives, the type of service in question and the tools available.

But nonetheless, the belief that government is always wasteful has deep historical roots. It was at the heart of the public choice economics which urged and achieved a shift to contracting during the 1990s and 2000s. Several decades on, research shows that service delivery through private providers does not produce a consistently more effective model. Professor Mark Considine's detailed study of various contracted government services in Australia reports very mixed outcomes rather than clear and sustained efficiency gains.

Now, none of this is definitive. It may be that government is simply poor at procurement, for example, and so fails to harness the gains possible through contracting. But rather than presume an answer, suggests Professor Considine, we should ask how do you get a system that delivers the best possible results, rather than presuming that you know the answer before you start. To be compelling, claims about a relative efficiency must be program-specific and evidence-based.

The third theme that I heard in many of the election campaigns around the world was about trust. Even if government can be efficient and effective, some people simply do not want public servants holding significant power. They warn of an administrative state which is unresponsive to political directive, that public servants are motivated by personal advantage and they'll block any move which threatens their privilege. And again, there's a long tradition of this thinking at work. You can hear it in William Niskanen's arguments about the budgeting maximising officials, or much easier, you can watch any episode of Yes Minister.

Now, sadly, it's not difficult to find examples of bureaucratic intransigence. Most organisations, public and private, bridle at criticism. They resent demands to change. Few organisations are good at admitting mistakes or correcting errors, and many organisations do not welcome direction from those who are authorised to govern. Yet, claims that public servants routinely conspire to frustrate the popular will are difficult to test. Context clearly matters. A public official who gives unwelcome advice or declines to act on an instruction because it's unlawful, is hardly a covert operator. We might instead call them brave, such as Centrelink officer, Colleen Taylor, OAM who called out the faulty and unfair logic of the Robodebt program.

Over more than half a century, Australia's legislated to make the work of government more transparent. And you know those initiatives because we all live with them. Administrative Review Tribunals, Freedom of Information legislation, whistleblower protections, ombudspersons, estimates hearings, anti-corruption commissions. So, too APS legislation, integrity guidelines, value statements, conflict of interest declarations, code of conduct procedures. And though each and all are far from perfect, collectively they call public servants to account if they behave as if beyond scrutiny.

Now, government agencies are just people and therefore fallible. "From the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made," as Kant said. Yet, we can design organisations to rule out self-interest. We can insist on integrity measures, we can test for fairness, and we can recruit for personal qualities. There is a reason so many people choose to commit their working lives to serving others. And that's the room I'm looking at.

I linger on these three criticisms because they do raise important issues worth mulling. There are always competing narratives about the best way to organise the state, even if the debate sometimes relies more on belief than on evidence. Just as good policy advice is based on facts and analysis, so the value of Public Service should be evaluated on its merits. Australia has its own administrative of traditions, including a non-partisan Public Service that informs and implements the decisions of ministers and parliament, and government has always been a significant part of our history. As he looked back on legendary public servants, such as Nugget Coombs, the political scientist A.F. Davies argued that "Australians have demonstrated," and I'm quoting, "A talent for bureaucracy."

I suspect the eminent historian W.K. Hancock was somewhat less enthusiastic when he suggested that we depend too deeply through our history on government services. "Australia," he said, and I'm quoting, "has come to look upon the state as a giant utility which could meet most of its needs." From different perspectives, both academics are reflecting on the early and enduring role of government in our national life, from pioneering social provision to Medicare in the 1980s and on. And supporting that commitment has been a Commonwealth Public Service for 125 years next year that remains relatively small in scale amid a changing world.

As Budget Paper No. 4 from this year makes clear, the average staffing levels of the Australian Public Service are still now in 2024, below those of the final year of the Howard government as a percentage of the labour force. So, the APS has grown more slowly than the Australian population, but we continue to need great public servants. Public servants who are proud to work for the National Disability Insurance Agency, to defend borders, to respond to crisis, to contribute to foreign policy. And we do so like the generations that came before us, and in rather similar numbers.

For just 125 years, this APS has been a national institution. Trusted by most of the Australian people, as the annual APS Reform trust survey makes clear. And the Australian people will continue to look to the APS in times of hardship for swift action in emergencies, for protection of the public interest.

So, I want to turn briefly from the why to the how. When Prime Minister Anthony Albanese invited me to lead the department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, which came in a phone call just around the election time to my astonishment, he stressed his commitment to Cabinet government. In his experience, the Prime Minister finds government most effective when there's collective decision-making and a continuous conversation about goals informed by good policy advice from the Public Service. And it's an outlook I enthusiastically share. Government has too many moving parts to be steered decisively from the centre. The task instead is to ensure a rigorous policy cycle so the elected ministers in Cabinet have the information and the advice to make choices eyes wide open. After all, they're the ones who are going to stand or fall on the strength of those choices.

In his recent book on leadership, Tony Blair notes that while people are usually, quote, "sniffy" about Public Service routines, we get better decisions when we care about how we go about them. With encouragement and support, suggests Blair, officials will deliver what he calls process genius.

An effective policy cycle requires an ethic of service, public officials who put aside personal views and ego and insist on intellectual and personal humility as they move through each stage of policy development, decision and implementation. This means listening to those we disagree with and engaging with ideas which make us uncomfortable. It requires collegiality and respect, and maturity in handling conflict. It asks us to understand and navigate those conflicts inherent in the society in which we serve.

In return, public servants earn the extraordinary privilege of contributing to the fundamental issues of our time. And it's why I see a professional Public Service as crucial. The APS builds judgement from experience, from living with policy success and failure. Good process, timely expertise must be nurtured. That is the work of stewardship.

Ministers get the benefit every day of council from their political advisors, and they also receive independent advice from officials, particularly around the details of drafting laws and planning complex implementation.

At heart, Cabinet government can bring together these two worlds, politics and administration, because it's best served when political advice is separate from policy analysis. And ministers have access to both. And this requires the Public Service committed to supporting the Cabinet system, willing to deal with complexity that will always cross over ministerial and departmental boundaries. It requires central agencies committed to collaboration and coordination so that policy analysis, economic settings and budget implications inform every decision.

And I have the remarkable privilege of seeing this preference for teamwork every month at Secretaries Board, including this morning. The best outcomes are achieved by agencies working together, informed by shared data, but each willing to put forward its best argument. And these decisions are published soon after Secretaries meet. I'm very fortunate to work with a like-minded group of departmental leaders, lots of opinions, some great debates, some disagreements, but an underlying shared commitment to cooperation.

And hence, the extensive use during 2024 of multi-agency task forces to tackle cross-cutting issues. Some shared by PMC, many not. From a review of NDIS rules to the establishment of the Net Zero Energy Authority, from the care economy to policy lessons from COVID-19, from a Future Made in Australia to addressing domestic and family violence, from insurance affordability to updating Commonwealth emergency management plans. Collaboration across agencies makes the Public Service the effective partner with ministers in the shared work of government.

And I think this approach can serve us well for the challenges that will confront whoever is our government after the next election, responding to the greater tempo of natural disasters, the shifting global order, the opportunities and risks of artificial intelligence, the

stresses on housing, services and costs.

In a recent speech, Governor-General Sam Mostyn called for strong, ethical and modern governance. "This," she argued, "is why Australians will trust their Public Service. We should bring," she said, "the spirit of care to our work every day."

It's a wise observation. Public office is a public trust. And the Australian Public Service is not some impersonal machine, but a reflection of our national aspirations. It's a repository of our democratic choices embodied and embedded in programs and institutions. A storehouse for experience and future capability. It's guided by stewardship, a sense of doing the right thing in the right way so they endure. And I see this fundamental commitment to Public Service every day in the people I'm proud to call colleagues. Our Australian Public Service is an enduring project in the interest of citizens, and it's an inspiring vocation for those with an ethic of service.

So, yes, we must listen to the critics. We must worry about efficiency and effectiveness. We must reflect on what we do and find ways to do it better, but we should never doubt that our work is honourable and necessary. Thank you.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA: Thank you, Glyn. That's, I think, a fantastic robust description of the values and the value of the Public Service. Can I ask, you framed this as who needs a Public Service, why do you think we're having this debate now?

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: That's a great question. So, I suspect it's slightly different in each national context, and it depends on people's assessment. In a world where growth has slowed and people are feeling very much the costs of, and for a generation that has never had to live with inflation or high interest rates, last recession in this country was 1991, this is a shock. And people are looking around for answers, and one of the answers is it might be the fault of government itself. And that's certainly the way it was framed in some of the critiques in the UK, in the election they've just had. And if you listen to some of the American arguments, you hear very similar points of view. That, in a sense, there's this thing that's stopping us from growing and stopping us from being as prosperous as we used to be. And one of those things might be government, I'm guessing.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA: You talked about this through the speech. One of the things, I think, there's been so much reflection across the Public Service over the last couple of years, quite rightly, looking at how we can continue to improve, learn the lessons from where we haven't been our best and where there has been failure. And so, quite rightly, a lot of focus on that, balancing that with wanting to instil a sense of pride and vocation in people who work in the service. So, you drew that out, but I think any reflections on how we get the balance right in that debate, that we take accountability but also recognise the strengths of the Public Service.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Absolutely. And part of our constraint is we can't go out and run a campaign. We must be very careful what we say, careful about how we present ourselves in public. We're careful about the claims we can make and not make about what we do, and that's entirely appropriate. That just goes with the role we play. It does mean that people can thump us over the head, and we have to smile and live with it.

And yet, anyone who's, and we've all done this at some point, gone and met the new graduates coming in at the start of each year, it is the most uplifting way you can spend a morning. Just these brilliant young people who are just excited about the chance to serve and the chance to be part of conversations, the chance to deliver projects. And they can see a life where they do this, and they're willing to do that. And they're bright, they have other choices. It's not like this is... This is the thing they want to do.

I met with two today for other reasons but their first year in the Public Service, and these are people genuinely who are excited by what it is they're currently, doing by what they'd like to do, by ways they think they can make a difference. So, we continue to find people, notwithstanding the public rhetoric sometimes, for whom this is absolutely core. It's a fantastic thing. Long may it be true.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA: Some of the things you talked about in your speech go to core enduring values of an effective Public Service. We have had several years, though, of talking about APS reform and how as a service we need to continue to innovate, learn from lessons, but continue to respond to changing expectations of community, the changing operating environment, changing strategic environment. Any reflections on marrying the need to do that reform with delivering on our core responsibilities?

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Yeah. And it's always the risk, isn't it, that we get distracted from what we're here to do by wanting to talk about how we go about it and what we value. And yet, if you look at the delivery, if you look at what's happening across agencies and the commitment to delivering quality services, it's quite striking. And you and I were part of a discussion just today in Secretaries Board about some of the work, that's the quality of what's being done in Services Australia and the quality of what's being done in a range of, not just departments but agencies as well, and how much that reflects the willingness to embrace new ways of doing things and new technologies and to bring them to play.

We're talking about how successfully the Department of Veterans Affairs has reduced the waiting lists for access to services. What were we doing as a country, making veterans wait for entitlements? They are entitlements. Should have had them. And that is deeply encouraging. And so, again, it's easy to despair if you listen to a public debate.

But the reason I stress in the speech the independence of the APS is because we've, again, heard in other countries arguments to remove large sections of the professional Public Service and replace them with political appointments. And it's not that I don't see a role for political appointments, but you run the risk of turning the system into something that can't endure and that can't provide continuity and stability over time. Because if large sections of the system leave, depending on our electoral outcomes, then you lose that ability to build long run services, and just to nurture expertise that you might not need to call on very often. And yet when it comes crucial, it really does matter.

We saw that in COVID. We saw where we did have deep expertise, but also where we clearly hadn't invested and we've paid for it. The risk of a Public Service that's instantly responsive because it's, essentially, political in character is that we lose that. It comes at a price; is I guess what I'm saying.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA: You quoted Tony Blair. I must get that book. I think anyone who can come up with a phrase process genius, that needs to be coined in some way. I'm sure Jenny Wilkinson will think about it in the context of the budget process. But I think just teasing that concept out a bit and our role as stewards and getting the balance line, and I speak as someone who is a lawyer and is often characterised as contributing to process that requires things to be slowed down from time to time so careful consideration can be given to legal risk. But any

more you want to say about the concept of process genius and why we should be advocating for that?

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: So, it was a striking phrase and it's an easy book to read because he's trying to write... assumes that you're aspiring to or already are a political leader. So, by leaders, he means political leaders. And it's a message to them to say. "You might think you have all the answers, but if you don't have a process around you to work this through carefully, you'll come to grief." And he gives examples of people who have.

And it's in that context, it's advice to political leaders to say it is a huge advantage to have a very professional Public Service that can give you sensible advice. And sometimes that advice is, "For God's sake, don't do this." And that is hugely important advice, it's just not advice you want to hear. And I guess he's also saying don't get angry at a system that can tell you. And so, a lovely British phrase, a civil service phrase that. "If you're going to do this damn stupid thing, don't do it in this damn stupid way."

It's the sort of last resort advice to a minister when everything else has failed, but it's powerful and that's the right advice to give. The objective is not worth pursuing. But if you insist, let's think about a better way to do it.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA: I'm going to ask one more question before I open it to the floor but noting now we're almost through a full parliamentary term, we don't know exactly when that will be, but we're getting close to the end. So, you've been the head of the service for almost a full term now, anything in terms of your observation of how the services has evolved over that three years that you'd like to share?

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Okay, thank you. And thank you for the advanced notice because I would've like to have thought about that.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA: Sorry, I didn't give him advance notice.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: I'd like to have thought about that. So, the Service that I joined gratefully and with enthusiasm in June 2022 was still coming to terms with the consequences of Robodebt, which is probably, I think will be recorded as one of the most profound shocks in most people's lifetime around quality of service. It just exemplified how things can go wrong. We hadn't yet had the Royal Commission, and that was important. It was also important in not prejudging some people. There were

calls for various people to be treated in ways. And until you've done the work, you can't do that. It's not fair.

I understand why people who were the victims of Robodebt might have a different view, but I think it is that was important and the process was important and the Royal Commission was important and the codes of conduct that are followed are important. You're going to deal with this, and it's a classic case of slowing up and doing it properly and thoroughly because otherwise you're never going to learn the lessons and you're never going to see how it must change.

That said, I found a Public Service really excited about several of the initiatives it was about to launch, really committed. Having experimented with a lot of contracting out, and the Commonwealth did that and hired a lot of people into labour market firms rather than wrestling with the character of what's called Public Service, what should be an agency is what should be contracted in, that's not a debate you ever resolve. But you must go through it and you have to keep arguing it and you have to keep thinking about it. But a willingness to do that. And just, whatever the public reputation, when I talk to people about what the Commonwealth Public Service does, I get very positive messages back. They can all recount, people can all recount and experience an important engagement they had that told them that somebody cared. So, that idea of empathy is at the core of what we do is one I find strongly reflected.

I had a really fabulous day down at a NDIS office in Geelong, watching how they worked with clients, assist them. I had the same experience in going out to Services Australia and watching how the calls were handled and triaged. The people I spoke to were so committed to what they did and so concerned about the people on the other end of the phone. Thought this is worth being part of. So, I actually am very upbeat and positive about what we have and, of course, there are problems and it's easy to paint a negative picture, but the reason I wanted to speak about this today is because I don't think we value enough just the commitment, the empathy, the quality of the people we have and their willingness to spend their lives in the service of others, which is what public servants do.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA: Thank you. I did put you on the spot but that was a fantastic answer. So, we've got a few minutes, I think, to open for questions from the floor. I believe IPAA staff have microphones, I can't see them, but there. I think we've got a question from right up the very front here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER Thank you very much Secretary.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Sorry, and you are?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Cameron.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Cameron.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, until this week I was a graduate at the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Thought what you said about the grads was really, nice, so thanks for that. But this week is, for a lot of grads, the first week where we've come out of the graduate program and now, we are fully fledged public servants, proper. So, I'm just curious, do you have any more advice for outgoing grads who are now fully, properly in the Public Service without the training wheels?

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: You will do well because the people we've chosen through the grad programs can do well in the Public Service. That, it's hard sometimes not to be anxious about what are the next steps and what is my career going to be like. And the only thing I can say from the experience is your career is going to be like nothing you planned, and everything you plan won't happen. And then a whole sort of thing... And I say that as someone sitting in this position, in this stage.

When I was a very junior academic, I used to get to teach in some of the graduate programs for the APS. And I watched then the people that came through, they used to come to the ANU where I was a PhD student, and we would spend half a day with them. The thing I noticed early on is they were an undifferentiated mass, but when they came back six weeks later, you could tell who was in the ag department because they were speaking slowly, and you could tell who foreign affairs was because they could... as long as the conversation kept going, they weren't fussed about the content. And it was just great.

And then I encountered some of those people years later and they had really grown into themselves and their roles, and they had all found themselves in jobs they hadn't anticipated, and they're all grateful for the prior experience in lots of different places that unexpectedly... It's almost as though someone had planned it, that they would have the right set of skills by the time they hit the senior jobs. And I think that's a wonderful thing, and it's about not being anxious about what is my career going to be like, but rather saying, "There's all this opportunity. I'm going to grab as much of it as I can on the way through." And it will pay off

personally, but professionally. It'll pay off because I'll have acquired these skills that I didn't know I was busy acquiring while I thought I was doing this job, but it turned out that mattered.

So, I would go into your first day without training wheels full of enthusiasm as you truly are committed to the idea of Public Service and open to the experience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Thank you very much.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA:

Thank you. Question there.

MELISSA COADE:

Hello Melissa Coade from the Mandarin. Thank you for your talk. Katherine Jones mentioned community expectation.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC

Yeah.

MELISSA COADE:

And what I wanted to ask about was civics education and whether we should be educating our younger people earlier on about the complexity and impressive work of the Public Service instead of every four years, if it should be an election topic, or at the time a referendum rolls around.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC:

Probably I'm the wrong position to be lecturing this from. We've just been in the last two years through a referendum. And I'm not confident the stats, but if I recall what I read, it is that nearly 40% of Australians didn't know we had a constitution, although they were being asked to vote on a proposition to change it. And that certainly is a powerful argument for civics education. Not really about the Public Service but about the broader.

It's not that it doesn't happen, but it's a question of when it happens, how it's taught and where it gets taught. So, I'm in favour of anything that makes it more transparent and more available. And like lots of people, we worry about a democracy if people don't have information they need to make their own judgements. You're not trying to tell them what to think. You are trying to make sure they have information. I found that a particularly sobering set of numbers around that referendum. And I've heard those numbers, similar numbers in previous... it's not like that was new or different. So, we have a task ahead of us.

AUDIENCE MEMBER I'm not quite certain here you're going to answer this, so I don't mind if you dodge it. It's a slightly tricky one.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Unlike the other one.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Chris Wormald has this been appointed as the UK Cabinet Secretary and head of the Civil Service. And from my knowledge of him, I have met him a couple of times, I think that's a pretty good decision. Except, that was done by external competition and the process chaired by what is called the First Civil Service Commission. You mentioned a different process in which the PM invited you to take up the position.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Now, I think, personally, that was a superb choice, don't get me wrong, but there is something of an Australian tradition here of the head of your department changing with government.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Yep.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So, I don't know if there's something you can reflect on here, that is why it's tricky, I mean given we are in a period... Well, the other thing is the pendulum swings are endemic to Anglo-Foreign countries. And we've been through this, reflecting the different positions you mentioned before. New Zealand's just gone through that swing again recently, and of course the US, plus populism's growing. So, there's this question of instability potentially lurking.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC: Yep. John, thank you for the question. So, I'm going to give a slightly technical answer. The who serves in the role I'm in is that the pleasure of the Prime Minister. I don't mean in the American sense of president, but we have contracts as opposed to being permanent heads of department. I was party to a review that recommended changes to that process that would've restored some of those. So, I'm on record as what my personal view is on this and that I signed off on recommendations. They, to date, have not been adopted. There has been debated and discussion within government, but they haven't been adopted.

And one of the questions is, are we willing to roll back decisions of previous administrations that traded off tenure for salary and other matters? If it were my choice, I have a very clear view, which I put in writing, but it isn't my choice. I think the practise which we have developed in Australia of turning over a lot of secretaries, if there's a radical shift in government

direction is not a happy one. It doesn't just happen on changes of government; it happens within governments. We had a government halfway through its term knock off quite a few secretaries not that long ago.

I cannot see how that is good for the Service. I cannot see how that is good for continuity of Service, and I worry that bright people might make the judgement, "I will not put up my hand, ultimately, for those roles if that puts me into the firing line." And I think that's a genuine concern. We have the character of the role should reflect the character of the Service. However, the law is what the law says and the government of the day is entitled. And governments on both sides have considered those recommendations and, to date at least, not adopted them. So, I must reflect the fact that they're elected and not me.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Well, you fielded and answer very well. Thank you.

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC:

Thank you, John.

KATHERINE JONES PSM

I've got time for one more question.

MIRIAM WEBBER:

Thank you, Professor Davis. Miriam Webber from the Canberra Times. You've referenced elections abroad in your speech, but we're also going into our own election campaign with a very big focus on the Public Service, references to it being wasteful. So, what do you see as the risk if any government comes in and cuts Public Service capability?

PROFESSOR GLYN DAVIS AC:

I guess I've tried to argue in this paper that the key variable here is evidence, that if there's evidence of the Public Service being wasteful, then it's absolutely legitimated to act on that. Nobody is going to run a counter case. But that evidence needs to be thought through carefully and it needs to be based on data and information rather than prejudice. And prejudice is belief.

Now, we all have lots of beliefs and lots of prejudices, and it's not like we're all completely data-driven in our own lives. But nonetheless, if you're going to make important decisions about how the Australian state is to be run, it's just helpful if that proceeds from a debate, which is a good thing because debates force you to put evidence on the table. And that is how we deal with other policy issues in elections. We are looking for debate discussion, contrary views and working out... And then the electorate gets to decide. And that's exactly how it should be.

And we are the Public Service, our job is to support the decisions of the government chosen by the people. So that's not in dispute, but it is the more it can be a discussion about what we're trying to achieve and why and how the more likely it is to produce good outcomes for the country. And that's the point I'm making. Of course, not going to buy into any discussion about relative merits of policy proposals or so on. And neither side to the best of my knowledge has put out Public Service policies in any detail. So, I don't feel I know what's on the table and what it will be debated. But given that I've just heard it debated in lots of countries around the world in 2024, I expect we'll hear about it in 2025.

KATHERINE JONES PSM FIPAA: Okay. Glen, thanks for a compelling speech and for some frank observations from the questions I would now invite Dr. Gordon de Brouwer to come to the stage to make some closing remarks in relation to your speech.

DR GORDON DE BROUWER
PSM FIPAA:

Thanks very much Katherine and thank you Glyn for your speech. You've invited us to lift our gaze to see the bigger picture, and you've invited us to lift our heads and be confident as public servants, not in an arrogant way, but with confidence. So, thank you. It's particularly apposite that you've made that invitation today because today is when stewardship becomes practised as enforced or becomes a value within the Public Service. And you've talked a lot about stewardship.

And stewardship is important for everyone in the Public Service, and that's something that you've advocated very strongly, because it means that we're all responsible for our part of the system. And not just that we're responsible, but that we have agency to exercise that responsibility. And that was the thrust of that.

I think, in the idea of stewardship and the Public Service that goes back to you mentioned the independent review, which we both participated on. And that was something that you pushed, and me, very strongly in that review process. And I would say you did that also in the way that's characteristic of who you are and the sort of leader you are. That is that you engaged on the intellectual, on the meaning and the concept of stewardship. You reflected very deeply on what it means for us as people. And we are people, and you built that in.

But you also, in the implementation of it, did it in a way which is the character of your leadership, which is to engage where you must engage and support where you can support and lean in where you need to. And that was very much my own experience of the stewardship becoming a value, and my own experience as Commissioner and previously as Secretary for Public Sector Reform in working with you. So, I want to thank you for walking the talk. So please, that's a thank you to Glyn on your speech, and please join me in thanking Glyn for his presentation today.