

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE | EPISODE #130
ON A JOURNEY OF CONTINUOUS REFORM PART 2

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David Pembroke:
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Hello everyone and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves the Australian people.

My name is David Pembroke, thanks for joining me.

As we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting from today, the Ngunnawal and the Ngambri peoples and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. I'd also like to acknowledge all the custodians of the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

So today we are bringing you part 2 of our First APS reform in action program which is produced in partnership with the Australian Public Service Commission. On the last episode, Dr Rachel Bacon who is the Deputy Commissioner of the Integrity, Reform and Enabling Services at the Australian Public Service Commission and Professor Janine O'Flynn who is the director of The ANU Crawford School of Public Policy both reflected on the progress of APS reform and why public trust can never ever be taken for granted.

Today they look to return to look at what Australia has learnt from public services overseas and what other countries are learning from us. They will also dive into the important topic of collaboration and why it's so important as we respond to increasingly complex challenges.

Let's jump back into the conversation.

David Pembroke:

Was there one or two things that you took out of that OECD conversation, where you had the privilege to sit, listen, to participate, to be in, was there something that you thought, "Ah, there's something that we can add to the mix back in Australia, that will help us around this issue of integrity, around trust around democracy."

Were there any learnings there that you thought to yourself, "We're maybe missing a trick at the moment, and that's something that we could bring back?"

Dr Rachel Bacon:

We've unashamedly begged, borrowed and stolen from a number of our colleagues in other countries when it comes to

Janine O'Flynn:

The Australian way.

Dr Rachel Bacon:

Yeah, the Australian way, Janine. Great ideas, that looks good. Let's adapt and adopt. Interestingly, on the long-term insights briefing that I was talking about earlier, we stole that from New Zealand, but New Zealand colleagues have come and said, "Actually, we really like the way you're doing that. We think you've improved on the model, and we might take that on board."

You've almost got this ability to adapt, adopt, improve, share back, and then everyone is the beneficiary of that.

In terms of, so we have got a lot of great ideas from a lot of different countries around the world, that's just one example. Probably the thing I did take back, is that we cannot let familiarity breed contempt.

David Pembroke:

What does that mean?

Dr Rachel Bacon:

We cannot take for granted the absolute privilege that we have in Australia, of having a Public Service that is largely non-corrupt, functional, focused on the needs of the people, the parliament and the government, because not every country has that.

It's probably less so in the OECD, although the thing that I did take away that really reinforced that to me, and I know Gordon says, "Don't talk about this too much, because it looks like we're patting ourselves on the back."

What I really did take away, is how many countries throughout that whole day, referred to Australia and what Australia is doing. I was blown away by it, I did not expect it.

David Pembroke:

They're watching?

Dr Rachel Bacon:

They are absolutely watching us, and that comes with a lot of responsibility. When I talk to colleagues from Sri Lanka, for example, and sitting with a very senior person in Sri Lanka, a very impressive man in the Sri Lankan institutional structure, and he wanted to understand what we were doing in APS Reform, particularly around integrity and how we were strengthening integrity.

Because he had experienced the counterfactual, with the IMF having to step in, the riots in Sri Lanka, the senior politicians needing to flee the city, etc, Sri Lanka has experienced the counterfactual.

Looking at what we have, and those insights make me realise and remember, we cannot take for granted what we have. Sometimes it's easier to slip into that, but I think it just means we've got to fight even harder for Australia to defend what it has and to value what it has, because if you lose it, people die.

Janine O'Flynn:

Our colleagues in Indonesia are taking some inspiration from capability reviews. I was talking with some of them at the end of last year, and they've been watching what we've been doing, and I know there's a lot of sharing between the Australian and Indonesian Public Service over many, many years.

They've been using that model exactly as we've been using it, to do some assessment of capability in Indonesia, so that they can start planning for the long-run goals that they have there, around becoming a rich country.

They have that very explicitly set out, their mission and how they want to go, and so they're borrowing. I think, at this point I'm borrowing, and we do all beg, borrow and steal from each other, there's no question, and often there's little circuits within that, of countries that copy a lot off each other and then adapt to their particular settings.

It's a big way of doing innovation. Innovation doesn't always have to be seen as, we blow the system up and rebuild. In fact, the Australian story of innovation has been a long-run one, and certainly it's been about radical ... I've said, Gordon and I use this term, interchangeably, which is around radical incrementalism.

If we look at it on a week by week or year by year basis, it doesn't look like we change very much, but if we look back over the last two, three, four decades of reform in Australia, it's an extraordinary story of profound change, stewarded over decades with different governments, but that change has happened.

I think, this idea that Rachel was talking about, the importance of trust in that institution. If that falters, our ability to do that over time, in a way that even though we might have political differences and people will have their own views of how the Public Service should operate, and governments have imprinted their principles and values on it over many years, there's a sense that regardless of that, we believe that it's an important institution, that even though we might want to change the way that things are done, it's very important to have.

I often say that having a high-performing public service enables government, of course, to deliver on the promises that they make to the public, and the reforms that they want to make in society, and the policies that they've set out, that they'd like to pursue. They can't do that without this extraordinary set of organisations and institutions to do that work.

David Pembroke:

To return to the question.

Janine O'Flynn:

Sorry, David.

David Pembroke:

No, but that was worthwhile, that was worthy. Again, it's this layered approach, where obviously the purpose of the Public Service is well understood, widespread. The values culturally are then understood, and then on top of the layers, then you have the different programs and other things.

The question that I did ask, was around those foundations and progress and the strength that we feel is in place, is around maintenance of that. Rachel, to you again, how do you see, as we start to look a bit forward, making progress, keeping the foundations solid, how do you keep building on APS Reform over this next period?

Obviously there's an election coming up, incoming governments will do what incoming governments do, but you just need to stick with what you know to be the place at the moment. How do you see the areas of ongoing sustenance and improvement?

Dr Rachel Bacon:

Yeah, and we've already talked about stewardship, so I won't go into that again, but I do think the conversation around stewardship, there has been a shift in the conversation, so-

David Pembroke:

Yeah, but it needs to be sustained, doesn't it?

Dr Rachel Bacon:

It does.

David Pembroke:

It's just not a, here it is, we know what it is, we're certain about it, let's just drop it in. It really does need to be pushed and pulled and contested and discussed, such that it does bring more meaning and more value to it, as it is implemented consistently across what is a very diverse, a very distributed, an enormous complex organisation. Because with stewardship, to somebody who's working as a meat inspector in Geraldton, as opposed to somebody sitting in a policy area in the east, it's a different conversation to make it relevant to them, isn't it?

Dr Rachel Bacon:

Oh, it absolutely looks different, and I think that's actually a really, really important point, is how does stewardship look different? How does it apply in these really diverse roles all around the nation, that we have in the Public Service?

We've got some really great material, actually, our stewardship material made the Channel 7 nightly television news when we released it. On the day that we released our stewardship guidance, it was on there. That's a KPI, yeah.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, but what was the angle of the news story? That it's just been introduced or were they-

Dr Rachel Bacon: It was a really good factual-

David Pembroke: Thoughtful.

Dr Rachel Bacon: Reporting. Balanced.

David Pembroke: Okay, right.

Dr Rachel Bacon: I don't know how common it is for the Australian Public Service Commission's Guidance to make their nightly television news. However, the stewardship guidance is excellent. I would totally encourage people to go and read it, but it does really try hard to have some actual practical examples.

Because you can talk about it, and there's a word, and Janine and I have been having fun exploring all of these big topics through time and across geographies, etc, but what they hell does that all mean in practice?

Well, the stewardship guidance that we've tried to do, tries to make it very grounded. For a meat inspector in Geraldton, that's a bloody important job, because can you imagine the trust in the food supply chain, and what it takes to maintain that trust?

That actually what you're stewarding is people's trust that the food that they're feeding their kids is not going to make them sick. That's an incredibly important example of stewardship.

Then, we roll through, well, what does that look like for the person, the EL-1 who's writing the brief for the Treasurer as part of the budget process?

What does stewardship look like for the APS-5 who's actually recording the notes of the stakeholder engagement meeting, so that someone in a year's time can actually see what was important to that community group?

How does stewardship work for the APS-4 customer service operator in Services Australia, who's got a really distressed person on the other end of the line, who is completely confused about how they navigate the system? I've seen them do this, they are incredible.

Janine O'Flynn: Extraordinary.

Dr Rachel Bacon: They have so much patience and empathy and knowledge, about how to navigate the system of complex and sophisticated entitlements that we necessarily have in this country today, and take a distressed person through that process, to deliberately get the best outcome for that person.

That customer service operator in Services Australia, is actually stewarding for the whole of the Public Service, our relationship with the public. Because for that person who's asked for that help when they've been in a vulnerable or upsetting situation, that is their touch point with government, that is the experience they will take away of, this is how my experience of government was, and share that with their community.

That APS-4 customer service operator has held in their hands the relationship or the credibility and the experience of government, for actually who knows how many people.

Stewardship just manifests in so many different ways, but every single job, I would really challenge anyone to say, "What about this job? I can't think of how stewardship applies," because I bet you it does.

I do think the conversation matters, and it looks very different in different parts of the service.

In terms of, well, how do we actually make that stick and conversations can move on, caravans of reform always roll on, and agendas change and so on.

I do think it for me comes back to capability, and there's a particular aspect of capability, I can talk more or less about it, depending on your interest in it.

I do think our capability to partner and engage really well with communities, with individual members of the public, with businesses, with small businesses, it goes to what Janine was saying before about delivery.

In our system of government, the public service needs to be the arms and legs or the delivery mechanism of the elected government of the day. It's how the elected government of the day delivers, is through the Public Service.

Increasingly, I'm seeing a demand and a push from elected representatives, to want to deliver things either in partnership with businesses, or an industry sector, or with a community group, or a group in the community, deliver our agenda in partnership with them. Or at the very least, deliver in a way where you've engaged, you've listened to what that industry or those businesses or that community group or that part of Australian society, you've actually listened to what's important to them, to the people and to businesses. Our delivery reflects that really effective listening to what's important to people in business.

I think, to the capability point, the work that we're currently doing at the moment, which is thinking about, how do we lift the capability of the

Public Service to partner and engage better, to be able to deliver better for the government of the day?

I think, because that capability building effort, it takes a long time to erode capability once you've built it up, and so that effort around capability, and I would call out the partnership and engagement capability, it's all about delivery, that's the thing that potentially we can really dive into and that can be quite enduring.

David Pembroke:

Janine, your views on just exactly what Rachel has spoken about there, about this notion of collaboration, this notion of working together. Now, either side of government, everyone is I think, moving in this path. I think technology is driving, now that everyone has a super computer in their pocket, and they can all express their views and they all can get it, this need to be able to demonstrate and to derive benefit from collaboration and partnership.

How well are we doing it at the moment, and what do we need to do to be more effective around partnerships across the APS?

Janine O'Flynn:

Yeah, it's a really tough question, and it's one that governments and Public Service across many decades have grappled with. I often think of this as, how do we arrange to get the work of government done? Some of that we want government, Public Service to do itself, and some of that we want to do through formal, informal partnerships.

Some of it we do in partnerships without even realising it, and I think, actually the meat inspector is a really great example, because that requires someone on the ground, literally, inspecting meat in Geraldton, wherever we put this person.

Working with industry, exercising discretion around how things are happening in a particular organisation, how the process of work is happening, and what are the short and long-run effects into the food supply for those actions.

Also, they get quite incredible discretion in how to work with the provider of that abattoir, how they do their work.

There's something in ... I always think collaboration is a difficult word, and I wrote this piece many years ago, called the Cult of Collaboration, and I wrote it with a little bit of frustration, because it was at a point in time where everything that government did was being called collaboration.

Now, my wonderful colleague at the ANU, Helen Sullivan, we would have a long debate about what does collaboration mean? Certainly I think, there's lots of ways that government works with other parties to

get the work of government done and to reach those community needs and aspirations.

Some of it needs to be done in deep partnership through stakeholder engagement and community engagement and dialogue, and other things we do in quite a transactional way, because we can get the work of government done that way.

I always love this quote from a colleague of mine in the US, that contracting for pencils is a bit different for contracting for social services. In one we can specify how many pencils we want and what kind of pencil, but that's much more difficult in other areas of government.

There's no question that collaboration and partnership and working with other parts of society, whether they're private, non-profit or whether you're talking about volunteer individuals, or you're doing co-production with clients at the business end of what it is that government does, are needed, they always have been.

I think, as we get into increasingly complex policy areas, there's no way that any of those sectors or parties can do it alone, and so the demand and desire for collaboration and to work out how to do that effectively is really, really difficult.

I was very lucky some years ago, to do a large project, which was several universities and several APS agencies looking at joined-up government and collaboration.

We looked across areas, everything from, interestingly pandemic preparedness, through to the coordination of indigenous services into particular communities. There were some really important findings from that around, I used this term earlier, how do you build a supporting architecture to allow collaboration to happen?

Whether it's collaboration across different parts of government, because working with other parts of government can be, to be frank, just as challenging, sometimes even more challenging than working with parties outside.

How do you build a supporting architecture within government that enables that? We did some work on the enabling environment for that. How do you use things like the tools that government has in its toolkit, legislative change, budgetary, processes, performance, development, programs, capability building? How can you use a performance review to encourage people to collaborate?

Well, if you keep telling them it's important to collaborate, but you never assess them against their collaborative behaviours and capacities, you

can pretty much guarantee that they'll continue to operate meeting a relatively siloed set of expectations.

It does require big thinking across a complex system, and I never like to think of the APS, I know we like to talk about it as one APS, but it is a complex system of roughly 100, is 97, 95, the number of organisations within the APS now.

You're talking about a large number of organisations, each with their own purpose, mission, cultures, subcultures, strategic plans and so on, different ... Some of them are regulators, some of them are service delivery, some of them are, they're different beasts. How do you coordinate the different parts of that? It's very challenging.

We talked in our work, around things like how do you design recruitment processes for leaders into that? How do you craft actually, a performance statement or a job description for someone who you essentially want to be a collaborator across the system?

Then, how do you design a performance management system that will judge someone against that criteria, rather than saying you want people like that, and then putting you into a system that has all of the incentives working against it.

How do you delegate authority? How do you allow people to act in managing a team that cuts across different Departments, rather than a single one?

These are all very specific technical questions, that we certainly found in our work at the time, and it was a while ago now, were not really thought about.

Let's just have this big collaborative push, but not work out ... I always say, "They didn't work out the plumbing." The strategic agreement was there, around the big reforms. Huge motivation on the ground to do it right, but we missed the plumbing in the middle.

One of the things that's been really interesting to me about the program of reform at the moment, is it's trying to do all of that, it's trying to get the plumbing in the middle.

David Pembroke:

Do you think we've got the plumbing right?

Janine O'Flynn:

I don't know if we've got it right.

Dr Rachel Bacon:

We've had a good crack at it.

Janine O'Flynn:

Had a good crack. We've really talked about the plumbing. We go to the-

David Pembroke:

Oh, do you?

Janine O'Flynn:

Oh yeah, everything.

David Pembroke:

The plumbing.

Janine O'Flynn:

We go to the Chief Operating Officer's Committee, and well, I do, and I'll say, "We've done a huge amount of work on the plumbing."

That's the infrastructure that you get in Departments of State, in agencies. A lot of work that's being delivered is delivered through agencies rather than just, it's certainly not only Departments of State, a lot in agencies.

We also talk about, is the delivery plumbing full? Because we've seen a lot of initiatives. You go through cycles sometimes, but there are times when there's so many initiatives that the Public Service is trying to deliver, that delivery becomes challenging, because the plumbing can actually get quite full, and you need to be able for things to keep moving through from design.

David Pembroke:

It's impossibly complex, isn't it? In terms of trying to imagine structure, deliver, monitor a value across all of the different sites, yeah, it's hard. I suppose, and we're coming hard up against time, and just a final question to both of you, because ultimately it's people who are going to continue the work of the APS, and who are going to continue to embrace reform and need to be on the journey, so to speak, and having the conversations and encouraging the conversations.

What advice, what words of wisdom, what would you like to impart as a parting note to those who are listening today, about their role and their place in reform, and how is it that they can contribute to this long, ongoing, never ending, and it's never going to end?

You think about changes in context, and changes in technology, and changes in need, and changes in different parts of the community, and changes in different parts of Australia, from the cities to the country, to the outback to the ... It's incredibly difficult and there's no simple solution.

There are people, so again, that advice perhaps, to people, and the role that they can play in delivering. Janine, maybe throw it to you first, and then closing words from Rachel.

Janine O'Flynn:

Yeah, I mean, I had the privilege at the start of last year, to speak to about 300 incoming new public servants into the Australian Public Service, and a couple of things I spoke with them about, firstly was about pride.

In an era where it's extremely easy to knock the Public Service and to talk about the things that don't work, we talk very rarely about what does work, and so I made a point of talking there about pride in work and in the service. When we have these issues around trust and

scandal and so on, that gives a knock to pride that people have in their work.

David Pembroke:

For sure.

Janine O'Flynn:

I think it's really important for people to feel that, and purpose is incredibly important. People come to the public service because they actually care and want to make a difference in the world.

We know that empirically, because around the world there are major studies that look at this unique thing of public service motivation. We know that people come, and so tapping that is really important.

Then, the other thing I talked with that group about, as they were starting off on their journey into the Public Service, was that even though they might not be able to see it right now, the decisions that they made and the advice that they gave and how they went about their work, would have a profound impact on people's lives and could change them.

They might not see all the steps in between that yet, but as they went on in their careers, they might become a bit closer to the impact of those decisions.

It was very important for them to keep that, both in their head and their heart, as they went into a job where they would often hold people's futures without even realising it, in their hands.

Small decisions they make on the front line, big decisions they make in designing policy, will shape people's lives, and I think it's really important for people to remember that. It's not a clocking in, clocking out job, and on a day-to-day basis many of us feel like that about our work, but the purpose of that is really about changing society for the long run, and they play a big part in that.

I feel, as you can tell, very passionate about telling that story to people, that what they're doing is very important.

I think a big part of what both the Australian Public Service, but also public service in other parts of the world need to do at this particular point in history, is remind people about the incredible impact that they have on their lives.

I think it's of our time, it's a big important activity for those of us who are sitting outside of the Public Service, but also those in, to remind people what it is that the Public Service provides and what value it is, that it creates for our society.

David Pembroke:

A final word to you, Rachel.

Dr Rachel Bacon:

I love that, Janine. The two words-

David Pembroke:

The transcript will be available, so you say you can rip that off as well.

Dr Rachel Bacon:

The two words in my mind, are firstly innovation, and to me that's innovate at the local level. Because productivity, improving the way we do things, actually is highly local. Have a crack, innovate, think about how you want to do that in your own operating environment, and just have a go.

The second word is delivery, and to again pick up one of Janine's threads, that I think is really profound and very moving, actually. Delivery for who and delivery why? What are we actually here to deliver? I think there's a true north in our delivery that's about people. It's about Australia as a nation, and it's about people. It's about people who make up businesses, people in communities.

The story I'll finish on, picking up that thread, a very good colleague of mine, after having a chat with me about whether we thought he should sign up to be someone who can give apologies on behalf of the Commonwealth to members of the Stolen Generation, as part of the Stolen Generation Redress Scheme. I heard the most moving story in the last few days, about someone's dad who'd never talked about their experience, who made an application, wasn't expecting that much out of it and got the most heartfelt, meaningful letter, that recognised their dad's experience, recognised the hurt, recognised everything he had to be proud of.

Janine, to your point about the impact on people's lives, that changes their life in the future, this I think was a story of the most profound impact on someone thinking and reflecting about their life over the course of their whole life and actually changing the way that they thought about the course of their whole life. That one public servant, who puts their heart deeply into something and really listens, with that as their true north in what they do, can have the most life-changing impact on people, and that's ultimately what we aspire to do.

David Pembroke:

A wonderful sentiment to end this wonderful conversation. Again, it just goes to the heart, doesn't it, of the APS and the importance of APS and the importance of the Reform Program to drive and encourage that continuous improvement, and that idea of local experimentation and how can we keep that true north well understood, but then think about experiment, test, learn, make better improvements to deliver for the Australian people, because ultimately that's what the APS is all about. It's wonderful too, to reflect that when you do go to these international conferences, perhaps Australia is seen as a beacon for some of these important institutions and structures and processes and other things that we do have in place, and not to be complacent about that at any point in time.

Thanks for coming in for the first of our series about APS Reform, and we'll get into the nitty-gritty into these programs. Rachel spoke about some of them before, around the Academy, the insights, these other things.

Through this APS special series, what we're going to do is really look at the detail and again, look at your part as Australian public servants about what you can do to continue this continuous improvement of the Australian Public Service in service of the Australian people.

A big thanks to Rachel Bacon and Janine O'Flynn, for joining me in the studio this afternoon.

Work With Purpose can be found on Spotify, Apple, wherever that you get your podcasts. If you do happen to go past, go and give us a rating or a review.

We had some fantastic ratings and reviews last year about the program, and we're delighted that we've been able to grow the audience and your engagement with us so strongly, as we did through 2024. Just give us a rating or a review, because what it does is help us to be found by others, and indeed, we are being found all around the world. We have a global audience for Work With Purpose, as people continue to try to understand a little bit more about the Australian Public Service. Please, if you could give us a rating or a review, we would be very grateful for that.

Now, you can follow contentgroup or IPAA ACT on LinkedIn, and you will find all of the latest information about Work With Purpose.

Again, as I said at the beginning of the program, we are driven by your needs and driven by your interests, so it does not take much to say, "Hey, I'd like to know a little bit more about X." Let us know, and the team will go about trying to put together wonderful guests like we had today, to really take us through some of these important issues.

Now, Work With Purpose is produced in collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia, ACT, and this series, APS Reform in Action, is proudly produced in partnership with our very good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission.

A big thanks again to Rachel and Janine, and a big thank you to you, the audience, for coming back to our first program in 2025.

We'll be back at the same time, in probably about a week with our next program, but for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

