

## **TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST**

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GIVING BETTER: HOLISTIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH MICHELLE STEELE

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**David Pembroke:**

Hello everyone and welcome once again 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 today, the Ngunnawal and 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. And indeed, I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast is also joining us from.

So often on Work with Purpose, when we're talking about the Australian public sector, people think about the public service, and from those who make policy to those who talk about how to deliver your Medicare benefits, but the public sector in Australia is much broader than that. It includes not-for-profits that do work for public good, and both are often deeply invested in engaging with communities, but they do it in a slightly different way. So today, what we want to unpack is what does good community engagement look like? What can the public service learn from not-for-profits? And how can both sectors work together to solve Australia's thorniest problems? And we couldn't ask for a better guest to discuss this topic, someone who has worked on both sides of the fence, both at the Department of Health and at the Paul Ramsey Foundation.

Michelle Steele is a Kamilaroi/Gomeri Yinarr woman from Moree, New South Wales, and is the Chief First Nations Officer at the Paul Ramsey Foundation. Prior to joining the Paul Ramsey Foundation, Michelle worked in the public sector for more than 18 years, leading in key policy areas delivering for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly in health and aged care. During the pandemic, she led the COVID-19 Indigenous and Remote Policy and Implementation Branch, supporting the pandemic response and vaccine implementation program through a strong partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector. Michelle has represented Australia at the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous People. She's also an inaugural fellow of the Atlantic Fellows for Social Equity Program, which is an indigenous-led, lifelong, collaborative fellowship program and platform for systemic change. Michelle joins me on the line. Michelle, welcome to Work with Purpose.

**Michelle Steele:** Thank you so much, David. Thank you so much for having me.

**David Pembroke:** And listen, before we jump into it, I just want to recognise Paul Ramsey, the man, Paul Ramsey. I was very, very fortunate to get to know Paul Ramsey. We had a mutual love of the game of Rugby Union, and Paul, when I worked with the national rugby team, the Wallabies, Paul would follow us all over the world and it wouldn't matter where you were, up, would jump the ram at the right time, and he'd be there in his colourful pants, and he'd be just such a great supporter, such a great person, such a wonderful businessman, and really, to think that his life work and the essence of that wonderful human is now expressed through the work of the Paul Ramsey Foundation.

**Michelle Steele:** David, I have heard many stories about Paul. I was not fortunate enough to know him when he was still with us, but obviously, the legacy lives on because he was such a generous person, and everyone will tell you all the stories, the leadership with humility, the love that he had for other people and for really doing what was right. And yeah, I am extremely grateful to be in the position that I am, and enacting some of that legacy, and hopefully, would be very proud of what we're doing at the Paul Ramsey Foundation.

**David Pembroke:** I know he would be very, very proud of the work that you-

**Michelle Steele:** That's great.

**David Pembroke:** ... do at the Paul Ramsey Foundation, and he would be so enthusiastic about it. He would be all over it. He would be-

**Michelle Steele:** Yeah.

**David Pembroke:** I could imagine if he was still with us, he would be so deeply involved in what you were doing, and how you were doing it, and how could he help with you, and who did he know that he could introduce you to. But anyway, that's the great man, the great Paul Ramsey. So, anyway, tell us a little bit about the role that you have there at the Paul Ramsey Foundation.

**Michelle Steele:** Yeah, so I'm the Chief First Nations Officer with the Paul Ramsey Foundation, with PRF. Yeah, I started the role about two years ago. It was the first of its kind in terms of the... In elevating a First Nations approach to its investments. And essentially, my role develops leads and implements PRF strategies and engagement as it relates to First Nations, childrens, families and communities. I have a really great honour as well

in leading a strategy that actually outcomes in course for an outcome in self-determination. And so, it really is in a way in which I can actually be extremely flexible and really open to the way in which community want to see their work and how they want to see impact.

**David Pembroke:**

So, in terms of that, can you put it into practical steps in terms of what's some of the work and some of the focuses that you're looking at immediately in terms of achieving some of those objectives?

**Michelle Steele:**

Yeah, so we've got the three, I suppose, three core areas at the moment that really primarily focuses around First Nations peoples and communities. So, for example, we have a Strengthened in Culture Program that looks at the way in which culture actually leads to better education engagement and outcomes, and especially for children aged five to 12, so mainly through primary school. We also, too, focus in on justice reinvestment. And so, a lot of people, and especially within the public service and with the Australian Government's Attorney-General's Department now picking up that program more nationally. We also, too, look at the way in which First Nations peoples in contact and also to recidivism within the criminal justice system, but mostly with a youth focus.

And another large package, which I'm really extremely proud of, actually, is around economic development. And really, that's about the ability for communities to create their own wealth. And the reason for that is that when they actually create their own wealth and create their own profit, they'll actually reinvest back into their community more than what anyone else can really do. And it's a really great way to actually acknowledge that First Nations' contribution to the economy, but also to the way in which they'll invest in the communities themselves.

**David Pembroke:**

So with the work that you're doing, and you mentioned there the Attorney Generals are involved in the justice package of work, and clearly the delivery of the cultural work through primary schools, it involves engagement with government as a not-for-profit.

**Michelle Steele:**

Yes.

**David Pembroke:**

And again, through your career, you spent a long time as a public servant. How are you going about building that engagement with the government, whether it's local government, state government, federal government, to deliver the outcomes that you are being asked to deliver there at the Paul Ramsey Foundation?

**Michelle Steele:**

Yeah, David, and as I said, a really great question as well. Actually, it's because I've actually learned to have different communications and different conversations with communities. So, when I was a public servant, I found that a lot of the conversation was focused around compliance or specifically to a specific program that I was actually responsible for, rather than actually just sitting with the community and asking them, "How are you going? Tell me a little bit more about you." And so, what I've actually been able to do in working with government now is bring a different level of conversation that brings a little bit more of a holistic picture. Because quite often, as I said, when you're engaging with communities or from a government perspective, when you're engaging with someone in which you fund, then the conversation is usually focused around that program. So yeah, by being able to bring more of a holistic view into what's actually happening with community.

So, for example, within injustice, so for example, we actually know that in Moree. So Moree is my home, you said there before, I was born in Moree, but actually, that's one of our justice reinvestment sites through Just Reinvest New South Wales. And within Moree, we've actually found that there was a lot of statistics and especially around the Bail Reform Program that was really going on. New South Wales government had stepped in and were looking at a localised Moree response. What I was actually able to do was build a relationship with obviously a lot of family, but also too, a lot of people that I knew just by virtue of being from the location. And so what I was able to do was provide a little bit of insight or just a little bit of difference into what is really going on within the community. And then as we started breaking it down, they were actually quite honest in saying that maybe perhaps that government programmatic failures was where communities have actually been let down in terms of crime and statistics and things like that as well.

So as I said, it's really about just bringing a different level of the conversation together. But what I've really found as well is that philanthropy can have a really great role within testing ideas. We can actually really de-risk organisations or de-risk scaling ideas and concepts. And especially too when I strongly believe that communities are innovating at a pace which far outweighs the government's ability to actually fund that innovation, then I think that that's where philanthropy can really have a strong role to play as well. And again, that's what I'm really loving about being within PRF at the moment and working with government as well, because as I said, I'm just bringing a different layer of the conversation that maybe perhaps they're not always privy to.

**David Pembroke:**

So then in terms of effectiveness and building those trusted relationships between government and the not-for-profit sector, what advice do you have to both sides in the way they need to engage in order to deliver those outcomes for the community?

**Michelle Steele:**

Yeah, I think the best advice that I can give is especially around evaluations. So during government, obviously, evaluations were a really great method to tell you the kind of things that are happening. So what's actually happening within the program is it meeting its state of objectives? What could be done better? And as I said, really from an audit and evaluation and a compliance lens, whereas in PRF, what I've really learned is around what is actually the impact that a program and a funding is actually having? What can be attributed to that particular program or that funding or what can be a contribution to the impact that it's having?

And so, for me and for many of the... Especially within philanthropy, and I think across the whole philanthropic sector, we've really learned to look at impact instead of evaluation because I think any evaluation will tell you the core things, and especially for indigenous communities throughout Australia, that is really needed. It needs to be developed by First Nations people for First Nations peoples and delivered by First Nations organisations. And that's where I think the greatest opportunity for us then is around the impact, because we can actually then look at what are the insights? What are the learnings? What are the barriers? What are the biggest risks? Where can we actually amend and tailor into that? Because we're not bound to some of those programmatic guidelines, for example. We can actually be a little bit more flexible and a little bit more tailored within the funding in which we provide. So yeah, I think that impact and especially the way in which we can actually deliver for impact instead of delivering just for compliance, is a really important step.

**David Pembroke:**

Do you find that the communities have a different attitude towards you as part of the Paul Ramsey Foundation compared to when you were an Officer of the Commonwealth?

**Michelle Steele:**

Yeah, absolutely, David, as I said, because quite often, especially as a senior executive within government, you are seen as a decision maker. And so you are often then seen as a person who's responsible for their funding, whether their funding is going to be continued or not. Whereas with PRF, we can actually look at rather, and especially when we visit, we always visit with intent. We don't ever go to visit for extraction, and we

always visit with listening. We never visit with solutions. And so in a way, as I said, I do believe that the conversations are much different because we get to understand what those needs are from their perspective, as I said, as opposed to a programmatic approach. I don't know what it is. I think it's maybe because just the sheer amount of government funding that actually goes into First Nations communities and especially to communities to deliver services on behalf of governments such as the Aboriginal child and community-controlled health sector, early learning centres even because there's a very thin market, especially in rural and remote Australia as well.

So I just think that it's just a little bit different. I'm not sure why. David, if I'm honest, I can't even put my finger on it. I can't tell you why it is, but I do believe that the conversation has been much different. And as I said, maybe it's because at PRF, I'm a little bit closer to the decision-making too. Obviously, within my role, I report directly to the CEO, and then we have a board, and that's it. And so whereas within government, there's obviously complex layers and associated with those hierarchies. Maybe that's it. Maybe they do see me as a direct decision-maker, so they're open... being a little bit more open and honest within their approach. But also too, I think one of the things that I remember saying at the IFA's International Women's Day Panel Breakfast was around frank and fearless advice, and that really need for that frank and fearless advice at the public policy level.

But I also think that that should go both ways. And frank and fearless advice should also come back from communities back to government, back to any funder and any financing sectors because that's where the greatest, I think, anyway, the greatest gifts are is the insights and the knowledges and the learnings because public policy didn't come from Michelle's or anyone else's bright ideas. It's come from years of engagement, years of listening, years of actually sitting down and reading. It's years of actually understanding how decisions are made and the public policy cycle. And so really, I just think it's different, but it's really exciting all at the same time.

**David Pembroke:**

With that, what do you see as the barriers to frank and fearless advice, whether it's in working inside the Paul Ramsey Foundation with communities or working as part of the Federal Department of Health, working with communities as well? Where are the barriers, and why don't we see more frank and fearless advice?

**Michelle Steele:**

Well, especially for me, I've always... I remember when I first joined government, I worked with the Indigenous Land Corporation, and a

couple of years after, I moved into the Department of Finance down in Canberra and have been living in Canberra for the last 18 years now. And my very first Secretary at the Department of Finance was Dr. Watt, if you remember him.

**David Pembroke:**

I do.

**Michelle Steele:**

He was extremely big on frank and fearless advice. And even as he changed, and it was then... I think it was David Choon, the next Secretary, all those people after was always big on frank and fearless advice. Yeah. So it's always been ingrained into me about what that actually means, and really, it's about being honest in the approach to it because sometimes it's not actually about saying no or saying yes. It's just about outlining what it could be.

Yeah, I think one of the biggest barriers though, is a risk and loss of reputation. And especially if you are always seen to be the person who's actually speaking out against something. And in a public service and like any area that has its own little culture and remit of people, I think that the potential for seeing yourself maybe as a risk to your reputation of always fighting something can be something then that's being brought forward. I think the other one as well, which is the power imbalance. And let's face it, David, the power imbalance that exists between funders and First Nations communities, and as great as I'm making it sound working at PRF, we still understand that there is a power imbalance because we do come with funds, and that's always something that we're very mindful of.

And so I think then within government and how that plays out, that power imbalance as well, because then that frank and fearless advice coming back, again, could come from that years and notions of short-term funding agreements, lots of pilots, lots of test programs, but never leveraging long-term certainty. And so, in a way, maybe perhaps it's just a little bit of scaredness there as well to actually say the truth or to be frank and fearless in your advice and in the way in which you engage back as well because of that power imbalance that could exist between the funder and the funding.

**David Pembroke:**

So, just with that issue around funding, when you speak with communities on the ground, how do you create consensus about how money should be invested? Because I'm sure often, you may arrive in different communities, and different people have different views about what those different priorities are.

**Michelle Steele:**

Yeah, absolutely. Listen, I don't think like any population, any group, any diverse... especially in diverse groups as well, is that we're not only just diverse peoples, but we're actually diverse within our thinking as well. And so the word even consensus to me is I don't think ever really going to be achieved. And the reason why is because I do believe if this was easy, David, then it would already be done. Right? We wouldn't need jobs, we wouldn't need public policy if this was easy, but I reckon if I asked most Nations people in this country, "What do you want?" They'll all just say, "A better future for our children, a better today and an even better tomorrow." But how we get there is the thing that all of us will have an opinion on. Right? And that's because what happens in my family and my community is very different what will happen in, for example, Cape York or what will happen in WA or anywhere like that.

And so, gaining consensus is really hard, which is then the reason why so many frustrations do occur with government and even with PRF and other funders as well, because gaining consensus through consistency is actually just not practical at all. But where I've actually seen this really play out is actually around positive dissent. So my team and I have looked into a community that has absolutely a regional-based community that absolutely does not operate by consensus, but what it actually has is positive dissent. And what I mean by that is even if you are for a program or against a program, your voice will be heard by that organisation. And I think that that's a really great way to look at it. As I said, we will all want the same outcome. It's just how do we get there and how do we do that? That's where the fight is, but it's never really about fighting. As I said, it's just about a difference of opinion because what will work for me or what I think is going to be completely different to somebody else's opinion.

And I think then that's the hardest thing, and especially for the public service then is how do you then build on all of those conversations to come up with the one area that maybe perhaps people can agree on to be able to implement? But as I said, that's somewhat impractical as well, often as well.

**David Pembroke:**

So when you say positive dissent in that particular community that you mentioned, is that there is an agreement that you will be heard, that you will be able to express your point of view, but ultimately, if there is a decision made that you will support that position or does it not mean that?

**Michelle Steele:**

Most of the time, it will, and what it normally comes with is about how much dissent is actually happening. So, for example, if someone says,

"Hey, we want to trial this program," and I've seen that happen, or, "We want to do this program," for example, a teaching method within a school, and then there's dissent around it. What it means, though, is that they'll pause and they'll converse and they'll have a conversation around, "What does it actually mean?" Therefore, people aren't just making decisions based on what they think. It's based on really genuinely informed decision-making. And I think for me as well as being at PRF, the one thing that I've really learned to do is around to slow down, is to make an informed decision instead of just really thinking about that.

And that's the greatest opportunity I think anyone can have is forget everything that we know, forget everything that everyone else ever taught us about the public service, and actually learn around what does it mean? For Michelle, be a public servant, what does it mean for others to be that? Because I think that there is an ability to actually challenge the norm. There is an ability to actually think about things a little bit differently. And as I said, instead of thinking about consensus, think about, "But are people free to dissent? And I think that that's a really important factor as well.

**David Pembroke:**

But it's often a challenge, isn't it? Because the reality is we need results, we need things to happen. We've got a problem we're trying to deliver, we're trying to improve, and that's incongruous with that... Well, let's take a little bit more time to work through this particular issue. So when you are in that environment, which I'm sure you are a lot-

**Michelle Steele:**

A lot.

**David Pembroke:**

How do you balance that conflict?

**Michelle Steele:**

I don't think you can really. I know that sounds strange, but you can't because, as I said, there's a great example actually. So, around about three months ago, PRF decided to actually do a targeted grant round. And what we actually did was we actually called a number of organisations and spoke with a number of organisations. We actually went out and visited a lot of communities, a lot of the funded partners that we have, but also too, met with a lot of people that we don't currently fund, to really think about what is it that people really need? So that when we advertised an open grant round, that they could actually see themselves within it and that they then therefore weren't afraid to actually apply for funding, philanthropic funding. And I had some amazing conversations.

For one organisation, all they wanted was \$32,000, and I'm like, "\$32,000?" It was a very oddly specific number. And they said, "Yeah,

because we need to replace the desktop computers and the laptops. None of us actually have any..." All their laptops were so old that they had no cameras on them. So they couldn't do Teams meetings or Zoom meetings like everyone else. And then I went to... spoke to another community, and they wanted an alternative to mining income for their young people. And so, they were actually looking at cultural fire burning, and therefore, how can they enhance an alternative income source, basically for their community and for their people? And also too, obviously, employment.

So again, these are sometimes really simple things. Some things are really complex things, but other things are just by listening to people, you can always then gain consensus because as I said, everyone will have a different version of how to get there, but we're all fighting for the same goal. And I think that that's then the thing as an independent person I can help provide, which is, "This is what I've heard, this is what I've heard. What do you think about that?" And as I said, when you do find that dissent, sit with it. It's okay to sit with it because if I know better, then again, all of our jobs would've been fixed by now. If we were the only people with the answers, then we wouldn't actually need the big public service that we do.

**David Pembroke:**

You are not that long into your job at the Paul Ramsey Foundation, but if you were to throw yourself forward a few years to the point where you're cleaning up your desk and it's the time to move on to your next challenge, which I'm sure you will at some point in time, what would you like to see? What change would you like to have made that has delivered against your mission there at the Paul Ramsey Foundation to help improve the lives of indigenous Australians?

**Michelle Steele:**

I would love to see three things. For example, last year, PRF actually extended 46% of its total granting on First Nations-led initiatives. And around about just over 90% of that actually went to First Nations-led organisations. So that's either an Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation, so an ACCHO or a First Nation-led, and that's where it's either a majority of the board as well as its executive team and its staffing profile. And I'm really, really proud of that, but I'd love to see then over the course of the next few years is that to be sustained so that when we look at the historical reflection of PRF's total giving, that historically we're increasing our total portfolio pool. So that's something I'd love to achieve internally.

Externally, I would love to see more philanthropic funding going towards First Nations-led organisations. And so the Productivity Commission

released a report last year called Foundations for Giving, and it was a look into philanthropy and one specific chapter around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was in relation to that many of the organisations had actually been locked out of philanthropy for a really long time because it was either seen as elitist, difficult to access, was seen around who you know as opposed to the impact in which your programs would have. But what we'd also seen is that a lot of funding went towards First Nations benefit, but not to First Nations-led organisations. And as I said, that's either of those two organisation types I spoke before. So I would love to influence the broader ecosystem of philanthropy across Australia to give better to First Nations-led organisations.

And I think the third thing, if I can crack anything, it's to bring the financing sector on board with us as well. I think for too long, indigenous Australians have been locked out of traditional forms of finance as well. So banking, especially banking as well. And that's just because we were never coming from an equal plane foot, David. My parents were 16 or 17, I think 15, at the time when they were recognised as citizens within the country. So prior to that, they were going through education. They weren't able to access the same level of education. Our family that went off and fought in World War II weren't recognised within that, so didn't benefit from Australia's... the land or the housing estates that were given to returning soldiers. And so really, when it comes to economic development, when it comes to that genuine ability to finance or to bring capital to the table to be able to finance through traditional forms of finance, because we are coming behind, I would love to see the financing sector get on that.

And really, I think where that can be done, especially is through title and through native title lands and held title throughout Australia as well. I think it's something like 40% of Australia is under title. So I'd love to see the traditional access to financing come on board as well. So they're the three things that I would love to really influence, but as I said, I don't think my job's ever really going to be done. I am a huge believer in public policy. So you are right. There probably will be a return of public policy at some point because I do love it, but this is a really great form as well of influencing public policy. It's just doing it a little bit different. And as you said within your introduction as well, the not-for-profit sector, the charitable sector is a really important player within that. And so I would love to see just a better influence around public policy and how all of those things fit together, and especially within assistance lands.

**David Pembroke:**

A final question. Are you optimistic?

**Michelle Steele:**

Yeah, probably a little bit too much. No. Yes, I am. And because I really do believe in a better tomorrow. Just like if you asked me, "What do you want, Michelle?" I will tell you, a better today and a better tomorrow. So I am at a heart optimistic, but the reason that I'm really optimistic as well, David, is because I believe that everyone has a role to play. And so I'm a big believer in having really positive conversations with lots of people and as many people as possible to influence the way in which they might think about something or the way in which they might decide something or influence a decision. Because Australia as a whole will benefit from when it's First Nations people are flourishing, and that's the same as any diverse peoples, people living with disability. Our LGBTIQ+ communities, all of our communities, will be better and Australia will benefit when those that are most vulnerable, but also too, the most priority are flourishing as well.

**David Pembroke:**

Well, I do know one person who will be looking down on you, wishing you Godspeed with your work, Paul Ramsey. I'm sure he's very proud of the work that you're doing, and he'd be thrilled to pieces.

**Michelle Steele:**

Yeah, we are really proud of the legacy that we're creating here at the Paul Ramsey Foundation. But more importantly, I just think that philanthropy is a really great space to be, and it's working with public policy in different ways, and that's what I've really loved about my time away so far.

**David Pembroke:**

And he'd love the clarity and he'd love the priorities, and he'd love the fact that you were getting on with it. So that's tremendous, and good luck with all of your important work. And indeed, good luck with all the important work that you need to do in engaging with government-

**Michelle Steele:**

Yeah, I think so.

**David Pembroke:**

In delivering for a better today and better tomorrow. It's certainly an important collaboration, an important part of the community that works, that that collaboration and partnership works in the best interests of many, many diverse communities across Australia, but also with particular focus with your work there with the indigenous communities across Australia. So all the very best of luck with that work, and thanks very much for joining us today.

**Michelle Steele:**

Thank you, David, for having me.

**David Pembroke:**

And to you, the audience, thank you for coming back once again. What a great conversation there with Michelle Steele, a wonderful public servant who is taking a sabbatical or taking a detour into the not-for-profit sector to work with the wonderful Paul Ramsey Foundation. And I think, as I say, that clarity around better today, better tomorrow, and these are the particular areas. And I know that if you are interested in perhaps in your area, whether it be local government, state government, federal government, if you are interested in reaching out to Michelle, I'm sure she'd love to have a conversation with you to understand what you are doing and how indeed the Paul Ramsey Foundation can work with you to deliver that better today and better tomorrow.

Thanks again to all of you who keep reviewing and rating the program. It's fantastic to see it. You can follow contentgroup and IPAA ACT on LinkedIn to stay up to date with all of the latest information with Work with Purpose. And indeed, if you'd like to reach out with a topic suggestion, we're always willing to hear from you because indeed, this is your program, and a lot of the programming does come from you, the audience. We'll be back next week with another episode of Work With Purpose. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me, and it's bye for now.

**Speaker 3:**

Work with Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.