

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE | EPISODE #136
OF(F) COURSE MINISTER WITH SEAN INNIS

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13, May 2025

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Delivered in a partnership between IPAA ACT and contentgroup

Kate Driver (guest host):

Hello everyone and welcome to Work With Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves the Australian community. Now you might have noticed I am not David Pembroke. Today I am your guest host, Kate Driver, CEO of IPAA ACT, and national Director of IPAA National, standing in for Pemby, who unfortunately is a little under the weather. Now, of course, we always start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we're meeting today. And here in Canberra, in the studio, it's the Ngunnawal people. I pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and I acknowledge the ongoing contribution that they make to the life of this city and its region. I also extend that respect to other First Nations families connected with this region. I'd also like to acknowledge those of you who are listening in other countries around Australia, the lands upon which you are listening to this podcast.

So welcome to our first Work with Purpose episode since the Australian Federal Election. This is a timely one indeed. As the dust settles from a heady election night, the thoughts of many people, not only in Canberra but across the community, those who work for the Commonwealth Public Service and those who work beyond, turn to business and turning to business means working with ministers. And so today, we're going to take a bit of a deep dive into the relationships that are held between elected members of Parliament, those ministers and the public servants who provide service to them and support the government of the day. Now, these relationships are, of course, complex, but at their core, they are still rooted in a long-standing principle of responsible government. But what does it actually mean?

So, the Australian Parliamentary system was inherited from the United Kingdom. It's evolved in the Australian context for nearly 125 years, and some of the fundamental tenets of transparency, accountability, and responsible government that were embedded in reforms in the mid-nineteen-seventies also remain significant principles that underpin the work of public servants and also underpin the expectations of the community that elected officials serve. But it's also true to say that those principles have drifted, evolved, and arguably been misused or even corrupted in scandals like robo-debt and other public administration failings. So the relationship in the dawn of a new government between ministers, elected officials and the public sector, including public servants, is important as we think about how it actually looks on the ground today in 2025. Now, fortunately, you don't just need to listen to

my musings. This is a subject of a new book by Sean Innis, who joins me as our guest today. Welcome Sean.

Sean Innis:

Thanks, Kate. Lovely to be here.

Kate Driver:

Fantastic to have you here as our first post-election podcast. I can't think of a better topic to kick off. So, Sean, you are the author of a recently published book called Of(f) Course Minister. And for those that are following along, it is spelled O-F within an F in brackets. So, I'm curious about that title and where that takes us, Sean. Now you said to me your mantra is deeper thinking for a better world. And I love the fact that as part of the public sector ecosystem that we sit in, thinking is a really important part of the job. You're an honorary fellow at the ANU and an adjunct professor at the University of New South Wales at a fellow at ADC Forum, and an associate at Keteris. You're also an expert columnist in the Mandarin, and you might've seen some sneak peek extracts of Sean's book in the last few weeks. So, Sean, Of(f) Course Minister, tell me a little bit about what drove this piece of work.

Sean Innis:

Yeah, thanks Kate. So, it was an interesting journey. I started out writing a book about the public servants who work at the centre of government, at that nexus with ministers and parliament. And I ended up writing a different book. It still has a big focus on public servants, and it takes a view through what public servants do. But it ended up being a bit a deeper reflection on our system of government and, as you said, on the relationships at the centre between ministers, public servants and Parliament. The Of(f) Course title came to me as I was driving from Canberra down the coast to visit my mother. And what I was reflecting on was the difficulty senior public servants have between choosing when to say, "Of course minister, we'll get that done." And "Of course Minister Uh-uh, let's not go there or let's go there a different way." And that was the reason behind the title.

Kate Driver:

It's a rather pithy title, and the Democratic and Public Administration nerds amongst us, I think, are chuckling to the callback of previously, arguably fictional characters, although well-informed with excellent researchers in shows like guest minister and, of course, Utopia. But Sean, you've spent a lot of time around public sector and particularly the Commonwealth Public Service. You've seen it evolve and change. So, what are the things that have really stood out to you most over that time that have made it their way into the book and some that haven't?

Sean Innis:

Yeah, so it's not just my time. I've got a bit of grey hair, Kate, but I'm not quite as old as the history of the book projects. And in fact, as a writer, I

like going backwards in time to see what was and then look at how it's changed. So that's what I did in the book. And I went, in fact, so far back to the Magna Carta and even a bit earlier to talk about how we got to the principles of government that we arguably have lost today. The idea of public servants really only emerged in the 19th century. And in fact, civil servants were first not about what we call public servants today; they were in fact, employees of the East India Company. So, they were administrators in a private company working in India. And as the British government took over that company, the idea of civil servants in broader government emerged.

So, it's an interesting thing that 150 odd years ago, there was no such thing as a civil servant and the way we think about it, but there are three historical points that I think are important to us today. The first was in the mid-nineteenth century, around 1853, and it was the Northcote Trevelyan report. That report we hear about even today, lots of senior public servants talk about it. It's 23 pages long, it has no recommendations, and it was actually targeted at how to get more public servants, a challenge people in Canberra might be facing soon. The key aspect of the Northcote Trevelyan report was to conceive of the public service as something independent from ministers, and that was the start of what we call modern public service.

The second phase, if I can call it that, was really post-World War II and in Australia, it was the time of the seven Dwarfs. And that period of government public servants were characterised by high levels of independence, a very elite arm of the executive, and they were tellers of what we should do as a country. So, they saw themselves as telling ministers what we should do. The third phase, if you like, is the phase that we're in today. And it really started, as I think you mentioned, Kate, in the 1970s. Following a royal commission, the hundredth Royal Commission in Australia led by a guy called Nugget Coombs, one of the seven Dwarves. And what that Royal Commission did was take a big look at how public servants were working in the ecosystem of government. And the conclusion was they were far too independent. They weren't treating ministers appropriately as deciders and prioritisers within government.

And that started a long shift to what we see today, where we've moved from what we'd call the thinking or telling public servant to the reacting and responding public servants. So, if you like, they used to tell ministers what to do; now, public servants get it done. And that's the arc. And both in the 1970s and today, I would argue the system was out of balance, that

it was too far towards independence in the period of the Dwarves. Today, it is too far towards blindly just getting on with the job.

Kate Driver:

So, I'm conjuring up images from a history of privateering and Disney through to get shit done, which really tickles my fancy. But Sean, things have definitely drifted and changed since the 70s, haven't they? I mean, we've seen iterations of some of those fundamental tenants out of the Coombs Royal Commission and the administrative structures that the Commonwealth Public Service in particular, operates even today. But we've seen a little bit of a drift in how that's applied as well. And I think you talk about that a little bit as you reached some of the conclusions in your book.

Sean Innis:

Yeah, I think you're spot on, Kate, that what really struck me in writing the book was, as we got closer to today, the formalised structures around the public service have got stronger and stronger. If we sit back and read the 1999 Public Service Act, it actually says what most public servants would think their role is. So it's not really the formalised institutions and structures that I think have drifted. What has drifted is are the informal conventions of government, those soft guardrails that hold the system together and tell us what to do in the grey areas where the law is not 100% clear. And what I would say is that, drift involves public servants, but it is a drift of the system as a whole. It's not just public servants have changed. Interestingly, I do think public servants have changed in a way themselves, which has overresponded to the signals in the environment. So it's an interesting thing, it's that public service responsiveness, which is a good thing that has probably just been overdone.

Kate Driver:

And do you think that has a lot to do with the political context in which this institution operates? So if you think about the last 12 months in both the global context and the Australian context, there's probably been a lot more discourse around the role of public service in particular, but also off the back of that, the role of a broader public sector consultants, suppliers, providers, advisors, and for those public servants who are used to leading from behind, being, I think you called them the aimless leaders who might occasionally get a spot at a NIPRA event or on this podcast, but generally they do their craft behind the scenes. How do you think that public discourse has actually impacted the way that public servants are responsive?

Sean Innis:

Yeah, it's a great question, Kate. And something that I think has happened over the last few years in particular, is the two major parties have got further apart in their vision of what the public service, particularly those they work most closely with, should do. So, on the

current government and the just returned government side, the word that we often hear is partners. On the other side of the fence, and let's think about the government of Scott Morrison, they were simply deliverers. We would decide what to do, and new public servants just get on with doing it. Both visions of the public service actually sit quite comfortably in Westminster tradition. What I would argue is, the gap is too wide. The fact that if the government have changed on the weekend, public servants would be operating in quite a different way to what they will now face with the government being returned. That gap is harmful, and I do think there's merit in the new parliament having a think about what is it about the public service that all governments should receive.

Kate Driver:

So taking the view back now to a micro level and the title of your book, it really conjures a conversation between a public service leader and a minister in that context of divergent, but neither of you being inconsistent with the Westminster system, it strikes me that your research really speaks to the personality and the philosophical approach of ministers and governments of the day. What did you find in preparing the book about the examples or the ways in which those relationships have either returned to on-course or actually steered things off course?

Sean Innis:

Yeah, it was an interesting journey for me, that what I would say is rather than it being institutionally based, what we've seen is personal relationships really, really mattering. And that's very different from in the past. So the concept of independence was built around an institutional role both for minister and for public servant, and for that matter, for the parliament. Today, personal relationships seem to drive whether the overall relationship between a minister and a public servant works. And indeed, whether that public servant is able to say off-course at the right moment when the minister will listen.

Kate Driver:

And for those mid-career leaders who are listening today and those early career public servants who've maybe not long been in the sector and in fact might've started their career in a very different and topsy-turvy world of COVID, how do you actually build that reputation and that rapport?

Sean Innis:

With the minister? Most of us learn by watching others. So, I know I learned an awful lot watching people around the cabinet room and with ministers and as a young public servant, I had a lot of opportunities that helped me along the way. That happens a bit less now that I think I was an APS6, and I travelled with the minister and his staff around the country following the release of a major report. Wouldn't today send an APS5, and they probably shouldn't have then to be honest. So, it's making sure those opportunities exist, and people learn from one another. But I also

think there's a great merit in the public service spending more time thinking about what types of relationships work, what types of institutional relationships do you want? So that it doesn't all become a personal connection between minister and secretary. If it's all about the personalities, then public servants can't do their jobs properly.

Kate Driver:

And those guardrails, that guidance, those structures that pass through an institution rather than just the hands of individuals, very much embedded in that concept of responsible government and the role of the parliament, which seems to have shifted over time, you track through the course of the book, different iterations, different styles. How do you think that the structures of those institutions, those tenants that practitioners need to rely on to do their job well, have changed over time?

Sean Innis:

It's a great question. So, when I refer to two writers in the book from the Victorian era, the mid-nineteenth century, one was a guy called A. V. Dicey. He was a Donnish law professor, wrote a very big book about Westminster. The other was a journalist called Walter Bagshot, and he took a very different view as much livelier with his language and his views. So, I had these contrasting thinkers. And what struck me is both were writing at a time when, actually Westminster was changing quite a lot. So, in around 1867, an Act of Parliament in Britain doubled the number of people who could vote. So suddenly, you had a world where to reach the voters, you needed to organise politically. And that's where political parties became strong. And the reason I mention it is, what we saw within parliament was a change of behaviour. So, in the early part of that period, most parliamentarians voted with their own conscience.

They often voted against their party. 20 or 30 years later, almost all votes in the parliament, up to 80, 90%, were taken along party lines. So that is one of the big things that have happened, and I know it happened a long time ago, but our system hasn't quite adjusted to what that means. So, the system is almost designed for people in parliament to act independently of the executive, when what we really get is what I call partyism in the book, that the executive government is really controlling the parliament. And you can see that in the election, the excitement is, the government has a fairly substantial majority. That means it controls the parliament. What people assume, though is that it is the executive, that is the ministers who are appointed by the Governor General, when in fact, in Westminster theory, there is some separation between them and the parliamentarians who represent individual electorates. I hope that made some sense.

Kate Driver: Yes. It makes me think actually, Sean, about the way in which we've seen a changing demographic and its relationship with the public sector change over time. Not only on trust metrics and the material that's measured each year by the Public Service Commission and PM&C on trust indicators in Australia, but also the way that people relate to their local member in that context. As we've seen a shift to independent parties, as we've seen a rise of misinformation and disinformation, do you think that we are reaching a critical mass point where that system may well have to think about how it reconciles those changing community expectations because after all, we're in service to that community.

Sean Innis: It's a very big question, and it's one I've been musing on for quite some time and will probably be another book next year sometime.

Kate Driver: We'll come back and have a chat about that then, sure.

Sean Innis: Shall we? So, it is a really serious question, and I think one of the big things that is affecting our system of government, and as a result, the way ministers behave and the way public servants have responded is this expectations gap that is being created in the people. So governments are promising beyond what they can reasonably deliver, and this is systemic in democracies around the world. And as a result, you're getting this desire to control the narrative, everything's about announceables. You want quick wins; you don't want long-term implementation. What you want is quick wins, and that's driving both engagement with the people based on a 24/7 media cycle, but it's creating a gap with the people between what you're saying you're going to do and what actually pops out the other end.

Kate Driver: So, it seems to me there's a real opportunity. We're recording today's discussion on the Monday after the election. There's a new government, it's a returning government, but it's new in that there's a new mandate and a new context and yet to be seen if there are any significant impacts in terms of change to the Commonwealth public sector as a result. But how do practitioners take that opportunity? What did you learn from the book? You said you started writing one book and turned it into another. If you were here talking to some practitioners, mid-career in the more junior ranks of the senior leadership and even those secretaries and deputy secretaries that might sit alongside you, what would your advice be to them based on what you've learned in developing this book?

Sean Innis: That's a brilliant question and a difficult one to answer, and I'm going to answer it two different ways. So, there's a fast tempo bit to government

and a slow tempo bit, and ministers are generally operating in the fast tempo bit. The strength of the electoral mandate the government now has may slow them down a bit, may give them some confidence to slow down and that might change the dynamics. I'd encourage every public servant who's working closely with ministers to get a read on that, get a read on is it fast tempo still? Are we still driving for announceables and quick wins? Or is there an opportunity to step back a little bit and slow things down? So the first thing I'd say is you've got to read the ministerial context because public servants are servants. That's why the word is in the title.

So have to respond to that dynamic. But there is a longer-term game that I think is captured in the broad concept of stewardship that the public service as a whole needs to come to. And it's one of the tensions that I see we have at the moment, we put a lot of effort into individual public servants. That's a great thing, but we almost act as if the public service is simply the aggregation of individual public servants. And I'm not sure that's necessarily the best way to look at things, that it's both. It is a deep investment in individual public servants, but it's also looking at what is the role of the public service overall. And what does it overall need to be doing? So, it's not just left to individuals.

Long winded way of saying my advice to particularly mid-level public servants is now's the time to watch really carefully about what's going on and how that longer term aspiration, that's slower deeper thinking part is sitting against the fast tempo bit, the getting shit done bit of government that has dominated for quite some time.

Kate Driver:

And I think the conversations that we've had on this podcast and in a number of IPRA events around stewardship really underline your point there, Sean, which is, stewardship is about taking that longer-term view while parts of departments are oriented towards responding to ministers delivering immediately. There are also parts of the departments that are thinking about that longer-term view and roles that are about thinking in depth future foresight. The Thirty review and the APS Reform agenda both speak about those skills and that strategic foresight as a really fundamental part of the way we steward this institution.

And I think those who are at the top of the tree that the senior leaders I've seen and address in public environments, from the Commissioner Gordon de Brouwer, talking about you aren't just in the system, you are the system. You are able to influence that. And so, it seems to me that there are some ways of thinking and showing up within the parameters of this Westminster system that you've written about in your book that are

more effective in particular points in time than others. My long-winded question to you, though, Sean, is in the course of this research and going right back to Magna Carta and East India Company, and yes, I don't believe that you are probably there for first-hand experience of those things. What are some of the ways that these leaders and these public servants have shown up in ways that are surprisingly effective?

Sean Innis:

Do I have specific examples of public servants who have decided to stand on top of a hill and repel the hordes of ministers? The answer's no, right? The answer is no. There are a few interesting things that I do think the audience could reflect on that might be worthwhile. One is a former Commonwealth Secretary named Tony Ayres, famously, and this may or may not be a true story, said to a certain prime Minister, I'm not here to rude words, rude words tell you what you want to hear, I'm here to tell you what you need to hear. And I think that has been a really important thing that is sort of traded off a bit. Now that first and foremost, if you're interacting with ministers, you have to make sure that they hear what they need to hear to take the decision that they need to take or do the action they need to do.

An extra step is to advise them on what to do. The first is sacrosanct, the second is an opportunity. Never give up the first to have the second would be one piece of advice. The second thing I'd say about the system overall is this focus on change, which is the nature of democracy. No government in history has come in after an election, said, "Things are looking all right, we should just chug the machine along, right?" That just doesn't happen. Politicians are disposed to change. Public servants have to respond to that. What we've lost, though, is an ability to look at the deepest services provided by government. And I always reflect on the role of the executive is to deliver the new decisions of Parliament by all means, but it's also to deliver all of the past decisions of Parliament, all of those laws, all of those services.

And public servants, I think have a particular responsibility to understand how those services are going in the community, what are the big issues that are arising in them? Both short term and long term, and bring them more strongly both to the executive government but also to Parliament that is part of the role. So, I'll give you a little example. You asked a long question, so I'm taking a bit.

Kate Driver:

Oh, look, absolutely.

Sean Innis:

I'll give you a bit of an example, and this is not a criticism of anyone in particular, but in the lead up to the Royal Commission on Aged Care, I went back and looked at a series of annual reports. Now, formally, an annual report is from the secretary to the Parliament. The Secretary's review started out saying, "You know that Aged Care system, it's rocking along, all right." A year later, the same secretary review might've been a different secretary, it's not what I'm focused on. "That Aged Care system where we're going to make some changes, but we're running hard and it's going to be really good." A year later, well, the government's called a Royal Commission into Aged Care. It's an important thing to look at. So we'll be supporting the commission and whatever comes out of it, we'll be ready to go."

The one after that was obviously, oh, the commission found a few things. "We're going to implement all of those changes as well as we can. Of course, public servants should say that." The bit I'm talking about is the secretary, I think, has a particular responsibility to look at the delivery responsibility of the department and make a hard-nosed short and long-term judgement about how that's going and bring that into light both for the executive, the minister, but also for parliament.

Kate Driver:

So in that, I'm hearing some advice there for practitioners regardless of what level they might sit in the hierarchy, that understanding the context that's beyond your inbox and beyond your desktop.

Sean Innis:

Absolutely.

Kate Driver:

And I think that kind of takes me to my last question for today. So we look back to look forward, there's been some large reviews already brought forward in the public sector reform programme, and there's been some foreshadowing from ministers that more reform is yet to come. Where do you think we're going next? And where do you think any practitioner, whether they're in the public service, whether they're in the broader public sector working alongside partnering with public service departments in service to our community, should start to be thinking about what's on the horizon?

Sean Innis:

I'm not quite sure where we're going next. I think everyone has been surprised by what happened over the weekend, and it will take time for this particular government to find its character. I don't think anyone in the return to government was planning on the basis of what they will rightly feel is a strong mandate. So I don't quite know what is next, but there are a few things that I do think are important. One is, the public service should take an opportunity to have a conversation about what the public

service as a whole provides. And that emphasis on it being more than just delivering the frontier change that the government is bringing forward. That is important.

But I do think the opportunity should be taken to have a conversation about, well, are we really giving enough stewardship to the fundamental services and laws our parliaments have in acted over time? So that's one thing. Another thing that I think is really important for the public service to do is have a think about the core value it brings. And one that I think all public servants should think about is continuity. So one of the strongest reasons for having an independent public service is it provides continuity in the system. It provides continuity before, during, and after an election, that's obvious. But it provides continuity with stakeholders, it provides continuity with customers, it provides continuity of knowledge building of understanding, which is another core attribute of the public service. And we, I think, have drifted away from valuing continuity. So at a prime ministerial level, if the Prime Minister's going to listen to our podcast, I would-

Kate Driver:

I'm sure you will Albo, and I hope that you've had a nice relaxing Sunday afternoon before getting down to business.

Sean Innis:

The machinery of government changes are extremely disruptive. And in fact, Bob McMullen and I wrote about them some time ago, arguing the case for a different approach. But secretaries change structures all the time. Branch heads, change structures all the time. When we do, we think about the structure. We don't think about how it connects together to deliver a service to the people of the nation who we all ultimately serve. And it's that different mindset that I'd encourage all public servants to take on board.

Kate Driver:

It sounds like that larger context, that larger system is very much at the centre of a conversation yet to come around what stewardship looks like for our future public sector. Any final reflections? Sean, you said at the beginning of this conversation, you started writing one book and you ended up writing another. So I have a feeling we'll be back talking about the next book when you come off this little side quest. But any final reflections on the book?

Sean Innis:

And I think it is, look, the book was a joy to write. And hopefully when I write I do three things. I hope one is to say something interesting. The other is to help people think, make them think. I've got a lot of suggestions in the book. I don't think they are necessarily the absolutely right thing to do, but I want people to think about it. And the third thing I

try and do is make people laugh. We do work on serious issues. Those of us. I've not been in the public service for a long time, I still sort of drift into that. Public servants do something that's very, very important. But I do think humour sometimes unlocks thinking that serious faces hides.

Kate Driver:

Yes. And I think finding the joy that drives the passion that comes from so many people I talk to across the public sector, that it fulfils their own inner joy and gives them a sense of purpose, which funnily enough, we named a podcast after really important tenants. So look, Sean, thank you so much for joining us today. We've had a little taste of the book, but for those of you listening, have a look at the book. It's called Off-Course Minister. It's available via Austen McCauley Publishers, and we'll leave a link in the show notes to have a look. It sounds like we've got conversations starting about what the role of thinking is, that long-term systems approach, and they're the kinds of things that you can bring to your work regardless of the level that you might occupy in the hierarchy of either the public service or those who work alongside.

So Sean, thank you so much for your time today. Great conversation to have to kick off a discussion in a new Commonwealth government context. And of course, we're not far past an ACT government election either. So a lot of change, but I'm hearing that we need to get used to that, that changes a constant and has been for some time. And that the resilience of our public sector responding to that and driving it indeed is a real core skill of practitioners today. Thanks, Sean.

Sean Innis:

Thanks Kate. And good luck to everyone, both the Commonwealth public servants, but also state and territory public servants who face all these issues in sometimes an even more difficult context. So good luck to everyone.

Kate Driver:

Oh, thank you, Sean. So listeners, the book is called Of(f) Course Minister, get It Where You Get All Good Publications. And I hope that you'll listen to other episodes of our podcast Work With Purpose. You can get it on Spotify, Apple, or of course, wherever you get your podcast from. Now, of course, Pemby from his sick bed is sending me some messages telling me that it's very important that I ask you to leave a review and a rating. It helps us be seen and it actually starts a conversation with people and their algorithms about things that are of interest to them. So like, follow, comment, share with colleagues and friends and please leave a review. But, we're going to sign off here for now. And thanks very much for listening.