

Institute of Public Administration Australia
Inaugural Frances Adamson Oration
Marking United Nations Public Service Day

Speech by

Her Excellency the Honourable Frances Adamson AC, Governor of South Australia

23 June 2022

Dhawura nguna, dhawura Ngunnawal.

Yanggu ngalawiri dhunimanyin.

Ngunnawalwari dhawurawari.

Nginggada Dindi wanggiralidjinyin.

Today we are all meeting together on Ngunnawal Country.

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Elders, female and male.

Dr Gordon de Brouwer, National President, Institute of Public Administration Australia,

IPAA National Council members,

Former Australian Public Service colleagues from graduates to secretaries – it's lovely to be back, even if for one night only, and

Public servants from state and local government whether joining us virtually or in person – over the past year I have seen what you can and do do and let me just say I have been impressed.

Distinguished panel members.

Thank you, Gordon de Brouwer, for your thoughtful introduction.

I acknowledge with gratitude and admiration your careerlong professional and personal commitment to a public service which meets the highest standards and the example you personally have set to that end.

The Prime Minister's announcement yesterday of your appointment as Secretary for Public Sector Reform will be widely welcomed across the service.

I congratulate the Institute of Public Administration Australia on its decision to mark United Nations Public Service Day with an Oration.

In 2002, the United Nations General Assembly decided to designate 23 June as United Nations Public Service Day and reiterated that "efficient, accountable, effective and transparent public administration, at both the national and international levels, has a key role to play in the implementation of internationally agreed goals, including those contained in the United Nations Millennium Declaration".¹

This is a clear priority of my former DFAT colleagues whose job it is to design our overseas development programs.

Particularly in the Pacific, which these days accounts for nearly half of our total aid budget, the quality of public administration is key to translating that support into economic growth and poverty reduction.

Inclusive growth – that is, growth that also benefits the marginalised – can only occur where the rule of law is strong and public administration is reliable and transparent.

For this Oration, though, IPAA's purpose is to “engage the broader [Australian] public sector to reflect on and celebrate the critical role played by the public service and the institutional and individual integrity, resilience and challenges in the service”.

Before I turn to the task at hand, let me say I am deeply conscious of the honour IPAA, of which I am a proud Fellow, has paid me in establishing the oration in my name and inviting me to speak this evening.

I confess that I took a little persuading.

Over the years I have been asked by a Foreign Minister, a Prime Minister and a Premier, each on one occasion, to serve in various capacities which I had not previously envisaged.

I asked for time to consider and ultimately accepted what I can only describe as persuasive “invitations”.

There is only one person who has twice extended a similarly persuasive invitation to me and that is Gordon de Brouwer, firstly as IPAA ACT President and now as President of IPAA National. All I can say to you is beware of accepting his calls!

Seriously, though, what I need absolutely no convincing of is the value of public service, and the work done by public servants.

I have always been proud to call myself a public servant and I hope that whether you are new to the service or well into your careers, you, too, feel a sense of pride in the contribution you are making.

Perhaps more realistically, pride mixed with exhaustion, given the extreme demands made of many of you, whether in responding to the global pandemic, geopolitical developments or challenging economic and energy market conditions.

It is hard to recall a time in the past few decades when such monumental and far-reaching challenges have confronted the globe in such a truncated timespan.

I acknowledge with thanks your continued willingness, reflected in the APS Census results, to go the extra mile.

In the language often used by diplomats to describe foreigners' attitudes, you would say that I am “well disposed” towards the public service, although that doesn't mean I am uncritical or lacking in ambition for improvement.

With a nod to the Chinese way of structuring these things, and acknowledging the expectations of an oration, rather than an ordinary speech, I'd like to provide you this evening with what I will call four “encouragements” and one “entreaty”.

As DFAT Secretary, I contributed along with my Secretaries Board colleagues to the *Independent Review of the Australian Public Service*, led by David Thodey, the final report of which was published in late 2019 as “Our Public Service, Our Future”.

The report was produced in a strikingly inclusive and collaborative way and, along with my peers, I was strongly committed to its implementation.

I believe there is much in it which continues to provide valuable guidance, notwithstanding our natural tendency to regard anything pre-COVID as belonging to a different world.

I am confident that Glyn Davis, a Review panel member, will bring renewed vigour and rigor to the report’s implementation in his current role as Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

And I know he will ably assisted by another panel member, Gordon de Brouwer, in meeting the Prime Minister’s public sector reform agenda.

Indeed, my first “encouragement” is to urge full implementation of the Independent Review, in letter and in spirit, building on the good work already done.

Sometimes, we can be motivated to draw afresh on earlier good advice because we have come to appreciate just how wise it was. This is such an occasion.

My second “encouragement” to each of you is to think more broadly about our times and what they require of you. Let me speak briefly about my own times.

When I joined the APS, as a Department of Foreign Affairs Trainee, or FAT as we were known, in 1985, I was part of a Hawke government-led drive to recruit Economics graduates.

It was a time of sustained and much needed economic reform, led by Treasury but engaging the wider public service.

My own contribution was clear to me.

I was sent to the Australian Consulate-General in Hong Kong to monitor China’s then still new policy of “Gaige Kaifang” - reform and opening – and analyse its implications for Australia.

In late 1992, I undertook a short-term assignment as a member of the Australian Delegation to the United Nations in New York at the 47th session of the UN General Assembly.

The fall of the Berlin Wall three years earlier had heralded the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In 1992 it produced a parade of leaders and foreign ministers representing newly independent states, many of whom spoke in the General Debate with a sense of optimism, bordering on euphoria, about the future.

Though an optimist by nature, I knew it was too good to last, but it was a new era which demanded new thinking from the public service.

How to navigate what we came to know as the uni-polar moment and prepare for what was really to come?

The East-Asian financial crisis of the late-1990s and the global economic crisis a decade later served to underscore the importance of strong institutions to confidence in financial markets, and ultimately to economic prosperity.

Countries with weak institutions had nowhere to hide.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further underscored the point.

9/11 caused Australia and other countries to rethink our approach to countering terrorism in new and multi-faceted ways, which engaged the whole of government.

There has been no going back.

The work of public servants is often driven by the times and much as there is a natural tendency to think of the day-to-day, it is always worth reflecting on the bigger picture.

I've spoken a little about "my times", but what about your times now?

For well over a decade, the government has been dealing with the far-reaching and ever-sharper consequences of a major shift in global power and a significant – and structural - deterioration in our relationship with our major trading partner, China.

The speed of technological change, and the threats and opportunities it brings, challenges us all.

So, too, the increasing impacts of climate change. And now rising inflation and interest rates and failure in energy markets.

This is a time for steadiness, for listening and consultation, close collaboration, and a renewed appreciation of and respect for expertise in policy development - whether on the economy, climate change, China or homelessness.

A time to grow that expertise in a purposeful way through recruitment and development and to share it widely.

And, certainly, a time for frank, fearless, well informed, creative and constructive advice, whether that be in your submissions to ministers or, as one of our panellists did recently, in considered, authoritative public remarks.

Your answer to the question of what our times require of you will be personal to you as well as engaging the service as a whole, but I do encourage you to think about it, not just now but as times change, as they surely will.

My third "encouragement" goes to the culture of the public service and starts with the need to continue to work at fostering a genuine sense of belonging that goes beyond the ways we typically think about diversity, equity and inclusion.

Research, as well as our own intuition, shows us that belonging requires meaningful work, relationships, agency and accountability, and the public service can deliver all four every day.

There have been steps forward and steps back, but if the challenges of our times are to be met, I believe the public service, at all levels, needs to be capable of drawing in, retaining and developing the skills and talents of all Australians, not just those it has traditionally sought to attract.

Doing this effectively is not easy, but it is deeply rewarding.

I learned that while I was DFAT Secretary as we sought to go beyond implementing our Women in Leadership Strategy, and practical approaches to diversity and inclusion, to develop a culture of belonging.

We worked to create a place of work where every person could thrive and contribute at their very best.

For the first time in my career, I sought a mentor, Lisa Annese, CEO of Diversity Council Australia, and worked with Rhonda Brighton-Hall, founder of mwah – Making Work Absolutely Human - to help chart the way forward.

We made some modest progress, but building a culture across the APS where everyone is respected, feels they belong and all talents can be harnessed, will take sustained commitment and well-informed effort on the part of the entire service.

And this should be a feature of how the public service/government engages with the broader community -- that people belong at the very heart of the debate/decision making about public policy.

Although Parliament has lagged behind the public service in the diversity of its members, the May federal election marked visible progress in better representing the diversity of Australian society, with record numbers of women and indigenous Australians elected.

Full implementation of the Jenkins Review over the next two years would go a long way towards creating a culture of belonging on the Hill.

Public services across the country would be well advised to take heed of what is underway there and redouble their own efforts to meet the reasonable expectations of Australians when it comes to conduct and culture.

It is not impossible to envisage a future where Parliament itself leads the public service on diversity and culture.

The election results challenge the public service to rediscover and sustain progress on women in leadership and to do better in recruiting, retaining, developing and promoting indigenous Australians, Australians living with disability and Australians of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The priority being accorded the reconciliation agenda in Canberra, across the states and in local government provides opportunity, and indeed a responsibility, for the public service to engage more indigenous Australians in more meaningful ways to shape policy development and service delivery and to do so in ways that make Indigenous Australians feel they are part of a culture where everybody feels they belong.

In this context, I welcome the Foreign Minister's intention to appoint an Ambassador for First Nations peoples and to ensure First Nations peoples have a stronger voice in Australia's engagement with the world.

That voice will resonate across the south-west Pacific and in our wider region.

My fourth and last "encouragement" springs from long experience as a public servant working internationally and nationally, and my more recent experience, as Governor, of South Australian public servants, both at state and local levels.

It is an obvious point, but I make it because I am not sure that the reality is always as good as we can get it.

There are clear benefits to the public from close collaboration and cooperation between all levels of government as genuine partners.

I've always known it, but it was brought home to me most recently just last week when I visited the Women's Information Service's shopfront in Adelaide and spoke to volunteers and the policy staff in the Office for Women within the State Government's Department for Human Services who work alongside them.

The policy staff were, naturally, working on policy, but what struck me was how positive they were about the individual and organisational working relationships they enjoyed with their Commonwealth counterparts.

They clearly saw those relationships as being most productive in delivering for members of the public. Let me just say that wasn't the answer I was necessarily expecting!

Through regional travel in South Australia, I have also seen the benefits of close collaboration between local, state and federal public servants, even though the sheer number of relevant agencies in the latter two jurisdictions can be a challenge for the former.

At a time when there are some really big issues out there, as we have already discussed, collaboration and coordination, whether light-touch or structured, can make a real difference to citizens.

This is not the moment to be prescriptive, but I do encourage public servants across the country to ensure your relationships with counterparts in the tiers of government above and below where you work are in good order, however you choose to structure those.

How government works and is able to be accessed and used by young people, is something I am looking forward to discussing with students in South Australian high schools as part of their study of civics and my engagement with them through the Governor's Civics Awards for Schools.

My one "entreaty" is in relation to integrity.

When Steve Sedgwick's *Report into Consultations Regarding APS Approaches to Institutional Integrity* was published in December 2020, the minds of many public servants were on COVID responses.

I know mine was.

Mr Sedgwick noted that "Some in the APS and the government may not see investing in integrity as a short-term priority. But complacency or a reluctance to invest arguably reflects a misalignment between short term objectives and the professional interests of the APS leadership, in their role as the longer-term stewards of a key national institution."

I was pleased to see the Australian Public Service Commission issuing updated guidance late last year, and adopting the report's broader view of integrity:

"The pursuit of high standards of professionalism, which in turn means doing the right thing at the right time to deliver the best outcomes for Australia sought by the government of the day."

Again, the 2022 election campaign should not leave us in any doubt about the importance the Australian people attach to integrity and the structures required to support it.

Acting with integrity is how the service maintains the confidence and trust of the public. Indeed, integrity is one thing that does shift community attitudes and trust in government, so it is one of the tools that public servants have in strengthening public institutions.

On the flip side, we need look no further than the fierce spotlight that social media, citizen-led blogs and traditional media place on real or perceived transgressions within our institutions.

The public have a strong voice and an outlet for its expression.

And nor should we be in any doubt either about the importance ministers attach to integrity within the public service. In addition to the work the public service does in delivering the Government's agenda, the service maintains the confidence of ministers in part by not being political activists, by not obstructing and by not leaking, and by enabling and supporting a seamless transition between governments when that occurs.

It's a two-way street, and there will be times when the service needs the courage to defend its governance.

My entreaty, then, is to make integrity a short-, medium- and long-term priority for all public services in Australia.

As a two-time ministerial and prime ministerial staffer, I was delighted to read the advertisement in the national and local press on 28 May seeking expressions of interest from "Australians with diverse backgrounds and life experiences" for ministerial staff positions to support incoming ministers.

Successful candidates needed to "share the values and priorities of the new Australian Government" and, among other things to "have demonstrated personal integrity".

It was noted that they would be working "in conjunction with the apolitical Australian Public Service to deliver the Government's agenda."

The fact of the advertisement and the language used sends an unmistakeable signal and is a positive note on which to end my entreaty, for integrity must be a shared endeavour between the public service and the governments they serve, with both working in the interests of citizens.

A capable public service contributes to the effectiveness of the institutions of our democracy, the quality of governance, the health, education and safety of our people, our security, the performance of our economy and societal trust and cohesion.

It is no exaggeration to say that the quality of public service contributes to a nation's strategic weight. Individually and collectively, you contribute to Australia's strategic weight.

Australia's strategic weight in turn contributes to the stability, security, prosperity and development of our region and to its character.

In some respects, it's how we contribute to achieving the intent of the UN resolution I mentioned earlier – efficient, accountable, effective and transparent administration nationally and internationally and the implementation of internationally agreed goals.

And my last word?

Simply to wish you, and public servants throughout Australia and the world over, a happy United Nations Public Service Day!