

# TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

## SECRETARY VALEDICTORY: PHILIP GAETJENS

### **Philip Gaetjens (Guest)**

Former Secretary  
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

### **Katherine Jones (Host)**

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CAROLINE WALSH: Good morning, everyone. And welcome to today's address, the valedictory from Phil Gaetjens. In the spirit of reconciliation, I would like to pay my respects to the traditional owners that we're meeting on today, the Ngunnawal people and extend that respect to elders, past, present, and emerging. And of course, pay my respects to indigenous people who are joining us here today. I would now like to introduce our host for today's event. Katherine Jones. Katherine is the Secretary of the Attorney-General's department and IPAA ACT president. Katherine took up the role of IPAA president on the 3rd of May 2022.

CAROLINE WALSH: Prior to her appointment to the secretary of Attorney-General's department in August of 2021. Katherine was the associate secretary of the department of defence. Katherine's held deputy secretary roles in finance and Attorney-General's. In 2017, she received a public service medal for her outstanding contribution in the field of national security. Please join me in welcoming Katherine.

KATHERINE JONES: Thanks very much, Caroline. And welcome everyone to today's event. If I can start by also associating myself with Caroline's comments around acknowledgement for country here today. If I can just take a moment to acknowledge my predecessor in the role of ACT IPAA president, Dr. Steven Kennedy, who's in the front row here today. I just wanted to acknowledge the extraordinary role Steven played, overseeing, and providing leadership for IPAA over the last few years, in particular, when the organisation had to transition to a new way of operating through the pandemic, and he had a few other things on his plate at the time when he was dealing with all that, but gave fantastic leadership and guidance to IPAA. Thank you very much, Steven.

KATHERINE JONES: I'd just now like to start by introducing our speaker, Phil Gaetjens, well, everyone here knows Phil very well and knows that he has done some of the more difficult jobs in government over recent years. He was secretary of PM&C from the 2nd of September 2019 until May 2022. From 1 August 2018 until his appointment as Secretary PM&C was secretary to the treasury. And prior to his appointment as treasury secretary, Phil was chief of staff to the treasurer, the honourable Scott Morrison MP. He's had over 40 years' experience in Commonwealth and state public sectors. And interestingly he began as an assistant research officer in the Bureau of Transport Economics in 1977 and progressed through the department of transport before moving to primary minister and cabinet in 1993.

KATHERINE JONES: Phil worked in the South Australian department of treasury and finance from 1995 to 1996. And then for 10 years with chief of staff to the treasurer, the honourable Peter Costello, from 97 to 2007, including a period in a dedicated tax unit to oversee the introduction and passage of the new tax system, which the GST reform and other tax reforms were implemented. I think Phil might reflect on that in his speech. He commenced as chief advisor competition and consumer

policy division in treasury in 2008. Then in August 2008, he also commenced an overseas posting as the inaugural director of the APEC Policy Support Unit in Singapore. After returning to Australia, Phil took over the role of secretary of the GST distribution review in 2011.

KATHERINE JONES: In 2011, Phil was appointed to the position of the secretary of the New South Wales Treasury, while there he was also a member of the advisory board of the New South Wales Commission of Audit, secretaries board, chair of New South Wales Treasury corporation, and a board member of Infrastructure New South Wales. In addition to all that, Phil holds a graduate diploma in accounting from the University of Canberra, and a Bachelor of Arts from Flinders University. I'd like to just take a moment to thank Phil for his sustained support for IPAA during the period of both being secretary of PM&C and treasury and including your addresses to the public service that you did through IPAA each year. Thank you for that. Without further ado, welcome to the stage. Thank you.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Thank you and welcome everyone. Thank you for that introduction, Katherine. And I thank IPAA for hosting this farewell event. I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today. I thank the audience for your attendance. I hope my remarks provide you with some insights about how I operated as secretary, as well as some reflections and observations on what I thought helped me do my jobs. I exited the Australian public service as secretary of the department of the prime minister and cabinet on the 30th of May, three months before at the end of my contract. In a complete coincidence, this was exactly four years after my wife, Katherine, who was also in the audience today, retired from teaching after I was set to become Australia's ambassador to the OCD in Paris in 2018.

PHILIP GAETJENS: That did not happen. And time will prevent me from going into detail, but it was one of a couple of sliding door moments to which I will return. On the 26th of April this year I also privately celebrated the completion of 45 years in public service. Katherine has already briefly summarised my career. I regard it more as a succession of interesting jobs, all of which meant much more to me than a list of jobs on a CV. After working for 45 years and 35 days, how do I reflect on what I did, how I did it and my achievements? Let me start by saying, I feel a deep sense of pride and gratitude knowing I'm leaving a dynamic, resilient, capable, and future focused APS, that will continue to grow and adapt to tomorrow's challenges and opportunities.

PHILIP GAETJENS: In all my roles in public service, I've always had a sense of purpose and a need to do practical things for the good of Australia. In my tenure as secretary of PM&C and building on all the knowledge and experience gained in my earlier roles, I focused on embedding a culture of one APS. By this I mean maximising the impact of the APS by exploiting in the true sense of the word, the greater benefits that come from the sector as a whole, rather than the sum of its parts. Consistent with this, I consider I led significant improvements to the

functionality, strength, purpose, and dynamism of the secretary's board. I thank my former colleagues for collaborating to achieve this.

PHILIP GAETJENS: We changed this modus operandi from passive stewardship to active governance while still respecting the individual responsibilities and accountabilities of secretaries. I also add that as secretaries over the last few years, we did not have much choice but to lift our games. At the end of 2019, the government and the APS were managing the final stages of drought support and then floods and fires occurred. Black summer bushfires reached their most damaging levels early in 2020, and a long tail of response and recovery activity followed for all these natural disasters. And before the fires were out, the COVID pandemic started. The absolute need for the APS to respond to these complex and compounding events surely contributed to the increased purpose of the secretary's board and the service.

PHILIP GAETJENS: And it is my view that the December 2019 machinery of government changes also provided a better and more coherent architecture for the APS to serve its purpose. I notice that the new government retains some essential elements in its structure of government. In all these successive and ongoing challenges since 2019, to which you can add rising geopolitical tensions, I believe the APS and its leadership played a critical part in responding to the needs of the government and national interests and the Australian community. During the pandemic we saw a rapid reform in action and changes to how the APS worked to support and protect Australians during health and economic crisis. A key contributor to shaping the way the APS worked was the Chief Operating Officers Committee, the COO committee.

PHILIP GAETJENS: I initiated the formation of this group soon after becoming PM&C secretary. And it started with the authority of the secretary's board early in 2020. I thank Katherine Jones for being the inaugural chair of that committee and getting it off to a flying start. While one of its first roles was to seek a coherent approach for agencies to adopt in responding to bushfire smoke hazards, it worked all through COVID response to ensure the coordinated decision making and mobilisation of APS operations occurred to meet the challenges the APS had to address. For example, the COO committee played a key role in implementing the APS surge reserve, putting in place the largest mobilisation of APS staff in living memory.

PHILIP GAETJENS: More than four and a half thousand people were redeployed between APS agencies and between the Commonwealth and the states and territories to ensure high priority and urgent work could be undertaken. I believe national cabinet was a critical governance mechanism for the prime minister and state and territory leaders to share information, make decisions and coordinate actions. It may not have been perfect, but I firmly believe it brought more harmony and coherence to the COVID response than otherwise achievable. That national cabinet continues is a positive. From an official's perspective, national cabinet meant frequent interaction, not only of political leaders but also between me and most state and territory

counterparts.

PHILIP GAETJENS: I believe our first secretary group meetings assisted in delivering outcomes and provided greater understanding of each jurisdiction's perspectives given the spread of COVID was not uniform across the country. As an observation of what helped me chair that group, I believe trust and confidence was established early because I had senior experience at state level and had worked with four of my eight counterparts before I became secretary of PM&C. While the response to COVID was and remains a pervasive focus in Australia and globally, the government and the APS also had to deal with other issues, strategic, tactical, managing for the present as well as preparing for the future.

PHILIP GAETJENS: So, over the last two years, the secretary's board had its first scenario planning event, undertook multiple strategic deep dive exercises on cross-cutting policy, took a sharper focus on challenging policy issues. This enabled us to analyse and act on emerging policy and delivery issues in new and more collaborative ways. For example, the board drove improvements and enhancements to the regulation agenda within the APS. The establishment of the regulatory stewardship subcommittee was an internal component of the architecture to support portfolio's contribution to the government's deregulation agenda.

PHILIP GAETJENS: I also initiated a regulatory cohort group across the APS. So, regulators, whether they were inside departments or separate agencies, could communicate in a structured way to share lessons and experiences and implement best practice. To extract the maximum benefit from the agency that secretaries in the APS having their own right in the Westminster system, the secretaries board also implemented an enterprise-wide approach to digital transformation and established the secretary's digital committee and digital leadership committee to drive progress in these areas. While still early days, I thought this governance mechanism was effective at prioritising the most important decisions on digital and ICT investment and looking at those investments from a whole of APS perspective.

PHILIP GAETJENS: As this matures even further, this will help the APS to focus on achieving better whole of government outcomes. We also made great strides in how we used insights and data to guide operations as one enterprise, including improving the implementation of government initiatives through channels like the policy implementation committee of cabinet. Following the independent review of the APS, the third-year report and the government's response delivering for Australians, the APS reform office at PM&C was established to give strategic oversight to implementation. As a result of the widespread impacts of COVID and the need to reprioritize resources to work related to the pandemic, it was necessary for the secretary's board to craft an adaptive and iterative reform agenda to respond to those circumstances.

PHILIP GAETJENS: I think there was some unfair criticism about the progress in implementing the government's response, but rather than me address that, David Thodey has authorised me to make public what he said in an email he sent me in July last year. The full email will be in my written copy of the speech, but I'll read out the most relevant part. Will Story, who was running the APS reform unit. It's a quote from David, "Will Story just gave the APS review committee an update on the change initiatives you have implemented. It is encouraging to see the progress you have made and what struck me was the way you have driven change in a way below the radar, you have just done it and made the initiative your own and delivered some really tangible outcomes. Great to see the academy implemented and also progress on digital and processes. So, our congratulations to you as you have been the key driver for improvement, and also managed to bring the APS together in this process."

PHILIP GAETJENS: As the pandemic evolved and the initial crisis respondent's response ended the APS commissioner and I brought together secretary level champions to help drive APS reform and ensure initiatives remained aligned to the changing needs of Australians and the external environment. The commissioner and I also strengthened communication within the entire public service. So, APS staff were more aware of government priorities, emerging issues, and major changes. Before I left the job, I was very pleased by the level of collaboration that I could see happening across the APS, not just amongst agency heads, but at all levels. I hope that continues.

PHILIP GAETJENS: At a personal level, I worked incredibly closely with some of you, but with respect to driving change in the public service, none more so than with the Australian Public Service Commissioner, Peter Woolcott. I urge the deep and productive relationship between the head of PM&C and the public service commissioner is maintained in the pursuit of continuing to build a culture of one APS, a resilient, capable, and flexible workforce, and an APS that is always adapting and learning. My partnership with Peter supported by PM&C and the commission was a really effective model for driving change and included delivering authentic communication that reached all APS staff to build awareness of organisational priorities and changes through open letters and APS 200 events.

PHILIP GAETJENS: I also want to recognise and pay tribute to the great work of the secretary's talent council and its support by the public service commission. The council which comprises selected secretaries and the commissioner, oversees talent management and development opportunities through a professionally curated, consistent, and rigorous framework for all participants. There is also a succession element involved, which I am pleased to say has assisted in several recent secretary appointments. The secretary's board supported by the COO committee and the APSC also developed a suite of improvements to workforce planning and capability across the system to invest in broader APS people and capability.

PHILIP GAETJENS: These included implementing the first APS workforce strategy,

establishing the APS Academy, establishing several APS professions to support attraction development and retention of data, digital and other specialist cohorts. Establishing the future of work subcommittees to ensure a systems level approach to addressing capability gaps in a tight labour market. Before I offer a few reflections and observations about what helped me progress through the APS, I cannot ignore the recent focus on workplace behaviour in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces and the reports from Stephanie Foster and Kate Jenkins. As someone who worked in parliament house for 14 years, I was deeply saddened by the experiences suffered by some staff as revealed in those reports.

PHILIP GAETJENS: It will be a mammoth change for parliamentary leaders to shift their focus from the rules and procedures of parliamentary practises to improve staff management and welfare issues, but it must be done for the wellbeing and safety of those who work there. I wish all concerned, especially those with leadership and decision-making roles, the best in implementing practical and durable solutions that can restore the pride and dignity of that unique and honourable place. Now, let me finish with some themes, lessons and a couple of anecdotes to give you some insights that may be useful for you to advance in the APS and help you become a secretary if that is your ambition.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Allow some time to develop a deep knowledge in an area before broadening. In my case, after a graduate year and excluding the year, I was a Senate PLO, I stayed in the microeconomic reform area for around 18 years. I worked on a succession of interesting issues, many in Commonwealth state groupings when the policy paradigm was decreasing the footprint of governments across Australia. This involved a real focus on competition, competitive neutrality, deregulation, efficiency, and service delivery to meet customer needs. Understand the difference between signal and noise and focus on signal. Be disciplined and focus on the objectives, demands and delivery of your job and avoid distractions. A pattern of delivery of outcomes will be an asset in any future job selection process.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Choose interesting jobs that suit your capabilities or to which you can adapt and extend your capabilities. Don't just chase the dollars. The further you rise on a fragile base, the harder you will fall. Be self-aware and curious and get help to address development areas. I noticed this especially when I became New South Wales Treasury Secretary, and I needed to better understand and demonstrate leadership and influence to play my part in achieving necessary cultural change across the New South Wales public sector. While the norms of APS culture and my experiences in it were a solid foundation, I supplemented that with personal coaching and arranged coaching across the New South Wales Treasury executive. I cannot emphasise enough the need to change the mix of capabilities and move from subject matter expertise to strategic leadership and management skills when you move up the leadership levels.

PHILIP GAETJENS: And to the greatest extent possible adopt a systems approach to

embed clarity, coherence, and consistency. One of my first lessons was, do not lead as an individual to the exclusion of ideas and input from others. Lead to draw out the views of your executive teams and empower them to develop solutions. Thank you, Genevieve Vince, who was my coach while at New South Wales Treasury and my more recent coaches and all the executive teams I have worked with for their contribution in bringing the best out of me. Focus on receiving as well as transmitting. An extension of this is if your chair meetings is to ensure all attendees get the chance to contribute. Do not let a foghorn dominate an agenda or distract from it.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Stretch yourself up or sideways, even if it takes you out of your comfort zone. There will come times when opportunities arise that you might think is just out of your reach, or you may want to move to get out of a rut, for a better word. In the first case, think of your reaction if you thought you were objectively better than the successful applicant, and you didn't even apply. In the second case, think of the opportunity cost of staying in a rut when you could be doing something else that both interests you and is potentially CV positive. In my case I chose to do something different in a lateral way a couple of times, as the Senate PLO and the APEC Policy Support Unit would be a couple of examples. And also took a couple of large gulps and went for something big and demanding as chief of staff to Treasurer Costello and applying for the New South Wales Treasury Secretary position.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Both of those turned out okay. Take on or be involved in at least one high profile complex and lengthy policy or service delivery implementation process. As Katherine mentioned, mine was the new tax system package of reforms with the GST as its centrepiece. For around three years, I was in charge of an implementation team that built 24/7 with every imaginable claim about what the GST would do either in correspondence, Senate committee submissions, reports and any and every other means of communication. Content covered the field from substantive issues to complete bullshit if I say so myself. GSTs come in; the sun still shines. Anyway, three years of my life, but it was dealing with mega issues like that, that really tests capability, perseverance, resilience, and managing and coordinating complex issues in impossible timeframes.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Earlier in this address, I referred to a couple of sliding door moments. Let me expand. The first only became apparent well after a disappointment. In 2010 when I was running the APEC Policy Support Unit in Singapore, the position of secretary of the South Australian treasury and finance department was advertised. I had worked there in the mid-1990s and applied. I was interviewed and after that was then flown from Singapore of Adelaide to meet South Australia's, then treasurer. The meeting went well I thought, but I was later advised I was unsuccessful. In a telephone call I vividly remembered because I was at Tokyo's Disneyland with my wife and son between meetings in Japan's APEC host year.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Many years later, and after four years in the role of New South Wales



Treasury Secretary, I found out from two sources that I had been the top ranked applicant in the merit selection process for that job in South Australia. I was ruled out on a political basis. I do not mention this to quibble with the outcome. I do so only to say that if I had been successful then in 2010, I doubt I would've applied for the job in New South Wales in 2011, and my career path from that time would most likely have been completely different. In other words, opportunities still knock after adversity. And my involvement in the selection process in South Australia helped me prepare for and navigate the interview process in New South Wales.

PHILIP GAETJENS: The second sliding door moment was immediately apparent in 2018, when the opportunity arose after I'd been nominated as OECD ambassador, but before I left to take up the job. I put my name forward for the role of the secretary of the Commonwealth's treasury. And there was the choice between going to that, doing that, or going to Paris. For me, once the treasury secretary opportunity arose, there was no longer a choice. If that opportunity had occurred after I had started in Paris, I doubt I would've put my name forward, and again, my career path from then would undoubtedly have been different. A couple of last points. Implicit in my earlier comments is that there are times and opportunities when you need to determine whether you are making a job or career decision about a journey or a destination.

PHILIP GAETJENS: In different circumstances, either could be correct, but you need to decide and make considered judgements about the trade-offs, including between immediate or deferred satisfaction and income. I would also observe that it gets more and more lonely as you rise through the ranks and pressure relief options become more limited. I would urge you to have some trusted and absolutely confidential mechanism to share frustrations and talk through options. My succession of interesting jobs was a blast. Challenges are bounded and there were highs and lows, but that is to be expected as you transition from job to job and advance to more demanding roles. And I kept discovering I rise to challenges.

PHILIP GAETJENS: I had the help of others in a personal capacity to develop my potential and capabilities and had the help of colleagues in achieving results. Very few things in the public service are the result of individual effort and I acknowledge the contributions of everyone who helped me succeed throughout my working life. I am proud of what I did, what I achieved and how I did it. Now I start a different phase of my life and at the right times, I'm sure that will include some other different and interesting things to keep my body and mind active. My last words for this speech are I always have been and will continue to be proud to have been a public servant. Thank you.

KATHERINE JONES: Great. Thanks Phil. I'd note just at the outset, whilst you touched on some of the big highlights of your career, I think the fact that you were prepared to share I think some of the aspects of a career journey with people here who might be thinking about, what's the way to craft a career, I think is fantastic. It addresses one of the things that I think many senior people get asked all the time, which is, well, what was

your plan? And most of us I think would say, there was no plan. It was a lot of additional opportunities along the way. I've got a couple of questions that I wanted to start with, and then we'll open it up for further questions. I want to ask something specific to the role of being the secretary of prime minister and cabinet.

KATHERINE JONES: In that role you are the most senior policy advisor to the prime minister. You're also the head of the public service. And probably you are the key interlocutor between the Commonwealth and the states and the territories. So, three really significant responsibilities. Any reflections on how you balance across those three areas?

PHILIP GAETJENS: First of all, I'd say is to recognise all those aspects, and to the three you mentioned, I would also add one and that's being the CEO of the department. What I think you then need to do is compartmentalise. I have to say here, my dealing with politicians in particular, one of their great characteristics of good politicians is they compartmentalise things. They can shift from one thing to another quickly and leave things behind. That ability to compartmentalise, and all right, I've stopped that, and I have to think about something else. And whilst you can have several aspects to a job that doesn't need everything needs the same share of attention. So balancing things doesn't mean they all get an equal share.

PHILIP GAETJENS: And in all of the things you mentioned, there's a choice I think between how you act with either the prime minister or another portfolios with our minister, what is their work model? And you adapt your work model to that, so that you are not brushing up against things. You are actually adapting and melding your style to those you work for. And that applies for peers as well as ministerial interactions. Make your decisions, and again, get to know a topic and understand it. I think then you start making decisions, well, how much do I need to be involved in this? That then goes to delegation. It goes to, do I need to do this every day? Or do I delegate and get reports back on progress?

PHILIP GAETJENS: I think it's a combination of leadership focus, adapting to the circumstances in which you are in and who you are dealing with. Again, most things that we deal with, we are not doing it in a vacuum, we are doing it in the company and dealing with other people. So, it's an adaptive process as well. I think over time, once you become familiar with your rhythm, the rhythm of the issues that you're dealing with, that rhythm itself identifies how much you need to be involved. The last thing I'd say is, just because you don't hear something about what's going on, don't assume everything is going okay.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Again, I think if you delegate and step back a bit and let others do their job, and there's nothing worse I have to say than delegating and then sitting on people's shoulders. Make the choice. But when you delegate, have a report back mechanism so that you know, you are in touch with things enough to either for the radar to go up or for someone to say something immediately, not I need to get involved. I

think it's an adaptive, learned approach that will never be the same in every situation. But unless you work out, as you say, the balance and how you approach each, you're likely to get swamped by one or the other.

KATHERINE JONES: Great. Thank you. Second question I wanted to ask, you've been obviously secretary of two departments in the Commonwealth, secretary of department in state. Firstly, any reflections on managing the relationship between the Commonwealth and the state, particularly drawing on how that relationship evolved during the COVID pandemic in 2020, 21, and any observations you have about how we can further improve the relationship between the Commonwealth and the states?

PHILIP GAETJENS: My simple expression of Commonwealth state relations is to understand that in general the Commonwealth funds things and the states do things. That then goes back to these lovely three letter acronyms VFI, HFE, all that sort of stuff. We haven't got time to talk about that. But I think we need to understand in any Commonwealth state forum that we do different things. And what we then have to do is leverage off each other's characteristics or roles. Again, I don't necessarily say they are advantages or disadvantages, they're different. COVID, I think was probably something very different in most other Commonwealth state things, because it has been a continuing process. It goes beyond a funding argument, because what appeared through COVID I think was stark evidence of the interacting impacts between what the Commonwealth and states do.

PHILIP GAETJENS: The work that Steven and treasury did with Brendan and Paul Kelly in health, and with the modelling that was done, there's an interaction between health decisions that were made and their economic impact. Health decisions actually throw through very largely to the macro economy. And the macro economy probably affects the Commonwealth government and its budget more than the states and its budget. That's why I think national cabinet actually worked well because the leaders could actually talk amongst themselves about these issues and then the tensions and how to resolve them and the interactions. And there were differences between states at different times, largely because as I said, COVID was never uniform across Australia.

PHILIP GAETJENS: There were different issues. And of course, with the capacity of the jurisdictions, the larger jurisdictions were much more capable of handling surges rather than the smaller jurisdictions. But if you have an impact in a smaller jurisdiction, that still has to be managed. I think the key thing is talking, consulting, as I said, in the speech, not only were leaders consulting formally if you like, at national cabinet meetings, but there was an enormous amount of interaction going on between those meetings. I think there were interactions between smaller groupings seeking to get a consensus that would drive an outcome from a meeting, that would cut across the boundaries that were set. That is now re-emerging again with what is happening this winter with the combination of COVID and flu.

PHILIP GAETJENS: I just come back to the fact that as long as people get in a room and talk and understand the direction from which they're coming, rather than just say, well, the Commonwealth's better, or the state are better in this. That never works. And again, I think there are things national cabinet because the first secretary is actually attended the meeting, we knew exactly what was going on. There were never any disputes about what the outcomes of meetings were. And we just got on with it to the best that we could. We had our own meetings, again in small groups or, or groups just to keep the wheels going, keep the mechanisms going. I just think it's a point, and again, it goes to my view, I think I've had for a long time, having spent so much time in treasury that in terms of fiscal and budgets, we do operate as the OECD would describe Australia's budget as a national budget, which is an interaction between Commonwealth and states.

PHILIP GAETJENS: There is fiscal interoperability if you like. I don't think any of us can look at that. And in the case of COVID in particular, it's very clear that there was policy interoperability and impacts in other jurisdictions and between the levels of jurisdictions between what decisions were made. We just have to keep on talking, interacting, and understanding what the impacts are. I said, the work I think we did in Australia to model health and economics at the same time, again, I wasn't aware of that happening in other parts of the world, and I think it helped us out enormously.

KATHERINE JONES: I have this thing I do in the Attorney-General's department when people are initially nervous about answering a question and I threaten to start singing. And it's amazing how quickly the hands start popping up in the room. Over to you, here we go. Thank you.

MELISSA COADE: Melissa Coade from The Mandarin. You made a reference before about positive feedback and good work being done despite it flying under the radar. My question is about telling a good story, both for your internal audience and in terms of the progress of the project or the policy worker as it's happening, for example, the GST work you did.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Well, telling a good story, GST actually that was a great example about noise and signal. There was probably one or two signals, 50 million noises in that debate. Two things I think I would stress. In terms of getting the work done, for the team who's doing the work, make sure that the team is aware of everything, what and all, because to get things done you need to know all of the opportunities, challenges that you can use. I almost equate that period because I think I was lucky. In terms of big moments, the gulfs that I mentioned in the speech. That was events. One of the other fortunate things I think when I was coming up through the ranks in transport, in the late 80s in particular, the interaction between government and the public service then was fantastic.

PHILIP GAETJENS: The two bits of government if you like were just getting along very well and the machine was humming. Not everything went right, but

people were aware of the things that went wrong and why. And GST, that was one of the most acrimonious political debates that ever occurred. It lasted over the 98 elections, the 2001 election, the Howard government I think lost 14 seats to get that big reform through. And people now talk about big reforms when there isn't even a majority of 14 seats. I think it's a bit of a different era now to where we were. But in terms of giving good news, I think work out what the mechanism is, again in PM&C, we actually evaluated or tested what communication mechanisms worked. I think, Stephanie, was the joint leaders that had actually the most impact if I remember rightly?

MELISSA COADE: That's right.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Again, they were accessible to everyone. Again, they didn't go into everything warts and all, but they kept people in touch with what was going on. And certainly, from my own perspective during COVID, my sense as the leader of a department and leader of the public service was at a time when there was geographic or social separation. What we needed was a mass communication of the message, so that whilst people were physically separate, they never felt separate of understanding or knowing what was going on. I think that again was very important. I think in terms of other messages and projects, again, don't take the community I think for granted, and anything keep them in touch with what's going on with the debates.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Again, the GST whilst there were, again, some of the most stupid things said that I've ever heard, other people who wanted it became allies to the cause and knew what it was doing. In terms of the tax debate, again, there are some simple maxims that still I think stand true to this day, notwithstanding, it's getting harder, but broader the base, lower the rates, all of this sort of stuff still stands true. It's probably getting a bit wider than the topic, but within the team, make sure everyone knows what's going on totally with the communication, make sure that you are getting out the messages that need to be delivered, that need to actually form either progress or a call to action or the achievement of results.

JENNY STEWART: Hello, I'm Jenny Stewart from UNSW Canberra. Phil, you mentioned the politics word once in your address. I guess it would be fair to say that politics has played a more important part in your career than perhaps would be the norm. You were chief of staff for a number of years to Peter Costello, for example. I'm wondering if from the vantage point you possess now, whether you might reflect on that relationship between politics and public service, both personally and in the broader sense.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Well, the public service can't ignore politics. What it has to be is neutral about it. We are democracies. People have their political objectives, and you then have to intersect political objectives with policy objectives and outcomes. It's what democracies do. I spent a lot of time with Peter Costello, I did not know him before I worked for him. I didn't know Scott Morrison before I worked for him. But the one

thing that's hardly ever mentioned of course too, is when I was PLO, I was working with John Fortner as the manager of government business in the Senate. And at that stage, Gareth Evans was also the leader of the Senate. Working, whether it's chief of staff or up in political offices, what that gives you is the knowledge of, again, that drum beat versus the policy drum beat that we have in departments.

PHILIP GAETJENS: Certainly, one year I had as PLO, you get a sense of dealing with ministers and their offices, and that was very much in an apolitical public service role. I think once you understand the political process, it helps you do that part of the process in which you are involved with. Again, I don't know if people in this room ask themselves, what happens when a brief leaves my desk? What happens to it? Because if you know what happens to it, then you can actually probably shape the brief so that it gets more attention up in the office and is aimed to be better absorbed by the minister or prime minister for whom it is written. And if you don't understand that context in which they are working and just focus on your aspect of the job, well, I think that's falling short of doing the best that the public service can do.

PHILIP GAETJENS: This is not to make the brief political, but it's to make it digestible, consistent with the context in which it's being offered and making the objectives very, very clear. I learned an enormous amount from all the time I was up in parliament house, and in particular for the people who I worked for, and again, the longest was Peter Costello. And I have to say he was, working with him was something where you would be challenged every day in an intellectual sense. He was, he was a large man, Peter, he had a large IQ, a large brain, a large political presence in a policy sense, not just in a party sense of politics. One bit of me says the GST, I think probably would've been harder to get through if it wasn't someone with his abilities to actually do it at the time.

PHILIP GAETJENS: I stress to say also that it's not that I was more political because of the time up in the parliament house. I think that's one of the biggest misunderstandings about what I'd done when I was up there. I was never the head political honcho in an office, that was someone else's job. What I did was try and connect the public service to the treasurers, the ministers that I worked with to achieve as I said in the 80s, that point where when cabinet and the ministry and the public service do things in sync said the machine of government hums and you get good outcomes. I regard myself sometimes as a bit of a public service plant up in parliament house rather than now a political plant in the public service.

PHILIP GAETJENS: And again, that comment, all of what I said in my speech is contestable. For those people who know me, those people who want to say something's about me, if they think something different, then they can say that and I'm quite happy for them to have that view. But certainly, from the discussions that I have had with people who know me and how I've worked, it's that understanding of the process that means you can understand from policy inception to delivering, because unless your policy is delivered as government policy or

government statute, it doesn't go anywhere. The more that we know as public servants about the whole process, rather than just a part of it, I think the better off the whole system is

KATHERINE JONES: Great. I've got one brief question. Well, I can see a hand up there, but it's a one-minute question because I've been given the timing, so very quickly.

SPEAKER 6: I was wondering whether you could explain for me. We had [inaudible].

PHILIP GAETJENS: Sorry, the what?

SPEAKER 6: Frances Adamson spoke ... recently. And she mentioned that she was very strongly in support of all the 30 recommendations and that was also the view of her peers. But in the prime minister's response to 30, in the recommendations that were rejected, he said that was on the advice of the secretary's board. Can you explain that difference?

PHILIP GAETJENS: Well, I can certainly explain that the government response to the 30 report was done on the advice of the secretary's board. I wasn't here for, again, I'd have to read what Frances said that I wasn't here, but I can assure you that the government response was done on the basis of advice from the secretaries board.

KATHERINE JONES: I'm going to ask one final, very quick question. You noted at the end of your speech that very senior roles can be lonely, and you need to have mechanisms in place for support. They can also be enormously demanding over a period of time. Any reflections from you in terms of how you ensured that you had the resilience to do all the aspects of the role, keep delivering, but manage your own wellbeing and perhaps of your family as well?

PHILIP GAETJENS: Well, the family, again, I probably took work home in terms of documents to deal with, but I never took work home with either a mood or a discussion or anything like that. Work stopped outside the house, basically. And if I did work, I would spend Sundays at work just to be in a place to do things. But to go back about how you handle yourself, again, I just go back to the speech, and this is part of my sense about be self-aware. I think we all know best how we manage things. Just to put that into the nuance a bit further, I think we should understand also, what are the little triggers or tells that we have that say, I think I either need to put the pen down or do something different or have my own self-regulating mechanism or know that I have to go then and either speak to someone else or discuss it with someone else.

PHILIP GAETJENS: That's part of the detail of being self-aware. What is it that you do that either says, here's a trigger or I need to do something? I think that's very, very important in that. And in terms of your own self-management, we've all got, I think what we like doing, could be running, bike riding, listening to music, whatever it is that suits you or

that's your self-regulator. And other times, I think you get where you actually have to talk things through to people. And that's where I think that third party, totally confidential mechanism can be helpful. Coaches, I think can be helpful to actually help you explore your own self-awareness. Again, the leadership circle and things like that, I thought were incredibly valuable because they actually do look at things. They put you in a field with tens of thousands of other examples, so that you're benchmarked against a large group of people.

PHILIP GAETJENS:

The leadership circle itself also says, all right, this is how you normally react, but then there's another part of it. But when you are under pressure, it also tells you how to react. I think it's very important to know that. There are lots of tools that you can use to help with that. I found, again, particularly at the time with Costello and others, I realised I was capable of managing 50 balls up in the air at one time. I think it's been self-aware of how to do that and then how many of those balls you have to look at all the time as before, how many can you delegate? How many can you do this?

PHILIP GAETJENS:

And again, I think the other point I'd say, if you can, is build up resilience early, and then use that to withstand some of the pressures that come later on. And in that case, again, I think I was very fortunate with the people who led me again, Jack Evans, Rod Sims are names I've mentioned before Malcolm Grey, Mike Waller, again, a lot of people who just put trust in people to do things, let you get on with your job. You were supported, but again, you were given the opportunity to demonstrate one capability, and secondly, resilience.

KATHERINE JONES:

Right. Well, on that note, I'd just like to thank you, Phil, for your frankness, for your reflections. I think one of the things I take away from it to provide inspiration that if we could all at the end of our careers say that without a blast, it's not a bad thing to aspire to. Thanks very much for your thoughts today.