

TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

WHY BE A PUBLIC SERVANT?

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CATH INGRAM: Welcome to today's event and what a great crowd. And very topical and really hoping that you have a stimulating conversation with our panel today. Why be a public servant? My name is Cath Ingram and I'm the chair of KPMG. I'm also an IPAA Counsellor and Board member. And so, it's with great pleasure that I'm here today to really have the stimulating conversation. KPMG's also been a sponsor of IPAA for many years. And one of the things that drives us is supporting and contributing a high performing APS, because the work you do impacts every Australian. The significance of the decisions you make impacts our prosperity, our health, and our security. Firstly, could I welcome and introduce Sean Innis, Pat Hetherington, and beaming in from New Zealand, we have Harinder Sidhu. Firstly, Sean. Sean's had a long career in the APS, formally at DSS and senior leadership positions at PM&C and the Productivity Commission.

CATH INGRAM: Sean, I think, will bring today that best of both worlds because he's lived and had formative experiences of leadership in the APS, but he is now a principal at Damala St Consulting. He's also an Honorary Fellow at the Australian Studies Institute at the ANU and is the Senior Fellow and Chair of the Public Policy Forum, which is an ADC Forum. Sean's able to look from the inside and outside today, so welcome Sean. Pat Hetherington is the new Chief Operating Officer of the Department of Social Services. And I understand Pat, you only just started this job recently in the last month after being the deputy commissioner. And before that, the First Assistant Commissioner at the Australian Public Service Commission. And lastly, Harinder Sidhu is the Australian High Commissioner to New Zealand, and was previously the High Commissioner to India and the Ambassador to the Kingdom of Bhutan. And so, could you join with me in welcoming our panel today?

CATH INGRAM: Well, today in exploring this topic, 'Why be a public servant?', we're going to dig into the challenges and the rewards. It's a complex, challenging environment, it's been changing rapidly over the last two years of the pandemic. And I think with the announcements from the Prime Minister who has some optimism for restoring a professional relationship with the Australian Public Service. We're going to look at purpose, impact rewards, challenges in what is a contemporary public service, and also explore some of the more gnarly issues. What does it mean to be a steward? What is ethical decision making, and how do we manage when perhaps we're challenged and also talking about the hollowing out and the building of capability for a contemporary public service.

CATH INGRAM: Now the first thing we are going to do is show on screen the responses to the Survey Monkey, and I hope you can all see those there. That was your contribution from a recent survey that was issued prior to your attending today. Building on that, what I'd like to do is firstly explore the question with my panel, what drew you to the public service? And then secondly, perhaps what is the current biggest draw card or what keeps you there? Harinder, can I throw to you, what do you think is the biggest draw card, what drew you to the public service, and what keeps your passion burning?

HARINDER SIDHU: Okay. At the risk of sounding terribly shallow, what drew me to the public service was the prospect of travel. I saw the advertisements to join the Department of Foreign Affairs and as a first-generation migrant for whom this sort of thing was completely out of reach, it was this sense of adventure that I thought I could get to. And I did not really think about public service as such, but a few years later when I ended up working in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, I absolutely fell in love with the business of government. And I began to understand how government worked, the importance of the public service in making democracy work well. And right now, where I am, is I'm committed to contributing to the best public service that I can, to building capability, to delivering efficiency so things work well, and to delivering for your average Australian.

HARINDER SIDHU: Every day, the sense that my work makes a small difference is what continues to motivate me and inspire me. And the takeout I have from my own journey, and it must be for many other people, because I was thinking about this. When you join as a graduate in the department of home affairs, very few people would do so with a burning desire to work on immigration policy, it's to find a way to harness that spirit in people who joined the public service and move that along. But that's what works for me.

CATH INGRAM: Great. Thank you, Harinder. Sean, what was your burning desire and what are you to reflect on about the public service?

SEAN INNIS: Yeah. And can I start, it would've been lovely to see Harinder, but hearing her is just as lovely. And we're at PM&C together a very long time ago.

HARINDER SIDHU: Yeah.

SEAN INNIS: And my story's a little bit different. I'm a Perth boy. I fundamentally believe the sun should set over the ocean. I can see the sun set from my front window. It sets over some hills. It's kind of pretty, it's just wrong. And I always felt that I was going to be a beach bum and sit

under a tree and play my guitar and go swimming. What drew me to Canberra, and genuinely, it was the opportunity to make a difference to the nation as a whole. As a whole. And you can't do that anywhere else as a whole nation. That's the thing that drew me. I was actually enrolled in Architecture at UWA. And what I've discovered since is I love design. Would've been a rubbish architect, would've been an ordinary beach bum, but I would've given it a go. I love designing for human beings and I love designing for society. And that's the thing that drives me and drove me to be a public servant.

CATH INGRAM: Great. And Pat, I'm just going to change the question slightly for you. If you were writing a letter to your younger self when you were starting out your career, what would you say to that young Pat Hetherington about the career he was embarking on?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Well, I accept that it's a different question, but I'm going to answer it as a good public servant would in the way that I choose to answer it. Don't join for the money and fame because it ain't there. I suppose my story in some ways is not dissimilar. I did... What I would say to my younger self is do what makes you happy, do something you love. Don't pursue dollars, don't pursue kind of self-importance and fame, do something that actually makes you feel good. And whether that's being a public servant or any other occupation, that is what I would say to my own self. I suppose I joined the... I did economics and commerce at ANU, and like everybody that does economics and commerce, I was going to be a billionaire hedge fund trader.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I haven't written it off yet, it's still there somewhere. I thought I better do some travelling, right? A bit like Harinder, I thought travel would be good. Need some money to do that. I joined the public services and non-ongoing APS three in the department of defence. And then I never left. And the reason is because, I suppose what my colleagues have said, I sort of fell in love with the mission, right? I was finance guy, I was involved in costing operations. Deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan and Timor and those sorts of things. And I felt a real sense of purpose. It was something really important this country was doing for us as a nation, but for others. And I've done lots and lots of things now in my public service career, but all of them have been about how do we move our country forward, how do we contribute to this country and how do we kind of make sure that Australia remains prosperous into the future for its people? And I think for me, that's what's kept me in the public service.

CATH INGRAM: Right. Thank you. Harinder, I'm going to go to you now, just building actually on Pat's comment there about purpose, and Sean's comment about the whole of Australia, but let's talk about the professional

dilemmas. At times, there's the enormous rush, I'm sure, that goes with these amazing policies and programs that you deliver and can make a difference. But sometimes we can find ourselves perhaps disagreeing or our value is not aligned, perhaps, to a government policy or program. And you talk about, you started your career at Home Affairs. Are we expected to work on that policy and program? And then, what's your advice to people here in the room about how do you manage and deal with professional dilemmas? What advice would you give to others, Harinder?

HARINDER SIDHU:

Thanks for that, Cath. I didn't start in Home Affairs, actually. I started in Foreign Affairs, but in the course of my career, I have worked on a number of issues that I think you would say are either controversial or morally challenging. I worked on people smuggling way back in 2000, 2001 when it was a very big shift in government's policy. And people found that very, very challenging. In fact, there were people, I remember those early days of meetings, public servants who found they couldn't stay in the room and just found that where the policy was going was so challenging for them. I've worked in intelligence, and I've worked in the department of climate change for virtually its entire existence at a time where that was a hotly consistent policy issue. I hope it's not really as hotly contested now as was then.

HARINDER SIDHU:

And what keeps me going through all of that is remembering that I am first and foremost a servant of democracy. Governments are democratically elected by the people. We public servants serve the governments. I cannot, in my mind as a public servant, individually override the will of the people or the government. I will bring my skills to bear to serve the government. That said, I recall in those early days of the change in government policy on people smuggling when Peter Shergold was the secretary of PM&C, and he stood up at an all staff meeting one point and he said, look, I know people find this really difficult. Sean's nodding, he might even remember this, because I think you were there. He said, there are no shackles around your ankles. The public services are very, very broad church, a very big space. If you find you cannot work on a particular policy issue, go, and apply your suit somewhere else. You're not bound to stay in this space. And I think that was also very good advice, it's one thing that I keep in mind that if I really feel I can't, nobody is holding me there.

CATH INGRAM:

Thanks, Harinder. Sean, then to build on that and perhaps also extending the question to that of empowerment and having your voice in the APS and how do you find that and where do you have to hold the space and where do you contribute and share that voice? Perhaps some perspectives from both sides of the coin where you've

been with the public service.

SEAN INNIS:

Thanks, Cath. Terrific counsel from Harinder. And I remember that meeting well. And I think there are some realities about being a public servant. There are lots of privileges, lots of privileges. Harinder put it beautifully. We're servants of democracy. We're servants of democracy. There is a reality that comes with that, and you serve the government of the day, the government that's been elected by the people. And just like Harinder, I've got some things that I feel deep conflict about personally. I was involved in writing the cabinet documents that set up the northern territory intervention. I could see that there were good hearts involved, but I was deeply, deeply conflicted personally about elements of that policy. And the thing that got me through was we are serving the government of the day, we're servants of democracy, and we all get a vote on this later. All of us.

SEAN INNIS:

You do need to support decisions and implementation you don't like. That just comes with the territory. You have to support people whose philosophical bent doesn't match your own. That comes with the territory. The thing I'd say is, there's nothing wrong with having different views. In fact, the public service works by bringing together a diversity of views. We need to understand, and to a degree, reflect the whole spectrum of views we see in our nation. We need to understand them, bring them together. We do need to do that. And we ourselves are human beings and we're allowed to have our views, but the APS is no place for a crusade. Where I saw people really finding it difficult, Harinder will remember this, climate change, clearly people smuggling, indigenous affairs and home affairs. All areas where I've seen public servants really struggle, really struggle.

SEAN INNIS:

Cathy asked about freedom of expression. And very important to have diversity in, but also very important that you hold your voice outside. And especially as you become more senior. And I think it's becoming more difficult for people, that we live in a social media age where actually there's probably no such thing as a private conversation. John Howard a long time ago talked about the barbecue stopper. In a sense, Twitter is the barbecue of today. It's just that you're having it with everyone in society at once. There are some things you've got to give up, and your public voice is one of them. I didn't transition to my new life, which was through the Productivity Commission, ANU and then my own staff. A part of what I wanted to do was talk publicly about what I've learned, and the things I've seen and the policy issues of today much more openly than I could as a public servant. I made the choice to make a transition. That is a choice.

CATH INGRAM: Thank you. I'm going to change now, Pat.

SEAN INNIS: Can I-

CATH INGRAM: Please, of course.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Add one more thing to that? just because I feel I should. I agree with everything colleagues have said. You have agency, you have choice, right? If there's something that grates against you deeply, you should think about being somewhere else, because our job as public servants are to serve the government of the day and the people. But the other side of that is we have influence. When we talk about policy development, when we talk about a position that a government might take. We can inform that position, right? You're not without power, you're not without voice. The voice piece publicly is entirely relevant and proper, but as public servants, you think about... We've just had a change of government. The first piece of advice that government is going to see, ministers are going to see, will be our IGBs, right?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: We, as public servants, have crafted the first piece of advice a new government is going to lay its eyes on and it's going to help set the agenda. They've got an agenda for sure, but it's going to help give them the detail that will make that agenda real. And so, think about, in your own roles, how you can influence the direction of policy, and then wherever the policy lands, something that doesn't fit with you personally, then think about how you extract yourself from that situation because ultimately the role is government.

CATH INGRAM: No, that's great. Thank you for... And building on that and let's move to stewardship, is it different from leadership? But we talk about public servants often need to take responsibility for different things, a system, a framework, a culture. What do you see the benefits and challenges of the public service performing stewardship functions? What does it mean to you to be a steward of the public service?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Do you want to go to me first?

CATH INGRAM: Please, Pat. Yeah.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Yeah. Happy to kick off on that one. We talk a lot about, in particular, SES officers being stewards of the public service. I actually think we're all stewards of the public service. And I think, so when I see us working at our best is when we all work together, right. Over the last couple of years and everyone's got a COVID story, and everyone has done something important in the context of COVID. I was deployed down to Services Australia to help mobilise the workforce into

Services Australia from Defence into Services for about three or four months. And like so many other big problems that we grapple with as a nation, it's multi-agency. All the big problems that we're grappling with are multi-departmental, multi-agency, multi-sector. And you just can't get them done unless you kind of work together as a cohesive unit.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: And I think kind of being able to do that, come together for me around the purpose of the public service is so important. And so, I... Kind of fills me with such pride, what we've been able to do as a service. And then I think about why don't we do that all the time. Why is it that it takes a crisis to do that all the time? We should all strive to leave the public service in a better place than we found it. Certainly, I'd have to think about that pretty frequently about what am I going to do that's going to lift the public service in some way that's beyond my department, beyond me as a person. And I would challenge all of you to do that. I think part of what prevents us from thinking holistically about the service is our traditional portfolio lines, and this is a problem, I'm sure Sean can talk about it and Harinder can talk about it.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I think part of what prevents us from playing that real stewardship role across the public sector is we have ministers, they have their priorities, our secretaries have priorities in response to ministers and we do like to live within our lane. I just don't see that being the future and I think if we can break the culture down a little bit to operate more regularly, more routinely as a public service, then this notion of stewardship of the public service becomes more real to people because you see kind of all the elements of government and how they interact. It will help you to think about what are some of those things that I can do to make the service as a whole better. And I think once we can kind of grapple with some of those cultural pieces around, I guess, that stove piping in the public sector, then it's going to be easier for us to get after stewardship in a real sense. I'll stop.

CATH INGRAM: Harinder, can I go to you to comment on stewardship, and particularly in your role because you have a role facing into the world in your role as a High Commissioner as part of Foreign Affairs. Your reflections on stewardship.

HARINDER SIDHU: Yeah. There's so many dimensions and I really want to endorse everything that Pat said. And can I also just give my full endorsement to Pat's point about the early question about voice? I thought that was really powerful and an important point. I just want to make that point.

CATH INGRAM: Thank you.

HARINDER SIDHU: I see stewardship as having... There's two dimensions, right? It's what we, as the public service, are stewards of, which is kind of the institutions of government, the things that make things run. I know we sort of make a joke, I think it was the 2019 election where it took a while for the government to be finally formed. And everyone says, well, everything ran because the public service is able to run it, but that's actually a sign of the strength of the public services care for the institutions. And I think we should never lose sight of that because that then translates into what it is to be a steward of the public service.

HARINDER SIDHU: And I'm definitely here with Pat in that it's a responsibility of everybody to contribute to that. But SES officers, I do think here, have a special responsibility. And it is about inculcating the values and public service values into everybody. We need to model them and we need to inculcate them. And the second piece of stewardship we have is to take responsibility for maintaining the strength of the public service into the future. In other words, building the next generation of public service. My personal take on that has been to work as hard as I can to support public service that mirrors the community it serves. We have gender diversity, we have cultural diversity. Those are very important elements, because unless people can see in their leaders, if they can see themselves, we will not have credibility. We will risk being distanced from the community we serve. That part of building capability is all about making sure we never lose our connection with our ultimate client. It is the government, but it's actually the actual Australian citizen.

CATH INGRAM: Right.

HARINDER SIDHU: I see that as a core part of our stewardship function.

CATH INGRAM: Harinder, you've started to touch on, and I think I'm just going to move to our fit for future. And Pat, you've explored what some of the things are that to be this contemporary public service, we've got to shift. Sean, perhaps firstly, any reflections out of how the public service responded in the pandemic that we should keep going and take forward? And then secondly, what, from your observation, is that sort of capability that we all need to invest in ourselves or in those that we grow as a team coming forward?

SEAN INNIS: Thanks, Cath. And I'm going to take Pat's lead and answer the question with a little chape as we...

CATH INGRAM: Of course.

SEAN INNIS: I do want to touch on stewardship, and everything Pat and Harinder said I absolutely agree with. But I'd add a dimension that I actually think has weakened. And when I was at the Productivity Commission, we did an inquiry on human services and we looked across all of the human services world. We picked six particular services to deep dive on. One of them we wrestled with and didn't pick was age care, because we didn't think we could do a good enough job of it. We thought the problems were too deep. When we looked across human services, we saw something missing in the way, not just the Commonwealth Government, but all levels of government were approaching it. And that is, we didn't understand the human beings we're here to serve.

SEAN INNIS: We didn't understand their lives, we didn't understand the connections in their lives, we didn't understand the distribution of their lives. How many different types of lives people were leading, and we weren't designing for that. We had one of two models, either a bog-standard service offering that everyone got, or a pretence that we could cure a service offering individually for every single human being in the country. That doesn't make sense. One of the stewardship things that I'd encourage you to think about, and it is the role of the public service, is that understanding of the issues and the human beings and their wellbeing and how that comes together.

CATH INGRAM: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

SEAN INNIS: One thing that policy does badly, we do lifetime policy really badly. We do all these little interventions. And when you think about how they hit a person's life, actually they stop making sense, which is why Graton and others are starting to talk about the intergenerational bargain being broken, some of that's policy. I just wanted to say stewardship is all of the things that I mentioned, but there's a dimension more, which is you are the policy stewards of the country. You need to understand the population, the dynamics, and what's happening into the future. The pandemic, watching it from largely ANU, what a magnificent response from the public service. I had the privilege of hosting a meeting between the top tables of three departments recently. Three Secretaries and their Deputies. And what I observed at that meeting was a level of natural collaboration that I have never seen in the service. And that was born of the pandemic.

SEAN INNIS: I was surprised, heartened, and I could see this building change that Pat's referred to in the way the Australian public service operates. It needs to be caught, nurtured, and never ever let go. I think departments need to have different views and bring those views

together, but the traditional model of fierce competition and unhealthy competition wouldn't have worked in the pandemic. You guys shifted quickly. And I really do think it's something to embrace.

CATH INGRAM: Great. Thank you. Pat, your reflections.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Yeah. I mean, so many, and I'll add a couple to that I think are really important, but by no means a kind of exhaustive list of things that I think need to be the hallmarks of our service going forward. One of the things I observed, pandemic but other events as well, is we work well when we engage with risk and step into risk. We were taking lots of risks in our response. We understood them. We did the work to understand the nature of the risk and mitigate where we could, but a crisis often empowers us to take risk that we otherwise might not. And so, I think that's an important element of our success and something that we need to grab a hold of if we can. And now that changes with time, it changes with events, it changes with governments, it changes with leadership changes, but I think there's something really in that.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: And then probably for me, another important element of it is, and this is relevant to the future of the service and everybody in this room, is we were learning. We were learning very rapidly. We were stopping things that weren't working. We were kind of relying on subject matter experts in ways, quite publicly, that you don't often see out of the public service. And when things kind of went off the rails, we'd come back, we'd take another look, we'd learn to do things differently, we'd unlearn the thing that didn't work. I think that's our future. I really think that our capacity to build new capabilities, to continue to build on our learning and our knowledge as a public service, as well as being able to collaborate across the system and step into risk in a well understood way will continue to kind of define how successful we are as a service. And I think we did it in a first right way throughout the pandemic. We need to grab a hold of that in some way.

CATH INGRAM: Right. I'm just going to pause, and Caroline is under the lights here, with Menti. If you've all got your phones, I want to ask you the question, and could you keep it to three words? I'm hoping the question comes up also on the screen. All right. What are the challenges you see in the current public service? And just a three-word response, not a monologue, because it'll be a word cloud.

CAROLINE WALSH: And we are getting some answers up on the screen already. One person thinks inadequate remuneration, multiple priorities, talent attraction and retaining staff, APS brand recognition. Retaining staff is trumping a few, it's coming up. Collaboration, and burnout has just

been a standout in that centre as well.

CATH INGRAM: Okay. Now Harinder, I hope you were paying very keen interest to some of those words coming through. Any comments on the challenges that people in the room are feeling is facing the public service?

HARINDER SIDHU: Well, they all resonate with me. I've only been here a couple of months, so I've been through most of COVID with everyone else. And I can feel some of the feeling that sits behind that. I think that there's that piece around burnout, but it's collaboration and it's the fight for talent. And sitting here in New Zealand, it's very clear that New Zealand is facing exactly the same issues. This isn't peculiar to Australia, it's peculiar to everyone else. Could I throw in a couple more in there?

CATH INGRAM: Sure. Go for it.

HARINDER SIDHU: I think that the need for speed is very much on the agenda now. There's a real expectation on behalf of governments and the community that we will respond faster. This piece on collaboration, I think, is related to that, but I think it raises some real challenges for policy making. And the second thing that I think that we're going to be challenged by is the extent which our structures are fit for the kinds of problems we are going to have to solve into the future. We are in a world now where in every department I can think of, and I'm seeing it here in New Zealand as well, setting up task forces to deal with questions that just don't fit neatly in where we are at. And I think that's a trend for the future, but it does really raise that question about, well, should we think differently about how we pull ourselves together?

CATH INGRAM: Great. Can I draw on Pat? I think you referenced silos before and is that preventing collaboration. What's your thoughts and advice to the folk in the room here, some of which might be able to influence or control necessarily the structures they work in?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I'd say that might be true, but there's always opportunity to be involved in task forces. When we set up umpteen task forces at various levels right across the public service over the last couple of years, and we talk about mobility quite a bit in the public sector and I'm a big support of that. I'd say if you have an opportunity to be involved in a task force, then you should seriously think about grabbing a hold of that. If you have an opportunity to be involved in sort of surge work, then you should seriously think about doing that for a couple of reasons. First is ordinarily, we bring together task forces because we have a narrowly problem, it's horrendous to sort of

describe, that cuts across so many different areas and so many different skill sets.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Being involved in those things, you'll get to work with colleagues you may never otherwise get to work with, you'll get to learn from those people, you'll get to see how different skill sets contribute to resolving problems. And hopefully you'll get to make colleagues for life as a result of that. And I think one thing, if you haven't already worked out, much of what we do in the public service is based on relationships. And I think you can say that generally of the world. But build those strong relationships. Getting involved in task forces and those kinds of activities you may not otherwise get involved in will broaden your networks, will give you that opportunity to, "Hey, I know a person that works in that department. I can now reach out and have a conversation with them." And creating those linkages is just so, so important as you go through a career.

CATH INGRAM: It's a nice plug for IPAA. One of our big things is about networks and helping people promote and build a network. Couldn't miss the drive by there. Sean, just on capabilities though. What are perhaps the things, your advice, and reflections, we should all be in a continuous learning mode and investing in skills. What are the critical skills that... Harinder called out the need for speed, being agile, driving forward. Any top three that you can really think we all as a service need to focus on?

SEAN INNIS: Yeah. Thanks, Cath. And a couple of reflections. And Caroline and her crew know this. I wrote a piece recently on meetings. And I'm not naturally attracted to meetings, right? They're a bit boring, but a colleague and I were walking around the lake, we're wondering what would really contribute to public service productivity, dealing with all these issues we're talking about? Actually, doing meetings better. Making that part of your craft, because I'm sure as eggs, a lot of you've gone to meetings and you're not quite sure why you're there. You're not quite sure what was decided and you all walk away and no one carries the issues forward. That's disastrous, right, because the world is accelerated. The work you do is very busy. And the reason why I think that's important is two societal level changes that are coming together.

SEAN INNIS: The first is society shifted very strongly to a community-based decision-making model, a collective based decision making model, collective actions. You're all working together a lot more. And this is not just in the service, across society as a whole. Individual thinking is less valorised in all of these systems. I predict a future challenge for the public service is to get the balance of that right. I think the

collective models are really powerful and we're seeking them out, but actually need some time and space for individual thinking.

- CATH INGRAM: Great.
- SEAN INNIS: I'll leave that thought with you.
- CATH INGRAM: Can I just, because we have one last Menti activity and I'd love just to get that up on the screen as well.
- SPEAKER 5: The question is what are the positives and rewards you see in the current public service?
- CATH INGRAM: Three words that sum up positive and rewards. And they're coming through, are they, Caroline?
- CAROLINE WALSH: Getting some responses. Opportunity is big, influence, change, security.
- CATH INGRAM: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- CAROLINE WALSH: Opportunity and opportunities are both up there. That's fantastic.
- CATH INGRAM: Well, that's a great way for us to pause with our panel but keep them coming through. It might sort of stir some questions. Thank you, Harinder, Sean, and Pat. Now we're going to move to some questions from the audience. And we have about 15 minutes. Please don't be at all shy. You've got three highly experienced public servants, and please use that opportunity.
- GUEST: You talked about the need for stewardship and particularly considering lifelong impact on how we make policy in public service. How do you see that interacting with the consistently shortening life cycle of politics, in that decision making seems to become shorter and shorter to inform the chance of being reelected? How do you see those two things interacting and how can we influence that?
- SEAN INNIS: Be fascinated to hear what Pat and Harinder say, but being honest, it's part of the reason why I've taken the professional path I've taken. That it's so very hard for you people inside the public service to break out of what I call the frontier of activity in government. And that frontier is incredibly important. It's incredibly important to society, it's incredibly important to democracy, but it's strengthened. And it's very hard to find the time and the space and the freedom to think about the stewardship issues that I mentioned, not the ones that Pat and Harinder mentioned, but the policy stewardship. And my honest view

is that, and this is true of democracies around the world, that what we need to do is put some mechanisms around and supporting the public service to create some time and space for that. It's very hard to do it in the middle, but actually you need to build an infrastructure around you to support it. And truth be known, that was part of the reason for me going to ANU and setting up the public policy hub.

CATH INGRAM: Thank you, Pat.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Yeah. I mean, I could have a bit of a dig at that. I think I would never sort of term our system of democracy as a risk to good public policy. I wouldn't put it in there.

SEAN INNIS: No, that's not what I was saying.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: No, no, no. And I'm not suggesting that. I think that these mechanisms that you have outside of government that can really focus on longer term things, super important. You see really good models of that across the world. And we've got to grow some more of that capability here. I think the election cycles are reality. We need to accept that as public servants, that is our system. I suppose my perspective is if we are good enough at telling the story, if we've done the homework and the analysis, if we are focused on long term policy initiatives that are going to span multiple cycles of government, it's kind of up to us to convince government and Australian population of the merits of those things.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: And so I think we can see that as an excuse in some ways, and I'm not suggesting that people do this routinely, but we can see that the political cycle is a bit of an excuse to not get after some of these long term policy things, but I think if we sit back, if we kind of understand what it is we're trying to achieve and we can develop that argument well enough, I think we can cut through some of that and you will see things that cut across multiple political cycles.

CATH INGRAM: Is the craft of public policy something, again, you think we need to keep investing and treasure more? Has that been lost in this rapid speed react environment that we've been in?

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I mean, my view is it hasn't been lost. I think we still have really, really genuine strong capability in the public service, we need to continue to build on that. I don't think it's been lost. I think we're always going to have the urgent and important pieces and we're always going to need to respond to those, but I don't think our remit as a public services has reduced to the point where that's all we focused on. I think we will continue to need to play a long game and we need to get better at

being able to argue that case.

CATH INGRAM: Harinder, any reflections on policy cycles and political cycles?

HARINDER SIDHU: This has just reminded me of my time in the department of climate change, where we worked very intensely on a highly then politicised issue. And what you can manage in terms of delivering really good policy at speed and under pressure. It can be done if you have skills, expertise, and capability. And so, expertise actually gives you speed. Once you are really comfortable with your subject matter and you really know it, you can come to a solution much faster. And so we really need to find ways to deepen expertise to develop policy mastery on the part of our people. There's two sides though. There's a demand side and a supply side. We are talking all about the supply side of policy. There's some work that is now underway also about engaging with ministers or the public to actually shape how policy is demanded.

HARINDER SIDHU: Understanding by the customer, in the sense, of what policy is and what good policy looks like. And I think that is a conversation we need to continue having with our ministers, et cetera. One of the reasons we're having this conversation now is because we've been in crisis mode for so long, and we really do need to back out of crisis mode. When we do, we won't go back to a stately pace of working. It will be faster than it was before because that's what we're now used to, but I think that we really imperil the whole enterprise that we don't invest in capabilities.

CATH INGRAM: Fantastic. Thanks, Harinder. Other questions from the room?

SPEAKER 7: Masat from the Department of Infrastructure. I think the Department's name will be changed again.

CATH INGRAM: Okay. I had the acronyms.

SPEAKER 7: My question is what is my understanding is in the APS. There's a three-layer, operational, mid management and senior executives. In the operational level, we have three different deviation like male dominant, female, and multiculturalism. I can see that is a barrier from operational to mid management, mid management to the senior executives. I can say really good growth to the winning leaderships in the senior executives, but I really see a barrier. It is not going to be a multiculturalism in the senior management. I'm not sure why it is not happening. Is there any answer for me? Thank you.

CATH INGRAM: Okay.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I'm going to kick off, but-

CATH INGRAM: Great. Thank you, Pat.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I really want to hear Harinder. Harinder and I have had a number of conversations on this over time, and I know it's an area that you are passionate about, Harinder so I'll give you the floor to talk to that. I think you're right. When we look at our service, and I'm probably a little bit out of date in terms of the statistics of the service, but we are making progress from a gender perspective. From how many people do we employ, there's lots of work to do in the gender space as well. It'd be very easy for me to say, oh, we're about 60% female in the public service, what's the problem? Actually, there remain lots of problems from a gender perspective. We see the same thing with Aboriginal Torres Strait Islanders.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: We see the same thing in disability where we're good at bringing people into the service, but we're not necessarily great at helping progress people through a career and finding their ways into senior management. Lots of the strategies that we've got in place, public service commission is the author of those, but agency by agency, lots of plans out there to try and drive that. It comes down to building capability in lots of ways, it comes down to cultural competence in lots of ways. And as a service, we've got a bunch of work to do on that. Harinder, I might throw to you, mate.

HARINDER SIDHU: Thanks so much, Pat. Yeah. Yeah. I know Pat and I have had this conversation many, many times. And when it comes to cultural diversity, one of the worries as we go down the same path of the conversation that we had with women for most of my career, which is, oh, we need to get more people in the pipeline and they'll find their way up, et cetera, et cetera. There's a real complication there, which is it's logical to say 50% should be women because that's 50% of the population dead easy. It's much harder on the cultural diversity space. But one thing we can do is use rough estimates. And so, the cultural diversity team that I was the champion of in DFAT started to look at these things. The race discrimination commission has looked at ethnic diversity in leadership in Australia. And if you take broadly, the Australian public is about 50% Anglo Celtic. They're about 25% ish other European, and 25% ish non-Anglo, non-European.

HARINDER SIDHU: You kind of want to have that kind of makeup. One thing that seems to have worked in DFAT, which I'm very proud of, can I say, is that we paid very close attention almost as an experiment in our graduate recruitment for this year. And with me pestering people a lot, we actually looked at cultural diversity as one of the filters as we were

going through the process. Now we have an outstanding bunch of young graduates, the largest grad cohort we have ever brought in. 50% of that cohort come from culturally diverse backgrounds. Now, if you're a foreign service, you're showing your face of your country to the world. It really matters what you look like. What we have to do now is to kind of apply those filters at every stage. We've really got to be attentive because we know through the women in leadership, work that by being attentive to gender, we have been able to make a difference. And I think we need to do the same here.

CATH INGRAM:

Great. Thanks, Harinder. And thanks for the question. And I think it is a conversation, even in the private sector, that's ongoing. I think we're alive and aware to those barriers and I really appreciate, Harinder and Pat, you are leaning into that conversation and it takes a lot of champions as well. We probably have time for one more question if there's someone in the room who has a question.

SPEAKER 8:

Karyn Ervin from Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. My question is I'm actually after some advice. It was really interesting to see all the words and to hear what you've all said about having a voice, about being able to influence. One of the things in my career I've observed is there's two types of ambition in the public sector, positional ambition, climbing that ladder. And there's an ambition to have really fantastic outcomes no matter what level you're at. And we spoke about rewards and recognition and trust so it kind of all connects. I was after some advice about positional ambition versus ambition for really good outcomes.

CATH INGRAM:

Great question. Thank you, Sean.

SEAN INNIS:

I think that is a wonderful, wonderful question. And there's an Australian social researcher called Hugh Mackay. And he wrote a book called 'What Makes Us Tick'. And when I was reflecting on the future of work a year or so ago, I went back to Hugh's book to sort of try and explore what's driving us, because all of the research would suggest in the 1930s, everyone was predicting we'd be working 15 hours a week by now. And we're not. You guys are clearly not, right? I wrote another piece on busyness recently. What's driving that? And I did note it down for this session. I will use Hugh's words. He talked about a number of things that make us tick. To be taken seriously, to have something to believe in, to connect to others, to be useful, to belong, and to have a sense of control. He also mentioned that we do like more, which is the money thing, right? We have a drive to have more stuff. That's the money thing, but I want to focus on those other things. That doesn't matter what level you are, right?

SEAN INNIS: That matters about the nature of the work you're doing, who you're working with, and what you think that's achieving. And so my very strong advice is the level thing, truth be known, the further up the poll I got, the less nice the jobs looked. Being honest. I look at the secretary jobs today, they are really, really tough jobs, but I can see a huge number of jobs throughout the public service that deliver all of those things that Hugh Mackay mentions. I don't know if that's helpful, but for what it's worth.

CATH INGRAM: Perhaps you better have a crack at this one. You're in the APS.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: Karen and I, we know each other.

CATH INGRAM: Oh.

PATRICK HETHERINGTON: I suspect we've spoken about this a couple times before. I suppose you know my advice on this one, which coming from me, sometimes people sort of go, yeah, right. But I've always thought do things that you genuinely want to do. Do the jobs that you're genuinely going to find interest in and be passionate about. The kind of level things will come or not, in a sense. And so I can... To a point. I mean, so when you get into the SES, sometimes you're thrust into roles because they need a person in a place for a particular thing, but throughout my own career, I've just looked for jobs that I thought would be really cool. And gone actually, I'd really like to do that thing. I think that'll be a lot of fun. I'm going to learn something along the way. And if you kind of have that mindset, then I find you tend to do the thing better. And then the extent to which recognition and the levels thing and money's important, that often follows. I guess that's my view on that.

CATH INGRAM: And Harinder?

HARINDER SIDHU: I have no contest with what Pat and Sean have said. Very well, wise words. My observation of my own trajectory and those of others around me is that if you really focus on doing the job you love, doing it well, delivering the outcomes, strangely the position comes almost straight from that. You almost don't have to try on that front. That would be how... And if the position doesn't come, frankly, you're doing a job you love and that's meaningful to you and that's a win in its own right.

CATH INGRAM: Lovely. That is a great note to end on. That brings us to the end of our panel. I feel you've all had this sort of personal, professional, development coaching. And hopefully you're filled with richness, inspiration and ideas to take back into your careers or have different conversations within your agencies. But can you firstly, join with me in

thanking our panel, Harinder Sidhu, Sean Innis, and Pat Hetherington.