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TRANSCRIPT OF EVENT

FRANCES ADAMSON ORATION

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RENEE LEON: Well, good morning, everyone. Yuma, welcome, as we say in Ngunnawal Country. I would like to begin by acknowledging that we meet on the lands of the Ngunnawal people and pay my respects to Ngunnawal and Ngambri Elders who've extended their connection to a country over thousands of years. I pay my respects to their contribution to culture and community, and I pay my respects to any First Nations people who are here with us today.

Welcome to the 2023 Frances Adamson Oration, which marks United Nations Public Service Day. The Frances Adamson Oration is held annually, established in 2022, to honour the contribution of Her Excellency, the Honourable Frances Adamson, AC. Her Excellency is the 36th governor of South Australia and was made a Companion of the Order of Australia for eminent service to public administration. Of course, many of you know her through her lengthy career of service as a diplomat and ultimately as the Secretary of Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I'm particularly pleased to say that we're welcoming Frances who's watching online this morning, so she's very pleased to be here today virtually and looking forward to hearing the oration.

Without further ado, let me welcome Dr. Chris Sarra. Chris is a proud Gurang Gurang/Taribelang man from Bundaberg. He's the youngest of 10 children and became the first Aboriginal principal of Cherbourg State School in 1998 where he significantly improved the educational and life outcomes of students. He did this through a philosophy of strong and smart, which encouraged students to have a positive sense of cultural identity and to embrace positive community leadership. As Director-General of the former Department of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships, he led significant progress towards forging a path to treaty in Queensland. Most recently, he's been appointed as the director general of the Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. It's a very timely moment in Australia's history for us to be hearing from Chris about how the public service can better serve our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens. I look forward to hearing from you today, Chris. Thank you.

CHRIS SARRA: Well, thank you very much for that warm welcome. I'm delighted to be here in cool Canberra. I promise I won't make any jokes about state of origin or anything like that. I want to start just by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land. I say hello to all of those folks who are watching online. It's really great to be here delivering the Frances Adamson Oration. As many of

us know, and as was explained earlier, Frances was a distinguished diplomat and public servant and also significantly the president of the ACT division of IPAA, the Institute of Public Administration Australia, which is the thing that brings us all together today, which I think is very cool. Frances is a national fellow of IPAA, and that occurred in 2019. I must confess, I was a little bit daunted to know that this is the only the second oration. Frances, in fact, delivered the inaugural one last year. Up until this morning, I was moderately daunted. Now I'm a little bit freaked out knowing that Frances, you're online watching, so I'd better offer something special.

Just in keeping with that sort of theme, I'm a great fan of exceptional women in the public service, and Frances certainly was one of those, and many of us all know that. In fact, coincidentally, I was having coffee with somebody yesterday who worked with Frances, who described her as a woman of intellect who could embrace differing points of view and synthesise that into what were good quality decisions. In part, I want to speak about some of that today.

But let me reflect for a moment on some of the exceptional women that I've worked with. I think of my colleagues back in Queensland. Deidre Mulkerin is the Director-General of the Queensland Department of Child Safety, Seniors, and Disability Services. She's also the president of the Queensland chapter of IPAA back there. She's leading a reform in which the Queensland government is trusting First Nations people to make their own decisions about child placement. Imagine that. So really admirable. I'm inspired by people like Deidre who've got the courage to lead in a place where she's not unsure about.

Other people who come to mind are Commissioner Katarina Carroll, who's my colleague back home, Queensland's first female commissioner, and my First Nations colleague, Haylene Grogan. I'm not sure if they're online watching or not. Haylene is Queensland's Chief Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health officer. Back in the department that I used to lead, I want to make special mention of a lady who's an exceptional leader, Miss Kathy Parton, who is my former deputy director-general, a woman who works exceptionally hard and is tremendously loyal but is often told by the old boys, "You need to make yourself more visible." So I wanted to just take this moment to make her name known to much of Australia's public service as an exceptional woman in a leadership role.

I think my message today is one that would sit well with you, Frances, Your Excellency. I mentioned that I was a little bit daunted before. My message to you and all of you folks online as a fellow public servant is this, and I'll

talk through these points. I guess the key theme on a day like today is to say to you, to say to us is to be confident in our ability to public policy, to be confident in our ability to design First Nations policy even if you're not a First Nations person. In addition to that, my message is about being confident and comfortable designing policy that is able to treat the people that we serve differently and let us transcend this ridiculous assertion about the need to design policy that treats everybody as same.

Finally, I want us to be confident that we can do these things by reflecting upon and backing our own sense of intellect and our own sense of humanity. Let me explain, some of you have heard me talk about this before, the notion of the concrete universal. It's an intellectual concept that comes from an old friend of mine, Professor Roy Bhaskar, who is the founder of the critical realist philosophy. He talks about our sense of existence and the notion that we are not just one dimensional. We nor the people that we serve are not just one dimensional. For instance, I'm not just an Aboriginal person. Here I am finding myself running a Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. So we don't live in pigeonholes. Roy Bhaskar's intellectual concept of the concrete universal helps us to get our head around these things.

Let me explain. Roy would say that our existence and the existence of those we serve is stratified. It's a stratified ontology. It's multilayer, but it is anchored by our core humanity. So all of us at our core are human, and then upon our core humanity are various layers that make us who we are. We are not just the one layer. We are the totality of all of those layers and our core humanity. If we understand this, then we know that there are levels at which we can be same, and the level at which we are same is at the level of our core humanity. And that's okay. It's great in fact.

Then there are various layers that make us different, and those layers pertain to cultural background. My mother was Aboriginal. My father was Italian. I'm a public servant. That's another layer. I'm a former educator. That's another layer. I'm a father, I'm a grandfather, would you believe, all of those sorts of things. But there are other layers that point towards our sexuality, our abilities, or disabilities, all of these things, and we are not just one of those layers. We are the totality of all of those things. Those layers will resonate differently according to where we're at and what is happening at the time or according to context.

Let me just explain this really quickly. You heard me say that my father was Italian from a village called Miglianico in Abruzzo. My father had a wife and three kids in Italy before he came to Australia after the

Second World War. He came to Australia and had 10 kids out here. So my father was quite fertile, and I really do have a brother from another mother in Italy. But my point is this, when I'm in the village of Miglianico and I'm talking speaking in Italian with my brother, with my cousins in that village, because of where I am and what's happening in that time and that place, my sense of being Italian is resonating very, very strongly. It doesn't mean that I've stopped being Aboriginal. It just means that that layer upon my core humanity is not resonating as strongly as my sense of being Italian.

But when I'm home in my country in Bundaberg and I'm fishing and I'm looking across at Paddy's Island, wandering about some massacre that might have occurred there some years ago and what it was like for my ancestors over there and knowing that their blood is in the sand there, or if I'm advising the minister on matters to do with First Nations affairs or whatever, or I'm getting called abusive names by the next door neighbour being called little Black this or that or whatever, my sense of being Aboriginal resonates more strongly. It doesn't mean that I've stopped being Italian, just that part resonates more strongly. Does that make sense?

For most of my time, my sense of being Aboriginal resonates more strongly than any other of those layers. I'm sure you understand what I mean. I think that's true for all of us, and I hope that you can seek some understanding and transcend this kind of need to answer people when they say, "Well, are you Aboriginal, are you Italian or are you Australian?" Truth is we can be all of those things, and our kids should be able to embrace all of those layers and celebrate them with a sense of love for the magnificent things that those layers are.

What are the policy implications for this? I think sometimes when we make policy, when we decide on what outcomes are good enough for the people that we serve, we've got to make those decisions from a place that is anchored by our humanity and not from a place that is from a contaminated view of what that layer might be. Let me explain. If I'm an educator and I've got a child living with disabilities, rather than be mesmerised by the disability and decide that that's a good enough outcome, I've got to get down to the level of my own humanity and connect with that child's humanity and understand that that's the place that we need to get to. That's the outcome that's good enough for this particular child. Then in the efforts to plot the path to get to that outcome, I need to take into account that layer and understand the complexities that are going to be in and around on the journey towards that outcome.

In Aboriginal education, we need to get to the level of our humanity and understand that that's the place that we need to get to in terms of what outcomes are good enough, not get distracted by a contaminated view of the layer of being Aboriginal and get tricked into believing that Aboriginal children can't learn as well, so the best we can do for them is flog off some kind of remedial product from America because we think that that's good enough for them. To do that is a denial of the humanity in the sense of what's good enough for those Aboriginal children. In same-sex marriage, we understand that at the level of our humanity, love is love, and we need to get to an outcome that enables the humanity of folks who are living in same sex marriages or want to live in same sex marriages fulfil their sense of humanity and celebrate that layer that is the part of their sexuality or their being and that that can be fulfilled without their humanity being undermined.

If we think of policing in relation to domestic violence matters, I've seen circumstances where police will look at an Aboriginal community and a circumstance of domestic violence and say, "Oh, well, that's an Aboriginal community thing, so we just need to back off." That's not an Aboriginal community thing. That's a thing on which we have to engage with the humanity. That's a humanity thing that causes people in those circumstances to expect of us better outcomes than just a contaminated view of the layer. Does that make sense? Good, thank you.

An easy way to anchor our thought processes, and I often do this, I confess, is to stop and think, "Would I accept this for my own people? This policy that I'm designing and the outcomes that it will have at the front line, would I accept this for my little brother, for my nephew, for my uncle?" If the answer is no, then what we're doing is probably undermining a sense of humanity.

Let me challenge you to think about and understand this. That when we undermine the humanity of others, we undermine our own humanity. If it was your family that was struggling to keep it all together, would you want them to have their sense of agency stripped away by having them put on a Basics Card and to be told you are too hopeless to manage your own affairs? Would you want them to be whacked around the head with punitive measures that are proven to be ineffective? Or would you want them to have more support? Does your humanity let you hold the line on what you think is good public policy? Does your humanity hold the line on what you think is good public policy, or is your humanity found surrendering to what we might think is good public policy because we lack the courage to endure some sooky boy tantrums from charlatans who pretend

to have silver bullet policy solutions that are costly to taxpayers, that are costly to the people that we serve and that are costly to our own sense of humanity?

Designing public policy is complex. It requires us as public servants to be confident. It requires us as public servants to be intelligent. It also requires us to be good human beings. Silver bullets come from charlatans and policy carpetbaggers, and they're only good for shooting werewolves. My colleagues, let me say to you, I am more interested in backing your intellect as a public servant and your ability to design good public policy. I am more interested in backing your own sense of humanity than I am in backing your ability to find a werewolf to shoot with a silver bullet.

Coming back to the concrete universal and the notion that at levels we can be same and at levels we can be different, there are policy examples all over the place of where we do this. When we look at small to medium business owners, we design things that are available just for small to medium business owners because it makes sense to do so. In my new role, I get to understand the things that we offer to farmers who are caught in drought circumstances or having to be more resilient or recovering from disasters, and we design policy approaches and programmes that are different, that are not available to others.

So in the First Nations space, I think we just have to be okay and resist this ridiculous assertion that everybody should be treated the same when clearly the needs are different. So let's be okay about different processes for First Nations folks. There are good examples of contemplating outcomes while we are anchored by our humanity. Deciding what is needed for this particular group or that particular group because we get an understanding of, we come from a place of our humanity, and then we seek to understand the complexity of that layer so that we can serve those people better.

This brings me to the final point that I want to make. It's the misconception that if we haven't done First Nations cross-cultural awareness training, then we can't do First Nations policy design. When we respond to the needs of those in crisis in floods or cyclones or whatever crisis you can name, we don't say to ourselves as policymakers, "Oh, I haven't done a course in the effects of flooding, or I haven't done a course in living with that particular kind of crisis." We say in a way, "We are here to serve you. We are public servants. We want to understand your needs. How can we serve you?" That's what we say.

Let me be very clear about this. I'm not saying that it is not a good thing to have cultural competence. It's absolutely essential, but it's only one part of that. It is

only one part of the equation. It's the conversation about the head, the heart, and the hand. An online cross-cultural awareness programme or a two-day workshop or something will give you a cognitive sense of things that are worth understanding. So in your efforts to seek to understand better that layer, those kinds of things are useful.

But if you haven't done the course, that shouldn't prevent you from being able to design good public policy because the place that that happens is working alongside people. The place where the shift occurs is when our heart is stimulated to do things and understand things differently to the extent that we do things differently with our hands. This is why it is so important to have a more diverse workshop. There is no real cross-cultural awareness training thing that you can do that's going to tell you everything that you need to know about all of the Blackfellas all over Australia. The way that you will understand that is by working alongside Blackfellas and getting a sense of connectedness so that we can do things differently.

So that heart shift comes from, as I say, working alongside folks, and it leads us to wonder about the difference between what is cultural competence and intercultural agility, what I like to think of. See, if we haven't done the course or we don't know First Nations people, somehow, we surrender ourselves to our own sense of victim status as a public servant, and we've got to stop doing that. Because if you surrender your ability to design good public policy in a First Nations space, then your victim status is not serving us as Blackfellas. It's not serving you, and it's not serving our profession.

This is why I'm telling us that we need to back ourselves and not surrender our own humanity to be victims or to a notion that we are not culturally competent because we can seek a level of confidence by dropping down to our level of humanity to decide what is good enough. If we get down to that level, we will understand more deeply the need to connect with and work alongside First Nations folks to be moved and understand the things that we need to understand.

I think they're the key points that I wanted to make this morning. I'm aware that some of you might think that I might be accused of being a bit romantic in this kind of space, and I'm okay with that. But the truth is this, I've had quite a successful career as a public servant, as a First Nations person, as an educator. It's this way of thinking, this philosophical approach that has contributed to some really positive outcomes.

It's the thing that contributed to taking school attendance at Cherbourg School from 62% to 94%, among the best in any school. It's the philosophical

approach that caused us to get an entire education and profession across Australia to understand that it is right that we have high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and also of poor white children. It's this philosophical approach that enabled us to usher in a circumstance in which we're on a path to treaty in Queensland and that we are about to push go on a truth telling and healing process. So it's that philosophical approach that helped to usher in those things. It's that philosophical approach.

I guess my message is think of me what you will and take from what I share with you as you wish. I've got really nothing to prove to you. What I'm sharing with you is the result and the evolution of work that I've actually done. It's the intellectual rigour of a PhD in psychology. It's not something that's flogged off the shelf from somewhere. It's something that I've worked on over many, many years and delivered results on. So I don't mind what you think about me in this circumstance. Because the truth is it's not so much about me as a public servant and the extent to which I'm connected to my own sense of humanity, it's really about you. It's really about you and the extent to which you are connected to your own sense of humanity and the extent to which you are prepared to back your own intellect and your own ability. Thank you.

RENEE LEON: Thank you so much for that, Chris. I know that I'm not alone in feeling that it's a while since feel like I've heard something new when people talk about how to deliver policy in the area of First Nations business. So I feel really pleased to have had the opportunity to be given a fresh lens about that. I'm interested in what you think it is that has made the public service feel unable to enter into making policy for Australian Aboriginal people because of our feeling of difference, when, as you say, we're perfectly happy to make policy for single mothers or farmers or migrants or any other people with whom we don't necessarily share a lived experience. What do you think is underpinning that, and which parts of it do we need to not forget and take forward as opposed to discard, as you say, a contamination?

CHRIS SARRA: It's a combination. It's a good question. In response, I think it's a combination of factors that caused me to present such a challenge, I guess. One is clearly the data is saying that we still continue to need to do better in this space. Then of course, and there's not a lot we can do about this as public servants, but it is contaminated by the politics. We saw a thing like ATSIC exist many, many years ago to be swept away. The ease with which it was swept away is the reason we're having the conversation about the need for a voice today. If we'd have sorted out, accepted, there

are some things that needed fixing up, we should have just got back and fixed up what needed to be fixed up back then because what that offered was a sense of agency, a sense of First Nations voice in the conversation, at a macro level.

At a micro level, there are still some things that are quite obvious. Like, in Queensland, we had said about leading an agenda called Local Thriving Communities, which saw us take a long time to build a sense of trust that something was going to be different. As recently as maybe two months ago, there were 20 communities across Queensland that said, "We will step forward, and we will form a local decision-making body to have input into how we do service delivery and service design."

Let me just give you a quick example. In Palm Island, I received a letter from an email, as did many ministers, as did many other directors-general, about young kids out of control. That in the last three nights, there were 60 incidences reported of kids running amok in community. Some of you have probably seen these sorts of emails. So I rang the CEO on a Friday night. I said, "Look, I'm ringing you because I know you've sent this to everybody, but I just want to make sure that somebody is getting... I don't want to be assuming that somebody's not talking to you." So I rang him, and he went into the story.

I said, "Look, you've got a local decision-making body there. What are they saying they want to do?" He said, "Well, they're saying they want to have a night patrol." "If that's what they're saying, 'Let's have a night patrol,' I'll find $30,000. I'll put it against your $30,000. We'll get some more from the Commonwealth. If that's what they're saying they want to do, if that's what they think will work, then let's do that." So we executed that strategy. We went from, what did I say, 60 in three nights to zero for the next six or seven weeks. This is a community now that's having a conversation with its young people, where the old people are sitting down with the young kids and saying, "We don't like what you're doing, but we love you. Your parents, they're struggling, but we love them too."

Again, I know that some of this might seem esoteric, but there are the tangible things that we just cannot deny from embracing a sense of agency at a local community level. I guess it's the data that causes us to continue to be frustrated and our... I don't know if it's a reluctance, but I think we just need to have a sense of faith in what First Nations voices have to say to us, and we need to give them skin in the game about issues that affect them locally.

RENEE LEON: We often have difficulty as public servants doing the

listening that's involved in both building Trust and in genuinely hearing and building that faith that Indigenous communities have knowledge about what their own needs are and what the solutions are. Some of that's a time thing. The whole public service operates on punishing time frames. You're expected to develop a policy and have it ready to announce next week, deliver the week after. So public servants often feel that there's just no time to do that level of consultation.

But the story you told us about that community, of course, the lessons that we would learn from that kind of agency and that kind of listening would actually be beneficial to all of the policies that we develop. If we actually spent time with farmers and listened to their needs, we might actually deliver a drought policy that worked better for them. If we spent time in disadvantaged communities with lots of single parents and listened, then we'd be ready to deliver a policy that would work for them. Have you seen that in your public service career that the skills people have learned from listening and respecting the agency of community actually make them better public servants overall?

CHRIS SARRA: I might just gently push back on the need to spend time on the ground in communities. Clearly, if we can do that, that's the case. But it's why I want to prompt us as public servants to reflect on our own sense of humanity. Because realistically, there's not always the time, but it's our humanity that will connect with those wherever they are in remote locations or rural locations or whatever, it's at that deeper level where we can make the right decisions about where we need to get to together, but it's also that will cause us to reach out and understand the things that need to be understood.

There is one good example, and my friend here, Tony Cook will attest to this I'm sure, the government Champions Programme that operated in Queensland and the Ministerial Champions, which caused ministers and directors-general to have to be on the ground in communities and be advocates for an individual community that was selected for them. When you have people who are out on the ground being... I say confronted for want of a better word, but some of it is confronting. We get a firsthand view that, when it comes to policy or what we need to be designing or what programmes we need to run, we understand that A plus B doesn't always equal C. Sometimes A plus B might equal minus spinner or something like that. It is so complex. So it is good. I think that's a good example of how that sort of circumstance was caused.

RENEE LEON: Of course, an appeal to humanity is all very well for the public servants who are designing the policy. But sometimes you put that policy up to a minister whose

views don't necessarily align or who is, in some of the words that you used, more interested in punitive measures or measures that have been proven not to work. Any tips for public servants about how to be an effective influencer when that clash of values might be happening?

CHRIS SARRA: I invented my own joke on this. How many secretaries or directors-general does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but it needs to be approved by the undergrad in the minister's office. No, I shouldn't say [inaudible 00:34:31]. Sorry, sorry, sorry. But it's a serious question because it's the thing that makes public policy really complex. It's the politics, and it's the media, and we all watch with the sense of dismay. But you know what? As public servants, we don't control the politicians, and we'll get the politicians that we vote for. We don't control the media. So I don't know that we can afford to be distracted by things that we don't control.

We have to be anchored by our own sense of humanity and, in so doing, be anchored by our own sense of what is good public policy and is that public policy that I would accept for my own people. We just have to hold the line on that, accepting the limitations that go with that. Because at the end of the day, we need to go home and stare at ourselves in the mirror and say, "Did I hold the line? Did I uphold the interest of a good quality policy?" The answer's going to be yes or no. Each of you are going to know whether it's yes or no for you, and each of you is going to know whether or not you surrendered a little bit of your humanity by rolling over to give the minister what she or he wanted.

RENEE LEON: It's a great north star, Chris. Thank you. I want to take the time to get some questions from the audience. In particular, I want to start with a couple of questions. There's roving mics, so when you're the person, a mic will come to you. I want to start with a couple of questions from people who've never asked a question at an IPAA event before. So if that's you, now's the time. I know Chris has given us some really exceptionally interesting and inspiring things to think about. I can see a hand coming up here.

SPEAKER 3: I've never asked a question at an IPAA event before because I get very scared of asking questions in public. Dr. Sarra, I'm a big fan. I'm also a previous educator. My question is, you talked about the layers and how at the core is our humanity and then we have all these layers that make us up as individuals and the risk of being mesmerised by one particular layer, either because of the context you're working in or because that's the most important layer to you.

I wondered if you might have views on the importance

as public servants of working in different contexts. For me, I've worked in education, health, and attorney general's department now, and I bring that breadth of experience. I find it quite useful, particularly when it comes to things like First Nations justice. I wondered if you could speak to that difficulty of having expert public servants who can dive really deeply into a particular policy matter and rise up through their agency with that expertise versus generalist public servants who can work across agencies, and how we might bring those two things together to make more of a difference with closing the gap.

CHRIS SARRA: Interesting question. There are many angles from which I could come to offer some reflections. I think in my own role, previously I was the Director-General of Seniors, Disability Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships. Immediately, you search for the commonalities, and of course, the commonality is our humanity. Then when you explore the layers, of whether it's disabilities or seniors or Aboriginal and Torres Strait folks, you understand that it's often the folks who are left at the margins of society. Then that causes you to become committed to bringing people in from the margins and making them integral to our own sense of what we think is good community.

Then at an individual level, for me, it's like when I go into the office as a director-general, I don't stop being a Blackfella. There were moments in my previous role where I had to stop and reflect upon all of those things at a much deeper level. So if I was going to make a decision to go this way or sign this piece of paper in front of me, what does that mean for me as a public servant, and what does that mean for me as an Aboriginal man?

I think in those circumstances, I had to kind of go deeper, and even in my own mind, go back to my old people and wonder about them being in the room with me in that moment and thinking, if they were here, would they say, "No, boy, you're right. You sign that piece of paper. You're doing the right thing," or "Yeah, I'm not sure, boy." So I think I was obligated to keep those ways of thinking close to me in that kind of a role when it came to the kind of decisions that had to be made about particular policy directions or things like that.

More recently, as recently as just last week, I was talking to police liaison officers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait police liaison officers, and talking to them about the need to understand that there's a layer in which they are public servants, that they are police officers. So there's a level at which they've got to be blue, but it doesn't mean they have to be disconnected from the thing that makes them Black. But there's a time and a

place for one thing to resonate a little bit more strongly than the other.

All I can say is it's complex. I know I haven't given you a specific answer, but there are a whole range of things that are worth thinking about, I think. That's why I think that that notion of the concrete universal is a useful thing to reflect upon because it causes us to go to the layers of the people that we serve. The first question is wondering about whether or not that's a contaminated perspective on that layer, so seeking to understand the truth about what that layer is, and then dropping down to our sense of humanity to make sure that we're making the right decisions. I hope that makes sense.

RENEE LEON: Stan Grant recently explained to the nation when he was farewelling Q&A, his people's concept of yindyamarra, that respectful listening piece. I think there's much in what you say that's about, if we did more respectful listening, including from the diversity of professional backgrounds that people work with, we then get the benefit of bringing together all of those different perspectives. It won't necessarily mean choosing this one or that one. It's a way of melding them together so that you get the best decision.

CHRIS SARRA: I think I alluded to that. It was a reflection on my conversation yesterday about Frances and the way that she worked. I haven't met Frances, but hello again. It still freaks me out that you're online.

RENEE LEON: I'm sure she's online and applauding. Someone over here.

BERNADINE CARUANA: Hi, Bernadine Caruana from the Department of Industry, Science, and Resources. I haven't asked a question. I was at the first event for Frances's Oration. I can't think of a more fitting speaker to follow Frances at this. A fan of both yours having had the pleasure of working with Frances in China.

My question is, I had the privilege of doing a secondment with Jawun last year. I worked for the Aboriginal Employment Strategy, which was a really successful employment entity that had 100 Aboriginal staff around the country and was being very successful. I was working with them on a grant application. They were facing a cliff of probably having up to six months or more without a funding stream to continue their successful business.

What can we as a public service do to avoid the rolling three-year cycle of grants to allow where success was very evident? They were achieving outcomes. They were employing 100 people themselves, but also getting up to 2,000 or 3,000 Aboriginal people into

employment, often long-term unemployed, but they were facing this cliff. The pressure on that organisation, its ability to survive was in question. How do we overcome that, and what do we do to acknowledge where there's good outcomes being achieved and make sure we continue to support them?

CHRIS SARRA: Thanks for your question. I think we can take that and connect it to the first question around the frustrations that we have or why we think we've got further to go when it comes to First Nations policy. It's not only First Nations policy in which we do this. It's often there are a lot of human services policy in which we have that very circumstance. So there are political drivers that create that circumstance and electoral cycles, but there's also policy drivers that enable that circumstance. I think the challenge for us as public servants is to reflect upon that and think about what levers we can pull to create a shift in that circumstance. Again, it comes back to control, understanding the things that we control as public servants and what good quality advice we can put forward to transcend that circumstance because it's very true what you're describing. If we've got examples of people who are winning, why can't we just let them keep winning?

RENEE LEON: Your point about we should listen more to the data, which of course we're always prepared to do in other fields, is a good one about giving us a lens into the things we should feel some humanity about. I know we all were sort of shocked and horrified as public servants when the data came out a decade or more ago now about how many different Commonwealth contracts each small Aboriginal community was having to acquit because each department only saw its own, plenty of accountability going on here, making sure that we'll be able to account for every dollar, and answer questions at Senate estimates. But six different departments are all demanding that level of paperwork from a small Aboriginal community [inaudible 00:45:01].

CHRIS SARRA: By the way, how many of those departments actually spoke to the people in those particular communities? It's why we tried to... what we said about designing the local decision-making bodies in various communities across Queensland is so that every department was obliged to have to talk to that local decision-making body before dollars were signed off.

Because what happens in First Nations community is you'll have a situation where I could be in a place like Doomadgee or Aurukun or Lockhart River and bump into somebody at 10 o'clock in the morning and they'll say, "What are you doing here?" I'll say, "Oh, I'm doing this mental health project. I've got some money from

the feds to do it." "Oh, okay." Then you'll bump into somebody at 12 o'clock, and they'll say, "What are you doing here?" "Oh, I'm doing this mental health project. I got some money from the state government." Then you bump into somebody at 2 o'clock and say, "What are you doing here?" "Oh, we're doing this mental health project. We've got some money from the philanthropist to do this project to these people." You say, "Are you with those guys who...?" "Huh? No, we never heard of them."

So community is left out of the conversation when they shouldn't be. They should be like a portal that connects to the leadership of a local community to say, "Yeah, we think that's a good project. We want more of that," or, "Yeah, we know you've got dollars for that, but you know what? We've got people in community who can deliver that service. So we don't need people to fly in. So we'll take the dollars and let us spend it locally." We just need local leadership in on the conversation about them.

Some weeks ago, I didn't know if we all watched, but I certainly did watch with a sense of frustration about Alice Springs apparently blowing up. I didn't see anybody from Alice Springs actually having a say about what they thought they needed for that particular community. I saw lots of chests beating and those sorts of things. We just need to unveil the sense of agency. In Queensland, I'm proud of the work that we've done is to get 20 local leadership groups and the people of Palm Island to step forward in that way. We're on the cusp of a renaissance of Aboriginal leadership if we can just have faith in the sense of agency that exists in the leadership of First Nations people. There's no reason why shouldn't. It's been there for thousands of years. We've ignored it for a long time, and that's why we're getting the data that we get. So we need to give them skin in the game.

RENEE LEON: Those examples, Chris, are such a good reminder of why Australia needs the Voice because we have not been in the habit of listening, and we could get so much better results if we asked the people who know and who are going to be affected. I think I've got time for one last question, just here.

MELISSA COADE: Hello, Melissa Coade from the Mandarin. Thank you for your talk. I've asked many questions before. Can't stop, won't stop. I had the privilege of attending a really interesting IPAA Victoria event with a judicial leader, Rose Falla, in Victoria. Something really interesting she said in that talk was something that all people must be cognizant of, even when we think of this new generation of Indigenous leaders, which you refer to as a renaissance, is that they carry intergenerational

trauma with them. They don't shed that just in the same way that you say, "I don't stop being a Blackfella when I'm a leader." So my question is about resilience and motivation and hope. You spoke so much about humanity before. How do you not get depressed and give up-

RENEE LEON: Yeah, great question.

MELISSA COADE: ... in the context of the public service?

RENEE LEON: Great question.

CHRIS SARRA: That's a good question. I think it's knowing that... I could sit here and share awful stories about what it's like growing up in Bundaberg in the 1970s about racism when Joh Bjelke-Petersen was the premier and all of those kinds of things. Those things leave some scars, but they are not the totality of who we are as a people. Those things go back to the 1970s for me. But I'm carrying the blood of the first Australians, and that goes back thousands and thousands of years. So when I fish in the Burnett River, that's my river, and my people have been fishing in there for thousands of years. So I'm anchored more by that than I am by the trauma of somebody calling me a little Black bastard when I was at school or those sorts of things.

I'm thankful to my mother for that to help us cope with that by understanding that when people call you racist names, it's because they see you up here and they're trying to pull you down. The only way that they think they can pull you down is by saying something about being Black. She's quite a champion, my mom. When she got us to understand it like that, she then reinforced that, you know what, being Black, being Aboriginal is magnificent, so there's no reason anybody can pull you down for all of these reasons. So stay up there and now let's have a conversation about why that person feels like they're down there, and that becomes a conversation about humanity.

I think in those sorts of conversations, you actually end up feeling sorry for those people and wondering, "Why are you down there? Why can't you be up here with me?" I think at some point Australia will realise that. I think if we can play our own part in ushering in this renaissance of Aboriginal leadership and Torres Strait Islander leadership across the country by enabling that sense of voice, it's not something that's just good for Blackfellas. This is a gift that we as Blackfellas bring to the rest of Queensland, to the rest of Australia, to the rest of the world. It's something precious. I think people are starting to understand that slowly. So when it comes to things like Voice, I'm not going to tell anybody which way to vote or those sorts of things, but at some

point, I'd like to say let's not overthink this. There's something precious to be had here. So let's embrace First Nations people and what they have to say.

RENEE LEON: Thank you, Chris. What a magnificent contribution you've given us today, Chris. I'd now like to invite Miguel Carrasco from Boston Consulting Group, one of our sponsors for today, to deliver the Vote of Thanks.

MIGUEL CARRASCO: You're freaking out? Gosh, how do I follow that? I guess, look, it's fair to say that being a consultant in Canberra these days isn't winning any popularity contests. But I'm hopeful that our longstanding relationship, commitment to the public service, the shared values, and the public servants that have entrusted us to work with them over the years and the reputation, etc., speak for themselves, and that we're committed to excellent public service, in particular in the Indigenous policy space. I know my own cross-cultural awareness training over the years through Jawun and through working with many communities has absolutely enriched me and my ability to be a good advisor to many people in this space.

I did want to reflect; I think you've given us... you've stretched our minds quite profoundly this morning. I think, firstly, this notion of the concrete universal, and when you peel back the layers, looking at how to do good public policy through that shared humanity, it's a clarity of thinking, which I think is really very helpful and very practical. The second thing is this notion of embracing the difference and actually not shying away from that, which leads to the third point, which is the courage, actually having courage and having confidence to engage with the challenges and not shying away from that. So I think you've given us a real gift in the clarity of your thinking, and it's a real inspiration.

There's a quote I thought would be relevant on the United Nations Day for public servants from the former Secretary General Kofi Annan, who said, "To live is to choose, but to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go, and why you want to get there." I couldn't think of anyone who embodies that statement better, so thank you. On behalf of BCG, on behalf of IPAA, my deepest gratitude to you for being here, for sharing with us your thoughts. In the face of the coming referendum around the Voice, which I fully support and encourage others to do so as well, I don't think this could have come at a better time. Would you please join me in thanking Dr. Sarra.