

# TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

EPISODE #91

CONNECT, CARE, CONTRIBUTE: PUBLIC SERVICE FOR PUBLIC  
GOOD

**Dr Millie Rooney (guest)**

Social scientist and co-director  
Australia reMADE

**Dr Russell Ayres (guest)**

Associate professor  
Centre for Environmental Governance at the University of Canberra

Hosted by DAVID PEMBROKE, Founder and Chief Executive Officer and founder, contentgroup

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Enquiries should be directed to Caroline Walsh on 0413 139 427 or at [caroline.walsh@act.ipaa.org.au](mailto:caroline.walsh@act.ipaa.org.au)

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DAVID PEMBROKE:

Hello everyone and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Sector and how it serves the Australian community. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin today's episode of Work with Purpose, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are broadcasting from today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

Well, most, I would almost dare say, all public servants begin their careers with a mission to serve the Australian communities and to improve people's lives. While serving the public good is the core mission of a public servant's work, they also need to strike a balance with being responsive to the needs of the elected government of the day and to remaining apolitical and impartial at all times.

Now finding and maintaining that balance is not always easy, as the recent Robodebt and the management of consultant controversies continue, but it is a balance that public servants must strive for. So today, we want to discuss the idea of public good and how it connects to public service practice. We'll discuss what public good is, how we can better understand it, and indeed how it can best guide the work of the public service.

Today, we are joined by two experts from the public and community sectors to talk this through. Dr. Millie Rooney is a social scientist, researcher, and champion of participatory democracy and politics based in nipaluna, Hobart, Tasmania. She co-directs the strategic and daily operations work of Australia reMADE. Her social science expertise centres around community building and social capital.

As a carer for her family, as well as others in her community facing chronic illness and disability, Dr. Rooney is passionate about care, inclusion, and meeting the needs we all have to lead lives of

connection, care, and contribution. Dr. Rooney, thanks for joining us on Work with Purpose.

DR MILLIE ROONEY: Thank you so much.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Also joining us is Dr. Russell Ayres, who is associate professor with the Centre for Environmental Governance at the University of Canberra. He joined UC after a 30-year career in public policy and program management, mainly in the education and social services portfolios. His career has also included periods as an independent consultant advising government agencies on their policy development processes and other issues.

He now teaches public policy at three different universities and is researching the agency exercised by public servants in public policy and implementation. Russell, welcome to Work with Purpose.

DR RUSSELL AYRES: Thanks very much, David.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So, Millie, listen, we might start with you to wrap our arms around this concept of public good. How do you define what public good actually is?

DR MILLIE ROONEY: That's a really great question because it's such a big thing. At the end of 2020, we actually did some research where we asked the community. So, we asked hundreds of Australians from very different walks of life, very different political persuasions, backgrounds, cultures. We wanted to know, well, what does the public good mean to the public?

That really came out of this sense that we're at a moment with the 2019/2020 bushfires and then COVID-19, that people were really asking, "Well, why do we do what we do as a country and what is shaping our decision making as a collective?" So we went out and asked, "What do you and your communities want and who should provide it?"

What was so interesting about that is people very quickly reeled off. We want housing, healthcare, jobs, education, access to nature, access to the internet, but very swiftly that conversation then turned

to, "Well, I want a place where the coffee is free. I want to belong without having to fit in," and a real sense that the public good wants these very basic material needs were met. That the public good is actually the ability to connect with people and place, to care and be cared for, and to contribute.

That contribution element was a real surprise to me in that people saw the public good, at least in part as being able to contribute both locally and nationally to the bigger story we have of who we are as a nation. I can leave it there and we come back.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So just in terms of that research then, who did people then feel had the responsibility for the generation and maintenance of the public good?

DR MILLIE ROONEY:

Again, sort of both surprising and unsurprising answers. People were very clear that they wanted government to step in and do that work, and really uncertain about whether government could actually do it and whether they're up to the task. Remembering I talked to people from really different walks of life, different socioeconomic backgrounds, politics, I only ever heard the government spoken about in terms of either politicians who people had pretty negative ideas about, or that kind of bureaucratic interface at Centrelink. There's just this complete absence in the middle of government and the public service. No one had negative ideas particularly, it just wasn't there.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Okay. Russ, that's your turn to step into the void, your 30-year career-

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

Yup.

DR MILLIE ROONEY:

Sorry, about that.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

... without acknowledgement. It's interesting, isn't it? That government doesn't do a fantastic job of explaining to people what it does, when it does it, how it does? Perhaps, a better question might be about this interaction between the public servants, and public good, and your experience of that.

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

Thanks, David. Look, in part it's as it says on the tin. Public service, you're there to serve the public and the public good is part of that calculus. It's rather obvious, but then as you alluded to in your introduction, once you dig into the detail, it becomes much more complex for public servants. I think that's one of the aspects of being a public servant that is less apparent to the people that Millie and her colleagues were talking to.

So, any public servant who's thought about the public good, and I think most will have as you said David, particularly early in their careers, but even old public servants like me still think about it. It raises many questions that are quite difficult to answer. What is the public good in the context of the public service? On one level it can seem fairly straightforward, and I really liked the summary that Australia reMADE has come up with based on their grounded research around connect, care, and contribute. That's a nice crisp way of presenting it, but it becomes complicated in the public service.

In particular, what's important for public servants is who defines what public good is and who determines how public servants respond to it. The relationship between public servants and elected politicians is a really important and significant one here because both those groups are there to serve the public good in a final analysis way. Of course, there's the role of parliament. So, there's lots of complexities for public servants.

Now, I guess I've been a real academic in raising a bunch of questions, some of which I have views and answers to. The critical thing to me is at this stage of the discourse, is about what are the questions that are being asked and having that conversation both within the public service and critically with other people in the community who are interested in this. That's why I'm really keen on this partnership that I have with Millie and Australia reMADE, to try and bring these two worlds together because they're both concerned about largely the same thing. They just look at it in slightly different ways.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So from your experience of where we're at at the moment, and as you very nicely articulated there is that it's a complex job being a public servant because of all of the competing needs, pressures, and other things. In terms of keeping the public good at the centre, have you seen and do you recommend ways for different teams across the public service to talk about it, so as it does become and remain that central driver in what they do?

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

David, I think where I start with is yourself as an individual. When I'm doing teaching, when I used to lead teams, I talked about the importance of people being connected to their own values, their own history, their own perspective, but then broadening out from that base to talking about the people that they're serving. Because very often, certainly when I was working in welfare and education sectors, we're talking about supporting people who had very different life experience and background to me.

So, a lot of that is about finding ways to overcome your own bias if you like, your own perspectives about whatever it might be, gender, race, social status or whatever, to try and imaginatively enter into the lives of the people who you're trying to develop good policy for and deliver good services to. So, there's a lot of that discussion that I've seen teams have, and that's where it's worked best, where public servants shy away from that conversation and focus narrowly on the government of the day, which they do have to focus on but it's not only that. When they focus only on the government of the day, they can lose sight of that broader perspectives that this concept of the public good can give them.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

It's interesting though, isn't it? Because the reality is that life in a public service agency is busy. There is a lot to do. There's a lot to deliver. There's a lot happening. So, finding the time and the space to be reflective, I'm sure is quite difficult.

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

Oh, absolutely. Carving out the time for this reflection is difficult. In my own career, I took chunks of time out of the public service, for example to do a PhD, which was a bit of an extreme example of carving out some time. There are ways to do it in a smaller and

more targeted way with teams. I think that it needs to be built into the day-to-day practice of public servants.

You don't want to be constantly navel-gazing. So, I used to work on a sort of 10, 20, 70 judgement. 10% of your time and effort is spent looking longer term and more broadly, 20% of the time is spent understanding your immediate stakeholder group and their needs, and 70% is doing the work. So, I've roughly tried to have that notion in my mind when I was doing work. If I found the 70% was rapidly becoming 120%, I knew that there was a problem coming because I wasn't doing enough thinking about the broader perspective.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, listen Millie, Australia reMADE, it's a civil society organisation. You mentioned in your research there, the views of the people who you were speaking to about the public service. What's your view as someone who works in this public good sector, what's your view of the public service?

DR MILLIE ROONEY:

Well, firstly, I want to just back up in that comment I made about the absence of the public service. I think partly that absence is because it works. We don't notice things that are going well, and there's a whole lot that the public service does that works, and we just take for granted. So, I think in saying that it's invisible, there's a whole lot of work that could be done to say, "This is what we're doing and it's awesome. It's really serving the public good. It's serving you. It's why the world works so well for so many of us."

In terms of what it's like for me as an outsider of the public service, again I think there is just a very big gap between broader civil society, and civil society is huge. There are unions, big NGOs. We're not one group, and I can't speak for that group. I think there is a real disconnect between so much of what civil society is trying to do and the way that we communicate, or rely on, or build up the role of the public sector. I think there is an amazing opportunity here, and part of the work is what is the story of the public sector? Why do we value it? Why is it good for all the things that my work is trying to achieve? The public sector could be built up to do that even better.

It's strange. There's not great levels of trust in government. At the same time, people are really willing and eager to get involved and participate. So, at the moment, with everything that's going on in the public service and the opportunity for reform, I feel like there's a whole group in civil society ready to say, "Let us help you. How do we do this together?" Those walls, that chasm, that gap needs to be broken down.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, how would you do that?

DR MILLIE ROONEY:

Well, that's a big question, isn't it? Partly, that's the work that Russ and I have been talking about is how do we bring different groups together? So civil society leaders, public servants and across the spectrum, so from the senior policy makers across to nurses, frontline workers. Same in civil society, the senior leaders and those really accessing government services in a particular way, and one starting to have a conversation.

What is the role of the public sector? What can it do? Why are we excited about it? We want to be excited. Let us in. Let us get excited. So, in the very first instance, I think there's some public conversations that can happen where we start to talk together publicly. My experience as an outsider has been, "Oh my goodness, there are thousands of people who are passionate about what I'm passionate about, but they speak a different language. They work within a different framework. How exciting to bring this together?"

So, I think there's the public conversations, and then there's these conversations that some of us need to have where we can be uncertain and learn to trust each other. That point about navel-gazing and reflection, we know that one of the strongest kind of pieces of infrastructure we have is human relationships. We would be foolish to kind of in the pursuit of transactional efficiency, rule that out as something strategic and useful to help us do the work that we all do.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, Russell, Millie describes this willing coalition that's sitting outside of the public service wanting the conversations. Indeed,



one of the recommendations or the key conclusions of the 30-review was the need for the public service to quote, "Partner with the community and others to solve problems." There's been further commitments to co-design. Why doesn't it happen? What is stopping it from happening?

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

So, David, I guess I take a couple of points there. One is historically, government has grappled with what I would call the within portfolio boundary problems, health, education, national security. As time has gone on, government has become better at dealing with those internal to portfolio sorts of problems. We haven't fixed them all, but we've got a way of dealing with them.

So, it means now that government is having to deal increasingly with much more complex cross-cutting issues right across portfolio boundaries and really classically complex problems. In classical complex problem-solving way, no single individual or even institution can solve them. So, a lot of this is about public servants recognising what it means to be working in a complex system, and how you need to operate differently, and how important. It's not just a nice to have to partner with people in the community. It's not just because that's something that is flavour of the month. It's crucial to being able to respond to complex issues.

I would also say that even if you want to take a classical economic view, there is a specialisation that the public service can bring to the table that is about the strengths that the public service has around things like governance and process, data and analysis, financing, and accountability. Those are some of the things that good public servants do really well. If they bring those capacities to an open discussion with civil society, with local communities at all sorts of levels, national and local, then they can augment what the local community and what the society as a whole has, rather than necessarily thinking that government and in particular the public service has every answer, every time.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Again, you've described it beautifully really, the two of you to really balance the eager, the willing, keen to help. Then on the other side

of the bridge, we have this capable, specialised governance process, finance account. They know how to get stuff done. They know how to deliver. They know how to get organised. How do we build the bridge? How do we make that work such that there is an understanding, and there is a way to bring these two forces together for the benefit of the Australian people? I'll throw it to you first on that, Russ.

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

So, I think there's a couple of different levels. I do a lot of teaching, as you noted at the start, David. The young public servants I teach now, a lot of them are doing stakeholder work, and they're really keen to understand how to do that work better. I'm really encouraged by that motivation from public servants of that generation because I've got to tell you, when I was a young public servant, I ran away from stakeholders as fast as I could. I was terrified of doing that work. Young people are really keen.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Sorry, why was that? That's a really interesting point. Why was that?

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

Okay. Well, I should explain. I started my career in a regional social security office where I had really strong confronting difficult conversations with people. I had to tell people that anything they said may be taken down and used in a court as evidence against them, that sort of thing. So, my early career experience was quite confrontational over a DSS or now Centrelink counter.

So, I had to relearn as I came to Canberra and became a public servant here in Canberra, relearned the nature of the power dynamic and the relationship between me as a public servant and the stakeholders I was dealing with. I did eventually learn to really enjoy that work with stakeholders.

It can be difficult. It's hard emotional work that we shouldn't underestimate because you've got people as Millie said, who are really hungry to get things going, to get work happening, and who very often see government as part of the problem and not as part of the solution.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now sorry, I did interrupt you. You were also saying that the younger generation are a little different.

DR RUSSELL AYRES: So, there's that aspect of the individual doing things, picking up the phone, talking to people, finding ways to communicate with them. I do a lot of teaching around that role of stakeholders in the policy process. At a macro level, it's also about senior people, older more experienced public servants walking the talk and demonstrating their willingness and capacity to sometimes take the more humble route of going to a stakeholder group and saying, "Okay, we know that there's this problem. We actually don't know what the solution is."

"How do you see the problem? Let's have a conversation about that," and show that to the middle and lower level public servants as a model of weighing up the capacities that you as a public servant have, and the contributions that people in the public and the community can bring to the really fundamental challenge of identifying what the problem is and finding ways to solve it.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So, Millie, that was Russell's really sort of bell the cat there, really around perhaps some of the challenges from a public service point of view is that maybe sometimes the enthusiasm, the views, the way that that enthusiasm is expressed by some of the civil society organisations and others towards governments may be an inhibitor to greater engagement.

So, as you stand on your side of this river looking across, looking to build that bridge, what does your side of the discussion need to bring forward in order to be able to access that governance process, finance accountability, that real expertise that can help you to solve these problems inside the Australian system of government?

DR MILLIE ROONEY: I guess I would first challenge the idea that the expertise is only on the other side of the river. I think that where there's perhaps been some glitches in the past is that we're not looking at government and civil society or government and the people as being a collaborative team. I think that would be a radical shift to say what

does it look like to have a collaborative partnership between government and civil society?

I don't just mean formal civil society, I mean the public as well, because there is a lot of expertise that resides locally. Whether it's because Russell was talking about if you've got, how do you work for people who have varied different life experiences from you? You've really got to listen. You might not take exactly what they say as translating that into policy because you have your own expertise.

I think we need to on both, I don't want to say sides, I think that reinforces it. Across the board, how are we going to collaborate and trust that we are on the same team? There's real damage at the moment with Robodebt, with the consulting stuff going on. I think that real fracture in trust mean there's an opportunity to rebuild that kind of social contract between and across different frameworks.

So, I think one, how do we build trust and not be afraid of each other? That is so much about surfacing the shared values and purpose. You ask, "Well, what needs to happen?" I've recently been really inspired by the story in Wales. So, I don't know if listeners are familiar with this, but in Wales they ran a national conversation asking the community what is the Wales that we want? It was government funded but run by a lot of community organisations.

They had 10,000 people participating, which is amazing from such a small population. From that, they actually came up with these seven principles that is going to guide government and public sector work. They then legislated a Human Futures Act and a Human Futures Commissioner. I spoke with the commissioner recently, and she's been doing this job for seven years. She said, "A key part of that being successful was the community conversation, and the ability for government to listen to community in a way that was visibly heard."

I think so often where we go wrong in any kind of public consultation is we listen, even if we're genuinely applying what we hear. It goes into this black box and the people we've consulted

don't see how it got there, and they see an absence of themselves. So really, Russ talking about younger public servants wanting to consult. I think knowing that that's a skill, listening and showing that you've heard is a skill, and all of us getting better at that.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So in terms then, there is an immediate opportunity around the APS reform agenda that's been clearly called out, clearly made a priority is now sitting as part of the Australian Public Service Commission. So, change is being invited. In terms of this concept of public good and the participation of community, Russell, what's your views on where the public good could be inserted into the APS reform agenda?

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

Well, David, I'd take issue with the idea of the public good being inserted in the APS reform agenda. I think the APS reform agenda sits within the public good. One of the concepts I have when I've been dealing with stakeholders, and you've got a contentious issue. One of the strategies that I always employ is what's the next level up? At what point can we find a point of connection and agreement?

I think the public good is to me the highest level point of agreement that you can have. So, APS reform sits within the public good. In fact, I would argue that if this APS reform process doesn't strengthen the role of the public service in supporting the public good, then it will have failed. So, it is the measure by which I would judge the whole reform process.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Okay. Millie, your views?

DR MILLIE ROONEY:

Similar, I think. I've been trying to follow along with the reform process. I know there's been a few opportunities for people like me to input, but it's really difficult to find ways to engage. I think the intent is there, but if you try to engage in that process as an outsider, involves quite a lot of rabbit holes on the website.

So, I think that there is an opportunity and a potential for an invitation from that reform process out to the community more broadly, whether that's very big public opening or coming to people

like me and others and saying, "How do we talk about the public good? What does that mean for you in this process?" So, opening that up more.

Part of that is how can civil society serve this process? Coming back to the original research where public service wasn't present, the public service and the public sector does extraordinary things for this country. It's one of the great things about it. If we want it to stay that way long term, if we want to resource it, if we want to improve it, there's got to be buy-in from the broader public and from the formal civil society sector. To repeat what I've said before, there is an opportunity for really strong support I think, if we can show that the public good is at the heart of this.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So, a final question to you, Millie, before I finish with a final question to Russell. Are you optimistic that this change, that this maturation can take place such that there is greater collaboration? There are more genuine conversations and that a common ground can be found?

DR MILLIE ROONEY:

Yeah, I am. I've spent the last five years talking to people across the country about, "Imagine you've woken up in the Australia of your dreams. What is it like?" Russell's point about going higher up, there is very little difference in what people ultimately want. If we can allow ourselves to go to that point of similarity, and if we can allow ourselves to acknowledge what's not working, again I think the stuff coming out from the Robodebt Royal Commission, all of that is showing that there are significantly broken things, and at the same time we have an interest from people in getting more involved. If that isn't the perfect opportunity to really make something about it, I don't know what is.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Russell, to you the final say, optimism?

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

Yes. I'm optimistic particularly every time I teach young public servants. I'm optimistic about their enthusiasm and commitment, and that's why I'm teaching them. I'm also optimistic about Australia as a nation and our capacity as a society to learn, and evolve, and develop over time. I see this whole conversation as part of that.

We've done a lot of great things as a nation and we can build on those, maybe change some things as we're having national conversations about things like Voice to Parliament. That's got to happen through this partnership between government, and in this case it's public service representatives on the one hand and the community at large on the other. So that partnership has to happen at all points of scale, at large scale and very locally as I was suggesting before.

Critically, it requires humility and mutual trust. It requires a willingness to try new things and find out what works. It will require a public service that knows its strengths and brings those to the table, but also knows its limitations and has that instinct for collaboration and openness. It'll require the courage to say to the community, "I don't know. What do you reckon?"

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Well, let's hope that even this little conversation today is a contribution to that where it will start people to, well not start, but perhaps continue this discussion around just exactly where that how is, because I think the key point that's been made is that there's not a lot of disagreement at those higher levels. I like that idea that you just raised there Russell about, well, let's push it up to the point where we've got widespread agreement. The research says that we're united around so many things and it's then just a matter of, well, how do we ladder up over time to achieve those goals?

So, Dr. Russell Ayres, associate professor with the Centre for Environmental Governance at the University of Canberra, and Dr. Millie Rooney from Australia reMADE, thank you so much for joining us on Work with Purpose today.

DR MILLIE ROONEY:

Thanks so much.

DR RUSSELL AYRES:

Thanks very much, David.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

To you the audience, thank you so much for coming back once again for one of our conversations about the Australian Public Service, and really wonderful insights there by two genuine experts

around how indeed can we build a better Australia by bringing people together and how do we work together. So many great insights there about things that you can take into your work life every day, about those discussions and about indeed, how in fact are we going to create the environment for those discussions to take place. So, lots to take out of our conversation today with Millie Rooney and Russell Ayres.

Now listen, if you can follow along at Work with Purpose and you can do it at contentgroup or at IPAA ACT on LinkedIn, or if you have ideas for the program, email us at [events@act.ipaa.org.au](mailto:events@act.ipaa.org.au). Now, Work with Purpose is produced in collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia ACT, supported as always by the Australian Public Service Commission.

If you do have time for a rating or a review on your favourite podcast catcher, it does help the program to be found. We do have lots of reviews out there and thank you very much for everyone who has given up a little bit of your time to be able to do that because again, it does help us to be found. We are very grateful for each and every one of those reviews. So if you do have time, that would be fantastic. So, Work with Purpose will be back at the same time in a fortnight. My name is David Pembroke, and it's bye for now.

VOICEOVER:

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