



Speech

His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd)

Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

40th anniversary of Institute of Public Administration Australia (IPPA)

Tuesday, 18 February 2020

*I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the **Ngunnawal People**, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present, emerging leaders and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders gathered here today.*

[E&OE]

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the kind invitation to Linda and me to share in your 40th anniversary. As I look around the room I'm having a bit of a flashback because I'm not quite sure which interdepartmental committee I should be at with so many familiar faces from a previous life.

I also acknowledge all the distinguished guests we have here tonight who have individually and collectively helped shape Australia to be the country it is today. We're very grateful as a nation for your hard work.

I first came across IPAA as a Colonel in 1997, working in the then Vice Chief of the Defence Force's office. One of my co-worker public servants came up to me and said 'I'll be away tomorrow. I'm going to the IPAA conference.' Being curious, I said 'What's IPAA?' and she said 'Oh, you should know about this!' I said why. She said 'This is your intelligence gathering opportunity. Because if you go to IPAA you will find out how the Government is going to be shaped and how the policies are going to be shaped into the future. This is how you are going to learn how the Public Service is thinking about policy direction and the arguments that are going to and fro about the state of our nation.'

Now, I didn't take her up on that advice unfortunately until a lot later. But it was a wise observation, I think, because it recognised — even in the early days of IPAA — how important an institution it was, and is, to what happens in our country.

In my role as Governor-General and previously as Governor of New South Wales I interact with public servants that surround me in my appointment. At the state level it's nearly every day, because states revolve around service delivery — getting electricity, getting whatever — and public servants are critical to the implementation of that.

As I used to go around and visit rural communities and so forth, I'd call in the senior public servants to brief me on what were the issues in those areas, because that's your source of knowledge and where things might be going to change. And, of course, at this level, it's your input into the documents I sign on a regular basis that, again, shape the direction of the country, after the appropriate advice and discussion with ministers.

Since October we have been interacting with public services in a number of guises as we have dealt with both the bushfires as they occurred and the aftermath of the bushfires — those in uniform serving state and country and then those who were a bit invisible behind the uniforms. But the public service effort that goes into developing both the immediate response and longer-term recovery is just enormous. And it's an untold story.

So, if you're looking for an article for IPAA, in your magazines in the future, I think that's a powerful story about how this works. Because as soon as a fire goes through a community, the first question is 'Where is the support?' How is a government decision and the agencies that support it going to move into our community to help us get back on our feet — how that is conducted sets the tone of

course for the recovery, both mentally and physically, of communities.

We have met some beautiful people out there in the field who are engaging with people who are in deep despair. They've got a personal touch, they understand their policy and the resources they bring to the issue, and they deliver effectively. The states who have been affected should be particularly proud of that, in the way the recovery effort is going on. I think it's a very visible reminder that public service does matter to individuals in our country.

The environment you're moving into at the present time, 40 years on — it's very simple to say, 'Yes, it's extremely complex; difficult to navigate.' In '97 when I came back from War College — we had a term in those days (I'm sure you've heard of it): VUCA. And VUCA was looking forward to about now, saying 'What is the operational environment the Military is going to find itself in?' Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous — and that's pretty much the environment we find ourselves in most days.

When we are trying to work through policy direction with government in relation to these big issues that face our country — from climate change onwards and how to address that — what we present to the country in terms of policy and guidance and direction

on these issues is difficult work. Australia's faith in public administration and outcomes can only be enhanced by a Public Service that is continuously seeking to improve itself and to be in sync with government and the challenges that society perceive are out there.

It's a time to celebrate, of course, but celebrations should always be sober these days, and there are plenty of challenges around.

You'll no doubt be aware of the directions the Prime Minister gave to the Public Service quite recently. I like the line, which has got a bit of a military taste to it:

'... a clear line of sight between what you are doing every day ... straight through to the Australian public' and 'It's about the implementation ... We need a step-change in service delivery.'

I think he was pretty crystal clear on his expectations in that speech.

So, improved service delivery is his core challenge to the Public Service today. And, of course, how that service delivery change is achieved is in your hands. He's been very frank about that as well.

But questions arise about that. I notice Terry Moran's comments recently about his view on the state of public administration in the country today. He's concerned about centralised bureaucracy and

that levels of outsourcing of service delivery have perhaps gone too far. Where is the adjustment in that model? I think if you've been around long enough, like IPAA for 40 years, you've seen the cycles. We outsource; we don't outsource. Where are we in this phase or that cycle? I think that's a question that's out there at the present time that comes from the comments of the Prime Minister asking you to look at the models that we have in place. How effective and efficient are they in delivering government policy?

I think it will be a robust discussion because I know most of the people in the room who are going to be participating in it. I think that is good because the Australian public deserves that. Work it hard.

In all of this, building up trust with the Australian people is absolutely critical. I think if you look back on the 40-year history of IPAA that has been one of the things you have been trying to ensure is a key characteristic of public service and therefore public administration in our country.

Being non-partisan, being apolitical, membership across the country at different levels of government — you are able to bring so many different perspectives to public administration in our country.

So, enjoy the 40th anniversary. But can I bring you back to another General, General Sir John Monash. He came back from the First World War and became a Public Servant in Victoria. He gave some advice to his staff on what he thought sound public administration looked like. He said:

‘I don't care a damn for your loyal service when you think I am right; when I really want it most is when you think I am wrong.’

Now, he was known for plain speaking, and I think that's fairly plain. And you've heard that expressed in so many different ways by ministers and others in the past. But that's the art of it, isn't it. When you're in those difficult situations, when you've got a view to express that must be expressed — and not just for your department, again, but for the people of our country.

I was very pleased when I was asked to write the foreword for ‘A History of the Institute of Public Administration Australia 1980-2020.’ I wasn't a public servant in the classical sense myself. I wore a uniform. But we all served. I have been fortunate to serve alongside some magnificent public servants over my time. And to be tutored by some! Lectured to by some! Assisted in my path by some. And guided by some. All of it an invaluable experience and from people I

deeply respect. It has been a pleasure tonight to be part of the launching of that history and to give a little back if I can.

Of course, today, the world has pretty much changed in every sense from 1980. The challenges you face with the way technology has moved forward, the expectations of the public in how service delivery will occur and trying to shape our way in a really complex environment, particularly with technology and how it influences what we do, is difficult work.

I think the reflections in the book will be helpful, but the brains of the people sitting here today will be more helpful as we go forward.

The public's expectation of you is very high, and rightly so; and it will remain that way. But with IPAA's support — the effort that goes into it, the people that are members and the way you are shaping our future — I'm sure that the Public Service will continue to deliver to the high-quality outcomes and outputs that we've seen in the past.

Congratulations on your 40th anniversary. It has been a real pleasure for me to be part of the occasion today to launch the book.

Thank you very much.

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