

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

COLLABORATION FOR PUBLIC PURPOSE WITH HELEN
SULLIVAN #86

DAVID PEMBROKE (Host)

CEO & Founder
contentgroup

HELEN SULLIVAN (Guest)

Dean
ANU College of Asia & the Pacific

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Enquiries should be directed to CAROLINE WALSH on 0413 139 427 or at caroline.walsh@act.ipaa.org.au

DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Work With Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name's DAVID PEMBROKE. Thanks for joining me. As we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting 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, APS Reform has made collaboration, co-design, and partnership with the Australian community a priority for the government, whether it be with communities and businesses, the not-for-profit sector, universities or state and territory governments. The public sector is looking to improve how it works together with its community partners to solve the country's biggest issues. And it's not an easy task. The APS must deal with the complexity of public sector governance in Australia and the interdependence of policy with different tiers of government, the hybrid nature of service delivery, and the diversity priority and differing needs of people across Australia.

So how does the APS unlock this challenge to improve the way Australia works? Well, Professor HELEN SULLIVAN, who is the dean of the ANU College of Asia Pacific and a former IPAA ACT counsellor, has written a book about this very topic. It's called 'Collaboration and Public Policy', and it provides a new framework to help understand collaboration and partnership in a public sector context and how best to achieve outcomes that are in the best interests of the Australian people. HELEN SULLIVAN, prior to joining the ANU in 2016, was the director of the Crawford School of Public Policy, and she was also a founding director of the Melbourne School of Government at the University of Melbourne. She is a leading political scientist, and her work examines several key issues which are vital for Australian democracy, including the theory and practice of governance and collaboration, new forms of democratic participation and public policy and service reform. And we are fortunate to have her with us in the contentgroup studios today. Professor Sullivan, welcome to Work With Purpose.

HELEN SULLIVAN: Thanks very much for that lovely introduction. It's great to be here.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So take us through this. Where was the idea for the book? Was it the APS Reform Agenda or have you been working on this idea of collaboration and partnership for some time?

HELEN SULLIVAN: Oh, this is an interest that I've had ever since I started work, in fact, way, way back. And I think one of the things that is really

important to say about collaboration is that it's always been with us. Wherever we are in the world, whatever kinds of government, interestingly we work in, collaboration is always present. It took a different form, a particularly accentuated form in the 1990s, and every now and again, governments like the Australian Commonwealth Government will initiate a new reform agenda that specifies collaboration is at the heart of it. So the Australian Reform Agenda wasn't the catalyst for this. The book actually took me 12 years to write, and so it's the product of a lot of investigation around the world on just what is going on when we think we are collaborating for public purpose, and why is it so hard?

DAVID PEMBROKE: And why does it go in and go out of fashion for governments?

HELEN SULLIVAN: Well, I think governments like new things. They like to try new ideas, and collaboration is something that is always with us, but as I say, it's incredibly difficult. So I think governments go through phases of accentuating a particular kind of collaboration, public-private partnerships, for example, giving that a try, having some success, having some failures. And then moving away from that particular initiative and maybe moving away from collaboration. But the nature of the problems that we face, the public policy challenges we face, are such that you have to collaborate. And so there's always this cycle of coming back around to... It may have a slightly different name. It may have a slightly different nuance, but collaboration is something that we really have to get to grips with if we are to address the challenges we face.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So what are some of these enduring problems with collaboration, and why is it so difficult?

HELEN SULLIVAN: Why is it so difficult? Well, principally it's difficult because we are bringing together people and institutions who may have very different ideas both about what the problem is, how the problem should be addressed, and what their role should be in addressing that problem. Very often the, what I call recipe books for collaboration will say, "Step one, identify your shared purpose. Step two, find a collaboration vehicle. Step three, success." But step one is often the most difficult step. I mean, all the steps are difficult, but recognising that if you are a government, a private sector, a not-for-profit organisation, a community member, you may all agree. You may not, but you may all agree that climate change is a problem, but you may have very different ideas about how you should address that problem and what your role should be in addressing that problem. And so often collaboration falls over because the work isn't done to understand the different ways of perceiving the problem and how we might have to go through quite some process of negotiation to get to a point where we have a shared purpose. So that step is really important.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So why is that step left out, or why isn't it addressed as such a priority to ensure that you're going to have more success if you can land on this idea of a shared purpose or a shared problem?

HELEN SULLIVAN: I think there's a couple of reasons. One is the nature of, and the quite appropriate responsibility that government has. We elect politicians in this country. We have a democratic system where we put people in positions, and they have a manifesto and we say, "Okay, we need you to deliver that." And we give them responsibility for addressing particular issues. But sometimes what that turns into is a set of policy prescriptions that don't leave any room for other people to contribute. And what we've seen certainly over the last 30 years is that in order to get to a shared purpose, in order to get to the best understanding of a problem, you need to have voices from a variety of perspectives. So it's not enough for the government to say, "We understand the problem, and this is how we're going to address it." There has to be a process of, "Well, this is how we understand the problem. How do you understand the problem, and how can we address it?" But that is difficult, and it takes time.

DAVID PEMBROKE: I was about to raise that very point, time, which is a commodity in short supply when we have election cycles, as they move. How do you make the time? How do you find the time when there is expectations that once elected and promises made, that delivery should follow not long after?

HELEN SULLIVAN: It's a great question, and we are constantly told there is no time. Decisions have to be made very quickly. The cycle is very quick, the electoral cycle. All of that's correct. But the problems that we face, the really serious problems that we face that need collaboration to address them, are problems that have been with us for a while, and will be with us for a good while to come. So it's worth taking the longer view and making that time, because if you don't, then you will simply go around in this loop of failure and dysfunction. And you won't get the outcomes that you're looking for.

So I'm absolutely recognising that it's difficult, and the government has every right to say, "We were elected to do this. We will do it." But that's when things start falling over because there isn't that space for, "Well, how might we refine this? How might we need to think about this differently?" Which might actually give us... It might actually save you time in the long run, but that's a hard thing for politicians to come to terms with sometimes.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So how do you create the environment for that to be successful?

HELEN SULLIVAN: Well, there's a couple of ways. And the thing that I focus on in the book, which I think is something that has perhaps been

underdone, I mean, collaboration is not something that lacks academic or other analysis. There are hundreds, thousands of books written about this. The thing that I think that has been underdone is a sense of how collaboration fits with the existing public policy institutions, if you like. The things that make up how we make effective public policy, and central to that, of course, is us human actors and the way in which we draw on and use the tools at our disposal. And so I think, firstly, we need to start with us as individuals and our understanding of what it takes to collaborate, whether it's on a one-to-one basis with somebody else or whether it's on the basis of being the representative of an organisation with other organisations.

But then I think, and what I try to do in the book is to say, "Well, how do we think about collaboration in the context of those things that shape public policy?" So the rules of public policy, the ideas that shape public policy, the way we use expertise, the ethical frameworks, these are things that are inherent in our public policy system, but very often we think about collaboration as something separate. So, for me, us creating the space is not necessarily us needing to do anything drastically different, but it is to say when we have an idea about public policy and collaboration, how does that fit with the existing rules that we have for how we do things and how those rules might need to change or be adapted?

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Can you explain that a little bit more though, just in terms of the practical steps then that would need to take place to put people more involved in this context that you're describing?

HELEN SULLIVAN:

So we all have agency. We all have the capacity to act. We may have it in different ways and certainly, depending on whether we're in the public service, out of the public service, members of community, whatever particular identity we hold, we may have more or less, but we do all have some capacity to act. And so the first step is recognising that. And you mentioned earlier on the diversity of populations. Well, one easy first step is if we're thinking about a policy to address the challenges of the Murray-Darling basin, which is one of the perennial challenges in Australia, then what's the diversity of perspectives we need to engage with, and how do we engage with them? So there's a very easy first there, which is about understanding that I have agency as an individual. And maybe as somebody who works for the public service, I have quite a lot of agency, but part of my responsibility is understanding that there are different perspectives, and I need to go out and find out what they are.

Now in the context of the Murray-Darling basin, you don't need to go very far because people are constantly telling you. But that too is a challenge because some voices are louder than others. So there's something there about creating the space for different

voices. But then there's also the need to think about, well, if we are to try and figure out collaboration, for example, in the context of the Murray-Darling basin, then what are the existing rules and frameworks, and do they help us in collaboration or do they hinder? And if they hinder, how are we going to look at those perhaps to make changes so that they can become more helpful? And you can work through a series of steps that would enable you to not necessarily get at the perfect solution because, of course, in the context of public policy, there is no perfect solution, but certainly to enable you to adapt collaboration to the system that you're working with and also adapt the system to the collaborative needs.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So in terms of the current APS Reform and the priority around partnership collaboration, what are you hoping to see that comes out of it? There's talks of the charter of engagement and partnerships, and the use of data, the use of technology. But in a practical sense, what would you like to see happen as a result of the fact that the government has now made this one of its priorities in terms of reform?

HELEN SULLIVAN:

What would I like to see happen? Well, I think there's a couple of things. One is to recognise that while data and AI and all of those things that the government is quite rightly concerned about are important, and of course can certainly enhance collaborative activity, although can also bring problems. There's a whole bunch of other things that we tend to forget when we think about collaboration, and those are the things that I think really need to be focused on. And this isn't just this administration forgetting. All administrations don't pay enough attention to the kinds of capabilities that we need to build in order to enable people to collaborate effectively. We tend to assume that collaboration is something that people can just do, that there's no particular skill involved, that there's no particular way of understanding what's at stake. That we simply... It's a meeting or an engagement like any other and, of course, it's not. It's incredibly difficult, partly because it requires us to know ourselves pretty well.

Public servants aren't all that good at necessarily thinking about themselves in the context of the world that they're working in because they're used to thinking of themselves as public servants with a particular sort of anonymous frame. But if you don't understand yourself, then you're not going to be able to collaborate with anybody else. It also requires us to be empathetic. It requires us to have a cultural literacy about our engagement with people from other places and spaces and sectors. And so there's a range of skills which we kind of bracket off as soft skills, which is a horrible expression, but are really, really crucial. And so what I would like to see happen is some serious investment in enabling public servants, in particular, to be able to fulfil the responsibility that's

being placed on them. So as much attention being placed on that as there is on upskilling them all to become data analytics specialists.

And then, in a practical sense, what I would like to see happen is, one, recognising that government bureaucracies need to figure out how they work together before or at the same time as, preferably before, they go out and try to collaborate with others. Because often, one of the biggest difficulties is government departments simply not being able to work together. The problem is not collaboration with people from another sector or with communities. It's about the fact that you've got different departments who don't appear to be able to work together. That needs to be sorted out, and different ways of doing that. And then I think there is an expectation that if you're going to pursue particular policy priorities, for example, place-based working now seems to be coming back in as something that we want to be doing. Absolutely right. I think that's really important.

What do we know about how we've tried to do that in the past? What should we be learning, and what do we know particularly about collaboration and how collaboration has or hasn't worked in reshaping places? And using that knowledge to try and do it better next time. So I think there are practical things that need to be done, both in terms of the capability of the public service itself, but also better understanding or a renewal of understanding of we've tried some of these things in the past. What did we learn, and how do we do things differently?

DAVID PEMBROKE:

In terms of that issue of capability, do you believe it needs to belong in everywhere across the public service, that it needs to become almost a core skill, these soft skills? Again, I know you don't like the word or the categorisation, but is it something that should be seen as a core competence of most public servants that they're able to address these issues with that empathy, with that agency, with that understanding?

HELEN SULLIVAN:

Yeah, absolutely I do. And the reason is that often when we talk about capability building, we talk about things that are not present that need to be introduced. And that I would certainly argue that some of the things I've referenced, there's not enough of them in the public service, but what we forget is the public service is full of people who express particular ways of being and knowing, who privilege particular kinds of knowledge, who work in ways that seem ordinary to them, but are all built on history, tradition, and practice. And what I'm saying is that those things are all redolent with emotion, with affect, with things that maybe feel uncomfortable if you're not familiar with them. Once you're familiar with them, just feels like every day.

My point here is that when I talk about capability and collaboration, I don't think we're necessarily talking about things that are not already present in the public service. They're just present in very particular ways. They're present in ways of thinking and being that are established. What I'm saying is that we need to augment those with other things that perhaps hitherto we've thought of as slightly not appropriate emotions really. Do we have emotions in the public service? Well, of course we do. It's just the emotions that are acceptable are ones that we never acknowledge. It's the ones that are unacceptable that become noticeable because they are unfamiliar to us. But that really can reflect a couple of things. One, it can just reflect the perspective of a public servant who has come from a very different culture and background and is bringing a different set of cultural norms to work. The other is in the context of communities that emotions and particular emotional expressions are often the only way in which they feel that they can get their voices heard.

And so I think it's absolutely right that there are areas of... What do we call them? Capability gaps. But I think we need to start from acknowledging that the public service, as it currently stands, is full of cultures and norms and emotions and ways of being that we just don't think about. And so to suggest that somehow we can't develop those, I think negates the fact that forms of them are already present. And none of this is stuff that can't be learned. None of these are mystical skills or attributes.

DAVID PEMBROKE: As the APS Reform gets underway in this space, where would you have the APS on a maturity scale in terms of its ability, at the moment, to collaborate, its ability to partner? Good, bad, indifferent, improving?

HELEN SULLIVAN: Oh, well, I would say classic social science answer, it depends. It depends where you look.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well, that's probably fair enough, but it probably does depend. I'm sure it does.

HELEN SULLIVAN: There are certainly areas where I think people are becoming much more aware and recognise its importance. There are areas where people have a huge amount of experience, I think. But I think there are also areas where it is simply not considered as part of core activity. It is seen as something that happens out there when you have a special project, and you have special people who deal with it. And that I think is part of the problem of how some of these enduring challenges that we face are not addressed because we don't shift the mainstream of the organisation. We continue to create these special entities that deal with it, and then when they fail, we don't build back into the organisation any of the learning.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Calling it out though, making it front and centre, making it a priority is certainly a very useful-

HELEN SULLIVAN: Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So do you have any examples perhaps where you've seen recently, in terms of collaboration for public purpose, that stood out for you in terms of effectiveness and effectiveness, and why were they useful? Why were they effective?

HELEN SULLIVAN: I'm trying to think of an example that is Australian and pertinent to the public service. And actually there's one that is really close to home and that is the Sir Roland Wilson Scholarship program. So this is a collaboration between the Australian Public Service, the Australian National University, Charles Darwin University, and this entity set up in the name of Sir Roland Wilson. And what this institution has done over the last decade or so is to work together to bring public servants from the public service into universities. Initially to do higher degree programs, and laterally under the Pat Turner Scholarship Scheme, to focus specifically on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues to build master's coursework and now PhDs in that program as well.

But that collaboration, which involves serious investment from the public service. They pay them their public service salary to come and spend time doing a serious piece of work at the ANU or CDU, with the expectation that their research not only addresses a problem that is relevant to the public service, so it has to be something that's going to be useful, but also that they develop a set of leadership attributes that are going to take them back into the public service and will enable the public service itself to evolve, so to do the sort of continuous improvement work that you were talking about.

And it has been something that over a period of time... I've only been involved since 2017, '18, but over a period of time that collaboration, which has a very small staff at the centre of it holding it all together, has become something that has been very effective in the sense of it's done what it said it was going to do. It's taken these people, and it's given them a degree, and they have gone on and done extraordinary things in terms of rethinking the way in which... I mean, a lot of the work that's currently going on, opening up administrative data is supported by a couple of Sir Roland Wilson scholars who were doing that kind of work.

So in terms of bang for your buck, it's absolutely done what it should have done, and it continues to, but what it's also done, which comes to the affective, is that it has created this cadre of people who are part of the board of the Sir Roland Wilson Foundation, so the governing body, who have very powerful

relationships with each other. That are relationships that are built on both an understanding of the value of education and public service, but also a recognition that you need to be able to work in ways that are not just instrumental. You need to be able to have an eye to the culture that you're trying to create, and you have to live that culture yourself. And so Steven Kennedy, who has been a real supporter of this from the get-go and has had a number of people go through this program, it's a great example of somebody who both sees its instrumental value, but also can see the value of how it can shape a culture of public service.

And that also makes its way into the university too. So academics become more adept at understanding how they can contribute. And the particular more recent development of bringing in Pat Turner Scholars has really emphasised the way in which collaboration is not just about developing better public policy or public services, but it's also about thinking how different knowledge systems can come into contact and collaboration with each other. So it's a very small example.

DAVID PEMBROKE: I was going to say, but it's also a very... While it's an effective one, I would've thought universities and the APS, that's sort of an easy way of coming together.

HELEN SULLIVAN: Oh, you would think so.

DAVID PEMBROKE: No?

HELEN SULLIVAN: No.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But where might there be further examples of being able to bring in, not only universities, but business, community into looking for really rich, diverse groups where they're coming together?

HELEN SULLIVAN: Well, the first thing I should say is that it is not easy to get universities and the public service to work together.

DAVID PEMBROKE: No?

HELEN SULLIVAN: No, absolutely not. And this has been genuinely, I think, pathbreaking in terms of how it has built a set of new possibilities. But I take your point that it may look from the outside as well, of course, that would happen. Much more difficult to engage communities. But I could give you another example of some research I was involved in some years ago in Greater Melbourne where we were looking at the regeneration of the city of Dandenong. It's a very diverse community. It's a community where lots of migrants who come to Australia find themselves and have done for many generations. And it is a community that suffered a lot from the changes in economic patterns of activity. And what

that community has been through for the last 20 years is a program of renewal. And that program of renewal has been predicated on the basis that it involves all tiers of government, principally the state government, but also the local government. And without the local government, none of this would've happened, including the local government giving up some of its planning rights to the state in order for certain things to happen.

And I would go further in to say that it wasn't just the local government. It really was the particular CEO of the local government that really drove a lot of this activity, which went on for over a decade, but also involved the private sector in many, many different ways, as small businesses to large businesses, and the diversity of communities, including faith communities. And so there you have one of the-

DAVID PEMBROKE: That's the complexity, obviously.

HELEN SULLIVAN: Okay. Well, I would argue you have that complexity in the Sir Roland Wilson Scholarship, but if you want that kind of complexity, okay. So to give you an example of some of the symbolic or affective ways in which that works. Diverse set of communities, a very strong focus on a market and the need to renew the market. And one of the many, many things that they did, but one of the things that they did was to have a focus on food and to use food both as a-

DAVID PEMBROKE: Fascinating.

HELEN SULLIVAN: ... an economic indicator if you like, a way of bringing people in from the outside. So you bring people in on tours of food from all of these different places and spaces of the people who live in the area. But also using food as a symbol of how people come together. So having festivals and various other things where people who were involved in different ways in this regeneration program were able to come together and to not just share food, but to also then begin to have the kinds of contact with each other that were effective, that weren't just instrumental. They were about building relationships. And now again, I'm absolutely not going to romanticise this. It's hard, and it's inconsistent, but when we were doing the work, that was one of the areas, and I talk about it in the book, where it seemed as if we were looking at all of the usual things, the big buildings and the housing and the jobs. And then we came across food as this unifying factor, and then other things became possible.

DAVID PEMBROKE: What a great... See, that's a wonderful example.

HELEN SULLIVAN: You like that example?

DAVID PEMBROKE: To me, that brings that diversity together of all of the voices of all the community, and to identify food as a way of bringing people together to start the conversations, to build the empathy that's required. Smart, that's genius. And it achieved what it set out to achieve?

HELEN SULLIVAN: Yeah, absolutely. The city, it's still a work in progress and there's absolutely more to be done. And, of course, there's always a gap between ambition and what could have been achieved. But it is certainly the case that the market is now flourishing, that there is a very strong sense of the city as a community and also an appreciation, and this is one of the things I think Australia in general does really, really well compared to the UK where I'm from. One of the central points of this regeneration program was the new builds of a public square, which had at its heart a library, and again, the library is a symbol, a very working symbol of how people can come together and make use of it in a variety of different ways. And so it's the kind of regeneration that you would want to see. It worked, it had an impact, but it also had an impact beyond the instrumental, which isn't to say that it's finished. And anybody who's involved in that would absolutely say there's more to be done.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, we could go on for quite some time. There's a lot more. We'll have to get you back to talk more about it because I think this is a pathway, and given that it's a called out priority, it's a skillset, it's a way of thinking, it's going to be part of the future. But just a quick question before we do wrap up. The impacts of technology on people and behaviours, how does that change this notion of co-design, collaboration, partnership? Is it an enabler? Does it detract from the ability to bring people together? What are your views on that?

HELEN SULLIVAN: I think it can be both. I think it can certainly aid and where it can, it should, but I also am concerned that one of the things... And we all know this because we've been through COVID, and we've all had the dreaded Zoom meetings. The thing with technology is it can create a distance between people. And one of the things that, certainly going back to the example you liked, the Dandenong example, having people who had to get out of Melbourne and go, physically be in this place. And meet people and understand the world from their point of view. That human interconnection, that human contact is so important. So absolutely, let's use AI to augment all sorts of things. But let's not forget that what makes these things meaningful and sustainable is the relationships that sit behind them.

And that's not to say we should get involved in all sorts of exclusive networking. I don't mean that at all, but I do mean that we need to work at communicating and collaborating in ways that

require perhaps more of ourselves than we're used to perhaps giving as public servants. And one of the great things about technology is that you can hide behind it, and that can be good, but I think it can also be very problematic in terms of collaboration.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Interesting. It will be interesting to see how this evolves, how the skills are built, because we do know that it is now a priority, and there are co-design courses that the Public Service Commission are now putting in place. The professions, both the data profession, the digital profession, they're looking at building out particular skills to help people to be better at this. And then there's that personal element that you talk about, being able to get out into community to be with people. So it'll be interesting to see how it evolves and continues to evolve. So Professor HELEN SULLIVAN, thank you for joining me on Work with Purpose. Very grateful for you to give up some of your valuable time to be with us today. So thank you very much.

HELEN SULLIVAN:

Thank you.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Helen's book was published late last year and is available from Palgrave Macmillan as an ebook or hard cover book. So if you're keen to get more of the insights on collaboration, we highly recommend you buy a copy. Thanks again for joining us on Work With Purpose. You can follow contentgroup or IPAA ACT on LinkedIn or indeed email events@act.ipaa.org.au if you have any questions or suggestions about the program. Work with Purpose is produced in collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration Australia in the ACT and also with the support of our good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission.

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Voiceover:

Work with Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.