

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE #87

CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS AND WHY IT MATTERS WITH LISA
CONWAY

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DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello and welcome 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, 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 is joining us from.

Each year during NAIDOC Week, Australians are invited to celebrate the history, culture, and achievements of our First Nations people. While more and more people in Australia recognise the crucial role that our First Nations people play in looking after country and making Australia a place we can all enjoy and love living in, First Nations people still face significant adversity, which makes it difficult for them to pursue higher education or reach senior executive positions in either the public or private sectors.

Today, we'll speak with LISA CONWAY, a Yorta Yorta woman who has overcome major adversity and privation in her life to succeed in a career of helping others. She's currently researching the critically important topic of cultural responsiveness in order to improve service delivery for minority groups here in Australia. Now, LISA CONWAY is a Sir Roland Wilson Pat Turner Scholar at the Australian National University and is also a National Manager with Services Australia and she joins me now. Lisa, welcome to Work with Purpose.

LISA CONWAY: Thank you. And I'm here on Wandarang country here, so acknowledging their country as well.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Fantastic. So listen, a story always has a beginning and I'd love to know what your story is.

LISA CONWAY: My story, well, I am a Yorta Yorta woman, as you know. So my family is quite interesting. My father, his mother's from Stolen Generations, and my mum is actually a Forgotten Australian, so grew up in a pretty interesting time and I guess, eventually one day found myself in a Centrelink office looking for support and was sort of guided down the road of getting a scholarship to go and study social work and totally changing my life really. So from that point, ended up working in government and I've now been in government for 17 years at what was Centrelink and now Services Australia, and now find myself studying, as you said, doing my

PhD at ANU.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, I don't want to be too nosy, but could you just sort of explain to us and to many people who are listening who have never had to live through the trauma of growing up in the circumstances that you did, but could you share with us just what that meant to be the child of someone who was from the Stolen Generation, someone who was forgotten, just what was that like and what did it mean?

LISA CONWAY: I guess for me, what that meant was is that my parents, neither of them had grown up in an environment where they knew how to be parents themselves. They'd never been parented. They've grown up in institutions and it meant that we had that intergenerational trauma where people that experienced a lot of hardship, a lot of abuse, and didn't have parenting skills. So my kids are the first in five generations to not have grown up in some form of state care at some point.

So yeah, it's a tough time and you face discrimination because of my skin colour. I don't have the dark skin of the stereotypical Indigenous person, so I quite often felt like I wasn't accepted as a white person, but then also would be questioned about whether I was Indigenous. It's an interesting time growing up without those, I guess those things that are in place to support you to be nurtured and reach your maximum potential. So yeah, it was a challenging time.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And again. Look, I don't want to push it too far, but are their stories you could share with us that could help us to better understand just exactly what life was like growing up in that type of environment?

LISA CONWAY: Well, I guess there's things about my family like growing up in a country school where everybody in that town were the local farmers and they were all related. And then there was my family who were, my dad's extended family who were all considered what they called the tip rats. So we'd be called the tip rats at school and by people around. And even when you do well for yourself, people would still sort of say, "Oh, she's not like the rest of them." And so you'd get this really complex sort of feeling of trying to be proud, but still being ashamed. And that was really hard.

And right up till even after I left home, when I first started working at Centrelink, I was living in my car for the first six weeks and going into work every day trying to get that government payslip

that would give me the chance to get my own house and going into work every day and pretending that I'd been to the gym and having a shower at work before I started for the day with them not knowing that I was living in the car park in the shopping centre at night.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Where did you find the resilience to just keep going? Where did that come from?

LISA CONWAY: That's a really good question, and it's something that I quite often ask myself. How do we break these cycles? I guess for me part of it is that I am, academically, I do okay. So I think education was something drilled into me. And so, I always had that bit of a background for me. But I guess the real resilience for me, I think though is about knowing my why. I've got this ancestral mandate, I guess that my job is to make differences for people. And so I always just had to keep moving forward, keep moving forward. And my kids, I guess for me, when I had kids, that was a real wake-up call. It was time to break the cycle. I needed things to change and so I needed to make that difference for my own kids, but then it became a bigger thing. I needed to make that difference to my people in general.

And so you just keep moving forward. I guess that's what it is. It's not that... I don't know, that I see myself as more resilient than other mom, it's more that I just grab the opportunities and just keep going.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Who was the mentor who pushed you towards an understand understanding and appreciation that probably the only way out for you was through education?

LISA CONWAY: Ironically, it started with my father. My dad, he only did halfway through year seven or form one, it was back then, and by then he was in between care and on the streets in Melbourne. And so he felt that he never had that opportunity, he didn't have education. And a lot of people in my family felt really strongly about education. Education is something that nobody can ever take away from you. You can lose your home, you have your family torn apart, but if you've got an education, nobody can take that.

I guess it started there, but after that, ironically, it was through Centrelink. So by being a customer, going in there and then having career counselling from them to say, "Hey, you should go and study, you know, you can do this." From there, I've just always been really lucky. I've had lots of mentors within the public service who I guess, and this is sometimes what we need is people that

are going to champion you when they believe in you and you don't believe in yourself. And that really makes a huge difference.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Look, and I'm not going to push too much further, but just quickly before we go, I just want to walk back to something you said, which is just horrendous, that you and your family and your friends were described as tip rats. That just is horrendous to think that would've been said to you. Looking back from where you are now, how do you understand that? This will be the last question around that before we sort of move into the other areas of the conversation, but that just was like a punch in the guts to me when you said that word.

LISA CONWAY: Yeah. I think the saddest part for me about all that is that at the time, we accepted it. It was almost like I had been called that for so long growing up that it didn't occur to me that it wasn't okay for people to see us that way. It was just more of a sense of shame about that's who we are and that's how it is.

Reflecting back, I can see that was the culture of Australia in the, we're talking the 1970s and 1980s, and that was the culture, that sort of racism was quite overt. It was really out there. And yeah, it was the standard that that was acceptable in the community and was acceptable even to us. I guess the difference now is that I would never stand for that now. I would never stand for that. I guess that's how far Australia really has come. I know we've got a long way to go, but I think that Australia's come a long way in that that would never happen to my children in the school grounds now. And if it did, I'd be the first person down there to say something about it. Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Great. Well, listen, thank you very much for sharing that personal history with us because I think it does help to locate just how challenging some of these attitudes are, some of these mindsets are that we need to perpetually confront in order to make progress. We can't walk away from it, but we do need to talk about it so we can build that deeper understanding. But your journey, as you say, you went to Centrelink as a customer, but before you started working for Centrelink, it was down this path of being a social worker. But I read in an interview with the Geelong Independent that your family often feared social workers. So, can you explain that?

LISA CONWAY: Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

LISA CONWAY: Well, and I guess having family that have been removed for one reason or another, whether they were stolen in that traditional sense of the Stolen Generations or if it was just people taking from

our families because of neglect or other issues, what it meant was is that we had a genuine fear of social workers because to us they meant child protection or they meant government workers. It was about people who were out to destroy our families when obviously that's not necessarily what social workers are meant to be. I found it really ironic that I was told that the right career for me after doing this career counselling would be social work.

But yeah, social workers have had a lot to be responsible for during that Stolen Generation era. And yeah, we would move interstate. We'd move to Queensland and back a few times to avoid child protection, to try and keep us kids within our family. Because in my family, keeping your family together was the safest thing to do because when my parents grew up away from family, they were subjected to a lot of abuse in children's homes. So for my family, they're trying to keep us safe from the people who are meant to be keeping us safe.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

In an earlier answer, you did mention that you feel this greater responsibility now not just to your own family but to more broadly. Your PhD research is in fact looking into ensuring that cultural responsiveness, that it does underpin policy and decision-making. In fact, Centrelink social workers are currently required to undergo cultural responsiveness training that you in fact developed. Can you tell us a little bit more about what is cultural responsiveness?

LISA CONWAY:

Yeah. So cultural responsiveness is very much about understanding that we all have different cultures and we all have different experiences that influence our culture and our worldviews. And so, to take it back to our conversation about social workers, for example, if we were to be culturally responsive, if an Aboriginal person came into a Centrelink office and they are experiencing hardship or homelessness or something that they might actually, rather than reach out to a social worker and want to engage with them and talk to them about that, because of the cultural differences, an Aboriginal person going into a white government organisation could be quite fearful about sharing the fact that they're struggling because they're already worried that their children could be taken from them. So they've got that level of trauma or that concern. So reaching out for help can sometimes mean being vulnerable and opening yourself up to actually being under scrutiny of somewhere like child protection.

So really cultural responsiveness, in the past, we'd say cultural awareness, which was about let's learn as much as we can about Indigenous culture so that we can engage better with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But that's not enough because I might be a Yorta Yorta woman, but there might be another person who's a Yorta Yorta woman, but they have grown up in a different experience. They might have grown up on country, they might

have only found out yesterday that they're connected to Yorta Yorta people. We all have these different experiences. And so it's about understanding that it can be quite different, but also understanding that you yourself will have biases and experiences yourself that will actually change how you might approach a conversation with somebody or how you make decisions about them. So it just means that it's really important to be thinking about the experience of the person you're working with and how they might experience your culture, how the cultures intersect, and then accounting for that and dealing with the imbalance of power and the fear that might be felt by an Aboriginal person coming in. So, yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Would it be fair to say it's sort of the applied end of cultural awareness and really it's about equipping our public servants with the tools to be able to, I suppose, deal with their clients appropriately, that they've got that ability not just to know, but to be able to do something about the situation of the client who would be sitting in front of them?

LISA CONWAY: Yeah, absolutely. So it's application, I guess. And quite often that's what happens. We teach people about Indigenous culture, but then what do you do with that? How do you actually use that in your day-to-day? Probably the most important aspect of it too, I guess, David, is that cultural humility is a really important part of this. So we teach people about Indigenous culture, but then they need to understand that they need to have the humility to realise, okay, I'm not an expert in this person, they're the expert and I need to, even though I've got the bit of an understanding of what their culture's about, I need to now let them be the expert and tell me what that means to them and how I best work with them.

DAVID PEMBROKE: How long does it take to acquire the skills to be adequate? I suppose it's a lifelong... It's like a lot of skills. You can always improve. But in your experience, how long does it take people to become culturally responsive or effectively culturally responsive in their work?

LISA CONWAY: I feel like I'm still learning. Well, to give you an example, social workers already have a degree and then we put them through basically a 12-week training package. So a couple of hours every week where you are working on it. The thing about it is that some people might never get there because you need to have that really strong self-awareness, you need to be able to challenge yourself and have people around you who can challenge you and say, "Hmm, I think you're a bit biased in how you're looking at this. You need to sort of think about the lens you are using to look at this." But you are right, it's absolutely an ongoing process and you need to be constantly reflecting. And because culture evolves as well, culture's not stagnant. So it's about understanding that those

things can change and that you need to always be checking in that your knowledge is up-to-date about various cultures and your own biases because they change as well.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Inside the APS Reform Agenda, the public sector is focusing on this specific area where it's looking to set the standard for employment and cultural competency.

LISA CONWAY: Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Why is it important that the public sector is culturally competent and culturally responsive?

LISA CONWAY: I guess it's because for us to be effective as an institution or as the APS is that we need to be able to build policies and design and implement policies that are fit for purpose, which is fine when the majority of people in Australia are white Australians. Because at the moment, that's the dominant culture is white Australia because obviously that's been our majority for so long. But as time changes, that's not who we are working with anymore. We have to be able to represent the society that is around us. That means that we need to have people coming in who might have disabilities, we need people who are multicultural, we need Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and they need to be able to come in and to get the strength of that diverse workforce. We need to know that they are actually able to bring their whole selves to work because that's how we get that diversity.

I heard a really interesting comment when I was in Canada recently about currently a lot of public services, they recruit for diversity. So they bring in all those people for diversity, but then they onboard for assimilation. We sort of have all these policies around. The policies and procedures reinforced that to act in a certain way when really we want to bring out that diversity.

DAVID PEMBROKE: What were you doing in Canada?

LISA CONWAY: It was really exciting. So part my scholarship is that you get a travel allowance. So I spent six weeks in Canada and I spent a few weeks living with a Gitksan Chief and got to go around and meet a lot of First Nations communities around British Columbia. And then I spent three months with the Canadian public service and sort of a bit of knowledge dissemination I guess, teaching a little bit what we've been doing, learning what they're doing and hopefully giving me some ideas about some of the pitfalls from the way they work now, which is more closely aligned to self-determination of their First Nation communities and having a lot of their service delivery now is done by Indigenous organisations and

looking at the strengths, but also looking at where some of the issues might be so that I can think about what might be coming for us in the future and how we can change it.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, this is completely unfair, but I'm going to put you on the spot. What's one thing you learnt from your time with the Gitxsan Chief and what's one thing that you learnt in your time with the Canadian public service?

LISA CONWAY: The one thing I learned from being with the Gitxsan Chief I think is the value of vulnerability. I think that about you don't need to be the expert in your culture to be the best advocate for your culture. I think before I left, in my view, elders and the way I see elders in Australia is that you have to have all the knowledge and you got the expertise and the wisdom. Whereas the Gitxsan Chief, she was very comfortable in herself that she didn't necessarily have all of the wisdom, but she knew how to harness it from others. I thought that was a real strength. The other was, what was your other...

DAVID PEMBROKE: The public sector. That you had three weeks with the public sector and you said it's interesting, you were saying that they're perhaps in some ways more mature in the way that they deal with their First Nations people, but what was one thing that you took from them?

LISA CONWAY: Well, interestingly enough, I went there thinking that they were more advanced than the Australian public service with how they work with their Indigenous peoples. In some ways, they are, but I also noticed that because they now have Indigenous communities, sort of Indigenous organisations delivering services themselves, that they have sort of let go of building cultural capability within their public servants.

DAVID PEMBROKE: They've outsourced the responsibility.

LISA CONWAY: They've outsourced it when I think that that's not the answer because they're still guiding and creating new policies. So I felt that was a gap. Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay. Interesting. So, let's turn the spotlight back onto the APS. Are there any gaps in the public sector or what are those gaps in its current approach to cultural responsiveness?

LISA CONWAY: I think that the gaps that I see is very much about where... We are very good now at trying to identify Indigenous culture and understanding what Indigenous culture is and how it might impact, but we are not looking at our own culture as decision-makers. For example, we're not appreciating the culture of the people within the public service. And also the public service itself has a culture

and our policies. And so by focusing only on Indigenous culture, we're sort of missing the boat a little bit in being able to change our mindset and culture internally to be more culturally capable. So, if the focus is always on Indigenous culture, we're not really focusing on what the APS can do differently from their own cultural perspectives. I think it's a bigger gap than just the mob.

I think that if we were able to be more culturally responsive, there are some real wins there for other diverse groups, for people with disability, for example. If we made sure we learn a bit about people with disability, but then also thought about what about the ableist group and how does that impact that group, it's going to strengthen it overall. I guess I had a perfect example. Somebody from Disability Council of Australia said the other day, or not Disability, sorry, Diversity Council of Australia, she mentioned the other day that when you build a building at the moment, you automatically, the default is to build a building with stairs, which automatically means that you have to change it if somebody needs a wheelchair. But if every building standard was built with a ramp, then it would be a different ballgame. It would mean that everybody could use it from the start. Why don't we build our policies that way? Why don't we build policies in a way that automatically include everybody rather than have to add it on later? It's a challenge though.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

That's a huge challenge. But if I was to hand you this magic wand that I've got in my hand at the moment and you were able to make two or three decisions that would really help the APS strengthen this ability of cultural responsiveness, what are those changes that you would make?

LISA CONWAY:

The first change I would make would be to run training for every single public servant around how to understand what their cultural identity is. So that would be about understanding their family values, the sort of culture they've grown up in and how that impacts them now, how that comes out in the way they make decisions or how they view the world, because I think that's something that's missing. I'd also make me a secretary. Just thought I'd throw that in. Let's say Gordon's listening.

And look, I guess that if I had a perfect world, I would go through and do a discourse analysis of every policy document, every procedure that we have, and reset the APS and how it approaches things because we are not starting with a blank canvas, we've got a white canvas. It means that we really, at the moment when we try to increase cultural capability, we're sort of trying to build onto something that's already there when it would be nice to be able to start fresh.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Well, yeah, exactly. But it is encouraging that it's been called out in the APS Reform. So that sort of gives it that legitimacy and gives it that priority. So it's then really about maintaining progress from there and not falling back once you make some progress. So do you have any advice for people who are listening now thinking, "Okay, I'm going to take this challenge on, I'm going to... This all makes perfect sense to me." And I think the key word that you used a little bit earlier on was humility. That people really have to dunk themselves in a big vat of humility and to really probably unlearn a whole lot of things and really listen and to be present with this opportunity. There's good intention, but how do we make sure we make progress? But then how do we maintain progress?

LISA CONWAY:

Look, it's a really good question. I think that it is the humility and it's that being reflexive. So I think one of the best things that's happened to us is having Gordon de Brouwer come in because I feel like he does have that humility around "we don't have to be the experts and if we make mistakes, it's okay to own it and that's how we learn." I think that's a really important way forward for the APS because you can't just become culturally responsive and just stay that way. It's about that constant learning, that constant journey and reflecting on checking in. If you're working with people who are Indigenous, checking in with them, what makes you culturally safe in the workplace? What do we need to do differently? How do you think we are going? What's our scorecard like?

I think that's the other thing. Our scorecard needs to be marked by community, not by the APS. At the moment, I feel that we score ourselves and I think that we need to have more of that feedback from community. I'm really excited. I do feel like the environment's changed. I think that we're on a different path and I think it's the right path to improving that cultural capability.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

So listen, just before we wrap it up, because we're coming close on time, just in terms of other First Nations people who, I don't know, may in fact be or may have been or may might today be in the circumstance that you were in all those years ago when you walked into that Centrelink office and started to think about your future, what advice do you have to them about being able to equip themselves so that they can not just survive, but they can thrive in this environment and perhaps start to make their way through to these leadership positions that we spoke about earlier?

LISA CONWAY:

It's a great question because the thing is, is that I'm no different to most mob out there. Almost all of us have had that experience of impact from intergenerational trauma. Whether we're public servants or not, we are all facing those same sort of issues. I think it's about just knowing that you are no different to anybody else in the public service. You just got to keep moving forward. I think for

me, to stay resilient and to keep going. It's about understanding your why. You've got to know why you're there and what you're doing and to work towards that.

I think the other thing is to tell people. Don't be afraid to tell people you're interested in leadership roles. Name it, let people know that you are interested because I find that there is a willingness now to increase the leadership in the APS for Indigenous people. So it's there. I think the biggest thing is to grab every opportunity. I quite often find myself almost drowning because when the opportunity's there, I take it and then worry about how I'm going to do it later. And I just keep doing that. And like me doing a PhD, my friends think it's the biggest joke they've ever heard, but you just keep going and you find a way and just keep grabbing those opportunities. Because the opportunities are there, but mob don't put their hand up often enough to do them. I think that they just need to keep doing that because if you want a seat at the table, that's what you've got to do.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Well, a bit of advice to Gordon de Brouwer, look out, here comes LISA CONWAY on the way to the secretary position of the department of whichever you would like to service.

Lisa, you're an inspiration. What a great story. Thank you for being so honest, so open, so humble and so generous, not only with your time, but your insights. I think there's so much practical wisdom and applied knowledge that I think a lot of our listeners could take away today into their jobs, into their relationships, into their communities, into their houses, and into their homes, into their sporting clubs. Because again, it is one conversation at a time, isn't it? That progress will continue to be made.

LISA CONWAY:

Absolutely. Just got to keep chipping away and keep moving in that right direction and it is going to get there.

DAVID PEMBROKE:

Fantastic. Well, LISA CONWAY, thank you so much for being a guest on Work with Purpose. What a fabulous conversation. To be inspired by someone like that who is really sort of have had that challenge, that privation, that difficulty, but this sense of just continuing to go on. But then not just the responsibility to herself and her family, but to the wider community and now to be taking on the challenge of how do we as an APS inside this APS Reform become better equipped to be more effective in that cultural responsiveness, which again, is that an applied end of a cultural awareness. Awareness is one bit, and that's all great, but this responsiveness so as that we get better outcomes for our First Nations people. So thanks to Lisa for coming onto the program today.

Work With Purpose is produced in collaboration between

contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia or ACT and supported by our good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission. Now we're about 86/87 episodes in, something like that. So there's so much wonderful public service content that you can go back and listen to, not just today's interview with Lisa. So whether you're on Spotify, Apple, Stitcher, Google Podcast, I downloaded a Google Podcast on my phone today for some reason because I couldn't track it down anywhere else. So that's a good place to go as well. But please, yeah, just put us into your consideration set. I know there's loads of content out there, but if you do want to really connect with what's going on in the Australian Public Service and Australian Public Service Reform and many of the wonderful stories, we are the place to come for that.

A rating or a review. One last little ask before I go. If you do have time, please if you can get into those apps and leave a rating or review. It does help us to be found, so more people will be able to listen to the story of LISA CONWAY and more people will be better off because they've listened to that conversation. So a rating or review, please, that would be gratefully accepted.

My name is DAVID PEMBROKE. Work with Purpose will be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Voiceover:

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