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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

EP#2: RELATIONSHIPS MATTER with Andrew Metcalfe AO, Secretary,
Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment

Hosted by David Pembroke, Founder and CEO, contentgroup

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DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name's David Pembroke and thank you for joining me. My guest today is Andrew Metcalfe, the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. Andrew began his career in the Australian Public Service way back in 1980 when he joined as an administrative trainee. In a distinguished career of public service both in Australia and overseas, Andrew has served in key portfolios including immigration, ethnic affairs, agriculture, fisheries, and forestry, as well as the environment. Andrew served as chief of staff to a federal minister and advisor to the former Prime Minister, John Howard, on international affairs, national security, and machinery of government issues. Andrew was appointed secretary for the Department of Immigration, Multicultural Affairs and Indigenous Affairs in 2005 before a brief stint as the Secretary of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry in 2013. He took up his current role as Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment in February of this year, following a stint as a senior partner with the global management consulting firm, EY.

DAVID PEMBROKE: He joins me in studio 19. Andrew, thank you for joining Work with Purpose.

ANDREW METCALFE: Thanks, David. Great to be here.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, before we get started, I will declare an interest. I've known and admired Andrew Metcalfe for the past five years or so. A mutual friend of ours, the former ABC sports commentator, Tim Gavel, introduced us, and in the intervening sort of five years, we have caught up most months to discuss the power of content and how it can and should be used to tell the stories of government. Now in those conversations, Andrew quite regularly would return from one of his many adventures to Italy with his wife, Jenny, and let's just say there's no such thing as a short conversation when Andrew Metcalfe starts taking you on a virtual tour of Italy as he speaks passionately of the people, the food, the wine, the culture.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Andrew, on a day when it's confirmed that COVID-19 has now claimed the lives of more than 20,000 Italians, how do you react to that news?

ANDREW METCALFE: Oh, it's obviously a global tragedy, and in parts of Italy, a deep tragedy for families and for communities. We've travelled to many parts of Italy, and just thinking of how the Italians with their great joy of life have approached what's effectively been extreme social distancing, the tragic loss of life, which now hopefully has reached a zenith and is starting to come down the other side. It's hard to believe.

ANDREW METCALFE: And we'll go back to Italy. We were hoping to go back there in a week or so, in fact, and obviously that won't happen, but next year or the year after we'll go back, and it will be interesting to see how the Italians have responded. But I should also say that we've, of course, seen those wonderful YouTube videos of of Italians celebrating life, coming out on their balconies, singing with each other and that irrepressible Italian spirit. Obviously lives on.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So in terms of just observing this in the role that you're in, this pandemic, how have you observed it or have you just been so busy getting the work done that you really haven't had time to think about it?

ANDREW METCALFE: No, I think we all sort of look back and think, "Gee, those movies that we saw a few years ago, it's actually real." This extraordinary spread of a disease, which for some people is a minor irritant, but for other people is deadly, and which, because of the connectedness of people around the world, has spread to virtually every country on the planet, some of which are well-prepared, some of which are less prepared, some of which have governments that are able to take decisive action like ours, or others that are simply unsure about what's happening. So this has got a long way to run. It will profoundly change the way that people think about the world, I think, in some respects. But of course back here at home, I've been very much involved in the Australian response over the last couple of months. Indeed, from the very first day I started in my role as Secretary of Agriculture, Water, and the Environment was the day that the government introduced the first travel bans on entry from China, and it's been a very busy 10 weeks since then.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So in terms of that, and take us back to that time, because I think the other thing that really sort of probably needs to be recognised certainly as far as the public service is concerned, is that this came at the end of the devastating bush fires, so the public service was already stretched through that Christmas period. And now to have had to have, or now having to deal with the pandemic, like going back to that period where you started, were you feeling the pressure already from bush fires?

ANDREW METCALFE: Well certainly the department, and I know many others, were very focused on the response and the recovery after bush fires. The environment parts of my department, of course, were critically involved in many aspects of the government's response to the bush fires. Our threatened species commissioner, for example, has played a pivotal role given the tragic loss of ecosystems and of native wildlife. Over a billion animals we think were killed through those fires. And on the agriculture side, obviously the bush fires have come off the back of a continuing awful drought that's impacted on so much of Australia. The bush fires themselves didn't impact on a lot of highly productive agricultural country. They were mainly in areas of forest and national park, but clearly for me coming into the role just at the beginning of the year, that was a huge focus for us. And then, of course, there were the emerging stories about the epidemic in China and the rest is history, so to speak. It's been a very busy period for many of my colleagues, both in my department but working right across the Australian Public Service and indeed with governments around Australia.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So in terms of that, how then have you been able to deal with the immediate challenges of the pandemic and continued to run business as usual? How are you able to manage that, or can't you manage that?

ANDREW METCALFE: Oh no, we are managing it, but you obviously get very focused on priority setting. Indeed, I'd say that the vast majority of the divisions associated with agricultural productivity and innovation and are focused on the government's response to the pandemic. In normal times, they'd have a range of other reviews and inquiries that they'd be dealing with and some of those we've pushed back a little bit or others we've slowed down a little bit. So, we've obviously redeployed the focus on the urgency of the situation.

ANDREW METCALFE: Our biosecurity group, which is the largest part of the department, a large number of people in Canberra, but most of those staff outside Canberra have obviously been the front line of the response to the pandemic at airports and ports, in mail centres, and elsewhere. All of those folks have been critical around ensuring continuity of food supply, and Australia, of course, grows far more food than we consume. We're a very major agricultural exporter, but just ensuring that as various controls were brought in around state borders, around social distancing and whatever, that food products were able to be harvested and get through to consumers has been a key activity for us as well.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So can you describe then say some of the work of that biosecurity workforce and in detail? What sort of things are they doing to keep that supply chain moving?

ANDREW METCALFE: Well, the biosecurity group within my department effectively are focused on animal, and plant, and other pests that may enter Australia. We've also got staff in that group and elsewhere who are very much focused on the guarantee of safe food from Australia, as well. We're involved in the clearance of imports, both people and goods from an animal and plant health perspective, and we're involved in the clearance of exports for certain products, meat and grains, for example, to ensure that international trading partners regard them as being safe and being of high quality. So, we're involved right across the food chain from that point of view. In relation to human biosecurity, the director of biosecurity is the chief medical officer, but in relation to animal and plant biosecurity, I'm the director of biosecurity for Australia.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But in terms of that, your people though do have a role to play, don't they, in terms of that human biosecurity, where they're-

ANDREW METCALFE: That's is correct.

DAVID PEMBROKE: ... as you said, at those border points, they are involved.

ANDREW METCALFE: That's right. We act effectively as the agents for the chief medical officer for the Department of Health. At our borders, of course, is a shared working environment. Border force effectively takes on the immigration and customs responsibilities. Do people have permission to enter Australia? Are they bringing contraband with them? And from a customs perspective. But my staff have the biosecurity role, and you'll often see them at airports looking for any products that may cause a biosecurity perspective. The most famous way that that occurs is when people are lined up and one of our sniffer dogs goes along and sees whether there's anything in there, whether it's pork products, or honey products, or whatever it might happen to be.

ANDREW METCALFE: Now this is a very important role that's undertaken, because while we are obviously at the moment focused on a pandemic in relation to human health, there are many diseases that if they were to take hold in our animal population or our plant population, it could be quite devastating for parts of the economy as well. Foot and mouth disease is probably the best example of that. Australia is FMD free, and we worked very hard in relation to that. A more recent disease, which has a decimated pig populations around the world, is known as African swine fever. We have a particular focus in relation to pork products so that we can protect the Australian pork industry, for example.

- ANDREW METCALFE: But on human health, we're the agents for the Department of Health, and so we effectively undertake our role representing the requirements of the chief medical officer as to what sort of issues should be identified in relation to passengers arriving from overseas.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: Does it scare you that this spread of this, that this human virus, does it scare you that some of those, foot and mouth and African swine flu could, different strains of them could now move much faster than perhaps earlier anticipated and cause that devastation that you talk about?
- ANDREW METCALFE: Ironically because of the shutting down of the world's borders for people movement, we're, of course, seeing far fewer passengers arriving in the country and therefore far fewer potential carriers of diseases for plants or animals. We still have a focus obviously on mail centres and packages that may be sent into Australia, and we obviously have a strong focus at our ports as well, because trade is continuing through this period. But the large scale number of passengers arriving is one less risk actually that we have at the moment.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: All right. Listen, we were supposed to do this interview last week, but you rang and said, "The Prime Minister called, so I've got to go and see him." That's fair enough. What did he want?
- ANDREW METCALFE: Well, the Prime Minister has been, I don't know how he does it. He's been incredibly, incredibly hardworking through this period. And has now basically it set up a weekly cadence of discussions that lead to national cabinet meetings, through meetings with the federal cabinet, the national security committee, the expenditure review committee, but he's also focusing on discussions with particular groups of ministers about particular issues, so we now have a regular meeting with the Prime Minister by video, by secure video. In which we talk about the impact on particular industries or sectors of the pandemic and the response to the pandemic, but also on other issues, so that businesses usual point that you made before. And so that was the first of these discussions that we had with the Prime Minister last week and involved the three cabinet ministers from my portfolio, Minister Ley, Minister Littleproud, Minister Pitt, as well as the deputy Prime Minister, so.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay. So in terms of, you have only recently returned to the public service after a spell out in the private sector. Perhaps it's an unusual time to sort of ask you to perhaps draw comparison for what it was to what it is today. But well, I'll ask anyway. What observations would you make of the changes that have taken place?
- ANDREW METCALFE: Oh look, it is a bit hard to say, because I've effectively arrived at a time of a great national crisis, a great global crisis and so the public services at its best in these times. Many of us have probably worked through previous crises, obviously in the immigration portfolio during the GFC and while we were impacted by it, certainly the work pressure that we had was nothing like treasury or other departments some had. But I was in the Prime Minister's department when the tsunami, the Asian tsunami hit, for example, in the early 2000s. I was in Immigration for September 11, and the public service is a powerful instrument in responding to crises. We work very well together. Canberra is small enough that most of us know each other, and so most issues can be dealt with through a phone call or a phone conference and we get on with it.

ANDREW METCALFE: I still see that very much in abundance. In fact, even more so. This is the biggest crisis that we faced since World War II, and the biggest economic crisis that we faced since the Great Depression. I think that the public service is performing magnificently. So it's hard for me to draw a comparison between what I saw previously and what I see last time, because I still see many things that are familiar. I see public servants who are focused on working for the national interest. I see people who are proud of the contribution they can make. I see people who are humble, because we have jobs and we know that many fellow Australians have lost jobs recently, but if we do our job well, we can help those people through this period and get back into work. I see people who are working really strongly together and with industries, I'm in a very regular set of discussions with the president of the National Farmers' Federation, for example, and many other industry sectors, and I know that's being replicated all around the public service. So it's hard to draw a comparison because it's a different period, but I see many great things occurring, which I'm really pleased to be part of.

DAVID PEMBROKE: There was an interesting point that Katherine Jones made last week in our discussion about that connection to industry that the public service has. It's perhaps probably not well understood. So could you perhaps expand on that a little?

ANDREW METCALFE: Yeah. It is an area that I think the current crisis is probably forging new links and new relationships. That's because nationally we need to work on these issues together. So the work that's being done through the National Coordination Mechanism in the Department of Home Affairs, that each portfolio is undertaking. We obviously have a very strong focus on issues associated with the environment, with water and agriculture, and that's replicated across all of the departments. I'm seeing relationships with industry that were probably there, but they're being used and they're working hard. We are working on problems together. For example, to ensure that there is an easy access to my portfolio, I've appointed a senior industry engagement officer to be the focal point for our connection with agricultural industries. Mark Tucker, who's a former deputy secretary of the department, we brought him out of retirement, and he is very much the point person for us in sorting our problems, in hearing what's going on, and bringing that into the policy discussions with the minister, and myself, and others. I think that that model is replicating as well.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now you came back after five years into the public service and you had a great career there at EY. You were going along very happily. What drew you back? Why did you want to come back and do this job again?

ANDREW METCALFE: Look, to be perfectly honest, if the Prime Minister or the head of the Prime Minister's department rings you up and says that they've got a job that they'd like you to do, it's very hard to say no. And so as you said at the beginning of the podcast, I spent 34 years as a Australian public servant. I had started as a 20 year old as a graduate in the Prime Minister's department, and I ended up as Secretary of the then Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry. And so my whole lifetime has been as part of the Australian public service. I love the work that I did over the last six years. I learned a lot. I did understand a lot more about business. I worked in a business that needed to make a profit, and therefore it does bring a certain sharpness to your activities, but I had the chance to work with many different industries and government departments over that period, so it gave me a perspective I wouldn't have otherwise had.

But when you have the opportunity to lead a [inaudible 00:19:36] government department, you'd need to have a pretty good reason to say no, and I could think of that. I could only think of reasons to say yes.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well, listen. In the spirit of innovation and doing new things, I've been speaking to Drew from IPAA, and he's been chatting with the Future Leaders committee that they have over at IPAA, and what we're going to do is incorporate some questions from the Future Leaders committee during this podcast. A question for you, Andrew from Kylie Highley at the Australian Public Service Commission is: the current situation with COVID-19 has many discussions landing back with once we are back to normal. What is something that you see will be changed for the better that won't be part of the new way of operating in the future APS leadership world?

ANDREW METCALFE: Oh, that's a very good question Kylie. I've thought a fair bit about whether the world will be the same or not, and it's just too hard to imagine what the outcome of this will be, because this will continue on for quite a while I suspect.

DAVID PEMBROKE: You've mentioned that before.

ANDREW METCALFE: Yeah.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Are you talking the six months that the Prime Minister talks about, or are we really talking 12 months, 18 months?

ANDREW METCALFE: You probably need to ask the Chief Medical Officer that question. In Australia, clearly the actions that are being taken are proving effective and the cooperation that Australians have shown in being highly compliant around social distancing and isolation, staying at home over Easter for example, are clearly working. And so that's a tribute to the leadership that we have from the premiers, the Prime Minister, health ministers, and others, but also the fact that I think Australians get it, that we need to look after each other, and the best way to look after each other is to keep a safe distance from each other for the time being.

ANDREW METCALFE: But thinking globally, what we've seen is this pandemic sort of rolling around the world, firstly China, then other parts of Asia, South Korea, then the tragic events that have unfolded in Italy, and Spain, and now the UK, and then of course the United States is now the global centre. What we don't know is what's happening in some parts of the world which are developing nations which may not have the same reporting arrangements, certainly not the same testing arrangements, and certainly not the same medical facilities, and so that's why I think this will keep going for quite a while, and that will mean that for many of our trading partners, many of the countries that we have close relationships with, the ease of movement of people and goods, the ability for us to just get on a plane and end up in a spectacularly different part of the world or for people from around the world to visit us is going to be different, and that will take some time.

ANDREW METCALFE: Now, coming back to the question, I think that the change that I hope is a positive and is long lasting is that more profound set of relationships between the public service and the rest of the economy and business. Some departments are well joined up, others are using this to improve, and one of the things that I really did feel having had six years working in the private sector is that there is often a disconnect between the private sector understanding government and some parts of government understanding of the private sector, and for the tragic regions of the pandemic, we're getting to know each other a lot better and that's only for the good.

DAVID PEMBROKE: What about this notion of speed, of being able to move, and do things, and be able to adapt far quicker than the public service has been able to in the past? Is that something that will stay? Will that be a legacy that will, the bureaucracy will be lessened?

ANDREW METCALFE: I don't know the answer to that. I'd hope so. What we are seeing now and what we saw with the GFC, what we saw with the Asian tsunami, what we saw with September 11, there's a clear sense of purpose. There's a clear problem that we all working to approach, so everyone gets up in the morning and we know what our job is. It's to deal with the consequences of the pandemic to ensure that critical functions of government continue to run and that we have a permissive environment to cut across borders, to cut across boundaries, to work in a highly collegial way. Now I hope that that continues in a, when we get back to the new normal, whatever that may look like, but we won't have the same sense of crisis or purpose. So the question is how can we find a sense of purpose that motivates us all, that inspires quick action, but also inspires actions that if we make a mistake, we fix it and we move on rather than the fear of failure as well.

ANDREW METCALFE: Now, one aspect of that is, and I'm certainly a very strong advocate for accountability and for ensuring that the actions are properly reviewed and responded to, but we also have a very healthy system of looking backwards at problems, and so in taking the emergency action that we're taking in working in a very rapid manner to overcome problems, I think it will also be encumbered upon those accountability bodies to be aware of that context when they undertake their role in the future of looking back at what happened, and what didn't happen, and how things are done, and why things were done. Because otherwise you can find situations where people do become risk averse, because they're ultimately worried about the consequences from someone who has the luxury in a year or two of sitting back without that sense of crisis and raking over exactly what people did at any particular time.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay. Listen, we'll close with a final question from the IPAA Future Leaders Committee, and it's Steph McLennan at Geoscience Australia and her question to you, Andrew, is something I'd like to hear about is the unexpected outcomes from this situation. What surprised or inspired you over the last few weeks?

ANDREW METCALFE: Well, thanks Steph, and look, I'd just return to that theme I've been talking about. It's about relationships, and so even though we're in quite different ways. For those who can't see us here in this podcast, David and I are well separated.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Studio 19.

ANDREW METCALFE: We are learning to work in a virtual sense and look, humans are social creatures, and so normally we enjoy each other's company. We use body language and other ways of communicating. My working days now, Steph, on the end of the phone in my home office in my shed out at Sutton where I'm able to connect with the world, and where from first thing in the morning to quite often late in the evening I'm on telephone conferences with different people. But there are senses of partnerships. There's also a sense that we need to look after each other, and so frequently when I'm talking with my own staff through videos and other messages, I just remind people about the fact that we all need to be kind to each other. That's something I've seen from the highest leadership of government right through, that people are accepting that we are all under pressure in some way or another, that we are all doing our best, but we need to care for each other, as well, both in our working relationships, and with our friends, and with our families, and whatever. So I hope that perhaps out of this comes a new respect for each other, a new sense that as Australians we have risen to the challenge, and a sense that we have looked after each other.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well, Andrew Metcalfe, thank you so much for coming in and giving us a bit of your time today. Just in terms of the hours that you're working, seven days a week, 18 hours a day, is it that sort of thing at the moment, that you're always on?

ANDREW METCALFE: Look, no, it's not. There's a bit of downtime as well in these jobs, as we all know, I think. You're never sort of completely clock off. You're always checking the email and the WhatsApp and the text messages and everything else, and so work tends to sort of spread the field the available hours. But the working patterns for me are usually a catch up with my team first thing in the morning and then a series of fairly structured meetings through the day in the week, a regular catch up with my division heads, regular catch up with the three ministers in the portfolio, regular catch up, as I said before, with the Prime Minister, secretary, his board, my state counterparts, my New Zealand counterpart, so the working week is sort of populated in that way. And then there are many other sort of ad hoc issues that come along. But look, it's important to get a bit of time for rest and exercise as well, and so I'm doing that very well.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Very good. Well, rest up, because as you say is there's a long path ahead and thank you for your service. Thanks for coming in today, and thanks to you, the audience. Fantastic feedback and response to the first edition of Work with Purpose. So keep it up. And if you can do a review on your particular podcast app, that would be useful, because it helps the podcast to be found. And indeed, if you see some of the social media promotion come around, if you could share it and spread it around such that people will come to know and understand a little bit more about the work of the Australian Public Service. But for the moment, thank you very much for listening once again, and we'll be back at the same time next week. So thanks very much. Bye for now.

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