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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE
EPISODE 16

JANE HALTON AO PSM

Commissioner
National COVID-19 Coordination Commission

Hosted by DR GORDON DE BROUWER PSM, IPAA National President

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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 is David Pembroke. Today, I won't be joining you as it's school holidays here in the ACT, and I've taken the family to visit relatives in Dirranbandi in South West Queensland, where we'll be helping out shearing thousands of sheep. Wish me luck.

In my place is the ever-reliable National President of IPAA, GORDON DE BROUWER, and his guest is JANE HALTON, the esteemed former senior Australian public servant, who is playing such a key role in not only the national fight against COVID-19, but the global fight against COVID-19. JANE HALTON is the chair of the global Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and in March 2020, she was appointed to the Executive Board of the Australian National COVID-19 Coordination Commission.

This conversation focuses on the big issue of the day, the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on people, the public service, and where to from here. It also focuses on Jane's time as a distinguished career public servant in the APS and how it has prepared her to make a contribution at the highest level of public service. I hope you enjoy it.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Hello everyone and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public service. I'm GORDON DE BROUWER the IPAA National President. I begin today by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land in which we're meeting, the Ngunnawal people and pay my deep respect to their elders, past, present, and emerging and acknowledge their ongoing contribution that they make to the life of our city and our region.

I'm delighted today to be talking with JANE HALTON, who's got lots of acronyms after her name, AO, PSM, FAICD, and FIPAA. FIPAA's the most important there of Jane-

JANE HALTON: Of course!

GORDON DE BROUWER: ... who's on the National COVID Coordination Commission as the Commissioner, as well as Chair of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation. That's hard to say.

JANE HALTON: CEPI, call it CEPI-

GORDON DE BROUWER: CEPI.

JANE HALTON: ... it's easier.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Jane should be known to all of you, frankly, as a longstanding former Secretary of Finance and Health, a lot of experience. She left a couple of years ago is now on the Board of ANZ, Clayton Utz, Crown Resorts, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, and the US Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation, and is doing a lot of work on health. Welcome, Jane.

JANE HALTON: Lovely to see you.

GORDON DE BROUWER: We might start off with the pandemic, your own experiences that evolved, and how you saw that?

JANE HALTON: Well, I have said this publicly several times before, and because it's been one of my, call it enduring paranoias or interests, depending on the day, I've been working on this for such a long time that I unfortunately get lots of phone calls from people when odd things are happening around the world. I actually got my first phone call about this particular set of what looked like unusual pneumonia deaths in China actually in late December.

You have this horrible sense in the pit of the stomach. Where you think, "This could be it." And then you think, "No, no, no. We've seen this before. We don't panic." I was doing that with a small number of other people around the world. Well, sadly of course it turned out it was something that we all have to panic about.

So, I've been deeply engaged in what's been going on with this, with my CEPI hat on, and of course now more broadly, since really January when we really did get a sense this was something that we should all be deeply concerned about. So, it's been... And of course I can't say that I'm at the frontline and I have to pay my respects to the people who are on the frontline in health care in this context, but certainly, I have been very busy on this particular issue.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Can you talk a bit about the variety of roles that you're doing? What is CEPI?

JANE HALTON: Yeah. So, basically, for those who haven't heard of it, and actually there was a lovely thing in a US publication recently, described us as, "the hither to little known CEPI", which I think is fantastic. So, we were set up two and a half years ago to actually work on what are called priority pathogens, things that actually make people who know about these things nervous. We raised 800 million US dollars, we had an objective of a billion in the first five years, so that was pretty good, and we've been investing in research vaccine development around some of these pathogens and actually coronavirus was one of the first pathogens we put money into. We also put money into research and development of technology into what we call disease X, which is as it sounds, the unknown disease.

For those who are students of these things, and it's been hard to miss, the University of Queensland Technology called the Molecular Clamp Technology, which we actually financed that 18 months ago with a variety of potential viruses in mind, but not with one specific virus, of course. Now we've funded them to take that particular technology, this rapid development platform, to produce, now we hope, a successful vaccine, we'll see whether of course it does work. We gave them more money to do that in January.

GORDON DE BROUWER: So that's active, not just in Australia, but internationally?

JANE HALTON: The work that we do is right around the world and we have people that we're financing in research institutions, vaccine manufacturers, et cetera, literally all around the world. We have partners, collaborators, I have a scientific advisory committee. I'm literally talking, except for Antarctica, just about every continent, we have someone on our Board from. So it's genuinely a global collaboration.

Of course, at the moment, we, along with everyone else, are doing everything on Zoom or such similar, we've all turned into what we call 'Zoombies', and it's difficult of course to run board meetings with that variety of input in this way, but we're hardly on our own. So, we've been continuing our work in other pathogens, but obviously the key focus for us at the moment is on a SARS-CoV-2, otherwise known as COVID-19.

We have been the driving force behind the creation of something called COVAX. We call it the COVAX facility, there's a great international collaboration which we were very instrumental in getting set up, which is working on vaccines, diagnostics and therapies. The vaccine pillar is being jointly chaired by myself and Dr Ngozi, who, if anyone's been out and bought a certain book recently will recognise as the other author-

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah.

JANE HALTON: On that book, the front cover.

GORDON DE BROUWER: The Julia Gillard.

JANE HALTON: That's the one. So, Dr Ngozi and I are chairing the COVAX pillar and she Chairs the Gavi Board. So it's a combination of the science together with how to deliver vaccines to particularly low to middle income countries. But in this case, obviously, it's also about delivering vaccine, we hope, to a bunch of high income countries as well.

So, in addition to the CEPI work, we've got this COVAX mechanism that we're driving. And certainly, my CEO in London together with Seth Berkley, who's the CEO of Gavi, we're working very, very closely, including with the WHO, obviously, but we're driving this whole mechanism going forward and we just hope we get a vaccine that works.

GORDON DE BROUWER: If you get a vaccine that works, how do you prioritise who gets it?

JANE HALTON: I've been out talking a lot publicly about vaccine nationalism, which I'm very, very worried about, and there's a whole backstory in history to that. Essentially, what we're trying to do is arrange for any successful vaccine to be available to the world and then to be distributed on the basis of priorities. Working with the WHO, we believe that just about every country needs about 20% of its population immunised first. That's vulnerable people, basically. We are already seeing deaths terribly in Victoria on a day by day basis at the moment. So, older people, people are immune compromised, people have comorbidities, and of course, our first line responders. So people who work in healthcare, who work in these environments, they are at greater risk. Our first responders in terms of police forces, et cetera.

If we could get 20% of the world vaccinated to reduce that total risk... Now it doesn't mean everyone else isn't at any risk, but it will bring down mortality very significantly, but we have to get a vaccine, then we have to get it into the facility to make sure it's distributed. So it's a long way to go.

GORDON DE BROUWER: How do you deal with in a world, that is a very different world from 10 years ago where maybe a third of the G20 countries are now run by populist nationalists who would look after their people first, how do you deal with that?

JANE HALTON: Essentially, and this will sound a little curious to those of us who've always worked on the basis of stronger together, we have to actually understand that there are going to be commercial forces operating here and some countries, and we've seen this on PPE, Personal Protective Equipment already, some countries have slapped export bans on. One of the reasons we have been working so hardly across a number of countries, is to try and have enough muscle in the market to be able, particularly if it's not a vaccine that we have been part of developing, that we can actually get access to a vaccine, and partly that will be because we can pay for it, and we have enough countries lined up together to get into that supply chain.

Now, if it's a vaccine that we've been partied to funding, well, we do have some rights, because we have an equitable access policy and the people we work with sign on to that. For example, the University of Queensland work, which I talked about earlier, we have done a deal between them, CEPI, as in us, and CSL in relation to how CEPI will get a share for a global mechanism for global distribution for the public good and CSL of course just has a long standing relationship with the Australian government on biosecurity, which at one point I was on the other side of. So, that would be how that would work that, but again, it's a long way to go yet.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Can I take you back, the Prime Minister appointed you as members to the COVID-19 Commission? Can you talk a bit about how that worked and then what your insights or your responsibilities are on that?

JANE HALTON: The National COVID Coordination Commission, which I think is an unusual kind of structure at one level, because what it's done is it's brought into a group, a group of people who mostly have basically a private sector experience. They are people who are very well respected, very experienced in business, and I'm slightly odd one out in that group but I do now work in the commercial world, but I know an awful lot about health obviously, and a lot about government.

What the Prime Minister announced, is he wanted us to have the fastest kind of recovery and the best input to policy and all the rest of it that you can think of, and I'm sure everyone who's listening to this, who does policy work all the time, understands that you need the best input. The Prime Minister decided that he would like a group who could not only kind of input to policy, but also could actually help fix some problems, particularly at that very early stage when I think we were all collectively struggling to find a way through.

So, what the Commission has done, and it's a great group of people all have basically put their shoulder to the wheel, it's involved all sorts of things, helping remove roadblocks on access to PPE. So, looking to see whether we can repurpose manufacturing in some places so we can make things for ourselves. Helping with all that sort of work. Talking to businesses, working on the war on COVID Safe Workplace material, so actually advising business on how they basically could put themselves in a position where they probably were able to operate more than they were able to previously, how did they actually adjust to these new circumstances. Nev Power, the former CEO Fortescue, who is the Chair, he and I had a funny conversation the other day where we said, we think what we've spent 90% of our time doing is talking to people. "How might you go about this? Who can you get advice from? Where do you go? How do you think about it?", et cetera. Of course, we're all very conscious of everything from the

financing issues, and of course because I'm a Director of the ANZ, I've got an insight into what's going on in that world.

It's been a really, I mean, unusual, but I think a very worthwhile enterprise. We've gone from very early, just straight out get in and help where people needed it, crisis sort of response, and that's just covered a huge waterfront. Including, for example, somebody who is losing or going to have to stand down employees with customer service skills, knowing that there was another employer who needed people with customer service skills and literally just putting those parties together. I've done that myself, just introduce one group of people to another group of people and off they go and that's helped keep people in work, which has been fantastic. So that kind of really practical, just mucking in through to thinking about policy issues and particularly things the prime minister's got an interest in, and that it's been a privilege to be part of.

GORDON DE BROUWER: What sort of things have surprised you from it?

JANE HALTON: From the NCCC particularly?

GORDON DE BROUWER: Yeah.

JANE HALTON: I think it's a combination actually. Why should I be surprised? But every day you see something, you think, "Oh, that's interesting." I've been a bit surprised in some cases at the difference in the amount of time it's taken people to think their way through this and adjust. Some people, some businesses, some sectors have been, "Right, here we are. Okay, off we go. What do we need to do?" And have been really, really, really focused.

I mean, they've had, in some cases, to deal with very unexpected circumstances and the way people have kind of shifted... And I know this is complex because... For example, toilet paper, we all know about toilet paper, as in the absence of it. Working through the Supermarket Taskforce, the Commission has been working with those sorts of industries who want to scale up manufacturing, secondly, to look at supply chains, all of the kinds of things that will actually help facilitate things being produced and delivered. In some areas, people have been very, very fast and agile, in others... and it's probably the shock of the situation, actually, no one's been through this for a hundred years and some people it's taken them a while to get their head around it. I would argue that the community still hasn't got their head around this, not yet properly. "It's a passing thing, it's about to be fixed. It's all good now." And that's not where we're at.

GORDON DE BROUWER: So, what would be the immediate priorities you see on that work, but more generally around the pandemic?

JANE HALTON: I think in terms of that work, I think there's a real opportunity actually, for all of us. People have innovated, they've changed how they do things, they've literally found ways to solve problems that are frustrated people for years. I think one of the really big opportunities, and it's not just for government and for government policy, I think it's for industry, I think it's actually for all of us as people, what's worked really well, let's not lose it.

I think it's arguable that we've had more uptake of ICT than we've probably just about ever seen, including, and one of my hats is as the Chair of the Council on the Ageing, including amongst older people. I mean people who... And I know this

from the banking world, older people who basically just couldn't get their hands round online banking, they're now doing it. The past book is definitely dead and buried, whereas it wasn't before this.

I think one of the things we're seeing, and we've been talking with government about is how we keep the good things and see where the policy opportunities and the regulatory opportunities in terms of red tape might be in that sense. Now, not everything that we've had to do is good and so we need not to keep the things are less good, I think, but I think that's a real opportunity that we've seen.

GORDON DE BROUWER: So, what's your sense when you talk to business around that, of how they're positioning explicitly to lock in the good things, including from digitisation, the flexibility and work, that opportunity to really engage and know your customer?

JANE HALTON: What I'm actually seeing out there is, firstly people acknowledging that we don't know where that finish is yet and the beginnings of what it looks like in terms of a BAU, business as usual, kind of approach. There's a level of interest and enthusiasm, is one of the things that I'm saying. Whilst obviously some people are doing it very, very tough, but the question about how they might translate that into a new approach, the way they run their business, and probably a business that's going to be leaner, much more efficient than it was because everyone's now very minded of where the revenue's going to come from, et cetera. So, that's certainly one of the things that we've been seeing quite a lot of.

If I think about the banking world, how we accelerate what is this change to a whole new digital world in banking. Now that's challenging because there's a whole investment you've got to make to do that, and that doesn't come in the next five minutes, it takes a while. But at the same time, maintain customer service and all those sorts of issues. I think every business has got a different challenge and I think we can see, in our economy, some businesses have been really flexible and creative. I mean, all those restaurants who turned to take away overnight, and for those of us in Canberra, we can think of our favourite eatery and we've all gone around and had the takeaway from them recently, which is good. But I do think there will be some parts of our economy that we'll have to really think about it.

For example, tourism. Now we know Australians spend more going away overseas than people who come from overseas spend in Australia, but is the experience in the Australian tourism market going to keep those people who normally would've gone away overseas, will it keep them interested? So I think thinking about those sorts of things. There's going to be a lot of change, I think, Gordon.

GORDON DE BROUWER: I think that's right. Can I ask you then, reflecting on the public service, maybe not what you saw from that the international health work, but really what you saw from the Commission and working with the service, what were your impressions or your judgements around that?

JANE HALTON: It's such a familiar thing because I've been through this, not obviously on this scale before, but when I was in the service, but now working with the service and I still have a habit of saying, 'we' not 'you'. I'm sure you're the same. Look, what does the service do so well? In a crisis, it basically stands up. It puts aside its inclination to protect its own patch, it does exactly the things I just talked about with industry, it innovates, it is creative, it puts aside the kind of competition or

whatever it might be that sometimes there's a friction in a relationship. I have seen fantastic cooperation across agencies, really, really excellent.

Now, the danger of course, and we've seen this happen so many times, as soon as that crisis side is passing, people go back to what I describe as boundary riding, "Well, you can't do that, that's mine." I do think there's a challenge for the service. We've been talking about what reform looks like in the service. What does the new world look like? I think in a way, if you could take a bottle what's gone really well now and think about how you institutionalise some of that going forward, including the use of technology, more flexible working arrangements, et cetera, I think that would be a really good thing. I fear, and I've seen it recently, a bit more of the boundary riding's back. So I think the challenge for people is to keep that open mind.

GORDON DE BROUWER: How do you stop the boundary riding? It's just innate or have you got particular things that you can push back on it?

JANE HALTON: I do think it's a reflex and I think we all do it. I mean, I'm as guilty as anyone of doing it, but I do think there is an opportunity for people if they can actually focus more on shared objectives. If you think about what characterises the recent past, it is the one enemy, it is the one objective, and if we were better at expressing those because it's not actually the legislation that stops you. I have made that point time and time again, and I used to make this point when I was Secretary of Finance, but to be fair, when I was a Secretary of Health, there are ways under the legislation, including under the Appropriations Act to actually make those things happen. But you have to want to.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Do you reflect on the nature of the people, the extent of the hierarchy that those things are leaning in on some of those things, is that a way to change as well?

JANE HALTON: I think the ability to actually deploy, and I'm going to use this word with the proprietary label on it, the agile approach to life. So, there's a little R with a circle around it when I say agile in this context. I mean, I've seen that work outside in the private sector really, really well, and it does require you to bring together multidisciplinary teams. I think the service has done that in particular cases, but I don't think it's been institutionalised enough. I think, in fact, if you ran that kind of approach much more regularly across departments, "Here's a problem to be solved. We're all sharing in the solving of this problem. I'll provide the regulatory expert, you provide the person who's actually going to write the Cabinet's submission." Do you know what I mean?

GORDON DE BROUWER: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

JANE HALTON: I do think there are techniques that actually, if you've got a shared objective, if you have shared resourcing to deliver it, you probably could get a lot further.

GORDON DE BROUWER: There were some, I think, really powerful and great examples. Like you talked about with business of learning how to work with your customer or delivery, some phenomenal changes across service delivery both with the Commonwealth and States. The thing is, how do you lock it in, and pushing on those conversations is really important and valuable.

Is there anything else around that that you would like to reflect on? Well, on some of this working together, do you got any observations around say that the rise of populist nationalism and sometimes the increased problems around security and their interface with economics, you see those things playing out in the health domain?

JANE HALTON: Of course, absolutely. I mean, what we're seeing in a number of countries very much is playing out in that way. I mean, I don't think it's helpful to be a kind of commentator on politics, particularly in other countries. I mean, I think the fantastic thing about what we've seen here is not withstanding political difficulty, when we're in real trouble, people basically are working together, and that includes politically, which I think is fantastic. Other countries, not so. I do think the risk of using health resources and health approaches in a way which actually creates envy and division, which is what you're seeing in some places, and indeed often outright contradicting of the facts and the truth and the science, which I really have to say, as a person, I struggle with, because my approach has always been about evidence-based policy. I think the risk we've got at the moment is from a kind of global security perspective that some of those domestic arguments and approaches, they flow into the international context. I think for a small country like Australia, we have to hold our course, but I don't think we can be blind to those risks and some of the things that may therefore impact us as a consequence.

GORDON DE BROUWER: As a leader in health administration and in finance, you would have done a lot of work with the States, and National Cabinet has really reset the nature of that flavour and cooperation within the Federation. Do you see that reflected as well in the work that you do on the COVID Commission or on health?

JANE HALTON: Yeah.

GORDON DE BROUWER: How do you lock in that?

JANE HALTON: Well, again, I think it's exactly the same as the issue that I talked about with the service itself. I think there's very much a shared objective at the moment. I've just recently finished sitting on the Federal Financial Relations Review done by the New South Wales Government for the New South Wales Treasurer, Dominic Perrottet, with David Thodey. And I think one of the things we were reflecting on is that, in the National Cabinet, there genuinely has been partnership. There's some things where the traditional imbalance in those relationships often to do with Commonwealth revenue raising capacity, wasn't always a feature of those discussions because states have powers to open and close schools and manage hospitals and all those other things, which actually kind of brought a balance to that discussion, which I think has been pretty healthy and they haven't always agreed and they seem to have managed to work their way through it.

But as with everything, it takes more than one crisis to remake the relations that have taken over a hundred years to create. So what I would hope is that that spirit of just getting on with it can pervade Commonwealth state negotiations at that level going forward, because I think we've all seen and appreciated the goodwill and the output as a consequence.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Like you talked about with business, the digital transformation that COVID has really accelerated requires investment, and for public sector that means unless you invest in the digital technology and the capability, you're not going to be able to do those things or sustain those things. You got any reflections on that? Particularly as the former Secretary of Finance, Jane?

JANE HALTON: I've always been a fan of investment in technology providing it's well managed and it's focused on a particular purpose. I'm conscious that our colleagues and friends in Services Australia basically processed, I think it was about a year's worth of applications for assistance in about a month flat. Now, that is a Herculean task for which they... I mean, they won't probably get very many thanks, but all I can say is be assured some of us saw it and really appreciated the effort.

But of course, the more we can digitalise those kinds of functions, not only does it mean you don't have to just throw people at it, it means, one, it's easier for the citizen, but also the people we have who work on the service can actually deal with the really human issues. The people who are at great stress, the people who actually really do need lots of support. So, you're basically taking the valuable resource, the human resource, up the value chain and spending it in a way that's really effective.

Now, that does require an investment in technology and I'm really pleased that the government has invested, for example, in Services Australia, to keep going with that digitalisation, because I think everyone will benefit from that.

GORDON DE BROUWER: I think that's right. Can I ask you, so final reflection around yourself and how you found sort of personal resilience in this and it may be just the excitement and the importance, but also, is there something you learned about yourself as a person in this?

JANE HALTON: It's always the question, isn't it? Look, people who've worked with me for a long time will tell you that, I think it's terrible thing to say, but I do get a certain energy from a crisis. For those, again, who I've worked with and I know so well, I mean, essentially, a lot of my career has been around health resilience, health security, preparing the nation, and I mean, not that I ever actually really thought in my life I'd see this kind of crisis, but here we are. In a way, Gordon, I feel, this will sound a little strange perhaps, I feel quite privileged that I have an opportunity with all of the experience I've been privileged to gain working in the service, privileged to do the jobs I've done internationally, that I can now use all of that to help and I hope, particularly with my international work, but also with my domestic work, I hope that we can make a real difference to bringing it to a conclusion sooner.

GORDON DE BROUWER: Well, thanks. Thank you very much for doing this podcast, but thank you for your work too, Jane, I think it's great.

JANE HALTON: As I said, it is actually a privilege and it's my pleasure.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well, there they have it. Gordon de Brouwer in conversation with, it has to be said, the remarkable Jane Halton.

Ladies and gentlemen, Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms podcast network and if you would like to listen to GovComms, which I strongly suggest that you do, you will find it by typing the name into any of your podcast applications and it will be found.

Thanks also to you, the audience, for giving us some of your valuable time and attention once again, and please share, rate and review our programme so it can be found. The audience is continuing to grow and we are so grateful for your support. So please, keep at it, keep passing it along. Your efforts are working.

Thanks also, once again, to our great partners here at IPAA and the Australian Public Service Commission who have been so generous and supportive in making these conversations happen. I'm David Pembroke and you have been listening to a special edition of Work with Purpose. We'll be back at the same time next week, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

SPEAKER 4:

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