

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE | A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

ERMA RANIERI

COMMISSIONER FOR PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYMENT
GOVERNMENT OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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, thank you for joining me. I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and future, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region today. Today, another interview from our Work with Purpose: A National Perspective series hosted by Dr. Gordon de Brouwer.

GORDON DE BROWER: Hello listeners, and welcome to Work with Purpose: A National Perspective, a podcast about the Australian public service. I'm Gordon de Brouwer, the IPAA National President. Today, I'm delighted to host Erma Ranieri, South Australian Commissioner for Public Sector Employment. Erma was appointed commissioner in July 2014, and she has been working passionately to create a world leading public sector that serves South Australia as well, does what it says it will do and to which every public servant is proud to belong. Erma has lots of experience, more than 30 years helping organisations optimise productivity and employee wellbeing. She was named a 2014 Telstra Businesswoman of the Year. Welcome Erma to the 'A National Perspective' podcast.

ERMA RANIERI: Thanks, Gordon. Good to be here.

GORDON DE BROWER: Thanks. We might if it's okay just start with talking a little bit about how the pandemic evolved and how that affected you and South Australian public servants.

ERMA RANIERI: I suspect it involved the same as everyone else. I think we were starting the year in a way that we normally start with all the plans in the world to implement programmes and the rest of it. I think in about February, we were hearing about this virus that seemed to be somewhere else in the world, not here, but it was around March when we were meeting as a senior executive group. They're all the chief executives or secretaries where we were starting to talk about preparing business continuity plans, but we weren't sure what we were planning for. I remember a pivotal point was the virus, I guess, appearing having a few cases in each of the states and the, kind of, I think it was really quite difficult to know because we're used to dealing with emergencies that start and stop.

This one, it had a slow start and then a very quick with health advice, a very quick, we have got to do something about the workforce and keeping people safe and healthy. I recall, I think it was over the weekend. It was around mid to late March, of course and for us in South Australia we had a weekend to get as many public servants, who were not in the frontline, to start working from home. I recall preparing what we call 'a whole of government' email that actually said, "We have got an issue here. We have got to keep everyone safe and healthy, our workforce and our citizens." I recall basically sending the message out where if possible, people needed to work from home. We had to deploy as many people to be working from home within literally 48 hours.

GORDON DE BROWER: Thanks. All jurisdictions have their own protocols and ways to deal with the crisis including a pandemic, how useful were they? Did it go by script on that or a fair bit of innovation and variation?

ERMA RANIERI: I think there was a lot of innovation and variation. Firstly, the emergency response was being managed by health. Normally, we have, and our state coordinator is the chief of police basically, so the police commissioner, but now the coordinator of this emergency was actually the health department and I suspect the public health officer, Professor Nicola Spurrier, who's done an exceptional job, but what we do know is that police and emergency services are used to dealing with emergencies. We have never had a pandemic before, obviously, and the scramble was really about how quick were we getting information in relation to the health warnings around the virus versus responding to an emergency that's actually not something you can't see.

So, in fact, I think the lessons learned here was we were not waiting for someone to tell us, I would contact someone in the health officer's office. They were doing the messages out to the community. I was then taking those messages, nuancing them for the public service. Then I would get onto the police commissioners' people to see what was happening until we had an emergency declared. I think the innovation was that we did not care too much about waiting for someone to tell us that we were picking that information up. I think sometimes we are probably falling over each other, but I also think that in hindsight over communicating and actually keep repeating the message was actually clearly the success of the day is you keep talking to people.

GORDON DE BROWER: Thanks. I'd like to go through three different topics through the conversation, ones to start with around the impact on how you provided services to the community, and also how government continued its services to people. Then secondly, we'll go to public sector workplace and how workplace has changed, and you mentioned that, and the third is just some reflections on the nature of relationships within government with the community and within the federation.

So, just to go back to the first one on service delivery, can you talk a bit about how the pandemic affected or changed service delivery or how the public sector innovated to ensure services were provided?

ERMA RANIERI: There was a couple of elements. I mean, the one that was the most significant and the one that the public probably could see was things like elective surgery got postponed, people doing driver's licence testing, all the sort of services SA, things that we had had to be paused. In the case of education, very proudly the department continued with education, but there was a point at which I think it was in that term two where we actually sent teachers to do the online training from home, so the home schooling. Very quickly, we redesigned technology around that.

I remember speaking to the police commissioner, and he had 24% or 25% of his workforce doing things that police officers never were trained to do. Of course, health was having to redirect things. So, the frontline had to change quite significantly.

Now, I mean that in a sense of grant applications, our emergency centre was constantly getting inquiries from people that were losing jobs or didn't know what was happening or housing that sort of stuff. So, the front line was getting different inquiries and a surge in the people that they need. But, for the 26,000 or 30,000 public servants that are office based, that support all those emergency or frontline workers or central workers, they actually had to start working from home. We had about 50% of those, it was 17,000, went out and worked from home.

The challenge was to see if all of that could work online and what happened was from an ICT perspective, we had some glitches, but not a lot. People were able to get into emails, people were able to serve the community. We started to get more digital online. In fact, I have never seen, and this is the kind of platform you look for. We always were ready or that we're working from home arrangements, probably half of that. Probably 20% of the workforce was working from home. That it was possible and it was possible at a rate that we've never seen before.

To this day, we still have lots of people working from home and productivity. Whilst we probably have not analysed, we have done quite a bit of surveying now. I think productivity is actually increased, but mental health and other things are the things we need to look out for because the blurred lines between when you start, when you stop work, they're there when you're working from home. That is the response, and it seems to have worked really, really well, as you can see, by the way we've managed South Australia.

GORDON DE BROWER:

Thanks. There's a lot in that. Can I go back to this issue on service delivery? You mentioned using digital a lot more. Can you talk through some of the stories or some of the ways in which actual delivery changed and it became digitised and you could provide those services digitally rather than face to face?

ERMA RANIERI:

Well, it is a couple of things for me. If we talk about my own office personally, most of the work that we do is around leadership development, and our own IPAA basically had, a lot of it is face-to-face training. The first thing that we did was to get all our programmes online. What was amazing about that was that not only did we do that and the providers that were external, did it exceptionally well, we had a lot more participants. A lot more people felt that they could connect and develop themselves sort of in a digital world more so than the physical. I think there is a place for getting together with people, but we've done that.

All our programmes have gone online. Service SA, of course, would have to renew everything online and we have always wanted to do that, but that got accelerated, and we have done a bit of work with an external consulting company to look at how we can transform the public sector. This includes looking at what went digital and thinking we should continue to keep it like that. A lot of the paying your bills, aligning the things that Services SA do, whether it is renewal of registrations, licences, and the rest of it, and we were doing some of that. We accelerated that because people could not come into the centre, and we are maintaining that. We can do some sort of more value add in relation to that.

Another gem for us, and you would have probably seen them through IPAA, was a 'People on the Couch' series with all the key people that were involved in the emergency. We had an on the couch series, and I started the series. Then we had Nicola Spurrier, our chief health officer, who came along as well as mental health experts who joined us. We had the chief psychiatrist and every week we would have someone talking about their leadership and basically reassuring people that things were working well.

Basically, we probably connected more than we have ever connected before, because we actually had to do it differently. There's some real lessons in how you connect with people and it doesn't always have to be face to face. There were challenges from an ICT perspective in terms of what we call that sort of accessing through our VPN or Citrix, or whatever. I know that the ICT group that actually is a central group within primary cabinet, were able to allow access to every public servant that was working from home without having to go through that and securing it, which actually meant we could get on with the business very quickly.

There's just a couple of examples of how your system can actually do it, but the connecting with people and communicating was I think the key to success because people were, I think if they didn't hear from you, they were fairly isolated.

GORDON DE BROWER:

One group of the unsung heroes in all of this is going to be the IT teams and to hear across the board, how quickly they had to change and adapt and provide, not just technology, but then also the access and really quickly. Can I ask you just in terms of the public's perception of the public service through this, you got a sense of how that's evolved. You talked about how to lock in some of the changes in digital delivery of services, say by Services SA, have you got any sense of how the public sees that, their own experience of service delivery?

ERMA RANIERI:

I believe that there have been some surveys, and I actually only saw something yesterday in terms of the public's perception of the public sector and it was a credible source. In fact, it was a workshop that we'd actually been doing just redirecting people in terms of what's next for the second half of the year, is it appeared that the perception and the trust in public service had actually doubled. I think it was originally around 20% to 30%, and now it was up around 60% to 70%.

I think one of your questions was, what's my perception of that? I have been a long-term public servant. I know what the public service is capable of doing. I believe it is a very innovative institution and it has to be because it deals with complexity. I think what COVID has done is actually shown what is possible within the public service. They're big organisations, but the fact that we could do what we did and maintain, I guess, and it's really those 76,000 in South Australia frontline workers, they're putting themselves on the line every day. The perceptions around what we do of having the, basically the trust has increased, I have always known it, but we have been able to prove it and show it during COVID.

GORDON DE BROWER:

That is great, and that is a great statistic. You mentioned say on the service delivery, you're using someone to go through and work through what to keep or what to retain on different delivery. Can you talk a bit about what sort of principles or how you go about that or how you define the metrics to think about locking in the changes to service delivery?

ERMA RANIERI:

Well, what we did early on the piece when we were starting to reflect on, how do we actually learn and grow from this experience? We actually got together ready, willing CEs, basically and we got an external company that actually has been doing some of this work globally. We actually did sort of a webinar series and an engagement piece over the last six weeks or four weeks. We are in the middle of the pandemic and we are looking at how we collaborated, how we use technology, and what were some of the faster, smarter, and most cost effective ways of actually doing things and thinking a little bit outside the square and how could we maintain the working from home and keeping that balance. Asking ourselves when we did we actually need people in, and when could you efficiently do work through your Zoom or Teams meetings.

The key there was you consult with the leaders that were involved and they were leaders that ran either correctional service, so it was frontline essential services and the rest of it. We came up with actually three areas. Now, we have got a bit of a plan in place about what we might implement. One of those was re-imagining service delivery for the community. Some of that will actually be engaging with the community about what they think in relation to that. Some of it's digital, but others could be serving themselves in different ways, human services, grant applications, that sort of stuff and NGOs maybe delivering because they're more on the front line than we are.

We have got some ideas from agencies around that. Accelerating the digital agenda, which I talked about, so digital reform and improving data. Basically, we have done surveys, what data do we have now coming out of COVID that can inform how we might do things differently in the future. We have got enough of that data, I believe, to be able to kind of say, "Well, let's maintain online services for all these things whether it's registrations, births, deaths, marriages, whatever licencing things." They were all digitised during that time.

Then the third bit for me in particular is reshaping the workforce to be more adaptable and diverse and how do you do your frontline services differently, what do you do to accelerate leaders' capabilities of dealing with a workforce that might not be present and how do you do with, I guess, managing productivity or managing performance when presenteeism isn't your only way of assessing that. There's a lot in that and we can do that in a second podcast where I might be able to present what the strategies are. We are just about to test that with the people that were involved and use it as part of our reform agenda going forward.

GORDON DE BROWER:

That is great. Can you talk a bit more about some of the changes in work behaviour or work patterns say the importance of what you're saying about the importance of teams, how to exercise leadership, what's the role of hierarchy? Is there too much or too little? How do you deal with when often and you're in a crisis? It might be a bit of command and control of getting something done, as opposed to enabling people to make decisions on the ground quickly, that might be important for outcomes.

ERMA RANIERI:

We have prepared a manager's toolkit around the sorts of things that they need to do. So, checklists around how you do performance management remotely, our programmes that we did online was how they basically manage themselves first in relation to their own anxiety about what's going on, their ability to meet their deadlines and then more importantly, managing what is a remote workforce. I would say it's adaptive leadership. I think if you have resilience, if you're adaptable, if you, yourself, as a leader is fairly agile, you don't need to be seeing people and you connect with people by the ways that we've actually got. You managed it quite well, but of course, we're not all the same.

There are a lot of managers who do not philosophically believe, so they need to see their team or believe that their work was "you needed to be here to actually do it." I think there was a significant paradigm shift that that's required and some may not even make it. Little things like we needed to get all the things lined up for people to return. That is the social distancing. You couldn't use every desk. You needed the hand sanitizer, you couldn't use the cutlery. We were working towards activity-based work and all of a sudden, that's completely changed.

Then the question around infrastructure and buildings and what purpose do they serve is now being asked. When it comes to an emergency like this, I have found that they wanted direction immediately from this office. One voice, that was really important was the CEOs that were saying, "Well, what are we doing about working from home? Are they coming back? What date is that happening? What do we need to tell them?" That was all coming from health, but you needed a pivotal point. We did that. Here's some tools on how you actually do it.

The command and control bid were very well received. It's really the bit that happens now in maintaining it and those that can't cope with the fact that it's actually not going to go back to what it was, because a pandemic is going to continue for a long time. I think what I'm seeing is anxiety. We haven't talked about mental health, but I actually think mental health and wellbeing for every layer of the hierarchy is actually really important. I think it has questioned some peoples, whether it's middle management, top management needs to provide that leadership. But one would start to question, "What is my role if I can't see the people that I'm doing, and if I didn't value being a leader, if I was doing things, but I'm not here doing things with my people?" I think, there are some people that have struggled with that.

It is about giving them the tools to say you still have people, you just need to engage with them in a different way. You need to communicate in these ways and you need to operate teams. Some were not as IT literate as others and did not know how to put on the head piece or do the Teams or Zoom meeting or felt uncomfortable doing that. I am comfortable with it because I have had to adapt because I have raised children, come in the workforce, work part time and the rest of it. I have found that people that have that adaptive leadership capability I am managing, it is much better and in fact, thriving. You're thriving on the change and the innovation. For me, it is accelerated whole lot of things that I think we should have been doing probably at 10 years ago in less than five months.

GORDON DE BROWER:

That is pretty remarkable, isn't it? How quickly some of those changes have happened. On mental health, one thing it's a very wide ranging and frankly it's probably one of the biggest problems in workforces in general but also in public sector workforces and the sort of things you're describing. What about some places that have been doing is going in very directly rather than just saying in email, are you okay, going in very directly and talking to people or getting psychologists to talk to staff? What has been happening in South Australia on those sorts of issues about directly engaging?

ERMA RANIERI:

I think this is going to be the number one issue to be quite honest. I think that the bit I haven't touched on of course is the impact on the economy. Whilst public servants are considered maybe safe in their employment, many might have partners or family members that have lost jobs, and therefore, all of that in the mix and the lack of the social isolation and in particular for younger workers who are more unemployed, I think it's a significant issue. We have been doing quite a bit because we had quite a bit of feedback from our survey. The 'I work for SA' survey that said mental health and wellbeing is actually an issue prior to any COVID. We have developed what we are calling a mentally healthy workplaces toolkit and we launched that about a year ago. It's been a fantastic, and we had an action plan. Every agency had an action plan. Coming out of that, which actually gives all the tools for managers to deal with issues when they're happening in their workplace.

In terms of psychologists, one thing we have developed is a peer support programme. Part of the outcomes of the mentally healthy workplaces toolkit is that we would start to train about a thousand or I think we have done more than that, peer support officers across the sector. They do it well in emergency services when they do it. Peer support officers, we have trained about a thousand in what we call mental health first aid. Out of the pandemic, the government actually committed to another hundred being trained immediately in those frontline worker areas. We are doing that right now. It's a virtual mental health first aid.

I worked very closely with the chief psychiatrist. I don't know if you've seen it, but there's a fantastic wellbeing strategy for the state for citizens, but the chief psychiatrist and I worked together to ensure that not only did we get the peer support, extra people trained, but now we're offering another two or three EAP sessions with psychologists for all our frontline workers. That is being funded by the government. You can have up to three sessions. Now frontline workers in and during this pandemic can have up to six sessions with the psychologist.

When I talked about that on the couch series, I have a series on mental health. I had our chief psychiatrist and believe it or not, thousands of people tuned in, public servants, and they were getting tips on how to manage their life and the stresses and the rest of it, so coming from a psychiatrist, and then I had Luke Broomhall, who's a psychologist who does a lot of work with child protection and other places. Luke and I will have a series where people can just tune in and get some tips on how they manage some of that. We seriously thinking about the mental health and anxiety and the increasing statistics around what's happening in particular the younger people and our workers as we go through something that we've never had before.

GORDON DE BROWER:

That's really important. I think that's fantastic. Can I shoot now to say talk a bit about relationships and got any reflections on how you saw the service working together, but also how you saw the service working with the community and with ministers? So, the nature of that interaction between public servants, with each other, the community, and with ministers.

ERMA RANIERI:

I think that public service is probably very good at that. I talked about the complexity of working in government is that for the people that I've worked in the public service, they understand. When we have an emergency, I think the burning platform always kicks in the innovation and the resilience. I think that when you look at our frontline workers and even you look at the community and what we were all doing to do the right thing, it was second to none. Everyone was rallying behind say health, police and whatever they told us to do, we would kind of deploy our resources. I wait for the state coordinator to tell us what we need or someone from health. The collaboration between all the other agencies, I have just sent out something to all the chief executives... Sorry, I didn't talk about our mobilisation policy. So, we had a mobilisation policy, cabinet approved it, and I became the mobilisation coordinator.

When someone needs people, we deploy them. So, we want to use them within the public service. The treasurer wants that. The premier wants that. Over 800 to 1,000 public servants have been deployed in the necessary areas. All I need to do is to email or talk to the chief executives and they will deploy the people that they can as long as they're not essential service people. I just did it this morning. The South Australian police actually need border assessment officers to assess applications coming across the border and they need 30 or so by next week. I have every chief executive allocating staff to do that.

The collaboration is there. We all know what the end game is, is what health, police and any other emergency services area. So grant applications, that sort of stuff, we're deploying people depending on where the need is. We can collaborate, we can share, and we basically inform up to ministers that need it. When I was doing the joint application with the chief psychiatrist, it was a submission to the minister for health. That's not my minister, but I worked on that. Together we went and presented what we thought was needed, and I kept my minister informed. I believe public servants do this well and we have certainly proven that South Australia can.

GORDON DE BROWER:

Do you feel that the relationship with ministers has changed?

ERMA RANIERI: I think the relationship with ministers and premier has changed in a way, because this is a fairly new government, has changed because they have a much deeper understanding of the public sector. That we have been able to show why the public service exists and public sector exists. We have also proven how important we are in the current circumstances; how important we are for the survival of our citizens and for protecting our citizens. I've heard the premier say that so many times.

GORDON DE BROWER: That's great. Can I ask just, we're finishing up. Just two very quick questions. One's just around the federation. What's your observation in a minute on the federation? Then I'll come back to ask you a personal question Erma.

ERMA RANIERI: Okay. Expand a bit on what you mean the federation.

GORDON DE BROWER: Has it worked? Has South Australian seeing that it's closed its borders at various times to other states. What do you see the relationship then with other states? What do you see the relationship with the Commonwealth?

ERMA RANIERI: Okay. It has been great. I think what's happening at the moment in particular around the borders is quite challenging in relation to our Victoria border and the rest of it. One thing I can say is the Australian commissioners, I'm not sure if you're aware. We have all worked together over the last month or so to come up with a national framework for how we might second or deploy resources at a national level. We are about to publish that. The national cabinet has asked for that, and we have within a week or two come up with a way that we would actually share resources. We continue to be the home agency. I know that this has happened in the emergency services. We're just about to expand that at every level across government.

I think that is probably the best example of how the federation can actually work. Because I think emergency services do it really well within their own areas. Often, it's based on relationships and how you know each other when they deploy people for ambulance and we've done that. With a border, there is a border commissioner between Victoria and South Australia. We are working very closely with them, but I think the best example of the federation is just what's happened with the commissioners and a national framework for how we might do this, depending on where we go with the pandemic, but it can be used for a whole lot of things.

GORDON DE BROWER: That's great. Just for the last 30 seconds. I'm going to ask you a personal question of, in this process, in this time, what have you learned about yourself?

ERMA RANIERI: What I've learned about myself is that I believe I'm really good in an emergency situation. I think that if there's disruption, I'm the person that can actually pull it together. I feel very protective of people. have ageing parents and the rest, an ageing mother. So, I was worried, and I have to be honest, I was quite anxious about what that meant and our own wellbeing and where were we going, but it didn't matter. I was in the office every day and it was almost devastating to see businesses not open.

For me, it showed me that I am actually quite resilient, but you actually have to make sure that you take a break because this could burn you out. I think there are peaks and troughs of going I'm really tired and then days where it feels like Groundhog day and what do we do next. So, like anyone, I had a human response to it, but very happy to step in when I needed to show the leadership and show the way around leave, putting out a determination around COVID and how people that were sick would be looked after in the public service, but also how do they manage their own mental health as well. So, resilient would be in a word.

GORDON DE BROWER: Thank you so much. Thank you also for your contribution and what you've done for the people of South Australia. That's great. I really, really appreciate it, Erma.

ERMA RANIERI: Thank you. It's lovely being here.

GORDON DE BROWER: Thanks. To the audience, thank you for listening to this week's A National Perspective, and I look forward to hosting more state and territory public sector leaders across our nation. I hope you'll tune in again soon as we share more insights on public administration. Thank you, Erma. Until then, bye.

DAVID PEMBROKE: There you have it, another great conversation hosted by Dr. Gordon de Brouwer, Work with Purpose and National Perspective. Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms podcast network. If you do want to check out that GovComms podcast, please type it into your favourite podcast browser and it is sure to come up. If you do happen to come across our social media promotion for Work with Purpose, please pass it along and share it because it will help it to be found. If you do have enough time to give us a generous rating, probably a five star review, that would be appreciated as well, because that will help us to be discovered.

Thanks again to our good friends at IPAA and to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support. Thanks to you, the audience, for coming back once again. That's it for now. We'll be back at the same time next week, but for the moment it's bye for now.