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WORK WITH PURPOSE

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contentgroup

- DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello everyone and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public service. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: In today's program we examine the processes and procedures the Australian public service follow before, during and after a federal election. Australia is a representative democracy, which means that Australians over the age of 18 vote to elect members of parliament to make laws and decisions on their behalf. The purpose of the Australian public service as is set out in the Public Service Act is to establish and operate an apolitical public service that is efficient and effective in serving the government, the parliament and the Australian people. So with that as a foundation, what is the role of the Australian public service at election time?
- DAVID PEMBROKE: Joining me to discuss this topic is an expert panel of experienced leaders from across the Australian public service. Dr Stein Helgeby who had a long career in the Victorian public service before joining the Commonwealth is the Parliamentary Budget Officer in the Parliamentary Budget Office, a position he was appointed to in November of 2020. Prior to that, Stein was the Deputy Secretary of Governance and Resource Management at the Department of Finance.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: Peter Rush is an Assistant Secretary in the Parliamentary and Government Branch in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. His branch is responsible for ministerial arrangements, machinery of government matters, the government's legislative program and public sector governance. Peter has worked in the government division of PM&C since 2004 and has provided advice on the caretaker conventions during the last five federal elections.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: Rina Bruinsma is the First Assistant Commissioner of the Australian Public Service Commission, a position she was appointed to in May of this year. Rina joined the Commission from the Department of Finance, where she was responsible for public sector transformation, which included the whole of government grants, policy and administration, shared services, ICT investment approval, government business analytics and APS reform. Rina's time with finance included a 14-months secondment to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet as Deputy Coordinator of the interim National Bushfire Recovery Agency, where she supported its transition to becoming a permanent Commonwealth agency.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: And last, but by no means least is Katrina Di Marco, First Assistant Secretary of the Tax Analysis Division in The Treasury. Katrina's current role, which she began in February of 2020, focuses on leading teams who use data modelling to forecast tax revenue and assess the fiscal and distributional impacts of different policy proposals. Prior to her current role, she was Assistant Secretary in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, where she was the Director of several cross-agency projects on policy capability, regulating emerging technology, foundational technology. And she was also the co-head of the National Waste and Recycling Task Force.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Katrina joined the APS as a graduate in 2005. In 2014, she undertook us a secondment to BHP Billiton, where she worked as a Senior Economist based in Singapore. And from 2015 to 2018, she was the Director of Policy and a Senior Economic Advisor in the Office of the Prime Minister, the Honourable Malcolm Turnbull MP. A very big welcome to you all.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, before we begin, just a note for regular listeners. We do have four quality guests today and I want to make sure that each of them has plenty of time to share their knowledge and experience with you. So perhaps just as a bit of a warning to you, we will likely go past our normal 30-minute time limit. So perhaps you might plan a few more steps on your walk or perhaps a bigger job in the garden or whatever it is that you do when you listen to Work with Purpose. So we want to get full value from our talented guests today.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So with all of that, Peter Rush, if I might start with you. When a federal election is called, what does that mean for the public service and its day-to-day operations?

PETER RUSH: Thanks, David. What a privilege to be the first one to attempt to answer a question. When an election is called, one of the mechanical things that happens is that the House of Representatives is dissolved. And when that happens, it means that the government, which is formed by a majority of members in that house is no longer accountable to parliament through that house. The tradition has been around now for many decades in Australia, since at least the 1940s, that when that happens, the government goes into what's called a caretaker mode and applies the caretaker conventions. And that caretaker period is just a short period between the dissolution of the house and the outcome of the election. Usually only takes around six weeks, sometimes a bit longer. And during that period, governments restrict their activities and the public service adopts practices that support the caretaker conventions and protect our apolitical nature.

PETER RUSH: In essence, while the ongoing business of government continues, governments adopt practices which are aiming to ensure that their actions don't bind an incoming government or limit its freedom of action. And that's usually evidenced in three major ways. It means the government avoids taking major policy decisions. It stops making appointments of significance. And we stop entering major undertakings or contracts. And that just means that we save that stuff up for six or eight weeks' time.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So if you're a public servant and you're working, how does things change? How does your life change? Could you describe what the difference is from when you're doing your normal job when the government is in place to when you're doing your job during the caretaker period? What's the difference?

PETER RUSH: The noticeable difference for most public servants is that by and large, we stop providing policy advice to the government, but we continue to deliver the day-to-day business of government. So services, government services, benefits of paid programs continue to operate. It's not that government stops operating or that the public servants stop working. It's just a slightly different mode. The caretaking conventions mostly relate to the relationship between ministers and departments and it goes to our policy advice role.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Right. So is it a drop, noticeable drop in tempo inside the public service? Or is there a shift to other work that might not get done when government is sort of in full operational mode?

PETER RUSH: I think the days when, or if they ever existed, when the public service all went to the coast during the caretaker period for a holiday are well and truly in the past. Certainly, for most parts of government and within PM&C at least, it's just as busy as it always is. Yes, you do shift a little bit. I think there will be some parts of the public service where their job is very focused on policy advice to government, where it will slow down and they'll get the opportunity to catch up, but people delivering services to the community will notice very little difference, if any, and for some of us then caretaker period actually gets really busy.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Great. So listen, Stein, if I might turn to you, can you tell us a little bit about your role as the Parliamentary Budget Officer in the Parliamentary Budget Office before we look at it in terms of this caretaker period?

STEIN HELGEBY: Thanks, David. And thanks for having me. So the PBO as we call ourselves, we're about nine years old and we exist to support all parliamentarians to better understand complex financial issues. We do some of that in public. We do most of it confidentially. We like to say that we're about trying to level up the playing field. Big parties, whether they're in government or not in government, usually have considerable support available to them. Smaller parties, independents don't have that support, but they do have the same need to make sense of government financial issues. They're all very complex issues to handle.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And so in terms of that, how does it change or how does your work change during a caretaker period?

STEIN HELGEBY: Well, a lot of what we do relates to providing information to parliamentarians or providing costings to them. Many parliamentarians ask us for these, make these sorts of requests of us. And when we do our costing, for example, the approach we take is to try and replicate or to be at least comparable with what would happen if a member of the government asked for a costing from the public service itself.

STEIN HELGEBY: Around two thirds of our work outside of caretaker is confidential and is up to the parliamentarian how they want to use it. But when we come to election time, three things change and change importantly for us. The first change is that we become responsible for producing a definitive list of costings for all parties, government and non-government and that's publicly released after the election. That includes costings done within government under the Charter of Budget Honesty and costings done by us. You don't go get two goes of getting a costing done. You only get one go. It's one or the other. And that document we produce is a record of what the parties and any eligible independents or choosed users is what they took to the election. It's a document for the future.

STEIN HELGEBY: The second thing that happens is that if a parliamentarian requests a new costing from us during the caretaker period or even just a change costing during the caretaker period, it doesn't get covered by confidentiality anymore. It is automatically made public and handled in that way.

STEIN HELGEBY: And the third thing that happens is that parliamentarians can keep asking us for factual information, for example, about what estimates contain and that's a common one, but with a much tighter turnaround time. If we don't have the answer, we need to ask the relevant department or agency and the tighter turnaround times flow on to them. Now, importantly, that work continues, but it stays confidential even though the costings themselves that may be informed by that work are public.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So can you elaborate on how the policies are costed and how big a team do you have working on this, with this program of work?

STEIN HELGEBY: We're a small agency. Normally we're about 40-ish people. We bulk up a little bit to about 50-ish people for an election year, an election period. And that includes people seconded. So for example, we need to second people who can help us keep track of election candidates wherever makes sense. We are also try and bulk up a little bit to make sure that we can turn around costings requests quickly and information requests quickly. And then simply to produce that big document I talked about.

STEIN HELGEBY: When we do a costing, we're doing very much like anyone in government does. We're trying to say that if you change a policy in a particular way against a baseline, which is the government's current baseline, if you change that policy, then the financial implications are whatever they are, whatever they come up with. And we use the data that we get from departments and agencies. We use assumptions that we get from Treasury on economic assumptions. And we use models. Some of those models are models that we also get from departments and agencies, but others are ones we've had to create. And a lot of our work actually goes into the creation or the modification of models to produce particular sets of answers.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And is your operating tempo during the election, does it ... Obviously you have more people, but do you work longer hours? Is it more demanding during elections for the Parliamentary Budget Office?

STEIN HELGEBY: So I would describe and I haven't been through an election in the Parliamentary Budget Office, but what everyone tells me is, yes, it is quite noticeable. It's quite sharp. So if you look over time, the requests of us spike quite dramatically the closer you get to an election and then they drop off again afterwards. And so there is a significant change in tempo and also a change in expectations around the turnaround time.

STEIN HELGEBY: Now I'd like to think as I think this about all processes, the first job, if you're trying to manage a process is to get it planned as much as you can, recognising those things that aren't within your control and then try and put in place arrangements, whether that's people with responsibilities or systems as best as you can to try and smooth the peaks. And that's the way I think about it. And election isn't going to avoid the peaks for an organisation like us, but good planning is something that we aim to use in order to smooth the peaks.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Sounds like a great place to work. And I'm sure, I'm sure lots of people will be knocking on your door seeing if they can be seconded to work in the Parliamentary Budget Office.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But Katrina, if I might come to you. We get through the election, we have a result and there's a new government with new ministers. You've been involved in briefing new governments and supporting new ministers. Can you describe for us that process of first preparing for and then briefing an incoming government?

KATRINA DI MARCO: Thanks, David. And thanks very much for having me to join the panel here. It's always great to be talking around these kinds of issues.

KATRINA DI MARCO: I think there are lots of strands of an incoming government brief process and I think it is important to think about it as a process. It isn't just the production of a document and something you hand over to the government on the first day. It's about setting up the relationship and the dialogue between you, the minister and their office. And this means that it's important to sort of put yourself in their shoes and the users of the document and the work that you're producing.

KATRINA DI MARCO: I guess, like all briefing products, it's important that we think about their style and their tone and their format with empathy, if we want them to have maximum influence and impact. And this means that the documents and the work that you produce during that period is going to look substantially different for different users and for different outcomes. And often we think about it as, one, a returning government with the same minister, two, a returning government with a new minister, or three, a new government. And these can be quite substantially different products.

KATRINA DI MARCO: And I tend to think about these, the work that you're doing in that process as being in three parts. One of those first parts, which is really important is the transition to the office. The documents that you produce for that, and the work you can do for that include a really wide range of things. This can start from things like accountabilities, key portfolio legislation, to things like organisational charts, who to call, key contacts and down to things like propose templates for correspondence in QTBs. This is really the part that's helping the government get established because as soon as they're sworn in, they're off and running and you want to get them started off on the best possible foot.

KATRINA DI MARCO: And none of out of the process, which Stein's already talked about a little bit, is around election commitments. So over the period, parties will make various commitments and policies that they propose to implement if elected. They're often central processes for coordinating the stock of government and or election commitments that are proposed to be implemented. But it's important that as a department, that we've understood what those commitments are and have put thought into how you would go about implementing those commitments.

KATRINA DI MARCO: I think the third part and the third thing we think about a lot is things like policy advice. I know in that section, this covers a range of things from the strategic landscape, what's going on in the economy, what's going on in the kind of foreign environment and advance of policy and implementation advice across a range of portfolio issues. It's a really, really diverse process.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But if you were to pick out sort of some key elements of it that you must do to be successful, what's that advice that you would give to people who may be in these roles for the first time, to make sure they must deliver in order to be effective in supporting the incoming government?

KATRINA DI MARCO: Yeah. I think there's a couple of key things there. I think one, as I said, it's really important to think about that transition to office. But people have just been through a really significant election campaign. This is about how do you help them get set up and get off on the right foot. Often when after election, we're really excited to talk to people about policy advice and new policy ideas. But one of those key things is to help people get themselves set up, get the office established and get government humming again. That's kind of one of those key roles for the public service.

KATRINA DI MARCO: And the other thing I would say is really have a look at election commitments and a good focus on how you would go about implementing those and supporting the government of the day.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And clearly there are the two major parties who are largely involved informing potential government. How much work goes into both sides of it, either a returning government or a new government and understanding the policies that have been committed to? Do you actually go through two different processes that have one for each eventuality?

KATRINA DI MARCO: You absolutely do. Yeah. You've got one for each eventuality. And both of them involve in my experience sort of an equal amount of work. I was really touched by what Peter said before, the idea that during caretaker that you're off to the coast is sort of most certainly not my experience. It's often one of those, one of the busiest periods that you go through in government. It's an exciting period. I'd encourage people to get involved in it. It's a really great opportunity to think about policy, to think about delivery, to think about implementation, but it's most certainly not a quiet period.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So Rina, the public service has a number of important obligations to the parliament and indeed to the Australian people. What are those obligations during the caretaker period and how are they different to the regular obligations of the public service during government?

RINA BRUINSMA: Yeah. Thanks David. I mean, as Peter outlined earlier on, the APS still has a role to play, to support the business of government. So ordinary matters of administration, they're still addressed. What becomes more important for us, I think, is that we need to be a lot more careful that we are preserving the apolitical nature of our role. You would know that the APS employees are required under the Code of Conduct to uphold the value of impartiality at all times. So that means that in addition to providing high quality professional support, that needs to be irrespective of which political party is in power and of course, on their own personal political beliefs.

RINA BRUINSMA: We also need to ensure that our actions don't provide grounds for any reasonable person to conclude that we can't serve the government of the day impartially. But apart from that, the world goes on. Some examples, when grant agreements or contracts have been made, we continue to make payments under those agreements and manage those contracts, to make sure that those services are delivered to the Australian people. Specifically in relation to the parliament, annual reports are still tabled. It's just done out of session. And that ensures that the parliament and the public still have visibility of our performance. It's our usual business, and so it goes on.

RINA BRUINSMA: I often think it's often more useful to think about caretaker in terms of the things that we don't do or that we need to be very careful in the way that we do them. As others have said, we don't carry out work that would bind an incoming government to a particular course of action. Doesn't mean we don't ... that we stop everything. So we can still work on policy. We just don't provide policy advice to the minister during that time and we don't support any major policy decision-making.

RINA BRUINSMA: And while we might manage existing grants and agreements, we don't enter into major new agreements or contracts during this time. The split between what we do and don't do isn't always black and white. All agencies usually go through a process of kind of identifying the activities underway that they may pause, or they set up processes within the agency so that when requests come from the minister's office, somebody is triaging those requests, or just making sure that those requests sort of align with the caretaker conventions. And if you're ever in doubt, PM&C does have the guidance on caretaker conventions. And that provides a really detailed advice about what we, what ministers will be doing and what ministers won't be doing.

DAVID PEMBROKE: I was about to ask of that in terms of where that guidance is. And how comprehensive is that guidance for people working in the public service?

RINA BRUINSMA: Well, I don't want to speak on behalf of PM&C, but I referred to it quite a lot. It's actually got some really detailed examples. So under each of the headings of the things that the government ... sorry, that public service may do, it provides some advice on each of those. So I think, I believe it's on the PM&C website.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay. Very good. So people can get to the PM&C website and search it up and I'm sure they'll find it there. So Stein, what expectations and obligations apply when you make information requests during caretaker?

STEIN HELGEBY: Well, thanks David. As I said a bit earlier, we have quite a strong and collaborative set of relationships with the Commonwealth departments and agencies and quite frankly, an organisation our size simply couldn't function without a good sharing of information and without those good relationships. But we don't get free reign about all of those things. Agencies do have some ability to specify how the information they provide to us can be used.

STEIN HELGEBY: These arrangements are set up both formally through an MIU and informally through simply paperworking together over a period of time. And just to give some sense of how common this is. Over the last five years, so more than ... a bit more than one election and a few other periods, we've actually received back from departments and agencies something like 2,400 responses to our requests. And 99% of those responses came within the timeframes that we'd asked for and the time runs we negotiated. So I think it's very strong relationships, very strong relationship. And in fact, what that shows is most agencies are used to us making information requests outside of the caretaker period.

STEIN HELGEBY: But the interesting thing is when you come into caretaker period, sometimes they double check with us about whether it's appropriate to fulfil them. And for factual information the answer is yes. For both caretaker costings and preparation of election commitments report, the document we produce, legislatively the head of a Commonwealth agency must provide information that assists with costing commitments.

STEIN HELGEBY: So during the caretaker period, there's often a high number of information requests that come through with much tighter turnarounds because of the duration of caretaker. So, whereas outside caretaker, we might say, could you turn something around in 10 days or five days, depending on what the request is, that all cuts down to two days. So in fact, part of the reason why people in departments stay busy is because we keep asking them for things and we ask for them in much shorter timeframes and we're used to asking them.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But your experience is ... Well, I suppose, as you said, you haven't quite been in this. You haven't been through an election cycle yet, but your understanding is that the departments are gearing up to be able to respond faster as well.

STEIN HELGEBY: Yeah, that's my understanding and my expectation. One advantage I would say is of having senior and experienced people right throughout the public service is that there are people who maybe haven't done as many elections as Peter has in the role that he's done, but who have done more than one election and who know what they're talking about and who have been through some of these difficult issues and these matters of judgement. And so they're excellent people to have in any organisation because they help everyone navigate. And a lot of what happens in caretaker, in my experience, is navigating questions.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Katrina, if we might just return to you and at that focus on the relationship between the APS and the minister's offices. This period leading up to the election and during that caretaker period, does it change? And if it does change, how does it change?

KATRINA DI MARCO: Thanks, David. I guess I've sat on both sides of the fence for a caretaker and there is a noticeable difference over this period. Now I think Peter and Rina have already pointed out. There are a lot of parts of the public service and the access and the aspects of public administration that don't change. Taxes keep getting collected. Passports keep getting processed. National parks are open. So a lot of the business of government actually continues.

KATRINA DI MARCO: I think the bit that really does change though, is around the provision of policy advice. And the current advice that the caretaker conventions and Peter's advice provides is that advice can continue to be provided for government if it's necessary for an ongoing business or it's solely factual. And I think that's where Rina sort of alluded to before. Those lines can feel a little bit grey and it's important that you don't suffer in silence I suppose. There's a lot of processes within departments to help provide support.

KATRINA DI MARCO: As Stein said, there's a lot of people who've navigated this before and can help you provide visibility and support for making decisions. A lot of departments will set up things like caretaker working groups. Some of them will have key reporting functions where if you're not exactly sure where you sit on that line, you can go and ask questions. And often if they're not sure, they're going to reach out to PM&C to seek to clarify. So it is definitely different, but there are more things that are the same than you might think.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So in that, is it your experience that there is a lift in volume of requests around policy of departments during the caretaker period, or does it flatten off?

KATRINA DI MARCO: In my experience, it flattens off, just because that there is a much more limited nature of things that you can do. So you're not going to be providing policy advice on new policy ideas at that point in time. They might provide sort of factual requests for specific pieces of information that you can provide. But the nature of what you can do is quite different. And in my experience, ministers offices understand that, and they know that and they know that fairly well. And so you do see that volume dropping off, but then again, you've got the sort of acceleration of work for your incoming government process. So you'll continue to be just as busy, but doing slightly different things.

- DAVID PEMBROKE: Great. Hey Rina, can you talk about how public servants can navigate the issue of involvement in legitimate electoral activity while upholding the expectations of an apolitical service?
- RINA BRUINSMA: Yeah, thanks, David. I mentioned before, of course there is that need for us to uphold that value of impartiality at all times as public servants. But that doesn't mean that we have to be completely apolitical in our private lives. We're also citizens and we do have a right to participate in political activities outside of work, but we just need to be really careful about how our private behaviour could affect the public's confidence in the impartiality and integrity of the APS as a whole.
- RINA BRUINSMA: So if you want to take part in political activities in a private capacity, you just need to consider how your actions might affect the confidence of a reasonable member of the community that the APS remains impartial. The APSC has a guide called the APS Values and Code of Conduct in Practice on our website. And that includes a section called Employees as Citizens. And there's also a great tool that we've got, the APS Guidance for Social Media, which is pretty relevant during election campaigns.
- RINA BRUINSMA: So these guides include examples of things like whether or not it's okay to display political material in the office, having a role in a political campaign. So for example, handing out how to vote cards and entering into political debates online. You'll often find the answer is quite contextual. So it might depend on your seniority within the agency, the relationship between the activity you're engaged in and the type of work you do and the nature of the views you're expressing. It's not always black and white, but those guides give some really good ... They're a really useful tool in helping to navigate that situation.
- RINA BRUINSMA: And for those who want to go a bit further and actually into the realm of parliament, the rules are a little bit different. So for the federal parliament, if you wanted to go, if you wanted to run for federal parliament, you'd actually need to resign from the APS. But you do have a right to be reengaged. And there are very different considerations in local, state or territory governments. So it's a really good idea in those situations to speak to your HR area. And in actual fact, in some cases you might need to get legal advice. As I said, it isn't always black and white, but those guides that I referenced provide situation examples that can help you identify the risks, so you can navigate your way safely through.
- DAVID PEMBROKE: In your experience, do you find that members of the APS talk to each other about these particular judgments that they may have to make about the particular electoral activity they might like to be involved in and what sort of one side of the boundary and what might be the other? Or do they rely on the guides and the direction from the leadership to define those lines for them?

RINA BRUINSMA: Look, I think from my experience, the conversation always starts on the floor. So you reach out to your colleagues and friends because it's part of the interest and excitement, I guess, of being a citizen in an election. People often do want to get involved, but they do take very seriously their responsibilities as public servants. And so you'll often find that the conversation starts in the team and most people will refer to those guides that I've talked about or they'll go to their manager or to their HR area.

RINA BRUINSMA: I mean, my advice is because it is contextual, it's good to get some advice. The guides are good, but they don't cover every situation. What they're aiming to do is provide you with a tool that you can assess the risks of your behaviour against the risks that you may be perceived as being impartial, or there may be a conflict of interest and you can make a decision. But your manager is probably a really good place to start. And then if you need to, escalate into your HR area.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay. Thanks for that. Peter, what advice, having been around as long as you've been around and been involved in, as you say, five elections, what advice might you offer people who haven't been involved in elections? Obviously there's turnover and staffing to the APS. What advice would you give them if they start to think about how they will contribute through this period?

PETER RUSH: David, I think my colleagues have already started by giving a bit of a free advertisement for the PM&C's guidance on caretaker conventions, which is on the PM&C website. Look, that's a great resource. And for many public servants, that's a good place to start.

PETER RUSH: I'll return the favour to Rina and say, I think that the APSC guidance is excellent. The Values and Code of Conduct in Practice is a really good go-to for people to understand how to follow the rules and put them into practice. And as Stein said, it's really important to go talk to the people who have been there before. Just speak to the experienced hands in your agency and have those conversations so that you get to know what the right thing is to do. But importantly, it's not black and white, the things that you should or shouldn't do during an election period on any of those fronts. It's going to take a lot of judgement and mostly common sense.

PETER RUSH: So what we try to do in PM&C is set up a bit of a hotline for people to come to if they need some help to get through the application of the caretaker conventions in their particular circumstances. We try and avoid having 150,000 odd public servants across the Commonwealth all ringing the same caretaker hotline. So what we encourage is for portfolio departments to set up a small team of senior officers that act as a kind of triage for any caretaker or election challenges and questions that might come up during that time.

PETER RUSH: And then, for those key people in each agency to be in touch with PM&C if they've got something that is even trickier than that, than they feel confident to deal with. And that generally works pretty well. I mean, yes, there are some tricky situations that come up during an election period. That's inevitable. So people will have dilemmas, but we always get through the other side eventually.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So in terms then of this period, because the election is the culmination of this wonderful system of government we have of democracy. And there's often a lot of joy as we celebrate this particular, our system of government. Does it translate into the APS? And this is a question to all of you. Is there that sense of excitement and the culmination, I suppose, of a period of time where maybe the country is going to change, maybe it's not going to change. Does that sort of excitement sort of reach into the APS and do people get excited about elections? Peter, I'll start with you.

PETER RUSH: I get excited about elections.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah.

PETER RUSH: Yes. But that's kind of, it's a core part of our job to support that election process. As you say, it's a very important part of the way our government works and we should reflect on the fact. As public servants, we should be reflecting on the fact that this is the way, not how our government changes, but it's how we actually maintain the continuity of government. Government, it keeps on going through the caretaker period because of the caretaker conventions. And even when there is a change of government, it's a seamless change of government. And I think that's a remarkable thing and should be celebrated.

DAVID PEMBROKE: What about for you Katrina? Do you get caught up in it at all? Or are you just heads down trying to deliver?

KATRINA DI MARCO: I think you do get caught up, but in a good way. Like, I really sort of reflect on what Peter said. It is an exciting time. The incoming government briefing process is a really different period once you're in that caretaker mode. And I think there's lots of opportunities to look at different aspects of your role, different aspects of your work and engage sort of different parts of you, particularly for those in policy advice, when you're working through the incoming government briefing process, it's a really exciting time. I think it's great.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And what about you Stein? You'd probably be exhausted by the time this is all over.

STEIN HELGEBY: I'm sure there's plenty of people in that situation. We've got to remember that for the Australian Electoral Commission, for example, to run an election, it's one of the greatest mobilizations in peace time of people across Australia. And it happens every three years and it delivers a fundamentally important part of our democracy. So I think an election period, it's a really important time to remember why we do the jobs we do, and often why people were attracted to working in these sorts of jobs in the first place. They wanted to be part of a big system, a big democratic system that delivers for the people of Australia. And nothing brings that home more than election time.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And Rina, what about you?

RINA BRUINSMA: Well, look, I think my colleagues have sort of summed up my experience and I don't mean to be flippant, but I think there's also the anticipation of the sausage sizzle or the vegetarian equivalent when you're not under COVID restrictions. I'm going to share a little story of when Stein and I worked together. We found a website that had all of the places you could go to poll, but you could look up which sort of snacks they had, whether it was vegetarian or otherwise.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, listen, we do ... A feature of the podcast is we hear from the future leaders of IPAA. And we have a question from one of the committee members, Anthony Pronin who works at the National Indigenous Australians Agency. And he asks, "Once the caretaker period starts, public servants need to provide external stakeholders with information about the caretaker conventions and the limitations on the current engagements. How can these interactions be used to maintain relationships and build trust?" I'll throw that one to you to start, Peter.

PETER RUSH: It's a tricky one because I think we do need to be careful in our stakeholder relationships during the caretaker period that we don't over-complicate things. As I said earlier, the caretaker thing mostly applies to the relationship between ministers and their offices and public servants in departments. So public servants should be able to maintain community stakeholder relationships through that period, without any complication.

PETER RUSH: There will be some circumstances where, yes, it will be necessary to explain that, for instance, I'm not going to be able to provide policy advice to the minister until the other side of the election period. There might be circumstances where you're dealing with a tender process or a contractual process or something where you have to explain similarly that maybe the process will be deferred or slowed down a bit in order to get through that period. But you should be able to continue to maintain your stakeholder relationships during a caretaker period, by and large.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So listen, Stein, Peter, Rina and Katrina, we promised a lot and you delivered. Thanks a lot for the conversation today. It is an important conversation because often there are many people who do join the APS between elections and they won't have had the benefit or the experience that you've shared with us today. And I think it would be very valuable for them to reflect on the advice and guidance that you've given us today. So on behalf of the audience, thank you for your time today, much appreciated.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And a big thanks to you, the audience, for giving up some of your time and attention to listen to today's important conversation. We certainly appreciate it. Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms podcast network. And if you would like to subscribe to the podcast, which I strongly suggest that you do, you will find it by typing the name into any of your favourite podcast app catchers and it will be delivered to you on your phone. If you do happen to see the social media promotion for this episode in your feeds, a like or a share helps. And if you do have time for a rating or a review, that also certainly helps the podcast to be discovered.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Thanks once again, to our great partners at IPAA and the Australian Public Service Commission who are so supportive in making these conversations happen and also to the team at contentgroup who play a key role in producing the program each fortnight. I'm David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight, but for the moment it's bye for now.

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