

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE EPISODE #35

DAVID FRICKER

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DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public service. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks 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 emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city, and this region.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of being able to find access, analyse, and share trusted and reliable digital information in a timely and responsive manner. My guest today is David Fricker, the Director-General of the National Archives, and the man charged with responsibility for the integrity and performance of the federal government's information management system. The National Archives, like most of the APS have been extremely busy during the pandemic. The National Archives ensured that the data collected by the government's COVIDSafe app is secure and destroyed in accordance with the legislation.

DAVID PEMBROKE: The National Archives agreed in approach to managing cross jurisdictional National Cabinet records and worked with government agencies to help ensure that their most important records that documented their response to the COVID-19 pandemic was captured, secured and held as part of the national archives archival collection. David Fricker has been the director general of the archive since 2012. And like many of his fellow guests on Work with Purpose is an experienced and accomplished public servant, who as it happens is also currently serving as the president of the International Council on Archives. He joins me in the studio, David, welcome to Work with Purpose.

DAVID FRICKER: Thank you very much.

DAVID PEMBROKE: David, one of the most interesting parts of Work with Purpose is to ask guests to go back to March of last year when the pandemic was starting to build, or probably earlier in the year starting to build, but then we got to that point of, okay, borders closed, things are happening. Can you take us through your journey of when you started understanding what was coming and what did you do to prepare?

DAVID FRICKER: Well, it was a multi-pronged response as we started to understand the gravity of this situation and the international aspect of it all. First of all, about staff, what we'll be doing to look after our staff. Now, the Archives, we have offices all over Australia. In every state and territory jurisdiction, there were different pace of events were unfolding. And then through the Victorian lockdown of course our office in Victoria was doing it much tougher than say our staff up in Darwin who were enjoying in a very much uninterrupted life throughout the pandemic, all be it feeling the pressures in other ways. And we also were thinking about the records, what our responsibilities might be to actually make sure that we were preserving a record of Australia's experience through the Pandemic, to start thinking early about, okay, this is big, this is a pivotal point for Australia.

DAVID FRICKER: It its national history, Australia's history in the world that how we relate to other nations, et cetera. And so are we collecting Australia's memory? If this is going to serve us in the future? And also we're thinking about, well, looking back, what have we learned? What's in the archives that we could draw upon to help us face this situation? Because this is not ... I was very familiar and as the director general of the archives, I get very upset with people and they kept on introducing this speech by saying, these are unprecedented times. Well, they're not unprecedented times, the bubonic plague happens, it's just that it's not in our lived experience. And so these are unprecedented in our living memory, but Australia, if you start going back, we had AIDS. That was a major health challenge that needed a public policy response to it.

DAVID FRICKER: It created a lot of uncertainty, a lot of disruption in Australia. SARS, to some extent also intersected with international travel and international security, not to the extent that COVID has, but then of course, you eventually get back to the Spanish flu, which was a major disruptor. It killed tens of thousands of Australians, tens of millions of people around the world. And yet the Spanish flu, we remember hardly anything about the Spanish flu. We remember it was coincident with the first world war. And while we have, feels like we've recorded every bullet fired in the first world war, we remember almost nothing about our experience with the Spanish flu, even though the borders in Australia closed, even though there were public debates about, should we wear a mask? There was arguments about what sort of medication, how much we could trust there were never was a vaccine, but there was many, many treatments discussed back in the day.

DAVID FRICKER: And so all of these things were going on around us as the Archives about, well, how can we use memory to help us confront the situation and come up with informed policy responses and how are we going to deal with the public through this, the public services is quite disrupted, but I can expand more on that, I suppose. How are we going to continue to deliver essential services? And of course, looking ahead, let's not repeat the mistakes of the past. Can we make sure that while we're in the middle of this thing, while we are all running in a hundred different directions at once, while we're turning the model of the public service on its head and surging resources here, and mobilising ourselves in new ways, standing up a national cabinet, all sorts of new things were going on, but let's remember we're making history while we're doing this. And our legacy is going to be what Australia remembers about this, because there will be another pandemic and we'd better be ready for it next time.

DAVID PEMBROKE: It's a lovely notion, isn't it, relying on the memory of the country in order to make best decisions. How did you go about doing that? How did you go about assembling those insights and distributing those insights to the right people so that it had an impact?

DAVID FRICKER: Well, the main thing was through early, well, not quite an intervention, but early instructions to all departmental heads and Secretary heads, and laying it out was just a letter to accountable authorities across the public service, just I suppose, reciting those things I just went through that in times of crisis the need to maintain our collective memory in Australia is more important than ever. The thing about archives records, record keeping as a 21st century public servant, we think, okay, my work is digital. We're in the moment, we're all about being disruptive and innovate and of course we are. And record keeping can sound a bit unfashionable, that's the sort of thing you used to do on a Friday afternoon when you'd finished the real work. But of course the difference is in the digital world, you can't help but make records.

DAVID FRICKER: It's baked into everything we do, but it still requires deliberate action and it still requires professionalism, and it requires a public servant to understand his or her value to Australia in as much the transaction I'm performing for that Australian resident, citizen today. But the value I'm creating is the memory of this, is the record, is our corporate knowledge, our collective memory, et cetera, because at the end of the day we build roads and bridges, and schools, et cetera. But for most public servants, the real value is the records that they leave behind for the next time Australia has to face the same challenge.

DAVID PEMBROKE: What sort of response did you get to your letter to the various Secretaries?

DAVID FRICKER: No, no. It was a very positive response. I think people understood ... Public servants do understand that we, at times like this, we make history, we are of course serving the Australian public. But we are the Australian Government, we are the executive, we make history. History is not just made on battlefields and in science labs, it's also made in public administration because what builds a country is a product of its government, of its public administration. And I got a very good response, a very positive response to that. And it really resonated, I think with public servants, understanding of their professional obligations, but also that legacy, the value we create. And so it was quite gratifying in that regard.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Interesting around that professional obligation, but because it was a crisis, some of the rules and decision-making changed. And so we went to a sort of principles based decision decision-making as opposed to following the black letter of a process. How does that change, record keeping, when you've suddenly working to a different tempo, a different rhythm, a different decision-making framework?

DAVID FRICKER: Well, it's the way of values and culture become very, very important. You're right, we don't reach for a playbook every 10 minutes and figure out what the standard operating procedure tells me I should do now at a time like this, because there's no book. It comes down to value, our public service values, we are accountable, we maintain integrity, we are impartial. And all of those values are baked into what we do. And therefore it becomes second nature to ensure that what I am doing is accountable. That if I'm doing something new, if I'm doing something quite novel, then it's vitally important that I communicate that to my peers, to my organisation, to my collaborators. And the more that we work in policy hubs across traditional silos of departmental structures and agencies, et cetera, it becomes very important to be able to communicate precisely what we are doing in very concise, effective ways.

DAVID FRICKER: Well, that's record keeping. This is just what we are doing to lay a very clear trail of the decisions we've taken and the changes we've made. Also you mentioned in your introduction there, the changes in federal state relations also became very important as well. And we were stretching some of the preconceived ideas about information policy as it applies. Within the Commonwealth, we're normally just very accustomed to working with Commonwealth information, Commonwealth rules apply. You stand up a National Cabinet and you have Premiers, Prime Minister, Chief Ministers in the room, all part of that same organ of government, but each responsible and accountable to their own jurisdictions under their own laws, as it applies to information management.

DAVID FRICKER: And that was where we needed to step in very quickly and work with our colleagues in Prime Minister and Cabinet, and our state jurisdictions, and just make sure that there was that clear understanding. And we could continue not to interrupt, not to slow down anything, but to pave the way for smooth, fast, effective government, by just recognising those information policy issues and just knocking, not knocking them over, but just clarifying them. And you could if you're pragmatic and you're values-based and you've got a good information, culture well then your information solves problems. It never stands in the way.

DAVID PEMBROKE: How did it hold up, that relationship with the states, but also inside the Federal Government, if you were to give us a score out of 10, how did it go?

DAVID FRICKER: Look, the score out of 10. That's a good question. I don't want overwrite anything. Well, I think the states it's been very good, very cooperative. With the COVIDSafe App, for example, that moved very, very quickly in terms of the Health Minister, making a statement about this data will be collected for this specific purpose. It will be destroyed once the pandemic is finished and that is the case, but that's where it is resident in a Commonwealth data warehouse, a data holding, data store.

DAVID FRICKER: But of course, if a case does break out and a state jurisdiction has to download that data to do case management. It kicks into their accountability framework. And I would say that those sort of arrangements, 10 out of 10, because everybody across the states, territories and the Commonwealth are on the same page in terms of privacy, accountability, integrity. And we should get onto the phenomenon of disinformation misinformation, which becomes so pronounced during a pandemic, we're all on this campaign against disinformation.

DAVID FRICKER: And so none of us wanted to do anything that was going to add to the uncertainty and confusion being felt by the Australian public, in whatever jurisdiction they were and whether they were receiving a Commonwealth service or a state service, or a local council service. That all worked really well, as to the pace of maintaining a collective memory in Australia through the maintenance of records. I think I would say that did not decrease during the pandemic. We continued to have our challenges in terms of maintaining or achieving our goals with whole of government records management and information management, one downside of something like a pandemic is that it can create if you like almost a single issue government. And so it does mean that everything you do has to centre around a single issue, being the pandemic, in which case it does constrain the ability you have to make other innovations, which might've given us a higher score in whole of government records and information management.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Interestingly though, the Archives, like many government institutions is going through its own transformation. And that information management system that you talk about was a new whole of government system that was stood up. I think January the first it came into being. Did that help or did it hinder your effectiveness?

DAVID FRICKER: Well, it helped because that whole, and the policy that we've stood up is building trust in the public record. And it actually arrived at a very good time when we talk about misinformation, disinformation, and we talk about uncertainty, doubt and disruption in Australian society. It helped because it was all about all of these actions we're putting into this policy, all of these mandatory, and these recommended policy pieces in our building trust in the public record are about building trust, are about creating information that can be trusted, can be trusted by the community that we serve, can be trusted by the people making decisions downstream from you, and can be trusted by you when we are facing our challenges, making decisions ahead. That worked really well. The other thing about this policy is it's moved away from a sort of a fixed target, by the 5th of June, you will have achieved X, Y and Z, and this is a maturity model.

DAVID FRICKER: This is all about building trust. This is about making a whole range of recommendations and just the very few or mandatory requirements, but every government entity can work towards this at their own pace, within their own investment program to suit their own IT strategy or whatever other strategy, but to always build maturity, to grow and evolve into a very mature information management regime. Which does in the end build that interoperability of government information across the Commonwealth and indeed with our stakeholders outside of government, and also has got long term value. We're building information which will survive generations of technology, will survive machinery of government changes, will survive political cycles, and we'll continue to grow evolve sort of snowball as a true national asset for Australia. I think the timing, not that anyone chose the timing of COVID by any means, but the timing of introducing that building trust in the public record actually was worked out very well.

DAVID PEMBROKE: How do we rank globally or internationally around the effectiveness of our information management system?

DAVID FRICKER: Look, I would say we're probably up there in the top third, I'd have no hesitation saying that, there are some nation states, which are so far behind us, which we do not have a very reliable public record, a very reliable legal regime that guarantees records are made and guarantees records are kept. Australia, what puts us up in that top third is that it is almost unique in the archives legislation in Australia that makes it an offence to destroy or alter a record without the permission of the national archives. And also which dictates in which the national archives of the nation determines what records will be kept permanently as part of the national collective memory in most other countries around the world, either the departments and the ministries that create the records themselves determine what should be kept and what can be thrown away.

DAVID FRICKER: And also the ministries determine what should be made publicly available and what should be held back from public view. And I think the Australian system is very strong in this regard because there is a conflict of interest there. And I would say to all the public servants, listening to this podcast, we've got to realise the reason we have this visceral fear of FOI and archives is because we have this visceral feeling that if I reveal all the records of what I've done, it's going to expose me, it'll make me more vulnerable, it'll unpick the work I've done. But that simply isn't the case. The Australian system is designed to bolster the integrity of our public administration in Australia for that very reason that our records do with the passage of time, talking about 20 years in the case of archives, those records do for the most part become publicly vulnerable.

DAVID FRICKER: We are held to account by the Australian public, that's how we build trust and the knowledge that these records of what we're doing, what we have done, the evidence of what we've done, the knowledge that we all know in the public service that they will become publicly available in 20 years. It does actually add the integrity of what we do. It builds transparency and integrity and accountability of government, and it makes us a stronger Australian government. And I think this is why Australia does have one of the most successful democracies in the world, because one of those foundations of Australian democracy is this transparency and accountability, and it's embedded in the Archives Act.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, interestingly, you mentioned disinformation and misinformation because that's generally discussed through the lens of foreign actors trying to influence elections, but you're looking at it through the lens of the public servant. What's that story? Where does the public servant sit as a contributor or as a player, as an actor in disinformation misinformation narrative?

DAVID FRICKER: We're a very vitally important actor in this narrative because we are Australia's defence. We are the defenders of democracy. We're not parliamentarians or politicians, but it's our role within the executive, we are the defenders of democracy. And that is because the information that we're producing, that the quality and the integrity of the services that we deliver are where the Australian public can obtain authentic, reliable, trustworthy information, and where information gets weaponized outside the public service, but where information does become politicised becomes weaponized in order to pervert public discourse in order to change, to manipulate public opinion, to suit more nefarious outcomes. That's the huge role of the public service as a national institution is to make sure that the Australian public and indeed internationally. But if I talk about the Australian public is entitled to get authentic, accurate information and where there is misinformation, where there is disinformation being used.

DAVID FRICKER: So in the case of disinformation, to, as I say, pervert public opinion, public service needs to step into that and needs to say, well, here is the authoritative record, here's the authoritative information. And this was the strength of Brendan Murphy, for example, and other health officials. The pandemic, and we've all applauded this and the public service that this has been one of the high points in the public service. We've seen a public official appear as one of the most trusted voices in Australia at a time when Australia needed that reliable information coming out. And I think all of us in the public service have got that role to play. If we're talking to someone over the counter, over the phone through teams or whatever the channels are, we are the voice of the Australian government and it's our role to make sure that we are combating the effects of misinformation disinformation.

DAVID FRICKER: And we need to be very, very aware. There's a lot of information swimming around out there on social media or in various other fora that we need to, it's like an infodemic. We talk about pandemics, but there's an information of infodemic, and we've got to inoculate Australia against that infodemic.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But that requires velocity, that requires decision-making, that requires permissions, that requires, dare I say it, approvals. How do we get the system to move faster?

DAVID FRICKER Well, first, from where I sit in the National Archives and where we sit in terms of setting the policy for how information and records in the digital age, we'll talk about information. The way we're setting policies for information that is created to be interoperable, for example, across the whole government discoverable and usable and reusable. That's the first thing, you've got to have information, which is fit for purpose. We need information systems, which is fit for purpose. And so when anyone, any public servant at any level is called upon to produce information, and during the pandemic we've seen these cycles become very short. You've got 10 minutes, the meeting starts in 10 minutes.

DAVID FRICKER: If you take 12 minutes to produce it, it's too late. I think it, it does require us to have that professionalism in the way that we create, maintain and use information. And then I think you've pointed to some other things. We need those authorities, we need rapidly changing public service, we need to be certain about our responsibilities, but also our authority to use that information and produce it and share it when it is correct under our frameworks. But also to serve the public. And at fast moving times like this, we need to be a fast moving public service.

DAVID PEMBROKE: It's interesting. I had a conversation with someone the other day about a fast moving public service. And I think that is now almost the standard operating procedure. And there is this sense when you're going around talking to people in the public service that it's going fast and getting faster, and people are racing, I really think in many ways to try to keep up and there's increasing demands and pressures and other things. As someone who sits in a highly responsible position such as yours, in that sort of operating environment, what advice do you have to people to help them to best acquit their roles and responsibilities in this increasingly fast, pressured environment that they're working under at the moment?

DAVID FRICKER: Well, I think you've got to know, when you get out of bed in the morning and you go to work, wherever that might be, it might be in your kitchen, or it might be down the road, wherever you're going to work, you've got to really, you've got to live it, all of us need to stand for something in the public service. We've got to go to work with a purpose, dare I use that fantastic phrase. You've got to. But it's true. You got to work with a purpose. It's not enough to learn a policy or learn a procedure. And we don't go to work to follow rules, and we don't go to work to make sure that nothing happens. We go to work with a purpose to make sure that we understand the value that we are creating the system that we work within.

DAVID FRICKER: And we don't go to work to make sure nothing happens. We go to work to make sure something happens. And I think we just need to keep building that confidence in who we are individually, how we work within a team and to exercise that collective responsibility. If none of us are working alone, it's very difficult to make a mistake, if you're working in a team. Mistakes are made usually when you're working alone. And so if we have that team, that strength of the team, if we are working with a purpose, and if we are really confident in who we are and what we're doing, then I think that's a huge part of it because when I say go to work to make sure nothing happens, I think there is still across the public service, we have to meet this because we still are a risk of averse to fight all the wonderful things I've said about what the pandemic experience has shown that we can do.

DAVID FRICKER: We can break out of normal methods of behaviour, et cetera. But we can't wait for a crisis to show us we're capable of that. We have to start normalising that attitude in our wartime, you learn how to work during wartime, and then during peacetime, you try and maintain that. And I think this is part of it. Even if there is no crisis, we should be prepared to be a little bit less fearful about adverse consequences and a bit more courageous about leaning into a problem as a team and getting on with it. And in information policy, it still upsets me that I see a lot of work that isn't done, or a lot of information that is not shared promulgated, whatever, because we worried about FOI or we worry about privacy. And both FOI and privacy are important, but they exist to enable us to get more done.

DAVID FRICKER: They weren't invented to stop us doing things. And I think if we were managing our information holdings much more effectively, we wouldn't be so afraid of FOI. We'd actually be proud of what we do, we'd be proud of the record that shows what we did. And we'd be much more prepared when somebody wants to see some information in government we'd be far more prepared to say yes, there it is. It demonstrates that we are upholding public service values, that demonstrates that we are working for you, and that demonstrates that we can be trusted. As opposed to visceral response to FOI, which is to, my God, find every way you can to stop this going out. That just breeds distrust, that breeds ... That's fertile ground for misinformation, because if we're not providing that information, somebody else will step in and it won't be correct. And then we're chasing it. From then on we're chasing the issue, not leading the issue. And I really think we still have to work on that across the public service to build our self-confidence and to understand and manage those risks down.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But it's an education piece though, isn't it? You've really got to build that in so people understand that this is the impact of an action that they take, or an impact of an attitude that they may carry. And so therefore, you as a leader, as you look forward, how are you going to build into your organisation? So that they see the importance of it?

DAVID FRICKER: Well, a lot of us across the public service, we're all talking about the future of work. You and this podcast has been talking about the future work and what skills are going to take the public service forward. And it is, I reckon it's where you're going with your question. It's about critical thinking. It's not how good your memory is, that remembering policy procedure, it's, although listeners I'm not saying go off in a frolic and forget about that. But what sets us apart is going to be that critical thinking, the problem solving and the readiness and the ability to engage with new problems and new issues and networking. Networking across the traditional silos of the public service and bringing that together. And I think that's the difference and what I'm trying to do with our building trust and the public record policy is to make sure that everyone in the public service can use governments information assets as an asset, as the fuel that will run that engine of government.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Final question, a personal question to you. How are you different if you look back and think David Fricker, 2020 version. David Fricker, 2021. How has it changed you?

DAVID FRICKER: What, just one year? I was hoping you'd go back to when I was 13 years old. I could probably find something there. Because I knew everything when I was 13.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But it's to recognise the significance of what's taken place and the work that you've just described. There's a lot that's happened. What have you learned there? What is something that you know now, that you didn't know 12 months ago?

DAVID FRICKER: Look, I do think, it gets back to the discussion we were just having about what we are capable of doing across the public service and my issue about nobody comes to work to make sure nothing happens. We all come to work to make sure that change happens. And I think what we've been through in the last 12 months, and just seeing faced with a crisis. What we're able to do to push aside so many preconceptions and things that we would have thought were impossible before has really shown me that perhaps we don't need another crisis to keep this level of innovation going, to keep this momentum up. We really did break through so many barriers in responding to COVID-19. And that's really, I think the main thing for me, in my position, as the head of the National Archives is really saying, well, let's keep that momentum going-

DAVID PEMBROKE: Keep the foot on the accelerator.

DAVID FRICKER: Absolutely, absolutely. And it makes us stronger, it really does.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well, David Fricker, thank you for your service and the best of luck within the information management world. And just maybe one more question sort of globally, have you got anything looking ahead to 2021, is this sort of up the information management world globally. And are there emerging things that are coming out of that that are different to perhaps here in Australia? Or is it similar sorts of things around attitude, around skills, around the future of work?

DAVID FRICKER: A couple of things, rather first of all, around the need for interoperability and the need for information to be much more pluralised, if I can use that word, but also as a Vanguard against disinformation, misinformation. Everyone in my industry is talking about the effects of it, because it attacks democracy, it attacks et cetera. And the other thing-

DAVID PEMBROKE: And the scale of the problem is massive.

DAVID FRICKER: It is.

DAVID PEMBROKE: It is massive.

DAVID FRICKER: And it's not over yet. We in Australia, we're all sort of looking forward to the recovery, but can I tell you, I talked to my counterparts in France, in Spain, in Canada even, and it feels to them like we're a long way away from recovery. Australia, we've done a lot of things well in Australia, we should be very, very grateful. The recovery is a bit of way off yet internationally. And the other thing, interestingly is human rights. It is really surfaced and I think it is related to the pandemic and the lockdowns, and the experiences of people around the world who perhaps were marginalised, but now really feel even more marginalised and have surfaced a lot of inequality in the world.

DAVID FRICKER: And I think a reason we're seeing a lot of, much more vocal apparitions of people demanding human rights, be recognised in various forms, I think is something which is going to escalate and continue. And I see it as also this, the other thing that we need to do is to produce and maintain records as the government of Australia, that upholds defends and makes everybody know what their rights are and respects those rights and gives them access to justice and to their human rights. And hopefully along the way, address inequality.

DAVID PEMBROKE: He's teasing me, ladies and gentlemen, he wants another question. We could go on, we could go on. But I will resist so David, thank you again for your service. Thanks for coming in on a very wet and miserable day here in Canberra. And I do hope that wherever you are, I hope you staying dry on for those poor people who are dealing with the challenges of the floods and indeed the APS members who were working in bringing some comfort to people, best of luck to all of you. A big thanks as always to you, the audience for coming back in such big numbers, we really do appreciate your interest in Work with Purpose.

DAVID PEMBROKE: If you do see the social media promotion a like, or share, it never goes astray. Getting that information, moving around the system and reviews are very valued as well. If you do have time, please drop one by for us, thanks to IPAA for its ongoing support for Work with Purpose. And also to the Australian public service commission who are great supporters of podcast and also to the team back at Content Group who helped to put the show together every fortnight. That's it for this episode of Work with Purpose, we'll be back at the same time in a fortnight. But for the moment it's bye for now.

VOICEOVER:

Work with Purpose is a production of content group in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.