

National President's Post-Conference Message

The 2009 IPAA National Conference was a great success, and congratulations to IPAA Queensland as host and to both the National Office and Queensland Office for managing it in such a friendly and efficient manner.

The success is not just because of the numbers who attended, the good time had by all or our financial targets being met (though all these contributed). Most importantly, success is because of the quality of the presentations and discussions, and the learning by everyone who attended.

The Conference theme was the Changing Public Sector Climate with subthemes on communities, cooperation and collaboration ("Rising 'C' levels"); the capacity and performance of the public sector ("Survival of the Fittest"); the importance of international issues and connections ("Warming to Global Trends"); and the integrity and culture of the public sector ("Sustainable Practice"). Each of these was examined and debated in some detail, informed by a most impressive set of national and international leaders and scholars. The format allowed good opportunity for engagement by all participants, aided by technology which allowed individuals to text questions and comments during plenary sessions which were used extensively by our facilitator, Kerry O'Brien, to interrogate panel members and to promote debate.

With such a broad range of topics and issues, it is difficult to summarise the discussions. I took away a central message of the importance of adaptability and flexibility in order to adjust to the changing public sector climate. This requires, first, to be aware of the environment in which the public sector operates: the changing needs and demands of the public we serve – the changing technology we must use, the changing workforce we can draw upon and the changing national and international connections we work with.

Secondly, it requires being prepared to adapt and respond, to have the agility to move and move quickly.

Thirdly, it involves getting on to the front foot, looking for opportunities to contribute to and initiate national and international agendas which might benefit Australian and world citizens.

The Conference also underlined the importance of continuing professional development, including through such IPAA events which promote learning from each other across Australian jurisdictions and Australian universities, and also – and of increasing importance – learning from and with international experts and practitioners. We had wonderful contributions from and discussions with colleagues from the Netherlands, NZ, UK, China, Canada, PNG and some other Pacific nations.

The timing of the Conference could not have been better with the Prime Minister's Review of Australian Government Administration now underway. The Prime Minister himself presented the 50th Garran Oration at the end of the Conference issuing a challenge not only to the APS but to the whole Australian public sector to be the best and most professional public service in the world. While I remain uneasy with this rhetoric, I welcome the review and the Prime Minister's determination: the public sector in Australia must earn the trust and confidence of the Australian people and Australian Governments, but serving them as well as any public service elsewhere is serving their public's interests given our own institutional arrangements and our own social and economic priorities.

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