Chief Minister, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

I wish to acknowledge that we meet on the traditional lands of the Arrente people, whose family has included two very distinguished senior public administrators, Patricia Turner and the late Charles Perkins.

It is a great thrill to be able to present the Garran Oration today. I speak as a sometime participant in, and a fascinated observer over 30 years of, the peculiar theatre of Commonwealth-State relations. It has been a privilege to work with politicians from three political parties.

But first allow me an indulgence. For nearly thirty years I have been listening to, or reading, the Garran Orations. Just about all of them in some way have paid tribute to the remarkable man Sir Robert Randolph Garran, the first Commonwealth public servant, a federalist and significantly influential adviser to the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia, a man of some size himself, being very tall.

His is not a household name in Australia, his image graces no currency, yet his contribution to shaping the Australian nation was immense.
Sir Robert Garran had the responsibility of creating the Commonwealth’s public service. Edmund Barton, our first Prime Minister, appointed him Secretary of the Attorney-General’s Department on the very first day of federation. One of his first tasks was to organise elections. By the time Sir Robert retired, the Commonwealth public service numbered 32,000 and has been lauded over the years for its impartiality – the ultimate test of a public service in a democratic, political environment. Gough Whitlam was particularly complementary on this point in his Garran Oration of 1973.

As I listened to the Orations, I wondered about the women in Sir Robert Garran’s life and how they may have influenced him. He had five older sisters who helped cultivate his interest in the arts. His mother’s family were descended from the founders of Virginia, USA, were rumoured to have a family connection to Pocahontas and were related to former US Presidents. They lived in Adelaide, and Sir Robert visited there in the 1885, visiting relations who included members of parliament and judges (National Library of Australia, MS 2001/4). The State of South Australia was one of the strongest supporters of the need for Federation. We presume this influence on him because he was a strong federalist.
Robert Garran married Hilda Robson in 1902 and they had four boys. One became a Rhodes Scholar, one joined the British Foreign Service, another a successful chemical engineer and the other a successful agriculturalist. Hilda shared Robert’s passion for the arts, and they were frequently seen at theatre performances and art exhibitions in Melbourne and, later, Canberra.

Prior to her marriage to Robert, Hilda’s brother settled in Adelaide and later became a rector at a suburban parish there. Another of her brothers established the Sydney Church of England Grammar School, Shore.

With Sir Robert away much of the time throughout his career, it can be assumed that Lady Garran managed the household and the rearing of the four (tall) sons almost single-handedly. In Melbourne, Lady Garran also brought into existence, and was very active in, the Southern Suburbs Auxiliary of the Eye and Ear Hospital (East Melbourne).

After moving to Canberra in 1927, she became President of the Australian Branch of the Victoria League and at one stage was President of the Canberra Croquet Club.

Shortly after her death from appendicitis in 1936, boys and old boys of Canberra Grammar School arranged a memorial to her, in the form of a School bell. Weighing half a hundredweight and housed in a shingle roofed structure, it was inscribed “Canberra Grammar School. A gift from the boys in memory of Lady Garran, a good friend of the school. 1936”. The bell still has pride of place in the Senior School Main Quadrangle.

While the Australian colonies were debating federalism, the Suffragettes were also trying to gain electoral equality for women. South Australian women won the right to vote in 1895, with other States and the Commonwealth following afterwards.
There is some evidence in his diaries that Sir Robert had some sympathies towards the Suffragette movement of the 1890s … but if he did it was not evident in his official writing.

His diaries record that he knew Catherine Helen Spence, the social reformer and writer who was in the vanguard of the feminist movement in Australia. She fought for the right of women to vote and was the first female political candidate in Australia, to be a South Australian delegate to the 1897 Federal Convention.

While in Melbourne for the Premiers’ Conference of 1900, Sir Robert visited Miss Spence three times, including attending a lecture by her on effective voting. He reported that over 400 people were present, and that 380 ballot papers were handed in. He described a debate on women’s franchise in one of the many constitutional conferences as “…dreary.”

NOW TO THE TOPIC: ‘DOES SIZE REALLY MATTER?’

My thesis today is that size matters – of course it does. Should it dominate in the complex world of this century? I think that’s the question of the conference.
As the sun rose on the new Federation, the Commonwealth of Australia, on 1 January, 1901, so did the beginnings of the pecking order of power biased towards the Commonwealth and the big States, as many of the founding fathers had feared. The Commonwealth Government was slow to acquire more power, accelerating in World War II and tightening its control over the States and Territories, mostly by fiscal measures, right up to the present. In spite of many attempts by the States and Territories to regain the equilibrium, the bigger Commonwealth set the agenda and continues to do so. The rules of engagement which maintain the imbalance are now set like tired old dance steps. It is time the public sector developed new ways to respond to the challenges faced by the politicians.

There have been four actions since the 19th Century that have been designed to re-balance the issues of size which worried the States. I have called these structural adjustments because at each pressure point a decision was made to create a formal solution to their concerns.

**The first structural adjustment for size** was evident in the final construction of the Constitution.

Federation was a huge topic in the 1890s. There were several conventions and conferences, to which some delegates travelled for days to attend. Newspapers were awash with articles and letters, and at public meetings emotions could run high.

There was a depression in that decade, major industrial unrest and sections of society lived in abject poverty. The customs excises that inhibited free trade across colonial boundaries severely affected the living standards of people living near borders. The railway system was uncoordinated. The Colonies were organising their own defence forces. Immigration policies were disparate. There were many reasons why Federation was so eagerly sought. A national solution was seen as preferable in many areas, particularly customs and excise.
Size had been an issue in those debates of the 1890s leading up to the Federation. Whilst the argument for Federation was strong, there was one major reason why it took just short of a decade, from the first Convention to Federation Day, and it was “size”. The smaller colonies were concerned that the combined populations of New South Wales and Victoria would ride roughshod over their respective interests.

The architects of the Federation and its Constitution had to reassure the States, and in particular the small States, that the Constitution would maintain their powers to control those matters which were important to them and to make sure that they would have equal representation in one of the houses of Parliament.

There was concern, too, that a greater Federation would reduce the influence of the States. Sir Robert Garran identified this by writing “… We do not want to abolish our separate state governments, nor to make them subordinate to the central government. We do not want to make New South Wales, Victoria and the other colonies mere departments of a great unified Australian government” (Garran:125). He also said that Federalism was to provide “… a compromise between the two opposite systems of large States and small States” (Garran:15). The centrepiece of this compromise in Australia was the creation of the Senate, intended as the guardian of States’ rights, with equal numbers of representatives for the States. Garran continued “…it is the fundamental compromise needed to induce small States to throw in their lot
with large” (Garran:127). It took 75 more years before the Territories would even be recognised in the Senate.

The big states were not happy with the compromise. They saw a disproportionate weight of a Senate vote.

It was not envisaged that the Senate would divide along party lines at the time. It was created to balance the population-based lower house and to prevent legislation which “… is offensive to a majority of the States” (Garran:129). This adjustment mechanism was diluted from around 1910, when voting along party lines became the norm. The dilution was complete with the referendum result in 1977 that now requires a replacement Senator, as far as practicable, to be a member of the party of which the previous Senator was a member.

The other protection for the States built into the Constitution was the rule for amending the Constitution. A referendum needs to be passed not just by a national majority, but also by majorities in a majority of States. There have been five instances where a national “Yes” vote has been overridden by failing to win a majority of States. The small States have been predominantly the ones who mostly voted “No” (Australian Electoral Commission).

**The second structural adjustment for size** occurred when the Commonwealth Grants Commission was established.
Financing arrangements under Federation were the subject of much debate and were not as clearly resolved as other issues. As the Commonwealth assumed more taxing powers, the States argued about how the revenues should be distributed. “Between 1925 and 1932 there were no fewer than seven separate official inquiries and three Royal Commissions into the effects of federation on the State finances of Tasmania, Western Australia and South Australia” (Hancock & Smith:29).

From 1910 to the mid-1920s, Western Australia, Tasmania and South Australia sought extra grant allocations from the Commonwealth. These special grants were *ad hoc* and controversial. The larger States had greater revenue raising capacity and the smaller States were dissatisfied with their share of the revenue. Western Australian voted to secede in April 1933, applying extra pressure on the Federation. The Commonwealth decided to stabilise the system of grants to the smaller States, by setting up the Commonwealth Grants Commission on 17 July 1933 (Hancock and Smith: Chapter 2.4).

The principle of fiscal equalisation was established by the Commission. Although subsequently modified, according to the bigger States the modifications did not go far enough. The principle states that “…each State should be given the capacity to provide the average standard of State-type public services, assuming it does so at an average level of operational efficiency and makes an average effort to raise revenue from its own sources” (CGC website).
Whilst this adjustment may have given some satisfaction to the smaller States at the time, the Commonwealth found other ways of using its financial powers to control the States’ spending policies by using the Loan Council’s rules over borrowing and loan expenditure and by the use of tied grants (Parkin 2003:109). The decision to distribute the GST to the states changed this again, to the advantage at the time of many States.

**The third structural adjustment** for size was the creation of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in May 1992. In June 1990 there had been a particularly acrimonious Premiers’ Conference. There was tension between Prime Minister Hawke’s call for restraint and the call by the Premiers, led by South Australia’s John Bannon, for an 11-point plan to “…to redress the imbalance between taxation revenue gathered by the Commonwealth and the States”. He also called for rational goals and nationally cooperative programs of reform and change”. He was supported by New South Wales Premier Nick Greiner, who called for a review of the “…unclear responsibilities, conflicting policies and blurred lines of accountability…” between the Commonwealth and the States (Parkin).

A month later, Prime Minister Hawke proposed a major review of federalism in Australia, calling for “… a closer partnership between our three levels of government …to improve our national efficiency and international competitiveness and …improve the delivery and quality of services governments provide”. He created the Special Premiers’ Conference. When Prime Minister Keating followed, even though he had some reservations, he was persuaded by Queensland Premier Wayne Goss that the Special Premiers’ Conference was of value, so Prime Minister Keating put his own stamp on it and re-defined it as COAG (Parkin). This body was to consider “…policy reforms of national significance which require cooperative action” (COAG website).

**The fourth and latest structural adjustment**, the Council for the Australian Federation, was announced in July 2006, and is a States and Territories only
creation to address Commonwealth dominance. The announcement followed soon after Commonwealth Treasurer Peter Costello had proposed a review of Federalism so that the Commonwealth could take full control of taxes (“The Canberra Times”, 3 July 2006). It was formed to “… regenerate and reinvigorate the political strength of our States and Territories” (Rann). It will have its first meeting within a month of this IPAA conference. Canada, as it did at Federation, helped shape this development, with the idea stemming from the Canadian Council of the Federation which was established in 2003.

The States and Territories, as they did at Federation, reminded the Commonwealth that “…while we support the national economy and a united Australian identity, the role of the Federation was never designed to diminish self-government at the State level” (Rann).

The Council will deal with cross-jurisdictional matters, finding the best common position on COAG related matters, sharing best practice and anticipating future Commonwealth decisions.

**PUNCHING ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT**

From time to time States defy the dominance of the Commonwealth, not through structures but by other means and punch above their weight.

**They can take the initiative in the National agenda**

A strong Premier or Chief Minister can take an issue to the national stage and influence the Australian policy agenda. In recent times we have seen Victorian Premier Steve Bracks drive the National Reform Agenda, South Australian Premier Mike Rann has the lead on sustainability, e.g., renewable fuels and climate change challenges. The Northern Territory’s Chief Minister, Clare Martin, has called for a generational review of Indigenous Affairs, and the Northern Territory was ahead of every other State or Territory in building economic relationships with Asia.
An individual Minister for Housing in South Australia, Jay Weatherill, was the first to call for a national policy on affordable housing.

They can resist the Commonwealth Agenda
In recent times, States and Territories have provided an alternative to the Commonwealth agenda by their emissions trading initiative. They are challenging the Commonwealth’s industrial relations legislation in the High Court, they resisted the changes in education that were proposed by Dr Brendan Nelson and they refused to agree to a national nuclear waste dump, forcing the Commonwealth to impose this on the Northern Territory.

An individual politician can use the balance of power to a single State’s advantage
Former Tasmanian Senator Brian Harradine held the balance of power for a time and negotiated for additional funding and concessions for that State. That additional funding, particularly for information technology, enabled many initiatives in electronic service delivery.

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR IN COMMONWEALTH-STATE RELATIONS
I want to turn my attention to the role of the public sector in the discussion. On many occasions individual public servants have worked with politicians to address the imbalance of power, but the general patterns, or “song-lines”, are pretty much set in routine, to reinforce Commonwealth dominance.

Sir Robert Garran reflected over the best model to suit the Federation of States. In his conclusion (p.184), he quotes from Alexander Pope’s 1733 work, “The Essay of Man” …

“For forms of government let fools contest –
That which is best administer’d is best”

So how would we weigh up our administration? Have we “best administered”? We are relatively uncorrupted. The standard of public service is probably amongst the best in the world. I assert, however, that there is a down side,
where we have lost sight of our role as professional advisers and problem solvers and have become players in a set piece where we behave according to our level in the political pecking order.

Coming back into State administration after nearly eight years in Canberra, working on primarily Commonwealth issues, it is interesting to be back in Commonwealth-State negotiations. It feels like a familiar dance, but the person leading has a tighter grip. It is a formal dance pattern with well marked steps.

The dance steps have been designed over the years to ensure the dominance of the Commonwealth agenda. The nature of the dance is influenced by financial distribution and taxation policy. I am not sure though, in hindsight, whether they have been all that successful for the overall benefit of Australian communities.

The dance goes something like this.

**First decide who can come to the dance**

Every government comes in to power with commitments to groups who are fellow travellers. Some of these are fellow travellers in the political ideology. Always there is a view of the “punter”. But there are always “out groups”. Sometimes it is real groups, other times it is language.

In more recent time there has actually been the definition of “out groups” by perverse reference to political correctness as a negative. Out is gendered
language, feminists … anything vaguely representing special interest groups not in the “in group”.

There are preferred groups whose advice is listened to over others. There is usually some advantage to them for this influence. The groups aligned to the government with the money get the priority. For example, the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) flows in and out, depending on who is in power.

Second, decide what dance

The Constitution established responsibilities of the States and Commonwealth but there is room to move. The clear and present danger to the future State and Territory budgets is health - not that we are getting sicker, but because no one has worked out how to control the extraordinary escalation in costs and the emotionally effective lever of life and death that health professionals use to great effect. By about 2035 the health budget will consume all of the States’ budgets.

The acute heroic end of the system gets all the money and the bit that could make a difference, prevention and early intervention, gets the leftovers. I digress. The point is that the Commonwealth, with the larger share of the tax money, could quite easily give a priority to increasing health funds separately or, in fact, take it over. It is a matter of political choice. The looming crisis may well be the trigger for the fifth structural adjustment.
Third, dance with the richest and prettiest partners

From the beginning of the Federation, the size of a State has reflected its level of influence. Deals done with New South Wales and Victoria are pretty much the most important. Their opinions around a negotiating table are of higher value than those of smaller States and Territories.

The seating at the COAG table demonstrates this and shows that size matters. The Premiers of New South Wales and Victoria sit opposite the Prime Minister, who looks directly at them. The Premier of Queensland is in his line of vision. He has to turn his head significantly to see the Premiers of Western Australia, South Australia or Tasmania and turn his whole body to see the Territories' Chief Ministers or the Local Government Association’s representative. At the press conference after COAG, the seating is also arranged in order of size. The photographs afterwards show the Prime Minister sitting with the Premiers of New South Wales and Victoria, and sometimes the Premier of Queensland, with the others standing behind. They’ll have to shift the chairs in a few years when Queensland’s population overtakes Victoria’s. South Australia lost its status when Western Australia overtook it in size (Graycar).

Fourth, try out new steps whilst holding your partner very tightly
Someone in Canberra has an idea. Sometimes it’s a politician, but often a public servant. Money is put on the table, and States and Territories are tempted to match it. Slowly, the matching of the Commonwealth initiatives, overtime, reduces the capacity of the States and Territories to deliver their own priorities important to the citizen because every State and Territory treasury officer is trained to get matching money first when the budgets are tight. The conditions on these matchings are very one-sided now, and full of penalties. The grip is tightening.

Associated with this one is breaking the deadlock or wooing the first contract. Somebody will come to the party. It’s just a matter of waiting.

**Fifth, treading on the partner’s toes**

Seemingly intractable problems where the Commonwealth has had historical responsibility get highlighted from time to time by the press, and thus the Commonwealth’s first defence is to attack. We have seen this with Indigenous affairs, water and affordable housing.
Sixth, the person who knows the steps controls the dance

I was surprised to hear in Canberra when I was there that the Commonwealth does policy and the States and Territories don’t really have the capacity, that States and Territories worry about the lower order of things like service delivery and operations. This myth reinforces the notion that the States and Territories are agents of the Commonwealth, something Garran went out of his way to say wouldn’t happen. It makes it easy to criticise the perceived failure of the States to solve intractable problems. This superiority of policy thinking is one reason why States are often excluded in national policy formulation. Commonwealth agencies often exclude their own State representatives from policy development.

State strategic policy is important, and is being driven more now by State Plans. The South Australian one is a good example. The consultations about the indicators for success have been thorough and inclusive.

State and Territory policy officers have to respond to Commonwealth policy initiatives whilst working on their own issues. This is a challenging dual task. There is real State’s policy work to be done and it is often related to service delivery. Professor Andrew Parkin argued that there was a renaissance of States’ policy as talented leaders like Dunstan, Hamer, Wran, Cain, Greiner,
Kennett, Goss, Beattie, Carr and Lawrence “…became recognised outside their own states as political figures and policy innovators ” (Parkin 2003:106).

**Seventh, looking over the shoulder for a more attractive partner**

It doesn’t matter who is the elected government, there is a hunger for alternative partners. This may well be fine where the issues are directly the responsibility of the Commonwealth, but when they by-pass States and Territories with parallel programs this compounds complexity and confusion.

Andrew Parkin and Geoff Anderson have described this as *Parallel federalism: Commonwealth unilateralism*. It started with Whitlam, and continues. Some recent examples they give have been the establishment of the Australian Technical Colleges, the National Community Crime Prevention Program, National Heritage Trust, Investing in Our Schools Programs Grants and the Roads to Recovery (Parkin & Anderson:10).

This funding can be short-term and couched in concepts like capacity building, but there are two problems. Capacity takes a long time to build and Commonwealth withdrawal from these programs, usually inevitable, puts enormous pressure on the States to fill the gap – a bit rude when they weren’t involved in the first place. A little bit of magical thinking goes on here.

The Commonwealth found out recently that the some of the charitable organisations involved in their new work support program didn’t want to partner, for fear of being found out they had been at the dance at all!
Eighth, listen to me. If I explain this set of steps to you on paper, you will automatically dance them first time on the floor

There is a wonderful delusion of policy makers that says if you describe a policy and its rules, and if this policy is implemented accurately (pretty rare because the policy makers don’t often involve the implementers), there will be an automatic social/economic improvement and Australia will be the better for it. I call this policy chess.

Programs can be designed to suit a thought, not solve a problem. The pressure for instant policy is increased by the need to respond to today’s headline or by the demands of the talk-back radio hosts.

It would be better if it could immediately be turned into a program with another acronym that no-one could remember or understand.

Ninth, dance to the loudest music

Disaster/emergency management has been brought into sharp focus due to improved media communications and the subsequent challenges to the quality of government responses around the world to disasters such as the Asian tsunami in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina last year. We are getting much better at anticipating and responding. The massive attention to planning for
an influenza pandemic in Australia shows that governments can work together.

However, a recent example of two different water related disasters shows that, even in this area, size matters. In the last twelve months, the Gawler River in South Australia flooded and Cyclone Larry hit Queensland. Both of course had devastating impacts on their communities and on farmers in particular. The farmers in both places lost this year’s crops and it will take a year or more before some properties return an income stream.

The contrast in the response from the Commonwealth bureaucracy was extraordinary. In spite of advocacy from the local federal Liberal Member of Parliament and bureaucratic intervention everywhere for the Virginia farmers, Commonwealth officers in Canberra offered only the limited assistance of Farm Help. In stark contrast, the Queensland farmers were offered tax free grants, wage subsidies, income support for six months and had access to concessional loans (Howard).

**A CALL FOR A NEW PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

So what might we ask is the result for the community of public administration practices developed over the last Century? We have been through the power shake out over money, the more recent incredible shrinking period after privatisation took hold, and we’ve survived the great managerialism era when we all learned to operate like businesses.

I think that for all our good intentions, we have left a mixed legacy. We have created industries out of regulation, both external and internal. There is a proliferation of rules, guidelines and codes. The failure to trust each other and the community has left complex accountability practices and requirements. This compliance overburden has been at high cost and money has been diverted from direct application.
We have created our own complex world of programs and acronyms. We can talk in complete sentences to each other using initials and no-one except ourselves can understand what we are talking about. These initials describe centrally based programs into which communities and other levels of government have to fit themselves. We have invented programs, for example eight in homelessness and 17 in aged community care, which do similar things and then have to be reviewed to look at the overlap. We design short-term pilots which often disappear without a trace. We struggle to measure outcomes.

The application of strict competitive practices to the human services sector came from the private sector, which operates in a very different market place. This has created division and competition in a sector better encouraged by strategic alliances and promotion of more collaborative localised activities. The win/lose philosophy is in contrast to all the knowledge we have that communities become more resilient and stronger when solutions are defined cooperatively by layers of government and include local leaderships with a win/win attitude by all parties.

We have skewed local initiative by forcing people to find that little bit of their bigger agenda which might fit some government guideline if they can access the complexity of the bureaucracy and find the right place to apply.

We have not solved the big problems in all this. Two of the big issues at Federation were one national railway track of the same gauge and the River Murray. It took many, many decades to sort the railway and we still haven’t sorted the River Murray.
At the time of Federation, there was a terrible drought which reduced flows in the Murray-Darling system to record lows. The fight for control of the River system was, in Sir Robert’s words, a “…battle royal.” (NLA, MS 2001/4) New South Wales and Victoria argued over the issues of the river, such as the balance between navigation and irrigation, and there was fierce debate over the wording of the clause in the Constitution about relative powers of the Commonwealth and States in river navigation (Parliament of Australia, Senate, Records of the Australasian Federal Conventions). Over the next hundred years many commissions, acts and agreements would be struck (Henstock). But are we managing this shared resource any better now than we did at Federation? Not at all.
The issues are now much more complex, e.g., salinity, potability, hydro-electricity, effluent discharge, and the latest set of decisions still hasn’t been implemented, putting the water supply to South Australia in great jeopardy.

We know there is a problem with the River Murray. We know what we can do to address the problem. We have an agreed strategy that would address the problem. Why are the relevant governments unable to implement the agreed strategy?

In other places, we have encouraged an expectation that the “government ought to do it, fix it solve it”. We are responsible for the learned helplessness of some people because we have not involved them in solutions. Governments inevitably fail occasionally, and then get the blame when things go wrong. We are going to see the negative impact of this if an influenza pandemic ever hits because the government will not be able to do everything and we will be very dependent on the resilience of communities. We must understand what actually builds community strength.

We have created fear of funding being withdrawn if agencies tell the truth. They don’t feel like strategic friends who can have honest conversations about varying their programs over time as they solve problems.

Our solutions don’t stick. We have seen it at the national level, like the River Murray problem, and it also happens at the local community level. We offer short-term funding, couched in words like “capacity building”, without understanding that this is a long-term haul. We do little forays and offer snapshots of hope. We really don’t know if lots of our interventions actually work. We expect communities to find replacement funding when they are struggling to keep their doors open. We have a spare parts approach instead of looking at the whole car.

Opinion polls show that the public service, as well as the politicians, has a long way to go before the community trusts us.
We spend our time inventing programs, developing new, ever-tightening contracts. We regionalise, centralise and de-centralise like tides flowing back and forth, putting energy into structures without firstly working out the real purpose and the real benefits.

While politicians look to the political arrangements which address the imbalance of power, what can we do to break the old patterns of public administration and provide leadership for this century with elements of the best administration?

I can’t see a change to the cascade of power via the relative sizes of governments in the next decade, but we can provide our politicians with more appropriate and creative ways of responding to the challenges they face, particularly in this very complex world. We can develop new approaches which focus on collaborative, long-lasting and positive solutions to complex problems. In some ways, while the size of the dance floor might be the same, the old dance steps are out of date. Like the experience of Generation Y, the dances will be less structured and less formal. It’s a dance with lots of people and mosh pits. While the metaphorical DJs mix sounds and cultures, it’s a dance with lots of people expressing their individuality but still dancing to the same beat.

If we take ourselves forward to the year 2040 what would we want to see? We’d want a confident, relevant, fast-moving partner to elected governments, a partner renowned for the quality of information and thinking it brought to any conversation and which operated on the basis that Australia was a strong country, respected globally for its peace-making and “good neighbour” capabilities. Public sector people would have had lots of experience in the private or community sectors, and overseas, and would be well trained. People would think working for government was a great personal opportunity.

The public sector would be respected by the citizens who not only trusted it, but found it easy to engage in business with. Communities would be safer than they were at the turn of the century and people would be much more
aware of how to stay healthy. Every young person would be valued as an employee, having been given opportunity to succeed at what they could do. The very expensive ‘baby boomers’ won’t be there anymore to drain the health system. Citizens would see all governments working cooperatively to act on challenges, in collaboration with all other sectors.

Governments would be respected and valued by the citizens. Government programs would be designed with the community and customised according to the conditions of each community. Business people would see that their opportunities for global expansion were increased because of the public sector.

Barriers to transportation would have been resolved and the economic routes across the nation and overseas would operate like a well oiled machine. Australia would have reversed ecological decline and would be a world leader in sustainable environmental practices.

To get there we must start operating differently now. We can choose to change our practices with different approaches, different ways of looking a challenges and issues and different ways of solving problems. It’s not tweaking at the edges. It is time for a fundamental shift in our modus operandi. We have to learn to customise and design relevant solutions, and maybe different solutions, together.

Here are some of the things to which we could be directing our energy. This conference will find plenty more.

1. MINING INFORMATION AND TURNING IT INTO GOLD FOR USE.

There are thousands of data collections around the country of varying quality. The useful ones should be turned into knowledge. They are one of the vast treasures of Australia. We must mine them as we mine gold and copper. They can be interrogated intelligently. Some parts of the private sector do this better than us because understanding their data affects their activity, which
impacts on the bottom line. Why are we not so driven? We have a responsibility as professional public administrators to bring the best information to the table. This is even more important as politicians receive other advice, often anecdotal and often inaccurate, which goes unchallenged.

Under the leadership of Dennis Trewin, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has moved light years in making data more accessible and there is now a national Australian Statistical Advisory Council in which all States and Territories have a representative. It’s a start. At individual departmental levels we could, though, have a hard look at what really needs to be collected and then junk the stuff that’s going nowhere. The remaining useful information would be available to everyone else.

We should not walk away from the past, but we can learn that the failure to evaluate our interventions over time means that we are bound to continue to make mistakes. We can find out what causes successful results. Good evaluation must be built in up-front.

Governments should be open about their plans and be sufficiently flexible to link them to each other. We could aim for the Holy Grail of an agreed regional framework within which our collated data gets integrated so that we would have a consistent body of knowledge about any particular area. As a minimum, we should develop clearing houses of knowledge. As a maximum, we could develop formal groups, together with local government, to develop regional plans.

With this agreed data and overlapping collection regions, we could identify problems better, and work across levels and departments in looking for better solutions.

2. FIND OUT WHAT WORKS IN COMMUNITIES AND STICK WITH IT

The Victorian Government and others have undertaken studies which show what really builds strong communities. We should be concentrating on
addressing our interventions to the things that work. We have had a tendency to think in terms of consistency of programs, rather than consistency of outcomes. We need to turn this around.

Communities vary, of course. Some can be economically weak, but with strong social bonding. Others can be economically weak and in crisis. Assuming that priorities for intervention are to reduce negative indicators and increase safety, family functioning, access to employment and so on, we now know, thanks to the Victorian work, where intervention is most effective.

We also know how interventions can be made more effective by getting agreement on regional and local priorities, and then linking the funding from levels of government. While we do not anticipate ever taking away the decision-making power of the politicians, we can give them much better information about how their decisions can drive real improvements.

We could have a common understanding about the communities, and customise solutions. We could have alternatives to the “one size fits all for everything” approach. In this customisation we could have an agreed plan, with agreed expected outcomes that would be measured.

We could design the interventions without imposing standard program rules. They would emphasise strengthening the subtle institutions of neighbourhood and local leadership and community engagement.

The consistency of results would be improvements in school retention rates, community safety, in access to employment and in improved health indicators. We can tolerate inconsistency in programs if there is consistency of results.

We can build community capacity by cooperating, and by being seen to be cooperating, and by taking our own jobs out to communities, which would also provide an economic boost through increased employment. All government call centres should be out in the regions. We can recognise and build on
community expertise and faces that endure, rather than the ever-changing faces of bureaucracy which leave communities confused.

3. THE CITIZEN COUNTS

We can listen to what the people think about how we deliver our services. We can make it easier for them to do business with us. We can co-locate our services. We can act as each other’s agents and not turn people away. We can do better with language and disability access. We can manage queues better and extend our hours of service to 24 hours, each day of the week. We can provide a human face that is constant when problems get complex, we can streamline our procedures.

We can challenge the relevance of the myriad of rules we set, open longer hours, put more people on the counters at peak times. We can set standards of service which are publicly available. We can involve citizens in design. We can do all these things, but we don’t. A new public administration would require these as a minimum standard.

Australia is still ranked below the top three countries in electronic government. We can drive this stronger and use technology to improve the way we work. We can offer our services and share ideas and knowledge.

We can make it easier for community organisations to do business with us, like single grants’ sites and agreed quality standards.

Most elected governments are calling for reduction in red tape. It is driven by the need to attract business and to make it easier for business to compete internationally. We can do this even with simple things like having the same forms for State business across Australia. We can also look at our fragmented legislation and the compliance burdens which we impose on others and ourselves. But it takes skill and serious non-defensive attention. We must reduce processes for the citizens, businesses and the community sector. The discipline of process redesign (lean thinking) should be
introduced everywhere. It is a field filled with entrenched interests, but they could be brought to the table to resolve the conflicts in the interest of the whole country.

4 IT’S EVERYONE’S BUSINESS – WORK TOGETHER

We spend a lot of time distracting ourselves by rearranging departments to try to effect improvement. In fact, this often provides a distraction. We actually know that a much better idea is to get people from different agencies to come to the table, without carrying baggage and to work on a solution with the facts out in front. Accountability attached to delivering results should drive this action, rather than being the excuse for it not happening. The ways we work in crisis, casting aside egos and rules to produce positive change should be the way we operate all the time.

It takes deep breathing and courageous leadership to move the resources from crisis to those which get in early, to prevent problems. We should be prepared to hold the line and take the risks in the interest of the long-term. We talk of “joined up government”, but the advocates usually only talk of the same level of government. We must arrange to make this happen through all the levels together.

We need a new attitude to decision making which starts from the challenge that no one level of government has all the answers and that we come to the table as equal participants. Our people should go to the table not to defend turf, but to solve problems. It is not satisfactory to withdraw and say “that’s not my business”. The citizens don’t like buck-passing. They want cooperation. It starts with the public service.

5 EVERYONE AT THE TABLE

This should happen at two levels - the citizen and our young staff. It is not hard to bring people, the citizens experiencing problems, into the room while we solve problems. We must have more affected people in our
conversations, even if they represent different views. Open resolution develops more honest government. “Nothing about us without us” is the new mantra and it is worth adopting if we want traction with what we do.

We all have young people on our staff, and not enough of them. The scary thing is that lots of them won’t stay. They certainly have different expectations of the workplace and will not be waiting around for their voice to be heard. Our workplaces should be giving them opportunity to challenge the intractable problems and bring new ideas to public administration, and to work together across jurisdictions.

It is not hard to bring people suffering frustrations into the room while we solve problems. We need more people in our conversations. Grandparents are involved now in conversations with Commonwealth and State public administrations to solve some of their seemingly intractable problems. It’s good for all parties to hear different perspectives in the search for a solution.

We should be designing more flexible organisational forms, not the old command and control systems of management which the great global thinkers have agreed are out of date, but ones that are more team-based and flatter.

6. LIFTING OUR GAME TO WORLD CLASS

Australia leads in great issues, such as sustainability and dry land management. We owe it to our governments to act in Australia’s best interest and work as a united team using global connections. We should bring ideas from everywhere to our thinking.

We should embrace international best practice standards for public administration and make sure we exceed them in everything we do, so that we build Australia’s reputation as a preferred, and safe and uncorrupted, country with which to do business.
We should link with Universities to create more centres of global excellence so that Australia is seen as a world innovator. We must work out ways to keep our great innovators without them having to go overseas.

7. CONNECTING UP AUSTRALIA

There must be a way of designing the lines of movement across this country that feed the transport hubs, including ports, which will carry the tourists and the goods smoothly. There must be sensible ways to bring life into the vast expanse of our country. There should be a great infrastructure plan which serves the nation, from both transport and land use planning points of view.

We must resolve the conditions which threaten our biodiversity, while at the same time allowing economic development. We have the skills. We live in the digital generation and we work without boundaries. Some of the senior people had better learn to use a computer! 2040 will have us wired very differently from today.

Many other countries face corruption in government. Our public sector has a reputation for being free of corruption and having good governance arrangements. This is a community asset to be exported in the interests of building up failing states. We have a lot more to offer as a good neighbour, like Canada does, sending expertise in very respectful way to the countries of the world who can benefit by our knowledge.

8. THE GETTING AND KEEPING OF WISDOM

It is to our shame that in times of fiscal constraint, the public sector cuts its staff development budgets.

We do spend a lot of money on internal management issues, occupational health and safety, asset management and human resources processes. This is all good stuff, but it's only part of our work. It's very internally focused. We should be building the skills which connect us outwards. There should be just
as much emphasis on shared learning opportunities with Universities to bring our expertise and information to Ministers to the standard of the best in the world. We should be contributing to research centres in conjunction with Universities, to build a global presence. This should be an investment priority.

We must develop superior analytical thinking for the big policy questions and the big service delivery questions. Those with policy responsibility should learn that the best ideas often come from the people who are actually delivering services. We also should be reflecting on the big issues and come up with more creative ideas, based on the best research available and on learning from others.

We are losing some wisdom and knowledge with the passing through of the ‘baby boomers’, but it could be said that some of that was relevant for the times, but not so relevant for the future. Some of their knowledge, though, is invaluable. Apart from working out ways to keep them working part-time, we should be investing in electronic ways to capture their knowledge, and to combine it with official information and precedents, for easy access by the present and next generations.

All our staff should have access to regular, formal training to keep performing at the most superior level they can. It should not just be for people who put their hands up for it.

We should not cringe from building individuals with great excellence in subject matter areas and sending them overseas for advanced training. There should be an Australian public official presenting a paper at every significant overseas conference.

CONCLUSION
It’s a new Century. When Robert Garran quoted “…that which is best administer’d is best” he followed it with “…it is not so easy to ‘best administer’ a bad system” (Garran:184). He worked hard to make sure the Constitution was the best it could be, but he called it the dead mechanical framework of national unity. “The life and soul of the union must be breathed into it by the people themselves.”

He went on “…The nation will be a nation, not of clauses and sub-clauses, but of men and women” (Garran:185). He left us a great challenge. We don’t have a bad system of administration, but we do have one with fraying edges and a few too many clauses and sub-clauses, processes and old fashioned dance steps. We need thinkers of the same calibre as Sir Robert and of the calibre of the people at this conference to make the system the best it can be. The new Century requires new thinking about public administration in this different world, complex enough but often made more complex by us.

The solutions would not rest on power and size, but on knowledge, creative thinking and collaboration. Public administrators should understand the limitations of our present ways of operating and have the courage to develop more appropriate new ways of working together.

**Acknowledgements**

- Michael Fox -- for helping with the research
The librarians at the National Library of Australia’s Manuscripts Room and Petherick Reading Room for opening up the Garran archives for Michael Fox

Professor Andrew Parkin and Dr Adam Graycar -- for their historical advice on Commonwealth-State relations

Liz Wilson and Liz Durward -- for wisdom

Simon Kneebone -- for his cartoons

Geoff Henstock of SA Water -- for his advice on the River Murray

Kristen Kulesza of the SA Government Reform Commission -- for advice on ‘Generation Y’

Illustrations

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