

2019 National IPAA President's Address

Delivered by Professor Peter Shergold AC — the outgoing President of the Institute of Public Administration Australia — at the IPAA National Conference held in Darwin on 26 September 2019.

As you've heard, I am the outgoing President of IPAA and for two years I have been honoured to serve IPAA in that capacity and I am delighted to conclude my term with a few remarks this morning before handing over the reins to my very distinguished successor, Gordon de Brouwer.

I begin by contemplating the depth of time that Aboriginal people have walked this ancient land and acknowledge the past, present and future generations of the Larrakia people. I thank Bilawara Lee, Aunty Bee, for her thoughtful and welcoming address on behalf of the saltwater people and I have to say I really enjoyed that great performance by One Mob Different Country.

It is great for the IPAA National Conference to be held once again in the Northern Territory and in expressing my gratitude I pay tribute to the tremendous hard work undertaken by the organisers: Craig and David and Britta and the whole team.

Now this is the fourth time that IPAA's conference has been held in the NT in the last 40 years: three times we've met in Darwin, once in Alice Springs and in fact the NT has always been a key part of IPAA — a regional group was based in the NT as early as 1954. As Geoffrey Remington, who was a co-founder of the NSW group told them at one of their first meetings:

"You are on what I would call the 'periphery'. You may feel somewhat isolated and out of touch... you may think what you have to contribute is small, compared to Canberra. I believe that is not so. I do believe that in every place where the Public Service functions, there are most important activities... [which] are part and parcel of the whole development of this vast machine of the Public Service."

And so of course it has proved to be, although of course, what Remington saw as the periphery, we now see as the northern gateway to Asia, and a window on our First Nations.

You may not know — because I didn't know until last night when one of our new IPAA Fellows, Julie Crisp, Auditor-General here in the Northern Territory pointed it out to me — that the very first IPAA National President in 1980 was Duncan Steele Craik. And although he was the Commonwealth Auditor-General, he was here in Darwin during the transition to self-government as the Auditor-General of the NT and it was he incidentally, who argued strongly and indeed successfully, that the Audit Office should have the power to conduct efficiency audits. In other words, be able to evaluate projects against the criteria of value for money. It was a profound public service reform.

And finally, in looking forward to the address soon to be given by my longtime friend and colleague, Mick Dodson, I note with some pride that he is the fourth Aboriginal person to deliver the prestigious Garran Oration. He follows in the footsteps of Pat Turner, Lowitja O'Donoghue and Noel Pearson and symbolically at least, he will stand shoulder-to-shoulder with them this morning. A very worthy member of that distinguished group of Australians.

Now in my few minutes left, let me make just two points.

First, that the role of professional public administrators — non-partisan, apolitical public servants, able to serve successive governments with equal dedication and commitment, committed to honesty and integrity, and working within a framework of public accountability — that role is more important than ever.

And second, that IPAA — able to represent the collective interests of those public administrators — must continue to play a key role in maintaining, even protecting, the vocational ethos of a merit-based public service.

Now of course, you might anticipate that as National President on this stage, at this event, I would say that.

But I want to assure you that these are not just some comforting rhetorical clichés delivered as a fond farewell. In fact, I have to tell you, they are born of discomfort.

Democracies, including Australia, are not going to plan. Looking beyond Australia, to the broader group of liberal democracies — and in doing so I note with great pleasure, the conference participation of senior public servants from New Zealand and Singapore — looking beyond Australian shores, what does one witness?

Well I discern at least, democratic governance under threat — that is driven in part by all that is worst in the digital age of 24/7 social media. Driven in part by the fact that we face a future of work which is increasingly uncertain and a future of the planet which is a matter of open debate.

One watches... I watch... with increasing concern the reemergence of authoritarian impulse in great national: in China, in Russia, in India, in the Philippines, in Brazil, in Hungary and so on and so on. And, and, in established liberal democracies.

I watch and see increased persuasiveness of populism with politicians seeking and gaining election on the basis that they can provide simple solutions to the complex and wicked economic and social problems. And, of course, they can provide those solutions; the only problem is, that inevitably, they are wrong.

I see the emergence of identity politics and single-issue parties and concomitantly the declining membership and interest in the broad-based political parties of the past. And partly, as a consequence, I watch the erosion and the fragmentation of the political centre, torn apart by greater political tribalism. And, wearing briefly my velvet bonnet as the Chancellor of Western Sydney University, I watch with disquiet as the foundational principles of democracy — freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of inquiry — are under challenge by increasingly illiberal liberalism.

These, let me not mince my words, are challenging times in which the public's trust in politicians is at a historically low level and which faith in the benefits of democracy itself — especially amongst young people — is in decline. So in this troubling environment we need us: we need public administrators, we need policy-makers, we need service deliverers, we need regulators who are imbued with the spirit that good public policy should be based on evidence and experience, and who, through our training, are always seeking to find compromise and consensus.

We need people whose job it is to speak truth to power at all levels of leadership. And to make sure that governments, who appropriately make decisions, that those governments make their decisions with eyes wide open.

There is great value in having a professional cadre of administrators who are trained — including by IPAA — to look at all sides of an issue, and willing to test with ministers the unintended consequences of policies and the alternative strategies that might exist to meet government objectives.

We need... we need an institution that, along with an independent judiciary, can continue to be a moderating force in democratic governance. In short as I say, we need us: proud public administrators to act as a bulwark for democratic decision-making and service delivery against the potentially arbitrary exercise of executive authority.

Now let me be clear, I think it is appropriate, indeed I think it is good thing, that in all our public services we now have groups of ministerial advisers to help ministers. I think it is a good thing that governments, often through us, seek to work with consultancy companies to provide advice to government. But the ministerial advisers and consultants are not enough: the role that they play is quite different to those of us who are public servants, public administrators, in the way that we serve elected politicians.

And finally, we need IPAA.

We need IPAA on occasion to give loud voice to these sentiments, to say publicly, to say unequivocally that public servants are a foundation of democratic governance and are vital to Australia's future.

Thank you very much.