

The Sir Robert Garran Oration

Innovation in the Age of COVID

Delivered by the Hon Greg Hunt MP. Minister for Health and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Sector and Cabinet at Parliament House Canberra, on 15 October 2020, and broadcast online by the Institute of Public Administration Australia on 21 October 2020.

I want to acknowledge the presence of Gordon de Brouwer, the National President of the IPAA, Caroline Walsh, the Chief Executive Officer and Cath Ingram for her leadership at KPMG. But above all else I want to acknowledge our extraordinary public servants in this, the year of COVID-19. Arguably the greatest challenge Australia has faced since the Second World War — an economic challenge, a health challenge, a national challenge, and you have saved lives and protected lives, and you have made a profound difference to the trajectory of this nation, and you have done it through your innovation and your fearless advice which ultimately has set Australia on a path to saving lives and protecting lives.

So I want to begin by honoring and thanking each and every one of you for the contribution you've made, but it's not just in the Australian Government public service, but in all of the tiers and levels of service and public support across Australia, because it's been a challenge. It's been a global challenge. But in this year Australia's public service, in all of its manifestations, has shone brightly.

And you have saved lives and protected lives and indeed the Medical Journal of Australia only recently made the conclusion off the back of a peer-reviewed competitive paper, that Australia's response to COVID compared with the United Kingdom — which itself moved heaven and earth — had saved an additional 16,000 lives than might otherwise have been the case. So, to be able to recognise what you have done in terms of lives saved, is in many ways the ultimate recognition of what you have done, and how you have served this nation.

So today I want to address — as part of the Garran Oration honoring a great Australian — innovation in the age of COVID. What this year has meant for public service in Australia, particularly of course, given my focus for the Australian Public Service, but for the concept and notion and role of public service across the nation.

And I want to do it in three stages. Firstly, to look at the foundations of public service, beginning with Westminster. Secondly to look at innovation through this, the year of COVID. And then finally to look at the future of how we adapt and develop and evolve our public service, particularly with the lessons we've learnt from this year. And my thesis is actually very simple.

What this year has taught us is not only do we arguably have the finest public service in the world and I mean that absolutely, but we can be more innovative in faster time frames in a safe way than we had ever realised. And that's something I've learnt myself. My horizons have been lifted by the immense capacity that I have witnessed in our public servants and our public service.

The foundations of public service

So, let me begin with the Westminster System and the foundations. And the first of those principles is about independence. And of course, the public service serves the government of the day, but ultimately it serves the public, and the government is the elected representative of the day. And so that notion of independence remains immensely important. I think it's particularly so at the federal level, but it's an immensely important principle.

And that doesn't mean that public servants can't be aligned with the goals and objectives of the day, but their role as custodians of public interest is something which I have witnessed. Whether it's through some of the extraordinary secretaries such as Gordon de Brouwer or Glenys Beauchamp, the work of the amazing Brendan Murphy, all of them. I've seen that independence, where they valued that contribution to the public, through their service, to the government.

But above all else, the lodestar was are they helping the Australian public? And that has to be your touchstone going forwards through your career, whether you're at the very beginning, mid-career, or in the later stages.

The second of the principles is about courage.

So, it's independence and then it's courage, and in terms of courage what I'm focused on is this notion of frank and fearless advice. Now, in many ways it's sometimes held up as a cliché, it's not. There are numerous debates and discussions that ministers and public servants have. Numerous ones that I've had, every day. And so, through that process, what I have seen is that the conversations I most value are when I'm challenged. And I can tell you that's the case for every minister. That doesn't mean there aren't moments where it will be frustrating for the public service or for the minister or for others, but it's that process of contestability which actually produces accountability and the best policy. That's why Cabinet matters.

Then that leads me finally to capability, and our role here in terms of the traditional Westminster structure, is to keep building the capability both of the service and of the individual. And I want to set out some ways later on that we can do that, but that means we are building individual training. Lifelong training throughout your public service time. Flexibility to move between different roles and to move in and out of the public service.

I am a big believer that one of the adaptations we can have for the Australian service is to have people moving in and out and to give them experience outside and to bring outside experience within.

Innovation in the year of COVID

So, against that background, how did we perform and what did we learn from COVID-19?

This has obviously been the greatest health challenge, the greatest economic challenge since the Second World War. The greatest health challenge in fact since the Spanish Flu 100 years ago. And what we have seen is that there can be deep innovation. And I want to run through that in terms of the functional agencies, the Cabinet process, and the federation.

In terms of the functional agencies, obviously I'll focus on Health and I think to use an example is a great way to illustrate what can be done.

We had a ten-year national plan for a migration to whole of population universal telehealth. So, we had a foundation for that, but it was going to take a long while.

In ten heady days, we took a ten-year plan at the end of March and we were able to bring whole of population universal telehealth into being. We accepted that it may not be perfect, that most of the constraints which we would ordinarily require... because of the necessity of a country going into lockdown, because of the need to keep doctors and patients apart where possible to protect both the health system and the frail, elderly and so many others.

We took these decisions and we did it through a process that involved Cabinet, National Security Committee and Expenditure Review Committee — the three principle arms of the Cabinet governance system — but with intense hour-by-hour strategic design, and micro-detailed design by the public service. And what that saw was that we, through a series of stages, brought universal telehealth online.

As I speak, over 35 million telehealth services have been delivered in Australia. It's arguably the largest revolution in healthcare delivery and Medicare since Medicare was introduced. And what was begun as a temporary measure will be a permanent measure. And it is providing support for patients around the country. It's transforming the way health can be delivered in rural and remote Australia and it's assisting... whether it's a young mum at home with small kids who's not able to easily move because of their circumstances, whether it's somebody in lockdown, whether it's an older Australian, or whether it's somebody in rural, remote or Indigenous Australia.

That system developed iteratively but rapidly, lifted all of our sights: that we can do grand design and reform quickly. A lot of pressure and you wouldn't do it that quickly outside of an extraordinary event, but we can do it far faster. And so, I think when we're conceiving a policy we need to think of the policy, a longer-term approach but then can we do it in an expedited approach?

And what I've found is that whether it's the work we were doing on Great Barrier Reef reform with Gordon and his team in the Environment Department, whether with Glenys Beauchamp and her team, what we're able to do with reform of National Science Policy, or what we've been able to do with Caroline Edwards who was the acting Secretary when we brought in telehealth, has shown that we can expedite policy in a time of need, and that if we can do it in a time of need, we can also expedite grand change outside of that time of need. Perhaps with a little more caution and time, but on a faster timeframe. And that's exciting for productivity and for outcomes for Australia.

That then brings me to the next point, which is in relation to ... we're able to do this with medicines policy, bringing onboard e-prescriptions, bringing onboard continuous dispensing and home dispensing. Changes borne of necessity but delivered with speed and delivered in a way which has actually touched the lives of millions.

To touch the lives of millions and to improve them, that in a way is the Holy Grail for public service in Australia. And we can do it: that's the lesson. We are an innovative nation, and our structures can cope with change in a rapid way.

So then, what about the Cabinet process? And what have we learnt about Cabinet? We've learnt that Cabinet is actually indispensable. The rigours, even if it's in a short timeframe, of going through the National Security Committee, which became the engine room for our response to COVID, of going through the Expenditure Review Committee, which challenged whether it was JobKeeper or JobSeeker, the whole process it helped mould and shape through multiple iterations, those policy outcomes; and then the ultimate overview of Cabinet where it should be collegiate, but everything is open challenge.

This year has seen, to the best of my understanding, the highest number of meetings of each of those groups. At a time where there was every excuse to dispense with them, and we've seen examples from around the country and around the world where that Cabinet process has been missing in action and the consequences. In Australia in fact, the Prime Minister consciously and deliberately used that Westminster structure to oversee policy development for the rigour, for the contestability and ultimately for the deep belief in the governance structures of Australia and it's produced better outcomes. It's always produced better outcomes. And that's flowing through to what we've done with the federation.

Now, COAG has served its purpose — and in many ways it's served the nation well — but it became sclerotic and bureaucratic. The National Cabinet was borne of an awareness of what occurred during the Spanish Flu when the Federation fractured and so what Scott did, is he deliberately constructed a fast-moving National Cabinet built around the leaders who were able to make decisions in principle, in real time, in a Cabinet and collegiate structure.

That doesn't mean that 120 years of competitive federalism have suddenly disappeared overnight — that's a reality of a federal structure and always will be — but the collegiate structure was embedded and made permanent and displaced COAG and is therefore a far more collaborative body. Sure, there'll be challenges: there always will be. But most importantly, there is a collegiate structure which is fast-moving, leader-driven and responsive to the time. And that is a lesson in innovation which has served Australia profoundly well.

The future: how we adapt, and develop, and evolve our public service

So then let me turn to the future.

As I look to the future, I think of it as the individual public servant, the service and the nation.

In terms of the individual, what we want to do is allow for continuous growth. And so, for that continuous growth — I mentioned at the outset — lifetime training.

So, we want to have a public service, an Australian Public Service — but I'd commend this across the states and territories — where people are able to continuously develop.

Education, whether it's formal courses, whether it's units, or whether it's specialisations. And to be able to develop as a specialist or as a generalist, but what is most important is that continuous education — the formal and the informal, the mentoring as well as the educational structures — that's something that we must build in

to give people that evolutionary path, but to give people the educational and sense of self-worth, and growth as a fundamental part of their work.

Then there are the service changes for the future, the concept of the public service.

And that service, in my view, has been and will be enriched with diversity.

And so, we need to be able to bring people in at later stages in their career. I think that that's a very important part of what we're doing in Australia, of inviting people in, of bringing them in at later stages in their career, and allowing people within public service to move out of that service for a period of time. So, a much greater exchange between those within the service and those outside of the service.

And we've seen as well, the flexibility where 9,000 people have moved roles during the course of this year — and they've done that in real time to respond to the needs — and they've done it magnificently.

Then lastly there's the nation.

And I think what has happened, is that the nation has seen the value of the Australian Public Service. The natural cynicism, much of it's fallen away. They have seen that people have worked overnight, around-the-clock. They've provided air bridges in relation to test kits, they've ensured that what we've had with PPE has been different to the experience of the rest of the world. They've seen ventilators constructed; hospital agreements created. All of those things have been done by a public service that's been motivated and committed and passionate. And so, the very concept of the public service has been renewed this year. That's what COVID-19 has done. It's renewed our internal belief and it's renewed the public's faith. And we always have to keep going on that, but it's a moment where people should rightly reflect and say, "I contributed, I helped do that."

And so ultimately, when I think through the foundations of Westminster which we must continue to renew, the lessons of innovation which have been at the heart of COVID-19 and the Australian response, and the potential for the future for this to continue to be the most responsive and creative public service in the world, but to do it even better if we build in individual education and systems flexibility, and combine it with public support for what we're doing, then that will allow Australia to continue to lead the world in our economic, our social and our human delivery of outcomes.

I thank you, I honour you, and I wish you a quiet 2021.