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First Nations First

First Nations public servants, the future of the Australian public service workforce¹

Abstract

This article imagines a future public service that is culturally safe and supportive of First Nations employees and end users, a place where transformative policy can emerge. The authors, First Nations and settler/non-indigenous academics and public servants, offer visions for change in five key areas, drawing on our academic research and public service practice.

Keywords First Nations, workforce policy, public service, cultural safety, indigenous affairs

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All the authors except Julie and Geoff are currently employed by the Australian public service; the opinions presented here are our own.

We are a group of colleagues – First Nations and settler public servants and academics – who share a passion for improved workplace environments and a commitment to supporting public service problem-solving through rigorous research. In this article we address the question of the future of First Nations peoples’ employment in public service workplaces. The topic is multifaceted and we have chosen to write individually based on our interests, experience and research insights. The article explores current context, policy history, cultural safety, gender, mentoring, physical safety in service delivery and public service skills as they relate to the First Nations public service workforce. We write in the first person and introduce ourselves and our positionality. We write deliberately in this way to go against the tradition of writing in a single voice, to instead privilege our diverse experiences and insights. We take this approach to

honour indigenous² ways of doing research which make space for multiple voices. We are also acknowledging that public service workplaces are complex places and that there are no single fixes for addressing workforce issues; it requires everyone to pay attention and a relational approach to bring it all together.

Context setting

This article is being completed shortly after Australians voted ‘no’ in the referendum to create a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous Voice to Parliament; a vote where 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people supported a voice. A ‘yes’ vote would have, first, recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of Australia, and established a body known as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to provide advice to government on matters affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australian Government, 2023a). Instructive and thoughtful opinion pieces on the outcome written by First Nations and other scholars have already appeared (e.g., Nakata, 2023; Williamson, 2023). By the time this article appears in print, much will have been said about the outcome and how Australia lags behind other nations in formalising space for First Nations voices to speak to governing bodies and public service agencies. At this point, perhaps it is enough to say that the ‘no’ vote is a heartbreaking reminder of sharp divisions fracturing Australia, and that an opportunity has been missed to establish a mechanism that promised to enhance people’s lives through the work of government and the public service.

In the absence of a representative Indigenous Voice to Parliament, what are the implications for future public service institutions that seek to make policies for First Nations peoples? First Nations public servants in any settler colonial nation should never be expected to take the place of absent representative voices. Until a permanent structure is created to allow communities to speak directly to government agendas, there is much work to do inside the bureaucracy that will improve outcomes for First Nations peoples and the experience of First Nations public servants.

The Australian government has already signed up to the challenge of transforming government entities on the inside. In 2019 a National Agreement on Closing the Gap between First Nations and non-indigenous peoples in statistical and other measures was initiated. This landmark agreement, negotiated between the federal government and a coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations (the Coalition of Peaks), was significant in bringing indigenous organisational and service delivery expertise and government together to identify areas for improvement. It is unsurprising that one of four agreed

We, the authors, each write in our own voices, offering our standpoints and our research- and practice-led insights. One central thread binding our visions is the need for a redirection in workforce policy away from the tired and well-worn focus on headline statistics and First Nations public servant capabilities. A key insight is, rather, that the focus needs to shift towards improvements required within government agency workplace cultures to realise the current reform agenda for changing government entities on the inside.

When thinking about enhancing future workforce outcomes for First Nations peoples within the public service, it is instructive to note that 2023 marks 50 years since the Australian public service first began working on this issue.

areas for reform were government institutions themselves. Priority reform area 3’s focus is on ‘Transforming government organisations’, whereby ‘Governments, their organisations, and their institutions are accountable for Closing the Gap and are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including through the services they fund’ (Coalition of Peaks, 2023).

Some progress has occurred in this area, but the Coalition of Peaks lead, Pat Turner (Secretaries Board, 2022), and the Productivity Commission’s recent review (Productivity Commission, 2023) have been critical of progress. Much is yet to be achieved to change the culture of government departments and agencies. In this article we put forward multiple areas where public service agencies must change for there to be improved employment experiences for First Nations workers, enhanced decision making, and better outcomes for communities.

First Nations employment in the public service – a 50-year history

Samantha Faulkner is a Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal woman with family ties to Badu and Moa islands in the Torres Strait and the Wuthathi and Yadhagiana people of Cape York Peninsula. Julie Lahn is a German-Scottish heritage settler who grew up in north-eastern Australia.

When thinking about enhancing future workforce outcomes for First Nations peoples within the public service, it is instructive to note that 2023 marks 50 years since the Australian public service first began working on this issue. The 1967 referendum in which the Australian population voted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be allowed to vote and included in official population statistics paved the way for the federal government to make legislation and policy for First Nations peoples (previously this was the exclusive purview of subnational political jurisdictions) (see Ganter, 2016, for an historical account). In 1973 the

Public Service Board issued a two-page circular which read, in part:

While Aboriginals are already employed in Commonwealth departments, the Board is of the view that new measures are required which, having regard to the increasing numbers of Aboriginals seeking employment in urban and non-urban areas, and to the rising levels of educational attainment of young Aboriginals, will give them increasing access to employment in the service ... In addition, such new measures are required to permit the Service to utilise fully the particular skills and talents that Aboriginals may contribute. (Office of the Public Service Board, 1973, p.1)

remain. Employees remain disproportionately clustered at lower levels. Increased representation at senior executive levels (numbering 44 individuals as at June 2022 (ibid.) is a positive sign, particularly after having stalled for a decade (Australian National Audit Office, 2014; Faulkner and Lahn, 2019). But gains have been hard won and involve replacement of those departing. A new goal to increase representation across the Australian public service to reach 100 senior executive-level First Nations public servants, the 'SES 100', is now underway (Secretaries Board, 2022). The initiative asks that those applying be ready to 'make a difference' and 'influence decision-making processes', and individual preferences to 'remain on Country' will be considered rather than everyone being expected to move to the national capital (Australian

statistics to consider the conditions of employment in the public service. This is where we start our series of vision statements.

Public service agencies must be culturally responsive and recognise that cultural load is not okay

My name is Lisa Conway and I am a Yorta Yorta woman. My recently completed PhD research focused on how to build cultural capability in public administrations, with a specific interest in the Australian public service.

There are three overarching barriers to achieving a culturally safe and responsive public service. The first is understanding and acknowledging what the current state of the public service is and how it is experienced by its indigenous peoples who work there. This is despite the growing body of research on this critical issue (e.g., Bargallie, 2020a, 2020b; Faulkner and Lahn, 2019; Larkin, 2013). The second barrier is a lack of an agreed definition and vision of what a culturally safe and responsive workplace looks like. A third and crucial hurdle is the need for a comprehensive understanding of what is required to shift from the current state to one that is culturally safe and responsive.

As a public administration, the Australian public service has not effectively addressed workplace discrimination experienced by Mob³ (often labelled as cultural safety issues). A recent comparative discourse analysis of the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Strategy (the Mob strategy) and the Australian Public Service Disability Employment Strategy demonstrated a significant difference in how discrimination was addressed by each strategy, and how the Mob strategy went on to further reinforce the perception that it didn't exist and was not an area of focus (Conway, 2023).

Without actively identifying the issue of workplace discrimination that Mob face in public service workplaces, it is unlikely that lessons can be taken from those experiences Mob have, and the urgency of addressing these issues is not realised. As these employees are the canaries in the coalmine (Conway, 2020), the Australian public service needs to be more aware of this discrimination if it is to deliver on its

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Following this first policy directive was the first survey in 1973 of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants (Office of the Public Service Board, 1974). The policy and the survey established an agenda for action and a baseline for reporting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public service employment. These policy visions have been repeated, nuanced and statistically measured every year since 1973 (with rare exceptions). First Nations employment in the public service has been an ongoing concern for a very long time.

Much has improved in 50 years. Statistical representation has increased substantially, to the point where numbers are approaching parity: most recent estimates are 5,437 or 3.5% of all employees (Australian Public Service Commission, 2022). Behind the statistics, challenges

Government, 2023b). Such initiatives may assist with the ongoing challenge to halt the significant churn across the board whereby annual intake figures in the service are high, but shorter median periods of service and early exit persist to diminish or even eclipse gains (APS Indigenous Steering Committee, 2018; Australian National Audit Office, 2014). A now substantial literature indicates a long list of obstacles getting in the way of improved workforce outcomes, including exit linked to feeling undervalued and underutilised, racism, pigeonholing, problems with managers, pressure to move from regional offices to the national capital, opaque 'unwritten rules' of bureaucracy, unconscious bias in recruitment and a lack of cultural safety (eg. Bargallie, 2020b; Lahn, 2018; Larkin, 2013; Leon, 2022). In this article we dig in to look beyond headline

commitment to priority reform 3 in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to transform mainstream public administrations to be more culturally safe and responsive (Coalition of Peaks, 2023).

Currently in the Australian public service there is no agreed definition of what a culturally safe and responsive workplace is and no vision for what this future state looks like. What is clear, though, is that a culturally *unsafe* workplace is one where ongoing workplace discrimination endangers the psychological safety of its indigenous workers. This can be demonstrated through reported experiences of racism, as well as retention rates, which can be calculated via available data, but are not actively calculated nor reported on by the Australian public service (Conway, 2023).

If I were to describe my vision of a culturally safe and responsive workplace in an Australian public administration setting, one that as a Yorta Yorta woman I'd be happy to work in, I would be seeking three main attributes. First, it would have a shared accepted value of relationality; second, all staff would have a strong understanding of their cultural identity and that of their workplace; third, all knowledge would be valued, regardless of the knowledge holder's origin, and each worker would be responsible for their own cultural capability and Mob would not carry that as additional unpaid labour (often referred to as cultural load) (Bargallie, Carlson and Day, 2023).

Relationality is an important value in many indigenous groups (Tynan, 2021). It relates to the importance of connectedness, and each part's role in contributing to the whole. It's not about a hierarchy, where certain people are at the peak, but sees all things as equal and a necessary part of the whole. To embrace relationality, the Australian public service would be more conscious of the ripples created by its decisions in design and implementation of policy. Decision makers would be clear about policy intent and the repercussions of their decisions.

Additionally, bias would affect the public service less. Staff would be aware of their own cultural identity, and how it may impede decision making (yes, even the white⁴ Australian workers, who mostly

believe that 'race' equals 'non-white' (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p.13). Mob would be able to share knowledge and experiences with decision makers and they would also be heard. The public service would understand that it currently privileges the knowledge of white Australians and take careful steps to now also consider Mobs' input in its actions.

And finally (though I could go on), Mob would be remunerated for their work in the public service, but not be expected to provide additional work on top for no compensation. We would not bear the load of being expected to teach our white colleagues about indigenous culture, and how Mob experience

Improving retention by reducing service user violence and aggression against public servants

I'm Steve Munns, and I am a Gumbaynggirr/Bundjalung man with my Mob being from Grafton in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales. I'm a psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist and in my working life as an Australian public servant, in youth services, prisons and mental health worker roles, I have been aware of and witness to aggressions towards service staff.

I was recently supported by my public service employer to undertake a PhD at the Australian National University's School of Regulation and Global Governance under the Pat Turner Scholarship scheme, to

My survey of staff found that 51% of employees in Services Australia and 69% of Department of Veterans' Affairs staff had been subjected to service user violence and aggression during the previous 24 months.

interactions with the public service. Instead, our white colleagues would embrace their own responsibility to become culturally safe and responsive, and it would not have to happen at our expense. The Australian public service will have changed the mindset and culture rather than expecting Mob to suppress our true selves and assimilate to save white Australia the discomfort of learning to work, think and behave in different ways.

Without an acknowledgement and understanding of the current levels of cultural safety and responsiveness within the Australian public service, and having no vision of what this future state looks like, the public service is not ready to overcome the third barrier, which is the 'how' of getting from the current to the desired state. Only once the public service has worked through the first two barriers can we even begin to plan and deliver real change for Mob.

identify factors involved in and strategies to reduce violence against public service staff by service users during the provision of social services. The majority of indigenous staff continue to be employed at lower levels and in out-servicing and frontline client-facing work, in contract employment, and overwhelmingly in service provision agencies. These are areas where frontline public servants face service user violence and aggression. This is a significant issue with serious consequences for recruitment, retention and public confidence. More can be done to make interface situations safer for both parties.

Prior research into service user violence and aggression has focused on the health sector, where violence and aggression is committed against attending nurses and doctors (Wressell, Rasmussen and Driscoll, 2018; Hills, Joyce and Humphreys, 2013). Little research has been conducted in public service organisations such as social services (such as Centrelink) or veterans'

services. To understand the issue in the public service context I employed a multifaceted approach focusing on three domains: the public service organisation, public servants and service users. The study was conducted with both non-indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. Understanding these domains requires a multi-method approach. I undertook a thorough assessment of the environment, the structures, policies and experiences of service users and frontline public servants. I conducted multiple ethnographic site observations of interactions inside service provision agencies. I also spoke one-on-one with those who had been involved in aggressive incidents through in-depth interviews with service users and public service staff. In

challenging life circumstances their service user clients face. Other public servants are reluctant to report receiving abuse out of fear they may be perceived as incompetent, resulting in job loss; this was a particular concern among contract staff. In addition, public service agencies lack consistency in how reporting service user violence and aggression is managed. This was found between Services Australia and the Department of Veterans' Affairs, as well as across the Services Australia network. Staff noted that the process was often cumbersome and too long, or that they had been discouraged from completing the online reporting tool.

One negative flow-on from a public service culture of under-reporting is that public servants see violence and the threat

initiatives. One example could be a rotation regime to prevent burnout by periodically rotating staff in and out of high-risk offices. Other supports for staff include putting in place appropriate training. De-escalation training is very important. A 'tick and flick' exercise such as a 20-minute video is ineffectual, but intensive and high-quality role-play training can equip public servants with the knowledge and the confidence to be able to assess the likelihood of aggression or implement multi-network regulation across agencies that work with the same individual. Understanding triggers on both sides through mental health training can assist staff to understand their clients, how mental health issues can present, and the triggers and practical strategies for avoiding and diffusing situations.

On the public service side another significant trigger is policies and procedures. This issue of policy-induced anxiety leading to aggression and self-harm is now well known in Australia, as recent royal commissions have been able to identify specific policies and procedures which have directly led to service users self-harming, and also acting aggressively towards public service staff. This also came through in my research and I was able to document where verbal threats were made to staff during calls, but also incidences of suicide threats by service users. Designing policies and procedures that are true to the legislation but are mindful of the potential for harm is critical in reducing the potential for violence.

Having a multi-networked approach to managing clients who require a number of support services can also reduce the likelihood of violence by reducing the number of interactions with public service agencies and staff. Educating public servants about the Privacy Act and helping them to understand what information can be shared is required for this sort of approach. Many don't currently understand that if there is a history of violence, or individuals are being threatening or aggressive, that information can be shared across agencies to design approaches to prevent possible incidents taking place.

Combining a multi-network approach with improved risk-assessment strategies can be a powerful combination for building awareness of triggers. If someone is noted

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addition, almost 5,000 service users completed surveys. Triangulating data across all methods showed a high degree of alignment in the findings. I found that, looking across the three domains, there are clear areas of intervention where additional support can be provided that can interact to reduce violence.

Getting better data is a critical place to start. My survey of staff found that 51% of employees in Services Australia and 69% of Department of Veterans' Affairs staff had been subjected to service user violence and aggression during the previous 24 months. Part of the public service data problem I found was an under-reporting of violence and threats of intimidation. Official data significantly underestimated the number of incidents in the same period. There are multiple factors at play in under-reporting. Some frontline public servants simply feel it is part of their role to take the abuse from others and justify it with reference to the

of it as the norm; this normalisation can affect people's mental health and their ability to stay composed at work. Public servants may not recognise when they're stressed and anxious at work. If a service user walks in and is upset and abusive there's a big risk that burnt-out public servants will themselves respond (robustly or forcefully), leading to unnecessary escalation. Staff-initiated conflict can also be more pronounced when agencies rely on contracted public servants who may be less empathetic or who may not have received the same level of training. Contractor-initiated triggering behaviours were reported to have accounted for a significant proportion of aggression incidents in my study.

Changing workplace expectations to promote a zero tolerance approach to aggression and encourage reporting of abuse and aggression would also give agencies the data to set up targeted

to be agitated, or we have insight into a possible aggression, a risk assessment could be undertaken on them. If the assessment indicates that they are at a higher level of risk, an alternative servicing arrangement could be put in place – for example, allocating one main contact and stipulating that interaction can only take place by telephone. The one main contact should be a staff member who has skills in being able to work with clients who have a tendency to become aggressive. This may be due to the client’s mental health, neurological conditions or other factors.

Improving physical safety and mental wellbeing at work in public service agencies may also improve staff retention (Johnson et al., 2018; Tummers, Brunetto and Teo, 2016). Focusing on physical safety, personal wellbeing and retention of public service staff will have important flow-on benefits for the clients who present to these agencies.

Enhancing workforce retention and career progression of Aboriginal women through mentoring

I’m Lee-Anne Daffy, an Aboriginal woman with Taungurung clan group heritage from my mother’s family. As a public servant of nearly two decades, I have witnessed the ever-evolving way in which the Australian public service has sought to increase its First Nations Australian workforce using specific models.

Specific models have seen increased recruitment of First Nations public service staff. However, in the same time frame, the Australian public service has seen high attrition rates for the same cohort (Australian National Audit Office, 2014). More concerning, exit interviews, once routinely offered, have ceased, thus making it difficult to measure the reason in real time why so many leave.

As a researcher currently undertaking a PhD, it has become more and more apparent to me that there need to be several intersections of influence in the public service workplace to create change on a larger scale; change that requires positive challenge to be embraced. This is not an easy achievement. It requires people to be brave. It requires people to be psychologically safe. It demands a level of unrelenting determination, some degree of influential but measured confrontation,

and purposeful creativity. It has the potential to allow robust debate that can bring about great ideas and new pathways.

As an Aboriginal woman my research passion has been to provide a mechanism to share stories of First Nations Australian women. Coming from a history of intergenerational trauma, my outlook has been to ‘make it count’. My history has shaped my life, my outlook, my tenacity. Making it count is why I wanted to be a researcher, a researcher who could use the Western ways of writing to the advantage of indigenous Australians. Despite the difficulties of walking in two worlds, being able to shape future programme and policy design continues to inspire me.

Acknowledging the value of differences in thinking for public service work is not only relevant to indigenous women; it can be a transferable insight to other minority groups, enhancing inclusivity and truly representing the multicultural make-up of the Australian population, nationwide.

Using my experiences, exposures and relationships provides me with a vast life library to draw from. I stand as a Taungurung woman: solid in my gender, solid in my culture; solid in my knowing, being and doing. Solid in my ability to relate, to engage and to keep it real. This is my standpoint. I am educated with two degrees, and currently completing a doctorate. I am a minority within a minority: tertiary educated as an Aboriginal woman. Married for more than 30 years, with a mortgage and employed full-time; still a minority within a minority. Statistically, housing and employment are key areas of concern for First Nations peoples. Understanding that employment is a significant key to improving other socio-economic outcomes, I hope to provide a diverse voice here.

I have made it my vision to highlight the strengths and tenacity of First Nations women in their desire to improve their life outlook through employment; in this instance employment in the Australian public service. First Nations women are an important cohort within the Australian public service: they make up more than two-thirds of all indigenous employees (Australian Public Service Commission, 2022). I use a qualitative, yarning approach to make space for women to speak their life journeys in entering the public service through entry-level programmes. The focus is on what is called ‘apprenticeships’, a 12-month programme whereby, generally, entry is at the low-level Australian Public

Service level 3, and the programme ends in their promotion to level 4. Additionally, there is a graduate programme whereby entry is for those who have completed university at either undergraduate or postgraduate level.

In these programmes mentoring is offered at various times, with varying delivery and results. Mentoring does not automatically guarantee positive results but I have found that mentoring is a key element that does sit behind all positive outcomes for women employed at these levels. For women these positive outcomes include feeling psychologically and physically safe at work, having increased confidence, and the real possibility of career progression. Mentoring that started early in the placement was seen as highly productive. Those with this type of ongoing

support, particularly the First Nations apprentices, reported a sense of enhanced engagement and understanding. As women, having mentors who understood family connectedness and responsibilities outside work employment was also identified as important.

Effective change for the betterment of programme delivery and policy uptake should include working to understand the gaps in support and the successes. Achieving embedded improvements for women must begin with a broad investigation of what changes are necessary.

A lot of areas don't deliver Indigenous programmes, but they have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, and struggle to find the relevance, to see the connections between their programmes and First Nations outcomes.

Using my lens from an indigenous Australian women's standpoint (Kwaymullina, 2017), understanding how the Aboriginal Australian woman brings immeasurable worth to public service is the core of my research. Ways of being, through this cultural lens, provides a foundation for difference in thinking. This unique perspective ensures that there is a more robust and representative knowing and doing. The value of targeted workforce strategies encourages cultural diversity (Larkin, 2013). Acknowledging the value of differences in thinking for public service work is not only relevant to indigenous women; it can be a transferable insight to other minority groups, enhancing inclusivity and truly representing the multicultural make-up of the Australian population, nationwide.

Viewing First Nations peoples from a deficit discourse must end. My research continues to challenge the mainstream, the

dominant social structures and the power differential. By viewing First Nations women as strong, capable and creative, the power shifts are dynamic. To achieve meaningful and sustained increases in retention and career progression for First Nations women, change must be required of mainstream line managers, office managers and senior executives. The areas to address these positive outcomes are many and far-reaching. Appropriate modelling to induce parity by making mentoring an integral part of the employment journey is essential.

Being provided with the opportunity to speak doesn't translate to actual, effective change until all the actors involved are serious about the value of cultural diversity in agencies, departments, and the entirety of the Australian public service. It is only then that we can truthfully argue that the public service as an employer of choice.

All government agencies have a role; all public servants have a role: recognising and valuing the soft skills required for First Nations policy work

I'm Geoff Richardson, a descendant of the Meriam people of Murray Island (Mer) in the Torres Strait and the Kuku Yalanji/Djabugay peoples of North Queensland. I spent 40 years in the Australian public service, all in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs portfolio, and was the first Torres Strait Islander to reach the senior executive service level, where I spent 22 years. I retired in 2017 and now run an

organisation connecting governments with First Nations communities.

When you retire you think a lot about what you've achieved and what remains to be done. Reflecting on the history of the Australian public service, the nearest we came to a vision for indigenous affairs at the policy level was under Prime Minister Whitlam; that was 50 years ago. Self-determination was the vision then, and it has to be the vision today. Currently, Closing the Gap is the main policy focus – achieving parity. But Closing the Gap is not a vision, it's a step towards it. Without a vision you can't hang your hat on anything. If, for example, indigenous affairs policy was linked to a vision for self-determination, you could ask about every policy initiative, 'how does that contribute towards the vision?' You can't say that about Closing the Gap. It would be an amazing thing to close gaps in outcomes, but that's a policy outcome, not a vision. If we reach parity, that's not the same as self-determination. Having a vision in public service is like the lighthouse on the hill: it keeps you focused on the way you work towards closing those gaps in outcomes.

The majority of policy affecting First Nations peoples actually comes from mainstream not indigenous policy areas. A lot of areas don't deliver indigenous programmes, but they have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, and struggle to find the relevance to see the connections between their programmes and First Nations outcomes. Of the total amount of money spent, indigenous-specific spending is roughly 20%. The heavy lifting always has to be done in mainstream agencies. But the specific criticism has always been of indigenous agencies like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the National Indigenous Affairs Agency. They are an easy target for disdain felt by non-indigenous agencies: 'it's not our problem, it's theirs'. In reality, every agency deals with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Embedding this awareness to ensure all departments see how their areas affect indigenous people is sorely needed in the public service. The government needs to make that very clear: it is everybody's business.

One of the things that the public service struggles with, because of the silos, is complexity. For example, take an issue like climate change: the way the public service works, internationally too, they struggle and go through a process of reductionism, reducing a complex issue to bite-sized chunks so that they can push it out to agencies to design and deliver targeted programmes. Reductionism is our biggest enemy, reinforcing the silos. Everyone owns their part. Reductionism does not recognise the interconnectedness and there is no responsibility for the whole. Indigenous affairs suffers from this sort of mindset.

Much more internal public service work needs to occur to instil community development-type skills – mediation, facilitation, and system and subsystem skills. If those sorts of programmes are rolled out and embedded as standard, you are going to grow a different kind of public servant and that will influence the culture within the public service; that will play out in the workplace and affect how those public servants relate to other colleagues. It will improve both policy and programming, but also the employment experience.

I came up with these domains of skills to work effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In my opinion there are four skill domains required for the public service now and in the future. You need a facilitation domain to be able to mediate, to broker things when you go into the community. In our space of indigenous affairs you need that. You also need development skills, to impart knowledge skills and work with a developmental mindset. You need systems skills to see things holistically and understand how systems map and work out, how things interconnect. Lastly, you need cross-cultural skills to communicate effectively. Most people have touches of these skills; some people have big doses of some but not others. The complete public servant will have big doses of all four skills.

Thinking specifically about working within indigenous affairs, some of these skills need to be brought into work-level standards of employment. These should reflect the skills needed to work in an indigenous space, especially with the

importance of cultural knowledge skills. They should recognise and value the range of soft skills that many indigenous (and non-indigenous) staff can bring and these sorts of skills should be built into position descriptions. This will avoid the situation where the wrong sort of people (those who use indigenous affairs as a stepping stone) come to work in the space.

I would like to finish with the notion of ‘cashing my credits’, the additional work that indigenous people take on to get things done within the bureaucracy. It is those relationships that we have as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that we draw on, those years spent on building networks, working on

target statistics are created and reported on to maintain focus on this policy aim. But, looking beyond the big statistics, agencies will improve retention if they attend to underlying issues for employees, such as feeling culturally, mentally and physically safe at work, being supported and understanding the ‘unwritten rules’ of public service workplaces at entry and when seeking to move through the ranks to senior levels, and recognition of the unique value of First Nations peoples’ contribution, including those soft skills that are vital to future public service work. Thinking about employment in indigenous affairs sphere specifically, a unique set of skills is required of all

A key future opportunity then rests with the ability of public service agencies to value First Nations public servant insights, to invest in time away for them to dig into issues, and take opportune risks to facilitate implementation and transferability.

relationships, that we use within our work domain. Not many non-indigenous senior executives would have done this. If we don’t step in and do the work, bring people together for community consultation, for example, then it won’t get done, or get done in a culturally appropriate and respectful way. In my experience, community thanked us for turning up and giving time and being honest. This is a part of adding value to the process.

The Australian public service needs that value. Relationality, connection and working in a ‘good way’ cuts through.

Conclusion

In this article our first priority has been to present research-led ideas for improving future public service workforce outcomes for First Nations peoples. A key focus of settler colonial governments is to recruit and retain indigenous peoples within public servant ranks. Headline

employees, non-indigenous included. Recognising and formalising these skill sets will create safer workplaces for all and improve coordination of programme and service delivery for First Nations peoples.

A secondary purpose of our article is to demonstrate the value in supporting First Nations public servants to investigate deeply the issues they’ve identified in their everyday work. During Geoff’s 40 years of service in government, he and other First Nations colleagues pursued such projects within the confines of the public service and in addition to their everyday workload. Lisa, Lee and Steve have, on the other hand, been supported to step outside their public service roles and investigate issues they have identified as relevant to their public service agencies through PhD research under the Pat Turner Scholarship programme; Samantha was supported by the Australian Public Service Commission via direct temporary secondment to a

university research position to work with Julie. The results of this support speak for themselves. They are also echoed in the recent Thodey-led review of the Australian public service, which asked what it would take for a future public service 'to become more porous, with people moving in and out during their careers, bringing expertise and insight from other sectors', because 'the public service will never be at its best working in isolation' (Thodey, 2018).

From Thodey's recommendations and Geoff's insight we can envision a public service that values and makes space for innovation and testing of ideas from inside the public service. Any future public service should also be looking to invest in its First

Nations public servants by encouraging staff to take their ideas into the academy to investigate public service issues and test the practice-based ideas and fixes. The benefits of doing this are threefold: benefits to the specific public service area under investigation; benefits to First Nations public servants as they build skills and confidence in a different (research) domain; and benefits to First Nations career advancement (if not uptake of the research findings).

A broader benefit is to build the research capacity of the public service generally. Of course, a known issue arising from such initiatives is translation and implementation, with uptake stifled by

gaps in knowledge systems and professional practices separating academia and public service (see, for example, Mercer et al., 2021). A key future opportunity then rests with the ability of public service agencies to value First Nations public servant insights, to invest in time away for them to dig into issues, and take opportune risks to facilitate implementation and transferability.

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1 Throughout this article this expression refers to the Commonwealth public service.

2 In this article 'indigenous' refers to Australian indigenous people (often capitalised now).

3 A term often used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to refer to themselves and their communities.

4 In this article 'white Australian' refers to the dominant socio-cultural group.

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