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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #104

THE POWER OF LEADERSHIP DEVOLUTION

with Blair Comley PSM

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone, and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service and how it serves the Australian people. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin today, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land from which we are broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from. Well today I'm delighted to welcome into the studio Blair Comley, PSM, who is the Secretary of the Federal Department of Health. Blair is one of Australia's leading public policy experts. He studied economics at Monash University and has a long and distinguished career in both the Commonwealth and New South Wales public services. He's worked extensively on market design issues, including leading the design of carbon pricing, the GST and Commonwealth competitive neutrality policy and other aspects of competition policy.

Blair was the Secretary of the Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, secretary of the Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism, and also the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet in New South Wales. And he has also spent significant time working in consulting. He joins me in the studio. Blair Comley, welcome to Work With Purpose.

Blair Comley:

Thanks, David. Glad to be here.

David Pembroke:

A feature of our interviews with secretaries is to really find out a little bit more about the person behind the secretary. So the Blair Comley story, where does it begin?

Blair Comley:

Well, it originally, well, it begins in New Zealand and then went through childhood with England, Adelaide, Melbourne, and ended up in Canberra. I became an economist, but I didn't start as an economist. My first degree out of uni. I studied electrical electronic engineering and then did science and then morphed into economics at a time that it was really interesting and topical, late '80s, J curves, twin deficits, Paul Keating talking about the big picture and the early '90s recession was a pretty seminal moment for me as I saw the consequences of economic and other policy going wrong for real, people losing their jobs, massive uptick in unemployment. And so that attracted me ultimately to the public service as a place to say, how can we make the world a better place?

David Pembroke:

So just if I might just jump back to that earlier story, that origin story was your father or mother in the services or something like that?

Blair Comley:

No, my father worked for an insurance company. He left school after year 12, and in those days I couldn't afford to go to university if you were a young guy who was good at maths, being an actuarial student was one of the pathways. So he became an actuarial student at what was then National Mutual and followed the company around for 30 years.

David Pembroke:

Okay. And your education, what was your big focus when you're in high school? What were your interests?

Blair Comley:

Maths, physics, chemistry. I did a bit of English on the side. I did economics in year 11 and dropped it. I thought it wasn't tough enough and then came back to it in university. But yeah, I was a pretty straight math science kind of guy.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. And your interests and hobbies when you were younger?

Blair Comley:

I'm sporty.

David Pembroke:

You're sporty?

Blair Comley:

Well, I was.

David Pembroke:

Okay. What were your sports?

Blair Comley:

So in year 12 I played cricket, indoor cricket, badminton, squash, and hockey with probably cricket and hockey, squash and hockey being the three things I did through university, et cetera. So yeah, I kept doing that. So I'm now on the board of the Australian Sports Commission, and it's one of those funny things to come back as a fan, but with an administrative role.

David Pembroke:

And as a cricketer, you a batter, bowler?

Blair Comley:

So I played within my extensive limitations as a grinding opening bat with a little bit of off spin.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Yeah. What did you like about opening the batting?

Blair Comley:

Look, in retrospect, I grew up in an era of cricket that was pretty dull. It was the time of attritional bowling, short pitch bowling on the telly and trying to leave everything you could. So it is a long, long way away from 2020 Cricket, I can assure you.

David Pembroke:

And so once into university, you said electrical engineering, that was the path, you were pretty clear at the?

Blair Comley:

No, no, I wasn't clear. I think essentially I had done all those sciences and first year electrical and electronic engineering was kind of science with a slightly practical bent, but I pivoted away from that pretty quickly. I then moved after first year from Adelaide to Melbourne. I stayed as a science degree but started doing economics. And when I was at first year at university, I used to had a couple of friends who were doing economics, so I used to sit in on their lectures and kind of liked it. And so then I started doing, I still did maths and physics, but I did more and more economics as I went through university. And it was just one thing I loved, really enjoyed it.

David Pembroke:

You liked the problem solving of it, understanding the major contextual societal challenges and the role that economics played, is that what drew you to it? The complexity of it?

Blair Comley:

One level economics isn't that complex. What I quite like about a lot of economics is taking a relatively small number of principles and then finding a way that they can be applied in a pretty subtle and different way in the real world. So there's only three or four concepts we'll get you through most of your economic problem solving, and then the rest of it is thinking about what that means in the real world. So I found that really attractive, really just interesting and intuitive. So yeah, I loved it.

David Pembroke:

So in terms of your journey into the public service, what did that look like? You looked at a graduate positions, is that what you were thinking or did you take a more senior position?

Blair Comley:

No, before I had a cadetship at treasury. So back in, I think they've come and gone, but in those days you have got a cadetship. They paid you through your honours' year. They gave you vacation employment between third year and fourth year, and then a guaranteed graduate position there. So it was almost pre-graduate. So I had that at treasury, but then I didn't go to treasury immediately after that and I stayed on and I did a Master's of Economics. I became lecturer in economics and then after a period, I then went to the public service from there.

David Pembroke:

And where did you go then? Where was that entry point?

Blair Comley:

So the first entry point was what was then the industry commission, now, the productivity commission at the Office of Regulation Review as it was then. So now what would be the Office of Impact Analysis and that was as an E one.

David Pembroke:

Okay. And what did you learn there?

Blair Comley:

Well, I learned quite a lot of things, but I learned that I wanted to be a bit closer to the policy game. So I'd been in academia and not for long, I'd quickly discovered that academia, I'm too much of an extrovert to be an academic. So whilst I loved teaching, the grinding away on your own in an office for long periods of time wasn't me. And so I went to the Office of Regulation Review when their marketing material, still got some friends there. Their marketing material was essentially you are directly advising cabinet, you're providing an input to the process. The reality was it was the early days of regulatory impact statements, which were going to become part of the cabinet process, but they were pretty distant from the cabinet process. So after about six months, I moved into treasury to be a bit closer to the policy advising action. Okay.

David Pembroke:

And then what was the journey from there? Because you pretty quickly moved through a number of senior and responsible positions.

Blair Comley:

Yeah, I mean I was at Treasury, I think it was 13 or 14 years, so I was there for a while. So I was an EL one for a couple of years at Treasury that was doing well, actually, ironically at one point I was treasury's climate change capacity. So it shows how times have changed. I was one EL one where it was about half of my job to do climate change and then moved across briefly to do indirect tax before I was promoted into an EL two, which when I was doing competition policy. So that would've back in '97, I was an EL two competition policy. And then six months into that, I got a call tax reform started.

So the GST design and development, and I had previously lectured in tax policy, but I didn't put my hand up to go on the task force. And I got a call, Ken Henry asked someone to call me and said, do you want to come and work on tax reform? And in retrospect, that was if there's kind of I think a sliding door moment in your career, it was going from not a backwater of treasury, but a sort of sedate business as usual area to an area that was really at the forefront of doing the big thing at the time, which was designing the GST.

David Pembroke:

You ultimately went on to be the secretary of the Department of Climate Change, but was it an accident that you ended up in treasury looking after climate change or was that something that you deliberately?

Blair Comley:

That just an accident.

David Pembroke:

That Was an accident. Okay.

Blair Comley:

Remember we're talking that period was when we're negotiating the Kyoto Protocol. So I happened to have gone from the industry Commission into treasury in the section that handled industry environment and defence, the whole section and just the guy who'd been doing climate moved on and they asked me to do it. So no, no link at all. I'd gone to treasury to be a general economist and work my way through treasury.

David Pembroke:

And how was that in those very, very early days of negotiating and contributing to things like the keto protocol?

Blair Comley:

Well, having then later in my career, done it on the face-to-face through the early hours of the morning, very different. That was essentially being a part of an IDC, an inter departmental committee preparing negotiating briefs for climate negotiations. That was a lot of hanging around fax machines as the latest draught came out late at night as departments were positioning themselves for where to put Australia. Now in retrospect, this is a debate that's run for a very long period of time. My recollection at the time is that the Rio Earth Summit signed up to the original architecture of the UNFCCC, and at least the folklore is in the Australian government. The foreign affairs and trade side of the business said, why do we let the Environment Department do that with compromising our trade interests?

So it was interesting to watch as an EL one watch this tussle between the kind of foreign policy and trade interests of the country versus the environmental agenda and how that came together. And as a treasury person, I was sort of trying to play a role in that. But yes, there was a lot of very long faxes, spitting off machines and people trying to nudge forward in their own perspective the Australian position by changing a word here and there and seeing if it'd get through late at night when no one was noticing.

David Pembroke:

Now you were involved in the design of the GST. Tell me that story.

Blair Comley:

Well, that was just fascinating. We had a fantastic team working on it, still friends with most of them. We did work pretty hard. And so it was a kind of three years of my life where we went through all the phases from the high level conceptual design of a GST, what you're going to cover, what you're not going to cover. And then there was an election. So '98 election was largely almost kind of a referendum on the GST. It was the big issue. Once that election finished, we had to turn into legislation. I mean, I remember the morning after the election, which I think was on the second or third or 3rd of October, I think listening to I think John Howard give an interview saying, we're going to put this legislation into Parliament before Christmas, I literally fell off my chair. That was not the plan. I mean, people don't think about it this way, but the GST is a tax that affects every transaction in the economy or you have to decide to not apply it to all the other transactions.

So we had two months to write the legislation because we introduced that into parliament on the 2nd of December. So two months later for tax, that affects everything. So I'd been involved in the high level policy design. I was very fortunate, we'll probably come back to this in the podcast about devolving, but I was an EL two, and Ken Henry and Paul McCullough, my boss at the time, allowed me to do a lot of the direct advising to Costello on the design elements and do the two and fro. I used to go to Parliament House most days before question time. I'd brief the treasurer after question time, he'd come back and I'd provide some feedback about how he'd gone. I was probably a bit cheeky in those days. And then we did the whole put the legislation into Parliament because we'd done in two months, it was almost like putting an exposure draught into parliament.

And so we then had all the stakeholders come up and say, you've got this wrong. Your legislation doesn't reflect the policy intent. And we had to do the triage on exactly, was that true? And again, in terms of devolution, I was given the responsibility as an EL two to triage and shepherd through the 30 odd amendments to that legislation. We then passed the legislation and then we had to be in a world of working out how are we going to have it implemented and how are we going to allow particularly the business community, but also the NGO community to build up their administrative systems, to be able to comply with something where every transaction in the economy was either going to be taxed or deliberately not taxed. So yeah, it was a great time.

David Pembroke:

What advice do you have to people who are in and around those EL one, EL two roles when something perhaps not as large as designing and implementing the GST, but when they're faced with a significant body of work that needs to be completed, what should they be doing? How should they be thinking about it?

Blair Comley:

Well, first of all, I think put your hand up to do it. I just don't, career progression and how you're going through life, there's a combination of capacity, but there's also a combination of luck and there's no question I kind of feel in those three year period, I got 10 years of experience compressed into three. So I think do it, throw yourself into it, be mindful whether you're exceeding your constraints, but look for opportunities to think about how can I go a bit above and beyond and how can I contribute to this process?

David Pembroke:

So you mentioned devolution because you gave a very popular speech, a very impactful speech earlier this year about your time back in the public service. You obviously served for quite some time before going out into the private sector. And I do want to come back and have a conversation about that as well. But you did speak about this notion of disempowerment at that EL two level where everyone's getting a go at your work. Can you just take us through your thinking about that again and how indeed that specific challenge and issue can be addressed or should be addressed in order to build a more capable APS?

Blair Comley:

Well, to me, let's just go back a step and when it really got round in mine was around that time of the GST, it was 1998, the treasury did a review and they decided that they had made the mistake for years of everything going up the line being cleared, three levels above, bouncing up and down the line, disempowering for staff and they didn't have job satisfaction. What it also means is the senior people don't have time to think about the things they should be thinking about, which is where's the genuine relative priorities that I should be doing and how can I get big issues through?

So that was where it came into my attention of it was such a better idea to devolve. And now when I think about it now, I think about devolution actually does three things for an organisation. The first thing it does is it reduces risk. And a lot of people think, how can it reduce risk? And I'll come back to that. I think it increases quality and it increases the level of satisfaction of the staff who've had the work devolve to them. And the reason that I think it does all those three things is, what's the alternative to devolution? The alternative to devolution is that a really senior person clears everything.

But if you're a really senior person and you are clearing a hundred things a week or a thousand things a week, that's not actually very good risk management at all because you don't have time. Whereas if you're an EL two and it's a marquee piece of work for you, you do it once a month or even once a week, then you've got the time to actually pay attention to it, and you are probably much closer to the subject material than the person who's more senior in the area. So it decreases risk and it increases quality and it's much better work for that person doing the work.

So you have to wrap a few things around that. You have to wrap around the capacity for a person to put their hand up and say, I suspect there's some beyond my span of control that I need to think about. And there has to be a culture where they're encouraged to manage that span of control issue one by consulting broadly both inside and outside the organisation, but also having the capacity to elevate things when they need. So you do need to wrap that around and you need to wrap around a culture of accountability that if it's being devolved to you, you are really responsible for getting it right.

David Pembroke:

But why doesn't it happen then? Why aren't those things wrapped around it? Why doesn't the system work that way?

Blair Comley:

Well, I think the first thing I always say about the public service, it's very heterogeneous, so there's no one size fits all. But I think the sense of the opposite view that I minimise risk by elevating it. Now, some of this comes from ministers who often some ministers and are in a relationship game, they trust certain individuals. They don't necessarily trust the organisational entity itself. So if a minister says, I want X to look at this because I trust X.

David Pembroke:

Yes.

Blair Comley:

Then X or X is secretary. If they're not the same person has a choice, they either say, absolutely that person will do it. And then you don't have to have any argument or you push back and you say, no, actually my job is to give you the best overall quality. And I actually think the better way to do that is not necessarily X does everything, but we have a system in place that can deliver that quality. So it's very easy for gravitational pull over time to pull everything up to more senior people who are individually trusted either by the senior leadership or by ministers outside the public service. That's the natural gravitational pull. And I think some of the individuals subject to that gravitational pull, to be honest, some of them quite like it. They quite like the idea of I'm the trusted advisor, I'm the person one. So they have to be prepared to share that responsibility and say it can be done by other people.

David Pembroke:

But what have you noticed as you've come back in terms of those relationships between minister's offices and the public service at a time of such dramatic change, technological change, enhanced speed, how is that impacting devolution and the way things are being managed?

Blair Comley:

Look, I'm in a lucky situation that the relationship with our officers, we've got five, is very good. And so that's not a problem. I actually think that speed actually builds the case for devolution. If you think most ministerial officers these days, there's many advisors there. If they can reach out to the person who is the EL two or the ban one who's a subject matter expert, and that advisor typically, if it's not the chief of staff has themselves a partial scope of the whole office. If they have direct relationship with that person and they're not trying to get into my diary or get into my deputy's diary, they get immediate response from someone who really knows the content.

So I think the technology facilitates devolution done well. If we can support that individual to feel that they can make the call, and if they do make a call that in retrospect we think is not perfect, we don't come down like a tonne of bricks on them. We have to say, did you make a reasonable call a time? And then if you think something's not quite right, if you exercise judgement to raise it with someone else, we need to wrap that around everyone.

David Pembroke:

So it's skills, it's culture, it's capability, and building capability is a priority for not only the Department of Health, but really across the APS and certainly a priority of APS reform. What are your views about capability and building capability in areas such as policy?

Blair Comley:

Well, we had a capability review that was delivered just after I arrived as secretary. We really took three themes out of that. The first was to uplift the strategic policy capability of the department. The second was to engage more deeply with our stakeholders. And one thing that they said to us as well from stakeholders was there is a need to have a strategic map of the health and age care system about where we should be going and what are the priorities. It doesn't exist at the moment. And the natural home for that is the Department of Health as an institutionally constant part of the system. And thirdly, the third one we've picked up is the empowering and devolving. So on strategic policy capability, we have to uplift it and we are starting on a programme of doing that. We think about it as having, well, I think about it as having three elements.

The first is making sure everyone has a good framework to think about policy. It's not always the same framework, but they have to think about what really matters. And us, it might be access to healthcare, it might be the efficiency of delivering that healthcare. It might be a whole range of other things, but a framework that they can make sense of what's really going to matter for the wellbeing of the Australian people. And then policy needs to be done with rigour. And I've talked a bit about three dimensions of rigour in the department recently. The first is communication rigour. So if we're not communicating our ideas clearly, we're not clear in our own thinking and we're also not going to be persuasive through the people we need to convince. Second thing is clarity about the numbers, absolute clarity about how that numbers and data and the evidence is important.

The third thing is clarity about the legal and governance basis of what we're doing because that's another dimension. So have a framework, have rigour with those three dimensions. And then the third thing is a cultural thing, which is a culture of collaboration which realises that you don't make policy in a vacuum and so that you should be consulting and reaching out across the department and to the stakeholders as you're designing policy to make sure it's grounded in reality. So that's why we think about it. We've got to get people to think, what's the framework I need to apply? We need to do it with rigour, and then we do it in culturally the right way to collaborate across silos.

David Pembroke:

How are you embedding that thinking and that approach in your role as secretary?

Blair Comley:

Well, part of it is I am a broken record on this topic. So constant communication through our executive committee, through monthly meeting of SES, through I do a weekly message to staff, which often touches on these sorts of themes. I'm out and about and I have a policy of meeting every branch once a year where I sit down for an hour and talk about anything that they want to talk about. And we're partly talking about these themes. So that's my communication.

Then we have, for example, the executive committee is looking at our learning development strategy. And our learning development strategy has a map back to what we need to do on our capability build. So we do that. We do the learning development strategy. We also think about where we're creating greater hubs of expertise. So as we take people on this journey, we're in a world which there's somewhere they can find some expertise to partner with if they haven't got as much in their area. And the third thing is we are looking at our recruitment, our reward and our performance appraisal systems to reflect the fact that we've got a higher value of this in the organisation that we had previously. So they're kind of the three things. Apart from the relentless communication, it is learning and development strategy, hubs of expertise and a system where we are trying to over time improve the mix of people with the skill sets that we need.

David Pembroke:

But how are you going to know whether it's working?

Blair Comley:

Yeah, so I get this asked quite a lot. I think some of these are quite hard to metrify, but look, you can tell when the quality is there. And I can also tell when it's being devolved to the right level because I'm partly talking continually about people as to what they're doing. And one of the reasons I know that is we're embedding more deeply in the organisation, upward feedback on all managers. So I'm getting a sense of what they're doing, what they're allocating their time to, what they're not allocating their time to. So actually I think we're a bit of work in progress on precise metrics. But you do know when you see the quality of work and whether it's hitting the market that you would like.

David Pembroke:

Can you feel it?

Blair Comley:

Yep. You can feel it and you can see pockets of where it's working well. And I think there's an element of this that we're a pretty big department, so no one's kidding themselves. I'm not kidding myself, that overnight we say this is the direction we want to go and get it. And this is a very bad analogy for a health department, but it's a bit viral. It's kind of we have, you want pockets of good practise, the pockets of good practise spread. You want some of those people to actually be mobile around the organisation. Part of this, David, is showing people what good looks like and once you've shown them what good looks like and you've supported them on that journey, they can do it better and they can see the impact it has.

David Pembroke:

And you mentioned it just a moment ago around the importance of communication. That was a very big theme of the speech that you gave in March. But this notice or this sense of improving writing and proposals and writing like you've writing for the AFR and just give it to me. And why is that so important that you get the writing piece right?

Blair Comley:

Well, there's clarity of thinking, but I turn around and I say, what's the test of a good piece of writing? And the test of a good piece of writing is have you made it as easy as possible for the reader? And if you think about on some of our influential products, who is the reader? We're preparing a new policy proposal to support the minister, put a case for resources within government. For example, our reader is a time poor minister on the expenditure review committee.

David Pembroke:

He's got a big pile of things to get through

Blair Comley:

Enormous pile of. And I think that, can't talk about this in too much detail, but it is staggering the number of issues that you have go through on an expenditure review committee.

If you can't make it as easy for them as possible, then they can't distil whether this is a good idea that warrants prioritisation in the process. So you have to have the lens of does this make it as easy as possible for the reader that will make our case more compelling, increase the chance of getting the outcomes that we think are important. It would also mean that if our argument does not resonate, someone can react to it and say, actually I don't agree with that. Push back to us and then we can deal with it. But if we spend weeks or months fumbling around because the person is not even sure what we're proposing, we are not at square one. So

that's why it's so important for me both in terms of making it easier for that audience, but also it drives our clarity of thinking and the clarity of thinking as part of the rigour, which goes to good strategic policy advice. So they're all connected.

David Pembroke:

So also going back to the framework, and you did speak about this back in March, this sense of place-based approaches and community engagement is key terms and key priorities for you. Can you talk about a project or a programme where you are seeing best practise at the moment emerging in those areas that you are seeing that the department is really working well and understanding their communities and translating that into good policy?

Blair Comley:

Yeah, I won't name a particular site, but I do think what we are trying to do with our First Nations communities is moving in the right direction, really trying to move towards partnership development of solutions. And that can be in a range of areas, including where would you roll out dialysis facilities, where would you work with someone like the Northern Territory government to collaborate? Where would you work with a recent budget analysis on period poverty for First Nations people? So I think all of these have a place-based dimension. We're trying to partner with First Nation people do as well as possible.

David Pembroke:

Okay. So I did mention a bit earlier about your time out before you came back. Can you just describe to that journey through consulting what you learned in the private sector that you've been able to bring back? Because clearly the passion burns to make a contribution as a public servant, but you spent quite a considerable time probably solving a lot of different types of problems in the consulting world. So what did you learn in that experience?

Blair Comley:

Yeah, some different problems, some the same from a different perspective. And maybe it's just worth briefly saying the sort of consulting I did because it was a bit unusual. I worked for a firm, I was a partner of that firm where we were doing strategy consulting and people outside consulting. What does that mean? It is generally asking in a corporate environment what are the big questions about what you should be doing as much as how you do it.

David Pembroke:

With a horizon of.

Blair Comley:

With a longer horizon often, but normally multiple horizons because no strategy works if there's not multiple horizons. In the corporate centre most of strategy translates either to big P policy or organisational strategy about how you align the organisation to those goals. But I worked in a part, I tried to concentrate my consulting in an area where I describe it as where government meets markets. So where either government needs to understand how its decisions will impact on how markets and commercial players respond. Or on the other side, commercial players have to understand what government does. And if you may not think about it this way, but there's actually a common thread through quite a bit of my previous career. If you think of a GST, you're changing all the relative prices that mean commercial entities are affected by that, have to work out what their strategy is.

With a carbon price, you are imposing a carbon price to change the behaviour of the private sector to achieve an environmental outcome hopefully at lowest economic cost. Lots of other things in my career have done similar things. So that was my consulting patch if you like, where you needed to know both. I suppose some of the things I learned in consulting is there's a range of toolkits in consulting, which when I think back on my public sector career, I knew many of them intuitively and could do them reasonably well, but they didn't have the formal language around some of those tools and that's been quite useful to pick up. The other thing in consulting, which I think is something that we can bring back into the public sector, is often a sense of urgency. Because you are on the client's clock, you have a limited period, they don't have you forever.

And so there's that rhythm and intensity that comes with, I've got six weeks. I remember one of my first projects I had four weeks and the partner I was working with on that after day one said, so 5% of our time's gone.

David Pembroke:

How you're tracking.

Blair Comley:

And by Thursday we are up at the 20% of our time has gone on the project. Have we made the progress commensurate of that? So there's lots of tools and tricks and there's a rhythm to it that is really useful. The other thing that I think was really personally valuable for me was I've been a secretary before I went into consulting in three departments, been a senior executive for a while, and I went into a model of consulting that's quite different to most, which very, very small teams with very high degree of senior time partner time my time.

So I went back on the tools as a problem solver of complex problems for five years. So if I think about my career, there's kind of a mix of complex problem solving and stakeholder management and organisational leadership. And as I went through the public sector, those ratios changed from pointy head solving GST problems to secretary of a department. The ratios changed. I then went back to consulting or to consulting and the flipped completely back to problem solver, almost no organisational leadership. Now while I stayed in consulting, I built the government practise within that consulting firm grew from a very small to a very significant part of the business around a third. And then I was sort of doing a bit more of organisational leadership but still spent a lot of time on the tools. And I think that that's a bit of a luxury.

It's kind of like you get a mid or late career opportunity to go back to match fit, complex problem solving, match fit and complex problem solving. And so I've been really struck that my time back in the public service, I've been hearkening back to things that I developed, tweaked, learned in my consulting as much if not more as my time as previous secretary, which surprised me.

David Pembroke:

You don't have to give me chapter and verse or too much about it, but where do you sit at the moment around this notion of consulting contracting into the public service? There's obviously been a change in the attitude of government. Sitting where you do, what are your views?

Blair Comley:

So the first thing I'd say is that the idea that we should rebuild capability within the public service is kind of paramount. So very much on that. I'm also, by the way, a great believer that there is significant latent capacity in the public service. You just need to give them the opportunity. It really is like a muscle that needs to be exercised. And so often in my organisation people will mention they're thinking of outsourcing something and my immediate reaction is why? Why can't we do that ourselves? We want to build the muscle.

But we are not going to get rid of consultants and contractors. We just need to be really purposeful about when we use them. And I think there's basically four reasons we use consultants. The first is surge capacity. You need to do something quickly and you're not going to have an ongoing need for it. It doesn't make sense to build up your internal workforce. The second is what a colleague once talked to me about as grey hair consulting or might be called Best Practise Consulting. You are doing something you do infrequently, but you get someone who does it 10 times a year. So whether you're doing say a risk management framework for a department or something else, you get someone who does 10 a year, they bring a transferable skillset, it's efficient partner with your internal. The third is what might be called wicked problem consulting.

So you've got a genuinely hard thing to crack and you want to bring in an expertise that's really hard to retain on a continuous basis in the public sector. So the consulting idea was essentially wicked problem consulting. The fourth reason you do is sometimes you need some form of independence where, and the classic one is let's say you were going through a downsizing of an organisation and each part of the organisation has a vested interest in a particular outcome. Sometimes you want independence or sometimes your relationship might be with external stakeholders that they want to see an external party. Because they might be happy to openly talk to them, but they won't be talking directly to the government who they might see as the funder of their programmes, for example. So we just need to be really purposeful. Which of these four categories is it in? And if it's not in those four categories, we shouldn't be outsourcing it.

David Pembroke:

Why did you come back?

Blair Comley:

Well, it's just too much fun. No, at the end of the day-

David Pembroke:

Well, that's a good answer. For someone who loves wicked problems, the Department of Health and Aged Care, I'm sure there are so many challenges that on a daily basis that you are wrestling with.

Blair Comley:

Yeah, I mean, so the Department of Health in particular, but no, at the end of the day, public policy, public service is a vocation and very happy to return to the vocation, very happy to return to a larger organisational leadership role because I think of myself as kind of a policy wonk largely. But I do love organisational leadership as well. So get to do both and the problems and the issues and the challenges in health and aged care and sport is just fantastic to grapple with.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. So looking forward, I'm sure you're hoping to achieve things three, five years down the track. What are you going to hope that you've, the legacy that you're going to be able to establish in your current role?

Blair Comley:

Look, I tend to move away from the specific policies or outcomes we might get in that time with probably one exception, I'll come back to. To me, if we delivered on the capability review, if we delivered on a department that had enormous strategic policy capability that could support the government of the day with thinking informed by a much longer term vision of the direction of travel, of the health and aged care system, but bring it back to practical implementable solutions on a daily basis, that we had that capability in spades. If we did it in a way that our stakeholders felt that not only did the health department listen and understand their perspectives, but dealt with them honestly when we disagreed with them so that they felt the solutions being

put to government were grounded in the reality that they faced and that we'd managed to build the capability not just to the senior people but across the whole organisation, then that is an institutional capability that would serve the health and aged care system overall.

And I'd love to think it would also serve the broader public sector. If you started having people saying, isn't it great? I got a fantastic training in the Department of Health and Aged Care and now I'm going to follow my passion in a different area of policy because I've got a skill set and a toolkit that allows me to go and do that. That would be fantastic. The one policy area I'd love is a general thing. I won't get too specific, but if we could pivot to prevention and away from acute care and not just prevention in a health system sense, but if we thought about the things that drive the health outcomes for an individual, the social determinants of health, genetics, behaviours through to the actual health system, and we thought about how we made that work better across all the things that really drive the outcomes for people in Australia, that would be something really good to look back on.

David Pembroke:

Now, most of the audience here and just in conclusion is, are members of the public service or with an interest in the public service, what message might you have for them as one of senior leaders as part of the secretary's board and in a key and influential position? What message would you like the wider public service to understand that you would like to see them to act and behave?

Blair Comley:

I'd say a few things. The first thing is that we sometimes take for granted that our day job is to improve the wellbeing of the Australian people. Cliche but actually true. The second thing is I think that a sense of optimism of what is possible is really critical in terms of making things happen. And I think in the public service we often tend towards pessimism and thinking about why it's difficult rather than what's the opportunity. And then the third thing, and I just came from a group talking about with some of the leaders in my department, I think engaging in the right way with risk is really important. I think the combination of pessimism and risk aversion kills innovation and kills the opportunity to really think, can we really move the dial on things that will improve the outcomes for the people of Australia?

David Pembroke:

Kills the fun too.

Blair Comley:

Kills the fun. Kills the fun. I mean, I have said in previous jobs, I still say it now, I kind of think my ethos in departments is we should do serious things in a fun way. And if you go back and even to management literature, I think one of Daniel Goldman's books on emotional intelligence says the best indicator of a healthy workplace is the level of laughter. So we should be optimistic, we should take some risks and we should have fun.

David Pembroke:

Well, Blair Comley, thank you for your service and thank you very much for coming in and sharing some of your very valuable time with the Work with Purpose audience. So very grateful for you coming in today.

Going forward, we'll be bringing you more podcasts featuring our secretaries as they set their own individual agendas. We'll hear from them, speak directly to their department, to their people, to the agency heads, but then we'll bring them into the Work with Purpose Studio and spend a bit of time unpicking those speeches. So we look forward to speaking to many more secretaries in the weeks and months ahead. Now, to all of you, a rating or a review, please, that is your weekly homework. Whichever podcast application you listen, whether

it's Spotify, Apple, Stitcher, five star reviews, please. And it's great that we do get a number of reviews and I'm very grateful for that, and the team are very grateful for that because it helps us to be found.

You can follow all the latest information about Work With Purpose at Content Group, but also at IPAA, ACT on LinkedIn. So before you go, if you'd like to learn more from public sector leaders such as Blair Comley, we highly recommend you register for IPAA ACT's Frances Adamson Oration, which is on the 1st of August this year, the Frances Adamson Oration, Wendy Craig, scientist, public policy advisor and company director will be there to deliver the keynote note speech. Work With Purpose is produced as a collaboration between Content Group and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia, ACT, and supported as always by our good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight. My name is David Pembroke and it's bye for now.