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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #108

THE POLICYMAKING TOOLKIT

Part 1

TRANSCRIPT

Julia Ahrens:

Hello, everyone, and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves Australia's communities. My name is Julia Ahrens, and I'm the Communications Manager at IPAA ACT. I'll hand over to David in just a second, but before I do, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, that's the Ngunawal and the 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. Indeed, I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

After we recorded this episode last week, like so many of us, David unfortunately caught a bug and wasn't able to record the intro to this episode. That's why you'll briefly hear from me about today's topic before we tune into the conversation. Now, policy development, the giving of advice and the evaluation of policy decisions are three core public service tasks. Whether it be short and concise advice about an emerging challenge or opportunity to a minister's office, or a more in-depth strategic policy design process, doing them well is at the heart of any successful senior public servants career. A few short weeks ago in response to your request that we do more education on Work with Purpose, we did host an expert panel to discuss the challenges and opportunities of design thinking in a public sector context.

Well, today, we head back to the classroom for a masterclass on policymaking and evaluation. And listeners, because our guests had so much wisdom to share, we decided to split this upcoming episode into two. So make sure to subscribe to the show so that you don't miss out on part two, which will be out next week. In this first part, we'll get to know more about why our guests chose to work in policy. Then we get to policy essentials, getting to know the political environment and policy cycle, incorporating diverse views, and creating a narrative that will get people on board with your policy. So let's wish David a speedy recovery and listen in on last week's conversation.

David Pembroke:

My first guest is Dr. Trish Mercer. Dr. Mercer is a visiting fellow at the Australian and New Zealand School of Government at the Australian National University. She has enjoyed a diverse and fascinating career in the APS with over 20 years in the SES with roles spanning policy, development, and research, financial management, programme implementation, community education, and direct service delivery. Dr. Mercer, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Trish Mercer:

Thank you, David.

David Pembroke:

My second guest is an old friend of mine and a grizzled veteran of the APS, Mr. Andrew Tongue PSM. Andrew joined the APS in 1985 and served in roles across multiple departments, including the Department of Agriculture, Water, and the environment. He delivered major reforms across industry, social, national security, and indigenous policy, and indeed served as the head of two departments in Victoria, including the Premier's department. I also noticed the other day that he's now doing capability reviews of certain departments. So no better person to welcome into the classroom today. Welcome to you, Andrew.

Andrew Tongue:

Thanks, David.

David Pembroke:

My final guest is Fiona Barbaro PSM, a senior executive in the ACT government's Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate. She has 25 years of experience in strategy, policy, and programme delivery in the ACT public service and was awarded her PSM for leadership of the ACT government's COVID-19 vaccination rollout. She holds degrees in arts, law, and an executive masters of public administration. Fiona, welcome to you.

Fiona Barbaro:

Thank you. Yuma.

David Pembroke:

So let's just get started. Now, I suppose to all of you, you've had long and distinguished careers in the public service and involvement in policy creation and evaluation, but I suppose, Trish, perhaps if I could start with you, was it this challenge and this opportunity to affect change through policy that encouraged you, first of all, into a public service career?

Trish Mercer:

Absolutely. It's really interesting, actually I'm an accidental public servant. I was at ANU, finished my doctorate, looked around and thought, "Where do I want to go?" And I ended up being recruited by the Department of Finance. I can't say it was an easy fit. But then I went to immigration and I went to PM&C, Prime, Minister and Cabinet, and then I went into all the employment education and also had a stint, six years, in service delivery as a Centrelink area manager for Central North Queensland. I mean, it's just a fascinating, fantastic world and you really do feel you can make a difference, frustrating as it can be.

David Pembroke:

Did you know when you first started that you were going to go into this world and what this world actually meant?

Trish Mercer:

Absolutely not. It was a complete culture shock. I went to work with guys in finance who'd never worked with a female clerk. Can you believe it? That was 1980. But pretty quickly, especially once I got to immigration, I knew that... It just offers such variety, David. That's the great thing about the public service. And I see like Andrew, he's moved backwards and forwards, Commonwealth and state, and Fiona, you know so much about the ACT. Really, it's a very exciting place to work.

David Pembroke:

And so, Andrew, back to your career. 1985, were you a accidental or a deliberate public servant, and what encouraged you into that career?

Andrew Tongue:

I joined the Commonwealth Public Service when unemployment was 10%, and I thought I was a prince to have a job. I only realised later just that sense of validation that you get when you've been working on a policy response to something that finds its way into the canon of the government and you look and think, "Well, that was me." That sense of not all me, because you're always doing it with a team and the ministers got their role,

but just that sense of, "I was part of that, and it matters." I wish I'd known that I would've started more positively, I guess, than just, "Thank, God, I've got a good job," if I'd known that a person in a bureaucracy can make a difference for people on the ground.

David Pembroke:

Do you think people feel that, most public servants feel that, that they're making a difference, they feel they can make a difference?

Andrew Tongue:

I think an awful lot of public servants are frustrated. I've had that sense of frustration. I can't make anything go at all levels. I just can't make things happen. But then there's a gap in the hedge, you spot an opportunity, you push it, it gets up, it attracts some money or some legislation or some action, something, and then you think, "Okay, yeah, onto the next battle," kind of thing. So I think at this moment a lot of people, perhaps at all moments, a lot of public servants are frustrated. All I'd say after a very long time at this is now's the time to energise and to think and to engage with the bigger questions and just be ready because the opportunity will emerge, and then go.

David Pembroke:

And for you, Fiona, what was your back story to a career in the APS? Sorry, not the APS, the ACT...

Fiona Barbaro:

The ACT.

David Pembroke:

... Public Service.

Fiona Barbaro:

Yeah, sure. I'm not sure if there are many planned public servants. I'm not sure it's something you think, "I'm going to grow up and be a public servant." I saw a job ad in the paper in 1999, my final year of uni for this grad programme in ACT Public Service. I applied, I'd secured the role before my last exam even. But then day one I knew this was for me, and it's been 25 years and I've had so much fun. The ACT government, we're unique. We have a seat at national cabinet, so we deal with national issues. We have all the responsibilities of state government. We're also a municipal government with council function. So the breadth of things that I've dealt with has just been remarkable. So challenging, we're a small, but we've learnt to leverage and celebrate that uniqueness that we're a hub of ideas, we can take risks, we can try things and quite often at the cutting-edge of policy.

I don't think in ACT government we have as much that level of frustration and fatigue as some of the other jurisdictions. We've worked on our role as a public service and really evolved, and our skills as public servants are really valuable and are valued by government here and by the community.

David Pembroke:

What was that day one experience that made you think, "Yep, this is for me."? What happened?

Fiona Barbaro:

I guess I came from doing an arts degree. I loved history, I loved political science. I loved doing essays and research, and I was like, "Wow, this is what I can actually do for a job." Because that's what policymaking is,

right, it's understanding problems, it's researching, it's coming up with positions and solutions. It's just contemporary issues.

David Pembroke:

All right, so that's why we're here today, is to learn from the three of you about this policymaking process. Now, Trish, you teach policy essentials to the students at the Australian National University. What are the core pieces of advice that you give to the students?

Trish Mercer:

Yeah, well, I mean, the important thing is being able to draw on your own experience. I deliver this course with a former colleague, Wendy Jarvie, and we aim to make it the sort of course we would've liked to have done when we joined the public service, when we felt we were just thrown in, as it were, to cope by fire, learn by doing. So we focus initially on making sure that people really understand the government they're working for, David, the political environment. You can't be good at policy if you don't understand that. You really have to understand the government's priorities, decision-making style, its values, the language it uses, they're very different. And that's also so of understanding your minister. All ministers are very different, and it doesn't matter what political party that they belong to, you've got to learn about them and their own particular style, particularly how they make decisions, whether that's fast or you need to really use sequential briefing, whatever it is that works with that minister.

So we spend some time on that. And then we focus in on the policy system, which certainly at the national level is I think probably even more hierarchical, perhaps a bit more formal than from what we've heard with Fiona at the ACT at a territory level. But there's a whole lot of myths that we aim to bust. Yes, policy especially. In Australia, policy is about pragmatic action, both by politicians and public servants. But there's also a lot of inaction, and I think that's where the frustration comes in that Andrew's talking about. A time has to be right, and so you brief up, you brief up, but nothing happens, and then you just have to be very resilient and wait for the next time.

So we look at that and we look at things like the fast policy thinking environment that they're surrounded with now. Politicians and senior SES have so little time to reflect and think, and so you've got to remember this in briefing up. You've got to try and get them to stop and think and reflect on what's the data and evidence. So we spend some time on that. And then we offer them some policy tools from the academic literature, believe it or not. Many public servants would be sceptical about that. Although if you've done things as Fiona described, you've done some of the master's programmes, you learn that policy theory can offer you a map, a guide especially if you're new to policy. So we explain some of the big policy models like policy window, the policy cycle, and we use that then to relate to them through case studies how this might actually be useful. So I think that's probably the three main areas we focus in on.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, okay. In terms then of gathering, perhaps to you Fiona, these perspectives that you are looking to put into this systematic approach to it, why is it important that you gather diverse perspectives as you're starting to pull together your advice?

Fiona Barbaro:

Well, diversity really equals robustness, doesn't it? That's what we're here to do, we're here to serve the government of the day, create good policy and robust policy. You could throw us a problem right now, we'll probably have a pretty good go at it and can come up with good policy, but we'd be doing a disservice to government because we don't know all of the answers and we don't share all of the unique perspectives within the community. So you need to throw in the mix of data, the data analysts, the stakeholders, people

with lived experience, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and all of the flavours of our community. You need to listen to that, and that's where the magic happens. All of a sudden we see the problem differently and then the solutions then start to emerge from those problems.

From a really pragmatic perspective as well, those views are out there. So if you don't seek them and invite them into the policy process, they're going to emerge at some point. Quite often you might have a nice polished piece of policy and you're ready to launch it or take it through cabinet or into parliament or the assembly, and then the voices emerge. And from a public servant perspective, they can come across as bit of blockers and barriers, but they're not. They're voices in the community that haven't been heard, that haven't been part of the process. Then you have to re-engineer the processes, re-adapt the policy. And it can be hard and frustrating because you're working in an environment of low trust. And it's hard, so your work value goes down, and so then does the public value that you are trying to deliver really.

David Pembroke:

Andrew, how do you manage that context, that collision of ideas and contested views on a particularly policy area?

Andrew Tongue:

What I've, I guess, learned to do over the years is create narrative. That starts with, what is the government trying to achieve? In some areas you'll have reams and reams about what they're trying to achieve, and in other areas you'll have half a line. But engaging with a minister and their advisors and thinking through the government's agenda and then working out, well, how does that relate to my responsibilities? And then crafting a narrative. I've always first crafted what I would call an internal narrative. Here's how I make sense of the world: starting with the stakeholders you know will keep it in the tent. And then going out to those stakeholders who are a bit more maybe frustrated or even angry and then testing the narrative with them. And then I suppose that's a process of adjusting the narrative to build the biggest tent you can around, well, what's the story here?

People mightn't even agree on what's the problem. These days, there isn't even generally consensus about what's the problem. But if you can build a story that everybody can live with, then staff feel happier because they're part of something. Stakeholders feel happier because they see they're having influence on this narrative. And then out of the narrative emerges, well, here's some lines of action we can do. Because the lines of action won't necessarily be spending money on a programme. Line of action might be a regulatory response, or it might simply be somebody using their convening power to bring people together to say, "Let's try and all work out what the problem is." In my book, that's policymaking. These days, getting agreement on the nature of the problem is a real achievement. Then you start the process of, well, what are we going to do about that?

I really believe in the power of creating narrative. Some people will call it storytelling, and I'm okay with that, because the world is so complicated, everything's connected to everything else, in a sense, the narrative just helps us bring structure. If you can bring structure into that milestone of everything that's going on, then you've got a foundation, you can work from there. Having recently retired, I've reflected on my own performance over all those years. That was probably when I was at my best, when I was actually working with people to create a narrative. I look to see who in the federal public service is doing that. When people say, "Oh, where should I go and work?" I say, "Go and work for that person. They know how to create the story." Because for me, these days, that's a key skill of senior public service.

David Pembroke:

I was just about to ask you that question. So to assemble that approach, what are the skills that you need? Listening, clearly one of them.

Andrew Tongue:

Ability to listen. People will laugh at this if they hear me say this, being humble. That notion of the public service I joined in 1985 where there were mandarins and they knew everything, nobody can know everything now. It's just too complex. So being humble and being able to let people who have something that they believe is important, whether it's evidence-based or emotionally-based that they believe is important, to have a say and to listen and reflect back. Again, I think on my own performance, "When was I at my best? In indigenous affairs," reflecting back to communities what I was hearing, and sometimes I wasn't hearing the right thing.

And then those processes of synthesis, so weaving in the data and the evidence, because you can die on a mountain of data and evidence, you can just surrender. But there's always a few key facts or data points that are consistent with the narrative. And if you're respecting people, you're respecting them enough to say, "Well, here's how I understand a problem and here's the evidence that I think is compelling." And if they disagree with you, they'll go away and look at the evidence and come back and say, "Well, you said this number was important, but we think that number's important." But the minute they've done that, they're in the tent. They're engaging with the evidence. So I think being au fait with the evidence, not all of it, just key bits, and then replaying that out.

And finally, integrity and trust. Trust is incredibly hard to build and so easy to lose. And it's very hard, I think, for many public servants to either say, "I don't know. All I know is we have a problem, and I don't know what the answer is." Very hard to sit in front of a community group and say, "I don't know." And it's hard for people to have that open conversation and not be worried that it won't end up on the front page of The Australian or it won't end up in a minister's office with a cranky advisor or something like that. That's that judgement, intelligence, and common sense thing that you look for in good people in the public service when to do that. And finally, it's that thing about, "Well, am I here to put socks on centipedes or am I here to make a difference?" So sometimes you've just got to be brave. So I think some of it's just have a go, be brave.

Trish Mercer:

I just really like to pick up, I think it's terrific hearing you talk about narrative, Andrew. I suppose one of the things I found the hardest was when a government would come in or rather we get a change of government and they come in with a big election promise, which you'd tried your hardest to find out about before, but really you're not sure of the narrative and you're not sure if they've talked to any and all of the stakeholders. And suddenly they want it delivered overnight. I'm just really interested to hear how you would've gone about that in the sense of trying to make yourself comfortable and understand enough of the reform but still offer that sort of advice you're talking about if it's needed.

Andrew Tongue:

So first off, I would always start with repackaging what they said they wanted to do. Those early briefings were all about, "This is what you said. Do we understand?" and very gently, "Have you thought about all these dimensions of whatever this involves?" and then through that process trying to get enough trust to then say, "Okay, go and talk to the stakeholders." So getting your foot in the door and then opening the door to further engagement. Now, sometimes you would just be told, "Don't care. Just do that."

Trish Mercer:

Just do it.

Andrew Tongue:

I frankly learned to say to myself, "Well, all governments come to power with an agenda, and they don't want to get policy advice from the public service because they know what they're going to do." And that lasts typically 12 to 18 months, and then they turn around and say, "Well, what are all your policy ideas?" If I had a

dollar for every time that's happened, I'd be a wealthy man. And so it is timeframe, that's the other thing here. In the modern age with social media and those sorts of things, it can feel like you've got to do policy in six hours, and we've all done that. But it's important to remember the longer sweep of policymaking, and the really important bits of policy move very slowly. And so again, just remembering, "Well, I get to revisit this. Might even be with another minister or another government, but I get to revisit this."

David Pembroke:

But Fiona, to that point though around this often febrile nature of having to make policy quickly, you received your Public Service Medal for your leadership around COVID-19, which was a health crisis.

Fiona Barbaro:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

How do you manage policymaking in those genuine crises?

Fiona Barbaro:

It's not easy, it never is, but it's very rewarding. Really good policy it necessitates good project management skills as well. So we had really good governance and clear roles and responsibilities. You just have to be really organised. And then that built confidence with government that we knew what we were doing, and it gave us space. So we had that trust, we had space to get on with it. Practising really good policy skills is obviously really important, listening, working to our strengths. We couldn't duplicate, we had to get the job done. So we had to really work with stakeholders and understand what everybody's different strengths were.

So people already had pre-existing relationships with their doctors, with the community sector, so we leveraged those relationships. We had vaccines, we had policy process, some money. Others had the relationships and could build confidence with the people that needed to be vaccinated. So it's all of those things. And then it's really important also to look after yourself when you are working on such significant policy and good policy and have that coalition of people around you who can support you, who you can reach out to, and sense-check and if things go wrong, because they inevitably will, from time to time things go wrong, people that have your back who are out there supporting you.

David Pembroke:

So Andrew, this role of engagement with ministers offices is clearly a key task of this advice, gathering insights, getting to a point of effectiveness. What advice do you have to people in terms of managing relationships with ministerial officers, not just the minister?

Andrew Tongue:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I'd come back to narrative. If the department or the relevant area of the department has a strong narrative, working with the relevant advisor or even two or three advisors around, "Here's the narrative," testing it with them. It's amazing if you persist, after weeks, you'll begin to hear your own language back, because advisors are busy people in a very unusual environment, and it's important to remember that. It's a very unusual environment. It's not good for mental health, let me put it like that. And so, helping advisors get their own story straight, even if they're bouncing off your narrative and putting the political overlay over the top, "Oh, the bloody department wants to do that. This is bad for this group of stakeholders," and even that is helping the advisor get a framework around what's going on here.

Advisors have an important job. I think bad news never gets better with age, and there is a bit of a tendency in all bureaucracies, and we've seen some very bad examples of this, where people sit on bad news. Nobody appreciates it. Secretaries hate it, ministers hate it. You've got to work out how bad is this bit, but then you've got to be honest and forthright. Either we have made a mistake or the external world has changed and we've got a problem. So I think bad news, being conscious that ministers are people. I don't know how many ministers I've worked for, hundreds, I think I've only worked for a handful who were readers. I won't use names, but one loved a 15-page brief, and they would ring you up and they would say, "Now, on page nine at line 25, you said this. What did you mean?" "I don't remember what I meant." But most ministers are moving these days at such speed.

So it is a discipline, and you see this particularly at PM&C. If you can't say it in two pages, you can't say it. And in the public service I joined all those years ago, the rule was, if you can't say it in a page, don't bother. So that brings discipline in dealing with ministers and their offices. If you really got to take eight pages to say something, then you really haven't thought it through. So condensing it down and working out what's really important here, remembering that ministers are people. Don't walk into the minister the day their child starts school and say, "We've got this huge problem and the world's going to end tomorrow if we don't..." That is not being sensitive. Ministers are human beings. Sometimes it doesn't feel like they are, but they're ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. That's another useful thing to think about.

Most ministers only get the chance to do one, maybe two if they're there for a while, big things and maybe two or three small things before they move on or the government changes or whatever. So as a senior public servant, finding ways to say to a minister, "Against this maelstrom of just everything that's coming at you, what's really important for you?" It might not be written down in the party policy, and it might not be something that you think is even that important. But if it's important to the minister and they're the representative of the people, then it's important to you. So just being conscious of that as a public service, that most of what we're working on is just the business of administering the country if you're in Canberra or the state or the territory. There really are only a few opportunities in a minister's time for change.

Julia Ahrens:

Listeners, that's it for part one of our masterclass on the craft of policymaking. David, Trish, Andrew, and Fiona will be back with part two of this episode next week, where we will cover why volunteering as a departmental liaison officer can be as important as doing a degree in public policy, differences between state and federal government, and how to find the right moment to pitch your policy ideas. So make sure to subscribe to the programme on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, or wherever you normally get your favourite podcast shows from. And also make sure to follow contentgroup and IIPA ACT for any news about Work with Purpose on LinkedIn. Now, listeners, before we let you go, as always, can we hassle you for a review? Please leave us a review on any of your favourite podcast providers as it really helps us to be found. Thank you so much for listening, and bye for now.