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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #110

PASSION FOR PUBLIC SERVICE WITH
THE HON PATRICK GORMAN MP

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Work With Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector 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 on which we are meeting 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. And indeed, I'd like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast today is joining us from.

Well, today we are joined in the studio by a very special guest and indeed our first ministerial guest in over 100 episodes of Work With Purpose. Patrick Gorman is the member for Perth first elected to Parliament at a by-election in 2018 and then elected subsequently at the two following general elections in 2019 and 2022. He is the assistant minister to the prime minister, assistant minister to the attorney general and assistant minister for the public service. Prior to joining Parliament, Minister Gorman was once a principal adviser to former prime minister, Kevin Rudd, and state secretary of WA Labour in 2017 when he successfully led the election campaign of Mark McGowan to the premiership. He has a master of business administration from the University of WA and a bachelor of social science from Curtin University and he joins me in the studio. Patrick Gorman, welcome to Work With Purpose.

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Thank you, David, and hello to all of your listeners and a wonderful honour to be one of your first ministerial guests.

David Pembroke:

Thank you very much.

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Hopefully I won't do anything that will ruin it for any of my colleagues. Hopefully they'll get more invites, not fewer.

David Pembroke:

Well, let's hope so. But listen, we are going to talk about some interesting things such as artificial intelligence, but on Work With Purpose we like to get to know people before we jump into it. So the Patrick Gorman story starts in Perth. Is that where it all began for you?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Yep. I was born in Fremantle. Mum and dad were both teachers and not many kids grow up wanting to be a member of Parliament or a minister. I wanted to be a pilot. That was the thing that I really wanted to do. But over time I got more and more interested in public policy and eventually that sort of drew me in. That's sort of what I went to study at university was social science, recognising that elections and democratic processes are really how you make big change in society and how you actually really hand down a better deal to the next generation.

David Pembroke:

So a small family, big family?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Me and my younger brother, Joey, well our first family home when I was born was actually opposite Fremantle Prison, which for those who know Fremantle now as a world heritage listed prison. But back when I was growing up opposite Fremantle Prison, Fremantle Prison was a prison and Fremantle was just going through that transformation in the 1980s from being a port town really quite industrial and functional to being something quite a lot more as we had the America's Cup hosted there.

David Pembroke:

Do you remember that, that big gentrification process that went on that really did transform Fremantle or you're a bit young?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

My memories kind of start just after the America's Cup was hosted, but I remember Fremantle becoming much more than what it had been. And obviously a lot of the infrastructure legacy from the America's Cup was sort of the Fremantle that I then grew up in. And so yeah, that was me as a kid, but I was also surrounded, was really close to my grandmother who was a public servant. She worked in the WA health system for many decades and my great-grandmother who later lived with us and she had worked in the Australian tax office for a number of years helping... She herself was a war widow and she spent a lot of time working on the work the tax office did in helping war widows like her get the support and income that they needed.

So yeah, I've got a lot of people in my family who've contributed a lot to the Australian Public Service at a state or Commonwealth level. And so I always recognise that when you're talking to your listeners and to people here in the Australian capital territory, that public servants aren't just a public servant who has a role to play, but they're also like they're our neighbours, they're our family and so often they're actually also our friends.

David Pembroke:

But do you remember discussions around the kitchen table and about public policy? Obviously your parents were teachers. Do you remember those early conversations and think, "I'm interested in this?"

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

I remember we would pop into John Dawkins office who was a former minister for education.

David Pembroke:

Oh, yes, remember him well.

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

And he was also the member for Fremantle and dad was a school principal, so he was quite active in advocating to make sure that his school got the support that it needed. And so having the federal minister for education just down the road didn't hurt. And so dad was a pretty enthusiastic advocate. My great-grandmother who worked in the tax office, she was very proud of the work that she'd done in the tax office and would often tell stories about her time working in the tax office. Which for those who know Perth well, is in a building that is now the Duxton Hotel. But that building started its life as the ATO's brand spanking new building many, many decades ago.

And so yeah, I do remember that there was always an idea that the decisions that are made in politics affect everyone and that there was also a real important right, that you had sort of a right and obligation to engage in those discussions. I remember as a kid in primary school, we'd write letters to the local council advocating

for things we think should be fixed at the Esplanade Park and other pieces. So again, just recognising that we all have a role as an active citizen.

David Pembroke:

And when was it not going to be a pilot and it was going to be politics? Do you remember that moment at all where you thought maybe I'm a bit more interested in public policy?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Late high school for me. I recognised between a range of things that were going to make a sort of career in either commercial aviation or the Air Force between asthma, requiring glasses, a few of those other things that were a bit out of my-

David Pembroke:

Top gun. You weren't going to be Top Gun.

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

I was not going to be Top Gun. So some of those things weren't going to happen for me and I'd also started to discover this other real love of economic policy, public policy. And so that was sort of the path that was sort of obvious to me. And I still have a great enthusiasm for aviation, but I think public policy is a place that I've landed, which is the right place for me.

David Pembroke:

Was student politics something that you were heavily involved in when you were doing your undergraduate work?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Yeah, so I went to university just as there was a whole range of changes, the deregulation of the HEC system at the time. So for me that idea that you're going to start to really shift the burden of costs from recognising that society benefits from an educated population to really pushing more of those costs onto students. That was when I first got involved in serving or served as the student president of the guild at Curtin University. Active on a range of those issues about trying to make sure that we kept an equitable education system. And I think again, having a mum and dad who are both teachers who really believe in the idea that education is something that opens up pathways for so many people has always been part of the work that I've done pre-politics now in politics.

And I think if I look at the legacy of some of the work, and obviously we've just seen the conclusion of a wonderful human being in Brendan O'Connor and his work as the minister for skills and training. If I think about what legacy he leaves, he leaves a legacy of 500,000 people having gone through our TAFE system with no fees and great career opportunities at the other end. So I really feel like that commitment to everyone getting a great education and to the job opportunities that come from it is something that I held very firmly. It's something I believed in as a teenager being active on Curtin University campus out in Bentley and it's something I still believe in to this very day.

David Pembroke:

Now before we get to the here and now, just a couple more questions. Head of WA Labour, running state election campaign, getting Mark McGowan elected, what did you learn about people? What did you learn about politics in that experience?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

What I learned in that experience is that people really want you to be able to explain your plans in ways and how it's going to affect them. And I think that's one of the things we did really well with Mark. We put out our plan for jobs, which was really about saying how every single measure that had been put forward in the Labour Party's policy platform was going to make sure we had either more jobs in the WA economy or secure the jobs of the future by expanding industries like tourism. I think when you put things in those really simple terms, you're in a much better place being able to explain the purpose of public policy changes. I also learned that people really do like meeting their candidates and they're elected representatives and sometimes I think we take this idea that the public don't want to engage in politics, and I think sometimes people project that as it's a problem with the public. Where actually I think it just means that members of parliament actually have to go and put themselves out there even more.

One of the things we did with Mark during that campaign, which everyone thought I was crazy at the time, but I was like, Western Australia has 59 electorates spread across the state. Western Australia's a pretty big place. Some of them are quite remote electorates. We're talking about one third of the Australian landmass. I'm like, "We're going to get to and I don't know how we're going to do the logistics, we're going to get the opposition leader who I hoped would soon become premier, we're going to get to every one of those electorates in one week." And we did this blitz of the state.

David Pembroke:

Wow. How did you do it?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

With a lot of careful planning, which I think is always something that's underappreciated in the political game. The more you plan, the more you can do. A lot of careful planning, a lot of enthusiasm. A few branch members helped us out driving from bit to bit, but we managed to do it in seven days and that was I think sort of a way of showing real respect to the entirety of this massive state of Western Australia, but also that people could come and genuinely engage in the political process. Again, really important to show that this thing we call democracy isn't a spectator sport.

David Pembroke:

An advisor to the former prime minister, Kevin Rudd, what did you learn there?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

I learned a lot about how the Australian government works and how much work you have to put in as a politician or a minister if you want to get things done. I also was really fortunate, I worked for Kevin for the entire time he was foreign minister to get a real appreciation of Australia's place in the world and how we're seen on the international stage. Australians are seen on the international stage as honest brokers, people who have really practical policy solutions, a country that has done some really impressive things from our longstanding ties with friends in the United States and forged in large part during World War II through to what people had seen. Particularly travelling with Kevin about how the apology stolen generation had really spoken, not just here at home in Australia, but had spoken to the world about the sort of path that Australia was on with reconciliation. So I really got a good sense of how Australia was seeing the world and the really positive role that Australia plays.

David Pembroke:

So you've rolled up all these collective experiences and you are now the assistant minister to the prime minister, assistant minister to the attorney general and also assistant minister for the public service. And I do

want to dig into that particularly, but what does an assistant minister do? Do you do everything that they don't want to do?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Well, I think if you know the prime minister, as I think Australians have gotten to know him quite well, he is someone who genuinely loves all parts of that job. I'm sure if he could do all of the pieces of that role that I do, he would. I've got great responsibilities that he's been very generous to let me have a role in from our legislative program, the public service terminology for my role there is the legislation minister. So making sure that we approve bills before they go into Parliament, do some work with the Office of Impact Analysis, making sure that we actually look at policy proposals from more than just one angle. So making sure that we're looking at what are the regulatory burdens of a new policy proposal? Are there smarter or more efficient ways to do it? Have we looked at the community impacts, the environmental impacts, the social impacts, the intergenerational impacts?

So doing all of that work to make sure that we have really good thorough policy processes, but as some of your more nerdy listeners would know, assistant ministers are technically parliamentary secretaries. So there's also a big load of work of just making sure that the parliamentary work that needs to be done within particular portfolios is done well. And I think it's a real honour to support our prime minister. I think in a sense every minister does that in different ways, but my role is to help specifically in the prime minister and cabinet portfolio make sure that we're delivering on everything that is expected of us to deliver for the people of Australia.

David Pembroke:

Do those three roles sort of stitch together the fact that you are assistant to the prime minister, the attorney, and also for the public service?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Well, I'll go to the public service first. Obviously the Australian Public Service Commission is within the prime minister and cabinet portfolio, so there is already a lot of synergy there and a lot of the work that's been done between Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Australian Public Service Commission around public service reform has been collaborative work. So that makes a lot of sense. And I'm not the first in that portfolio to hold both of those roles. When it comes to the work that I do supporting Mark Dreyfus as attorney general, obviously again, a massive department taking care of a huge number of pieces of legislation. There are some synergies where obviously a lot of our legislation is drafted by, or all our legislation is drafted by the Office of Parliamentary Council. So dealing with that on both sides, there's some really logical synergies there.

There's some interest areas that I deal with in the attorney general's portfolio around artificial intelligence, obviously making a huge impact, particularly on the legal profession, which we're also dealing with those challenges when it comes to how do we work through this, thinking about it as a public service and as a government. And other areas like the open government partnership, which is all about increasing transparency and accountability. Obviously massive changes that we've made there with the National Anti-Corruption Commission, but equally, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet does a huge amount of work in trying to lift integrity and lift standards across government, just as the Australian Public Service Commission has a similar role. So it does-

David Pembroke:

It's a huge workload.

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Well, it's a big country.

David Pembroke:

But how do you put it together? How do you manage it? Because that is a lot. What you've just described is an enormous amount of work that you've got to get done. How do you get it done?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Well, you've always got to prioritise which pieces you want to get done. Not everything is solved through a legislative mechanism. Some things are solved just by sitting down with public servants and thinking through what's the smart solution to a particular policy challenge. Also, recognising that sometimes you do get more done when you get agencies and departments to work together. Sometimes you might find yourself as just the connector. I'm also fortunate to be surrounded by a really first class team of advisors and staff who just make sure that I get everything that I needs to get done, done. And I've tried to practise what I preach when it comes to talking about digitisation and smart ways of working.

All of my ministerial paperwork I do on the iPad, so I sit there brief after brief, signing them on the iPad. It's actually incredibly secure, in some ways more secure than putting on a computer, printing them out, carrying around briefcases full of stuff. That really helps trying to sort of digitise those workflows and show there are smart ways of doing work. And also I think, again, supported by first-rate public servants who are also there. It doesn't all get delegated up to a minister or in my case an assistant minister, public services there to do their job. And when you empower them and give them the resources and the capability to do their job well, you can get everything you need to get done, done.

David Pembroke:

The Albanese government, very clear specific policy around the public service in terms of rebuilding capability, rebuilding capacity. It's a number of months now into it. How are you judging the success or otherwise of the uplift and improvement in the APS?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Well, the piece of our reform agenda that we talk about is about putting people and business at the centre of government. So that means making sure that every time we are thinking about the decisions we're making when it comes to the public service, is it going to be good for the people which we serve, or is it going to make business able to operate more effectively? I think we've seen some really good examples of declining wait times for Services Australia. We've seen some of the investments we've put into the National Disability Insurance Scheme, making a huge difference when it comes to people who are on every measure eligible for National Disability Insurance Scheme support package. The only reason they weren't was there weren't enough people to process them through. So again, we're seeing real differences there. And similarly, we've seen a huge reduction in the backlog at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Again, so that's what I want to see is I actually want to see real citizens seeing that those investments in the public service are making a difference for their day-to-day lives. And some people never know when they're going to rely on a government service. And I think it was only four years ago that all of a sudden people were finding themselves having to rely on payments and support through Centrelink, because we went through the worst of the COVID pandemic. We want to make sure that whatever turns life serves up to you, there is support and that there are good quality government services that are people-focused. So you reduce all of that friction that can come with complex areas of government policy, the job of public servants actually to help people through those processes. That's what they've always done. And I think if we can back them then the Australian public will recognise that these are investments that have made a real difference.

David Pembroke:

I sat in on a lunch the other day of a number of quite senior public servants, and the topic turned to Robodebt and the impacts of Robodebt. And I was struck by the impact that that has had on very senior public servants about the public service and the future of the public service. How do you reflect on that and how the public service moves forward from as it was described, one of the darkest periods in the history of the Australian Public Service?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Oh, well, Robodebt was a scandal, and unfortunately it was a scandal where people knew for months and months, years and years that people were not being treated fairly or with accountability, and we were seeing really perverse human outcomes as a result of that particular Robodebt. It was just awful. But I'm always careful to also talk when I talk about Robodebt, to also talk about if you go and read that Robodebt Royal Commission page after page, you'll also see stories of public servants who were doing the right thing, public servants who were raising concerns, public servants who were using the appropriate channels to raise their concerns with senior managers.

Not always having their requests or their concerns appropriately addressed, but people were doing the right thing or looking for other ways to help people through what was ultimately inappropriate in legal policy settings. So I think there are two stories in the Robodebt scandal. It's not just one story of those who did the wrong thing and made the wrong decisions. It's also a story of public servants recognising that that stewardship that they have, that that values of integrity are something that they really can live out even in very difficult intense circumstances.

David Pembroke:

Now, you did speak about artificial intelligence at an IPAA conference a few months ago, and obviously you do have some responsibilities for it through the Attorney General's Department as you mentioned. What is your view on artificial intelligence and how it should be applied and used in the APS to deliver benefit really ultimately to the Australian people, because that's what it's got to be about?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Yeah, so my view is that this is a huge technological shift that is happening whether people like it or not. And therefore we all as leaders in government, the public service and at every level of the public service have a huge obligation to think through how can we make sure it delivers value for taxpayers and delivers better quality services for the Australian people? Can't pretend that it's sort of not happening already. I think some of this is not new. I spoke about the example of the SmartGates that anyone who's travelled in or out of Australia in recent times would've been through a SmartGate. That's a massive investment in artificial intelligence. That means that we've freed up border force staff and others to do more of the detailed work, helping people who might have a problem as they're returning to Australia, helping people who might need some assistance going through customs or making sure that the wrong stuff doesn't get into Australia.

So that has made a huge difference, and it's just one example that many people have experienced through the clever application of artificial intelligence. Equally, I spoke to a senior public service leader just a little while ago. I was like, "Well, I'm doing this podcast, I think we're going to talk about AI. What would you like me to say about artificial intelligence?" And they were really open with me of saying, "I don't know enough yet." And there is some things I just sort of try and avoid, because I don't know yet where to engage. And I think we've all got to sort of sit with some of that discomfort. We've all got to engage with it, find a way through, because this is going to become the standard. I mean, you look at what Microsoft are doing now. They're putting Microsoft Copilot in every new PC they build.

You can't buy an Apple iPhone that doesn't have Siri in it. If you want to buy that product, it's going to come with some wrapped in AI, whether you like it or not. Similarly, we're going to start seeing that on the desktops that people use. We see it in our day-to-day lives in so many areas. The challenge is that how do you get good quality artificial intelligence products that make a difference? And yeah, of course the Commonwealth has a higher threshold as we should. Our higher threshold means that you want it to make huge benefit without any of the downside risks that you can sometimes see from these things. And obviously different chatbots are trained on different bases of information. We want to make sure that we've got things that solve Australian problems for Australian taxpayers, Australian citizens, and put it in the places where it's going to make the biggest difference.

David Pembroke:

But it is complex, isn't it, working through all of those issues. And you mentioned the key word there being risks that there are going to be risks, there are going to be mistakes made. So how then does the government and how do you and your leadership role create that environment where there's an acceptable risk tolerance around behaviour and usage?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Yeah. Well, I think first is that one of the bigger risks is having some of these technologies where people don't really understand how they work. So one of the best ways we do that is lifting our capability in terms of people understanding in the public service, what are these tools good at? What are they currently doing within the public service and how could you use them to make a difference? Equally, where can these tools go wrong? Where are they not up to scratch? And how do you make sure that we're not pushing work onto an artificial intelligence tool that's not up to the job? I think another example is where the Australian Tax Office have been using artificial intelligence to identify taxpayers who will be receptive to nudges to encourage them to file their tax returns on time.

That's obviously not just in the Commonwealth's interest of having up-to-date tax records, but it's also in the taxpayers interest of not having their tax blow out month on month on month potentially accruing an unnecessary debt. Now, I think that's nudged about 492,000 taxpayers to get their tax in on time. Again, using data, artificial intelligence, making a difference where everyone wins. And I think there's so many places like that where we can... Sometimes it's not even about replacing a service, it's about making a service get even better than it currently is. So, so often I think the conversation around AI is around saying, "Oh, what if you have a machine doing a job that was previously done by a human?" I'm like, "Well, what if actually if you could have the human doing the work they're doing, that really specialist work that relies on their expertise, their experience in public service, and somewhere like the chasing up work can be done through artificial intelligence actually delivering a better service to not just taxpayers but to citizens?"

David Pembroke:

But it seems to me that what you're suggesting is the need for education, the need for understanding, but then the need for iteration and understanding as to where those use cases are and then trialling and achieving those benefits. It's not as if we're going to all turn up to work one day and everything's going to be driven by an artificially enabled system. It's going to be small changes consistently over time from now until probably time stands still.

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

And the sorts of problems that it might be able to solve for us in the public sector will rely on a lot of careful thought from our best policy brains, our best public servants thinking, "Well, how can this make a difference?" And you can only truly answer that question if you've taken the time to kind of engage with these tools in sometimes more playful ways. And I had sent to me the other day from a training program that's run out of

the Australian Public Service Academy where they're doing training on APS, sorry, they're doing training on AI tools. And some officials in the health department had been training one of the AI tools to, obviously you can't use it to do serious work until you know how to test it out. They trained the AI tool to write a rap about the compliance with the APS style manual. And I think they'd done this because they knew that I was a nerd who really enjoyed the APS style manual.

Now I thought that was really good, because in testing out what these tools are capable of, you weren't using any confidential data, you weren't using any confidential policy information, but you're realising what power sits within those tools that it can write you all of this entertaining content. And so again, I think it's really good that we've got public servants who recognise that you can engage with these tools in ways that will ultimately make a difference.

And equally, and we talked about Robodebt before, the human element is irreplaceable. The human element is irreplaceable. I don't want to see political leaders having their speeches written by AI bots, because I just think it'd be really boring. But equally, I don't want to see time of processing large amounts of documents chewed up by humans who could be on the end of a phone line helping someone get their age pension. I'd rather have the humans where we need the humans. And just as we've done it was, I think back in the 1960s, I think the Commonwealth only had 34 computers across the entire Commonwealth, 34 computers. We have changed that over time. We have more computers now and we deliver more services, we support more people, and we have more people employed in the public service than we did in the 1960s. These things are not always opposed to one another. They're often quite complimentary.

David Pembroke:

A final question. I need to get you back to your very busy job, but a message to the public service. If I can take you back up to 30,000 feet, you're speaking to the Australian Public Service, what's your message?

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

I always start by thanking the Australian Public Service. We have 170,000 Australian public servants who every day deliver great quality services and policy that improve the lives of all Australians. So for that, I say to every public servant, thank you. It is an incredibly honourable career. It is one where you literally change the lives of your fellow citizens. And what we need all of our public servants to do is to celebrate the careers and opportunities that they have in the public service and encourage the next generation of public servants. We are in a huge competition for talent, and I want the most talented Australians to be thinking about a public service career.

David Pembroke:

Patrick Gorman, thank you very much for giving up some of your very valuable time to come in and share it with us today with the audience of Work With Purpose. Very grateful that you are able to do that, and thank you for your service as well to and for the Australian people.

Hon Patrick Gorman MP:

Thank you, David, and thanks to your listeners.

David Pembroke:

So there we go, everyone, our first minister, and what a great conversation by an engaging, enthusiastic, technologically literate minister who seriously and clearly has a passion for public service and has had that passion for public service. Can't you just imagine the minister sitting around the kitchen table in Fremantle listening to his grandmothers and listening to his parents and thinking, "Maybe I've got some ideas that I can bring to the table as well." So a big thanks for the minister coming in today.

To you listeners, I would encourage, as I have done previously, that you go back and listen to the 100 plus episodes about the Australian Public Service that we've created here at Work With Purpose. So whether it be on Spotify, Apple, Stitcher, wherever you get your podcasts, go back and listen to them. And while you're there, a rating or a review, 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, both on LinkedIn. And if you do have any suggestions, any advice, anything that you'd like to send through to us, please do that. Work With Purpose is produced in collaboration between Content Group and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia ACT, and supported by our good friends at the Australian Public Service Commission. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight with the next episode of Work With Purpose. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke and it's bye for now.

Voice Over

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