

Address by the Australian Deputy High Commissioner, Ann Harrap
To the Papua New Guinea Institute of Directors Workshop on Corporate
Governance

Thursday 19 April 2007

Good governance in the public service: An Australian perspective

Chairmen and Directors, colleagues from the public sector, ladies and gentlemen

Could I begin by giving an apology on behalf of the High Commissioner who is not able to be with you today because he is travelling in the Southern Highlands province.

Secondly could I say how pleased I am to be here on his behalf to talk to you about good governance in the public service and in particular to consider some of the elements that are essential components of good governance. I speak today as an Australian public servant of 15 years and as the Deputy manager (if you like) of one of Australia's largest diplomatic missions overseas - one which employs just under 200 people and brings together 9 Australian government departments. My comments will draw largely on a speech made last year by the Secretary of the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and, as such, reflect an Australian perspective on good governance from the most senior levels of our public service.

So while today I will be speaking from an Australian perspective, many of the issues of importance to us as public servants are equally applicable in the Papua New Guinea context. We might be two different cultures, of

different sizes and stages of development, and facing different challenges. But we have similar perspectives on the role of the State and the relative roles of the government and the market in sustaining economic growth. Public servants in both Australia and PNG ply their craft in democracies in which the pendulum of power between government and opposition parties is finely balanced. And we both have systems of public administration that find their origin in Westminster. By that I mean that we have elected government, served by professional public servants, selected on merit. Most of us, and as I say I speak as a public servant, subscribe to the notion of a public service that is apolitical in the sense that we believe that it is our role to work for successive governments with equal commitment.

Do we share the same concept of 'good governance'? To some the definitional sense is premised upon notions of competence: it is about efficiency and effectiveness, aligning expenditure to outcomes and focussing on results. To others the term has more fundamental connotations of corruption - it is about ethics and integrity, and the dangers posed by decision-making influenced by bribery, appointments open to nepotism or politically-motivated interference in public administration. To my mind, "good governance" hides a multitude of visions.

That said, I would suggest that there are three visions or ambitions that Australian public servants share with many of our Papua New Guinean public administration counterparts. First, we each have *a sense of public purpos*, (not necessarily fulfilled). All of us work both on the day-to-day routine, and periodic crises that are the staple of public administration. Most of us are involved, too, in addressing long-term political goals,

whether our efforts are directed at the elimination of absolute poverty or the distribution of the benefits of economic prosperity. We also face fearsome challenges, the solutions for which are beyond the capacity of any single government – climate change, health pandemic and global terrorism.

Whether we seek to display short-term tactical wisdom or long-term strategic vision, our ends are driven by a sense of public purpose. We share a common cause insofar as we work on public policy, paid for by public funds, driven by a sense of public interest, and held accountable for the manner and success with which we deliver public goods. I would like to think that we share not a job or career, but a vocation. We exist, with our institutional memory, to ensure the continuity of government through political transitions.

Second, we are *committed to delivering public benefit*. To do so we fulfil two exacting and complementary roles. We seek to inform and influence the development of public policy and, equally important, we aim to deliver that policy on time, on budget and to government expectations. Making good public policy means planning for its implementation and ensuring that the inevitable risks to execution can be prudently managed and overcome. Public benefit is served not just by our skill in designing public policies but in delivering them with commitment and integrity.

Third, we recognise the importance of *public sector leadership*. I talk here not of seniority or situational authority but of the display of certain behaviour at all levels and in all circumstances. And I talk of characteristics of leadership in public service that transcend any cultural difference.

A key characteristic of leadership is *creativity*. A good public servant should enjoy the hunt for innovative solutions to complex issues. In the public arena this is made more difficult by the fact that ‘the public’ consists of human beings with all their expectations, prejudices, inconsistencies and foibles. It’s what makes good governance such a demanding goal.

Public servants, to varying degrees, have to win the contest of ideas. The governing party will have its own. So will the media who scrutinise its performance, whether through the editorial pages of newspapers or the robust dialogue of talk-back radio. Universities, and a widening array of policy ‘think-tanks’, will contribute. Industry lobby groups and non-government advocacy organisations will pursue their goals. There is a babble of tongues persuasively arguing their cause with government.

The public servant must seek to distinguish in this hubbub the national as opposed to the particular interest, informed by the directions set by elected government. Equally important, the official should be reading, listening, synthesising and presenting their own perspectives both on policy and its delivery. It’s not just a matter of possessing the best ideas: it also requires having the best ideas on how to turn good ideas into great outcomes.

This brings me to the importance of *resilience*. A leader needs the will to see things through, whether it’s the design of policy, the crafting of legislation, the delivery of programmes or commitment to corporate goals such as effective performance management. One cannot afford to present the big picture, provide momentary inspiration to those tasked with

painting it and then move on to the next great project. Failure to execute brings disillusion and cynicism, not least to those who work to us. Persisting with ideas, seizing the opportunities to imbue them with political relevance, getting them accepted and then making them happen over the long term, is crucial to good governance. It is leadership founded on managerial determination.

Collegiality– by which I mean the ability to work in teams across the barriers of bureaucratic demarcation – is another essential component. The delivery of whole-of-government approaches, marked by collaborative policy development and seamless programme delivery, depends on such leadership. Without it the most carefully constructed organisational processes, systems and structures will fail to deliver the public goods. Success depends on the culture of the workplace not just its administrative architecture.

The establishment of *trust* between Ministers and senior public officials is equally vital. It needs to be based upon the willingness of both sides to engage in confidential public policy discussions robustly, but on the clear understanding that it is the responsibility of government – not the civil service – to make the decisions. It is entirely appropriate, too, that the official is responsive to the broad policy directions set by elected government.

The public servant may, on occasion, believe that the policies decided upon are wrong-headed (and should, in private, have conveyed such reservations) but it remains a matter for elected government to choose whether to proceed with them. And, no matter what one's personal

feelings, the role of the public servant is then to implement those decisions as efficiently, effectively and ethically as possible.

There is no place for self-serving obstructionism. A professional public servant needs to exhibit the energy necessary to give the government of the day every opportunity to achieve its political mandate and agenda before its performance is judged at the ballot box.

Nevertheless the public servant requires *integrity*, even *courage*, in speaking truth to power. A relationship of trust cannot be based upon subservience. If not on matters of policy, then on other occasions the public administrator must be willing to say 'no Minister'. Our leadership needs to be premised upon an unequivocal proposition that one key role of professional public administration is to protect the individual from the arbitrary exercise of executive authority.

The limits of government power are set out in our constitutions, legal systems, processes of administrative review and well-established political conventions. We share a responsibility to ensure that government wields its powers in accord with those standards. Although it is entirely appropriate, indeed necessary, to focus on the achievement of outcomes and results, we need also to recognise that public servants are the guardians of legality, due process, just means and respect for the rights of the individual citizen. It is a role we share with the legislature and the judiciary.

I suspect that the complex balance of power between Ministers and their senior public servants is not well understood in either of our countries. Perhaps in part that explains why 'the bureaucrat' is almost universally

perceived in a poor light. At best officials (generally qualified as ‘petty’) are seen to stifle individual initiative and to stand in the way of entrepreneurial endeavour: at worst, they are feared for the power they wield over the lives of citizens. In most countries, with varying degrees of justice, they are regarded as paper-pushers, requiring documentation in triplicate. In Australian vernacular, they appear to critics to be ‘shiny-bums’, sitting around all day finding ways to make life harder for Joe or Jane Citizen.

To some extent the blame for that negative stereotyping can be laid at our own feet. We have failed to inspire our public services with a true sense of their own importance. Of course administrators undertake the important routines necessary for government - delivering the welfare payments, processing the tax returns, issuing the visas and – in Australia – providing drought relief support for farmers. But too rarely do we, as leaders, convey a sense of the more fundamental significance of our tasks. We are, by our silence, our own worst enemies.

We need to inspire public servants with an understanding of the profound importance of what they do. They are providing services not to customers but to citizens. They are delivering both entitlements and obligations, without prejudice or favouritism. They are implementing programmes that are the manifestation of public policies and which influence not only their own lives but those of their children.

As public administrators we need to speak out with *passion* for the work we do. We have a duty to ensure that those who work to us appreciate fully how meaningful, worthwhile, and on occasion challenging is their contribution to a civil society. We need to instil in them a sense of *pride*,

derived from a clear understanding of how professional public servants provide the foundation of a citizen-centred democracy. If we persuade them, and through them the governments they serve and the public at large, then we will have put in place the bedrock of good governance in the public service – both in Australia and Papua New Guinea.