Introduction

How can you make decisions about Aboriginal people when you can’t even talk to the people you’ve got here that are blackfellas?

This question was posed by an Aboriginal senior public servant in 2007. She was imagining a conversation with the Northern Territory Public Service in Australia’s north, whose invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to join its departments forms the backdrop to this book. Counterposing ‘Aboriginal people’, the ubiquitous problematic policy subject, with the idiomatic ‘blackfella’ who is ‘here’ in government, her question resists the simple narrative that those who call themselves ‘blackfella’ can only live in the bush and have policy done to them. Telling us that ‘blackfellas’ may be present but not feel heard in the administration of government, her question alerts us to complex tensions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in the Northern Territory of Australia.

Sarah, as this speaker will be known, was telling us that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants share a racial identity with their policy subjects and service recipients. Many have history, family and land in common with the communities they serve. More often than not, the aspects of identity they share with the Northern Territory’s disadvantaged Aboriginal population make them attractive to a public service seeking to appear more representative of the people it serves. Sarah was reminding us that the public service is also...
attracted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants’ education, skills and experience, the qualities that set some apart from their people and make them members of the rising Indigenous middle/professional class. Sarah warned:

You have a pool of Indigenous people and you have a group of whitefellas sitting there talking about blackfellas’ issues—without even engaging you! … So that’s why I question whether we’re just numbers, we’re just bums on seats.

Sarah’s admonishment to government was in the tone of an old and familiar employment relationship. But we all know that old and familiar relationships can involve neglectful assumptions. Reporting ‘bums on seats’ or Indigenous employee numbers assumes that the mere presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants will bring about their meaningful contribution to government. In the words of one of Sarah’s colleagues: ‘It’s a start: If they’re [we’re] not there, then you got no basis to do anything.’ This colleague was voicing the ‘politics of presence’, the view developed by representation theorist Anne Phillips that the presence of minorities in enough numbers will eventually change the content of politics (Phillips 1995: 25). Sarah was insisting on a more substantive kind of representation—that she must not only speak as a public servant but be heard, if her people are to be taken into account.

Speaking as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander employee presents dilemmas. Some are reluctant to be seen as representing their people in changeable policies and programs. The question, ‘What do Aboriginal people think?’, may be directed vaguely towards an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander employee if there is one present in a meeting. How should he or she speak in reply? Public service ethics call for objectivity. The issue may call for local knowledge. The community may benefit from that knowledge. Yet this employee may feel constrained by knowing that he or she is not authorised to speak for his or her community and that he or she, privileged by well-paid employment, is not representative of the entire Northern Territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. This employee will feel a weight of responsibility, knowing that there ought to be properly representative external bodies, unconstrained by government, speaking for their people. This isolated representative
of the dispossessed and disadvantaged may feel that even if he or she accepts the well-intentioned, everyday invitation to represent an Indigenous viewpoint, the nuances of answering will not be heard.

At such moments, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander bureaucrat must choose between undesirable alternatives. To stay silent is not to participate in the terms of employment, and possibly turn down the opportunity to assist a community. To speak is to relinquish control over the information, to open oneself up for misinterpretation and be seen to acquiesce in a one-sided relationship between the government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Either way, one may be misheard. Whichever choice, the speaker is always situated somewhere in the social complex and, through speech and writing, participates in the construction of ‘others’ (Alcoff 1995: 100–1).

The choices available to the members of minority populations when they are in positions to speak or act on behalf of others have been captivating British and American political theorists for decades. These are the dilemmas of representation, or in the words of the famed representation theorist Hanna Pitkin, ‘the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact’ (1967: 8–9, italics in original). For some Aboriginal bureaucrats, meeting this everyday expectation is not as easy as it sounds. The 1967 work of Hanna Pitkin and subsequent analysts tell us why this is so. Through an elegant and insightful literature, Anne Phillips, Jane Mansbridge, Melissa Williams, Suzanne Dovi and others went on to refine our tools for understanding descriptive representation, or the representation of groups on the basis of likeness. In theoretical terms, the key question is how the descriptive representatives of historically dispossessed groups participate in the substantive representation of issues.

This book draws the nuanced vocabulary of political theory into the Indigenous public sector employment context in Australia, applying arguments developed for the electoral sphere to the fine-grained and unpredictable research data elicited through interviews with bureaucrats. We are concerned here with informal representation, where the sources of authority are messy and unclear. We are not concerned with formal principal–agent representation, where the principal’s authority binds the agent and the agent’s accountability is enforced, for example, through voting. We are concerned with the
subtleties and nuances of informal representation ‘in some sense’, in this case through employment in bureaucracies that seek to be representative of the populations they serve—so-called representative bureaucracies.

This book is about how and why ‘bums on seats’ do representation, even if they do it reluctantly.

Beyond tokens and advocates

The idea of representative public servants, particularly representative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, conjures the possibility of other, less clearly articulated, accountabilities than those contained in the terms of public service employment. At times, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in official roles have been characterised as ‘advocates’, whose radicalism compromises them as public servants. Alternatively, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander officials have been characterised as ‘tokens’, who compromise their communities through a greater obligation to the public service.

Outspoken Charles Perkins, the first Aboriginal Australian to become a senior Commonwealth public servant, personifies the advocate through his biographer, historian Peter Read (1990). Perkins was a civil rights campaigner in Australia in the 1960s, organiser of the famous Freedom Ride around the state of New South Wales against racial discrimination in 1965. Perkins was appointed an Assistant Secretary in the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra, the national capital, in 1973. Deputy Secretary in 1979, Perkins was the Australian Public Service’s single Second Division (senior executive) statistic from 1973 to 1981. In these positions, Perkins was counselled repeatedly for public challenges to his minister and secretary. He was cleared of any wrongdoing, appointed Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1984 and sacked by the minister in 1989 when his advocacy of an Aboriginal organisation was seen as a serious conflict of interest (Read 1990: 290–301). Charles Perkins was seen as speaking for Aboriginal Australians and as partisan in favouring their interests over other notions of the public interest.
In his own account of his early career, Perkins tells us he had experienced firsthand the policies that controlled Aboriginal lives at the Bungalow in Alice Springs where he had lived as a child with his mixed descent Arrernte mother. Perkins tells us he later felt ‘gazed upon’ by senior departmental colleagues, rather than genuinely involved, until the moment he spoke up and fell out with the bureaucracy: ‘I was no longer the messenger boy in the office’ (Perkins 1975: 172). Perkins describes ‘shattering, demoralising’ experiences on joining the public service: ‘I worked through papers and memos which told me what to do … the bureaucracy swallowed me up’ (1975: 109). He thought himself seen as ‘too emotional’ and saw many Canberra-based officers as ‘cold, hard statues’. He wrote: ‘I could not penetrate their armour’ (1975: 158–9). Perkins emulated what he saw in his mentors by learning to ‘say one thing and do another’ (1975: 159).

The influential Australian historian CD Rowley may have had Charles Perkins in mind when he suggested that the first Aboriginal public servants, ‘hoping to be received as the representatives of their people must have been dismayed to find themselves cogs in the bureaucratic machine’ (Rowley 1978: 207). Lorna Lippman, campaigner for Aboriginal rights in the 1960s and 1970s, revealed her commitment to this view of government in her depiction of ‘former Aboriginal radicals’ who are ‘in government employ, thus effectively silenced’ (Lippman 1979: 188, emphasis added; see also Bennett 1989: 102–3). Whereas advocates rail against the strictures of bureaucracy, tokens accept them. Some say tokens ‘sell out’. Tokens or sellouts benefit from Aboriginality’s symbolism without accountability or commitment to distinct Aboriginal interests. Anthropologist Michael Howard gave us this characterisation in his study of Nyoongah–state relations in southwestern Australia. He described Nyoongah people employed in the ‘bureaucratic brokerage niche’ as disconnected from their communities, ‘seeking refuge’ from political involvement and creating an ‘isolated elite’ (1981: 116–8), witlessly ‘co-opted’ and without ‘real power’ (1981: 144). For Howard, the token bureaucrat’s self-account was merely ‘false consciousness’ (Howard 1982: 95) and the token’s brokerage a form of ‘indirect rule’. At around the same time, anthropologist Lee Sacket characterised Aboriginal bureaucrats as the successors to ‘White go-betweens’, ‘far from typical’ Aboriginal people who ‘owed their prominence to their being the most assimilated of their people’ (Sackett 1983: 405). In her later exploration of
relationships between the Rembarrnga people and local cattle stations in the Northern Territory, anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw made a similar critique when she portrayed ‘insiders to the state’ as ‘go-betweens’ who may at best ‘occupy their positions temporarily and uncomfortably’ (Cowlishaw 2004: 65–6).

By always opposing state agency and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests, both the token and advocate characterisations draw on a limited theory of government and limited aspirations for Aboriginal political identity. The state and the vision for Aboriginal political identity are one-dimensional. The Aboriginal public servant either takes on the system from the inside and leaves as a shining hero, or stays in some uncomfortable and shaming twilight zone, over-promoted and ineffectual. Whereas the advocate is seen to exercise political agency, the token is only afforded state agency. The advocate represents too much; the token represents too little. One engages in political stand-off while the other becomes the state. Either way, state interests are positioned as antithetical to Aboriginal political interests.

This book proposes that the political identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants is formed by their relatively autonomous relationships to multi-sited portfolio interests. All sites within the state do not support the same imperatives and all who work in them are not in unison. To see the state as a one-dimensional, unpeopled entity is to fall for the ‘state effect’, a term coined by insightful political theorist Timothy Mitchell for the mistaken belief that government departments are the repositories of objectivity, impartiality and independence (Mitchell 1999). Those who rail against the subjectivities and inconsistencies of government fall for the state effect just as much as those who more obviously uphold them by reproducing the government’s self-account. This book seeks to bypass both problems by more detachedly observing government through the personal, off-the-record accounts of those who try making it work.

My starting hypothesis is that somewhere between representation that is too much and representation that is too little, there must be representation that is about right—that is good enough. What would that representation look like in the public service? In the view of American normative political theorist Suzanne Dovi (2007, 2002) the relationship between representative and represented is key and central to ‘good’ political representation. Good elected representatives
seek to know and be known by their constituencies and to interact with them fulsomely. They seek opportunities to explain themselves and to hear from those they represent. Good representatives need historical connection and a sense that they share the aims of those who are absent. Dovi proposes we judge descriptive representatives by the same standard. For Dovi, good descriptive representatives need ‘strong mutual relationships with dispossessed subgroups’ (2002: 729). These relationships need to be based on ‘mutual recognition’ (2002: 735–8).

In his study of the interaction of race and class in African-American electoral politics, African-American political scientist Michael C Dawson found that ‘the more education one had, the more likely one was to believe that blacks were economically subordinate to whites, and consequently, the more likely one was to believe that one’s fate was linked to that of the race’ (Dawson 1994: 81–2, italics in original). Dovi drew on Dawson’s ‘linked fate’ to argue the importance of ‘shared aims’ in the relationship between descriptive representative and those they represent (Dovi 2002: 738). Both should respect each other’s relationship to the group. Both should be inclusive, and not be too quick to declare others inauthentic (Dovi 2002: 737). Dovi argued later that ‘good representatives’ should keep ‘unjust excluders’ at a distance (2007: 161–2). Otherwise some would be excluded again—this time, at the hands of their own people. This was Howard’s general assumption for the subject communities of his token Nyoongah bureaucrats.

Dovi’s work offers more sophisticated analytic tools than the simple narratives of advocacy and tokenism. Many of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who participated in the research did not see falling out with their employers as useful to communities, nor were they silent participants in policies and programs. They did not hesitate to raise tough issues and they tried to be inclusive. Some asserted that being in positions of responsibility called for competency and accountability to those who looked to them for help, whose fates they believed they shared. In the bureaucratic context, this might be as good as representation gets.

This book does not assume that it is only ever tokenistic and politically compromising when descriptive representatives align their interests with government. In 1970, HC ‘Nugget’ Coombs described ‘the Government services’ as an arena in which Aboriginal leaders could ‘work quietly to build the foundations on which political action
will rest’, warning that Aboriginal leaders ‘need not, indeed should not, all of them be in the forefront of political action’ (cited in Rowse 2000: 78).

A decade later, away from the centres of national policy discourse at The Australian National University’s North Australia Research Unit in the tropical city of Darwin, Dr Peter Loveday also saw the potential in government employment. Loveday was interested in the relationships that lay behind Aboriginal contributions to the public service. Observing the challenges of service delivery during the early years of Northern Territory self-government, Loveday advised that ‘aboriginalising’ the public service may mean more than having ‘someone … with a black skin to do white things’. A member of an Aboriginal group, he explained, ‘may now be in a preferred position, compared with others in his group’ (Loveday 1982: 111). Political scientist Rolf Gerritsen (1982), Loveday’s colleague, looked back at the group when he observed the differential effects of power deriving from internal and external sources in Aboriginal community politics. Loveday took these ideas a step further when he looked beyond the group to acknowledge the ‘unofficial, unpublish and officially unorthodox’ ways (1983: 2–4) in which the presence of Aboriginal people was influencing public service administration. With local Aboriginal researcher Raelene Cummings, Loveday went on to test the ‘stereotypical racist contrast between “real” Aborigines and “burnt potatoes”’ through interviews with 43 Northern Territory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in the late 1980s. A ‘burnt potato’ is black on the outside and white on the inside, and uses his or her Indigeneity for personal privilege. If, as Loveday tells us, illness had not cut the work short, the project might have stimulated earlier attention to the tensions of representing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants (Loveday & Cummings 1989: 4).

Since the 1980s, research into the complex politics and potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions to the public service has been sparser. Surveying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health managers in 2000, John Wakerman and colleagues saw the tensions they reported experiencing as cultural rather than political (Wakerman et al. 2000: 25–6, 39–43). Applying an economist’s perspective, Boyd Hunter argued the role of ‘discrimination’ in employment disadvantage in the Australian labour market, though commenting on the difficulty of isolating and measuring discrimination.
factors empirically (Hunter 2005: 79). Two studies of the subjectivities of white bureaucrats showed that ethnographic research could bring deeper empirical insight. Tess Lea’s fine ethnography of ‘helping white’ bureaucrats in the Northern Territory who were ‘learning to govern’ Indigenous health, found them ‘hyper-privileging the contributions and presence of Aboriginal colleagues who operate in brokerage positions’ (Lea 2008: 182). Emma Kowal’s subsequent, powerful ethnography of liberal intervention found ‘White antiracists’ who could not tolerate radical difference (Kowal 2008: 346; Kowal 2015). Lea and Kowal’s studies invited the consideration of parallel urges among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, and revealed the viewpoints of some in my interviewees’ collegiate group.

More recently, Steven Larkin has taken up the political dimensions of Indigenous public sector employment in his doctoral examination of racist attitudes in the Australian Public Service, drawing on his perspective as an Indigenous senior executive (Larkin 2013). Anthropologist Julie Lahn has pointed to the need for further research into the representation of Indigenous people in professional occupations and engagement with work in urban locales more generally, including the relevance of ideas about an emergent Indigenous middle class (Lahn 2013). Finally, Biddle and Lahn (2016) have just released a study of the Australian Public Service that will be discussed in Chapter 6.

My theories and methods will build on these approaches, and will situate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees both as officials in structures of governance and as obligated members of communities.

To understand the interviewees better, to discover how they saw their representation, we need a working theory of bureaucracy.

**A working theory of bureaucracy**

One view of the bureaucracy is that it is an impartial, technical and politically neutral machine divided into departments by the portfolio interests of elected representatives. Each department develops policies and runs programs that cascade down into a myriad of tiny actions by a multitude of public servants who only ever see a fragment of the whole picture. This is the Weberian view. From the outside, this is a familiar image.
Another view portrays a more enlightened public service. This public service understands that knowledge is partial. This view might resonate better with many who are on the inside. Public servants might agree with the accountability theorist, Richard Mulgan, that the idea of the public service as impartial, technical and politically neutral is ‘a useful myth, a graphic metaphor’, for ensuring the public service remains a stable instrument of democratically elected government (Mulgan 1998: 13). Public servants well know that before decisions are made, proposals must be drafted. If drafts are to see the light of day, public servants have to persuade other public servants of their value. Email by email, meeting by meeting, proposals are revised, reiterated and revisited. One authority for the discretionary/deliberative view of the public service, American political theorist Henry S Richardson, tells us that public service departments are in fact mandated to be discretionary and partial under the general legislative conditions that grant them the autonomy they need to do their work. If bureaucrats could not use their judgement in the development and implementation of policy, nothing would ever be achieved (see Richardson 2002).

These two views are the rational/technical and discretionary/deliberative faces of the public service. They are in tension, yet both are true. The exercise of discretion in the public service, its weighing of things, is governed by an ethos that asks bureaucrats to be fair and impartial in that weighing by acknowledging their partiality.

The idea of representative bureaucracy is that the presence of individuals from particular social groups will make a bureaucracy reflect them, like a mirror. The aim of a representative bureaucracy is to improve the work of government by exposing that work to a variety of perspectives. It is through the interaction of ‘situated knowledges’, it was observed by the political theorist, Iris Marion Young, that ‘self-regarding understanding’ may shift to ‘comprehensive understanding’ (Young 2004: 20). This shift relies on the discretionary/deliberative view of the public service. A socially diverse bureaucracy can only improve the work of government if bureaucrats from socially identified categories bring themselves into their work. So, representative bureaucracy accepts the premise that bureaucrats are influenced by their social identities (race, gender, class or other characteristics). The aim of representative bureaucracy is to make the bureaucracy more impartial, fairer as a whole, by recognising that individual
public servants are prone to the partialities that come with their social categories, and that all individuals are susceptible to some level of identity-based self-interest.

If the best possible objectivity comes from acknowledging partiality, then by implication an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander public servant may be there to speak, at times, as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. That person’s merit may include some notion of making his or her voice heard as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. In practice, though, it is not easy for those licensed by their social categories to speak for particular interests. Public servants from other social categories may believe that their own views reflect a broader notion of the public interest, and may not judge the expression of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander views as meritorious. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants must not only be representative of social diversity but must also uphold the rational/technical view of government administration. They must compete within its ranks and its rules. Like all public servants, their terms of engagement must include upholding the appearance of impartiality in government.

The passive/active distinction

The passive/active distinction is central to the theory of representative bureaucracy. Passive, or descriptive, representation refers to the mirroring of a population in a demographic sense. Active, or substantive, representation refers to the responsiveness of government, through processes that are more discretionary and engaged. Applying the distinction to the public service as a whole, Kenneth J Meier, an American political scientist known for his efforts to prove the theory of representative bureaucracy, described bureaucracy as ‘passively representative if it looks like a given segment of the population’ and as ‘actively representative if it advocates the interests of a given segment of society’ (Meier & Hawes 2009: 270).

Whose view of likeness, whose view of interests? The distinction between passive and active representation is clear enough in theory, but it doesn’t hold up in practice. Even in the 1970s, Samuel Krislov argued that representative bureaucracy was not realisable in fact, because employee characteristics could not ever really prevail over the rational/technical purpose of bureaucracy (Krislov 1974: 136).
American researchers tried to identify the conditions under which minority representatives were most likely to represent the interests of their communities—for example, when they were working together on issues affecting their interests (Thompson 1976: 203) or when they were in service delivery roles (Thielemann & Stewart 2003). As Meier and Hawes summarised the research in 2009, the relationship between passive and active representation was still correlative rather than causal (Meier & Hawes 2009: 274).

The case for representative bureaucracy was weak. Building on Coombs’ insights in the 1970s, Peter Wilenski, Chair of the Australian Public Service Board from 1983 to 1987, encouraged the Australian Government to be more responsive to underrepresented sections of the Australian community. To strengthen the argument for internal diversity, Wilenski proposed a distinction between representing and contributing. Speaking of the ‘least powerful interests’ in the Australian Public Service: ‘Their role is not to “represent” (in the sense of “argue for”) the case of a particular group but rather to make a contribution to decision-making which reflects the values and background of the group from which they are drawn’ (Wilenski 1986: 222, emphasis added). What if those values gave rise to dissident views? What if others did not include these ‘least powerful interests’? Between arguing and contributing, or advocating and influencing, said one of the interviewees for this research, ‘it’s a fine line’. Wilenski’s distinction does not help us understand how this line works in practice. To lessen the risk of losing representative voices in departmental priorities, Wilenski’s solution was to ‘require administrators to be far more explicit about their value premises’ (Wilenski 1986: 63). But as the American empiricists had already demonstrated, the ideological grip of values was strong, and organisational socialisation made it hard for administrators to be explicit about their values. Charles Perkins had experienced these hard realities. With the benefit of hindsight, we may see that his lasting contribution to the Australian Public Service was his lone, jarring, argumentative voice.

The research into representative bureaucracy gives priority to the public administration account. In so doing, it largely forgets the represented. The research into representative bureaucracy does not ask important questions about the relationship between descriptive representative bureaucrats and their identity groups, and how these bureaucrats reconcile their identity with the rational/technical
view of the bureaucracy. The passive/active or mirror/agency distinction, as it is also known, is useful enough for the purposes of public administration, but the more nuanced vocabulary of political representation meshes better with the interviewees’ deliberations over what to say and do about their people in the myriad moments of everyday work. Theorists of political representation are more comfortable analysing political content and behaviour, using the terms descriptive and substantive to distinguish between what representatives *stand for* and what they *stand up for* through speech and action. Ultimately, substantive representation is about the crystallisation and representation of group perspectives. We will apply the finely honed theories of political representation to understand more about how this plays out between bureaucratic representatives and their represented.

A final note on my general approach. This book presents public service language and behaviours—including the very idea of representative bureaucracy—as artefacts of the government project, not self-evident truths. Readers are invited to suspend their judgement of government: not to be disapproving of the discretionary, partial administration of democratic government but to acknowledge these less acknowledged aspects of the work of public servants. Of course public servants bring identity to their work. Of course bureaucracies that strive to be representative encourage particularised populations to bring identity to their work. Of course this sets up tensions within the public service; of course there are workplace politics. Of course the tension between active representation and the principle of impartiality is not limited to representative bureaucrats. Representative bureaucracy creates the appearance of an impartial state by singling out the members of certain social groups for particular kinds of representation. As we shall see through the interviews, if those seen as representative argue with that identity, representative bureaucracy contains and limits their representations. Deeming that some public servants are representative of ethnicity, gender or some other politically relevant attribute might imply to the unwary observer that public servants who are not so identified are impartial. That too would be to fall for the state effect.
One hundred hours of speech

The interviews, conducted between July and December 2007, yielded a substantial body of data—100 hours of speech and nearly 2,500 pages of transcription, recording the encounters of 76 individuals with hundreds of public service projects since Northern Territory self-government in 1978. The effect of the presence of the researcher, a white middle-class educated southerner and former colleague, cannot be underestimated. But our discussions were frank, and the interviewees were open to having them. These were professional bureaucrats with confident views. While they did not form a group in the sociological sense of a coherent and self-referring entity, the lives of these 39 men and 37 women converged on a career detail. This was that they had all worked in the administration of the Northern Territory at some point in its self-governing years. Many knew each other. Some were in each other’s stories.

The interview questions explored the nature of the interviewees’ work, how influential they believed they were as public servants and the situations that created conflicts for them. Most of the interviews were held in Darwin, the Northern Territory’s humid, developing capital and the central headquarters of most departments. Darwin is at the north of the Northern Territory, the so-called ‘Top End’. Other Top End interviews were held in Katherine, three hours’ drive south from Darwin and in Wadeye, a large Aboriginal community that was once the Catholic mission of Port Keats, an hour’s flight southwest of Darwin. In desert Central Australia, the interviews were in Alice Springs, 1,600 km south of Darwin, and in the small multiracial town of Tennant Creek. One interview was held in Ntaria, the old Lutheran mission of Hermannsburg west of Alice Springs amid the gracious white gums of the wide, winding, dry Finke River bed.

About the interviewees

The interviewees reflected candidly on their careers, personal histories and sources of identity, contextualising their accounts in work events. When invited to characterise their relationship with the Northern Territory Government, the answers ranged all the way from the quirky
‘platonic’ to the accusatory ‘poison cousin’, which in Aboriginal terms is an avoidance relationship among close kin. Edith, who came from a Top End local language group, explained ‘poison cousin’ to mean:

Part of the same things, like they can sit in the car, but they’ve got their backs to each other; there’s no touching.

‘Poison cousin’ is a rich and telling metaphor for the relationship between some Aboriginal public servants and their government. This was a strong cultural reference. But generally speaking, the interviewees were uncomfortable with public service colleagues assuming they would make culturally distinct Aboriginal contributions. They preferred to watch and learn to participate in public service cultures. While acknowledging their embeddedness in the norms of public service workplaces, many still felt racially and culturally different. Even so, it was a clear theme of the interviews that Aboriginal culture was a matter for them to raise and discuss, and not other public servants.

Often, the interviewees referred to their absent constituencies as ‘the remotes’. Remoteness is relative. For example, the entire Northern Territory is described in national policy as remote and regional. For the interviewees, ‘the remotes’ was mostly shorthand for the 40,000 Aboriginal people who lived in rural-remote communities. Sometimes, ‘the remotes’ was used synonymously with ‘the non-compliant with government programs’. But as the interviewees also knew, many traditionally oriented remote community dwellers are compliant policy and program subjects who work to benefit their communities. And the non-compliant behaviours associated with itinerant populations in urban areas, reflecting government policy settings, are challenging government in new ways. When referring to ‘the remotes’, did the interviewees simply mean, ‘not us’? Even this interpretation would be too simplistic, as we shall see that many had come from remote places themselves. Because some were actively engaged in making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more present in the public service, ‘the remotes’ could also have referred to future employees.

Pinning down the absent in bureaucratic representing will lead us to consider whether the absent were imagined, just as the state is imagined, as an abstraction that is only given form through representation.
Pitkin tells us that descriptive representations are ‘renderings of an “original” in a medium different from it’ (1967: 72–3). The representative is like but not the same as, the represented. The likeness cannot go too far without losing the element that makes it representation. That element need only be a matter of extent, or the relationship of part to whole. The interviewees fulfilled the basic definition of descriptive representatives by being part of, but not the whole of, the Northern Territory Aboriginal population and by coming from some, but not all, communities and regions. They were like the represented in this sense, but they were not the very problematic policy subjects, the disaffected, program-non-compliant others that some of the programs they administered were trying to reach. The experiences of Northern Territory Aboriginal people in the protectionist and assimilationist policies of the past had been intensely dislocating, but had bestowed educational and employment advantages that now fitted some for public service professionalism. Between many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants and the rest of their population, there was not only a relationship of part to whole, but also of social differentiation through historical circumstance.

If representativeness is not typicality, the representative might improve the ‘typical’ likeness of the represented by emphasising those characteristics most ‘relevant for reproduction’ (Pitkin 1967: 87). This is an important idea, because not all characteristics of the Northern Territory’s problem population might be deemed ‘relevant for reproduction’. Bureaucratic representation might selectively reproduce the comportments of social compliance—work ethic, sobriety, parental responsibility and policy acquiescence—to encourage the Northern Territory’s problem population to adopt certain behaviours. Some interviewees gave accounts of modelling such behaviours and exhorting their less compliant communities to follow suit, effectively appropriating the aims of government in what the postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha calls the ‘final irony of partial representation’ (Bhabha 1984: 129). Although relevant observations were incidentally made by some community-based interviewees, the research on which this book is based did not set out to test the views and reactions of the represented. The research was designed to elicit the views of those representing, understanding absent communities through the constructions of their representatives.
This is not a study of the loyalties of front-line officers and counter staff who deal directly with the public, the ‘street-level bureaucrats’ of Michael Lipsky’s work on the culture of direct service (Lipsky 1980)—although some interviewees did meet that description—but on the experiences of those whose service was more indirect due to the responsibilities of seniority. This is a study of public servants who were closer to creating, naming and funding services than delivering them, who worked at the nexus between operations and policy and who had some discretion to make active representations in their departments. The closer public servants are to the top of hierarchies, the more the community expects them to be accountable and the more is invested in the appearance of impartiality and fairness. The more senior the officer, the more likely it is that his or her written words will not be changed by someone who is above them in the hierarchy.

This research follows the Northern Territory Government’s definition of a senior public servant, from middle management to the executive and senior executive levels.\(^1\) The interviewees were typically middle managers, although some were executives and senior executives. From middle management upwards, public servants may work in close proximity to executives and senior executives, and will be judged by others for their operational efficiency and strategic thinking. They might represent the government publicly. Their networks are both internal and external. They often have staffing and budget responsibilities, and they are expected to convey impartiality by reconciling diverse perspectives.

Fifty-three of the total 76 interviewees had been employed at a senior level at some time since Northern Territory self-government, but the other 23 also had interesting and relevant things to say. Ten of the 53 senior-level interviewees were or had been employed at executive or senior executive levels of the Northern Territory Public Service.\(^2\)

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1  In 2007, the definition of senior for statistical purposes in the Northern Territory Government equated to Administrative Officer level 7 or above or equivalent in other salary streams. Above Administrative Officer 7 was level 8, after which the executive levels began. The current pay progression, which was introduced in 2011, starts seniority a little higher at Senior Administrative Officer 1 (SAO1), or the equivalent of the former Administrative Officer 8.

2  The executive- and senior executive–level interviewees were very thinly spread across departments. For reasons of confidentiality, they are generally discussed together and as part of the larger senior cohort.
Most interviewees were in their 40s and 50s, but their ages ranged between the 20s and 60s. The only significant demographic difference between the senior and non-senior group was that there were more women (30) than men (23) among the 53 senior-level interviewees. While half the interviewees had not completed high school, more than half had achieved post-school qualifications later in life. Not having completed high school had not prevented anyone’s entry into the public service. Having tertiary qualifications had not been the deciding factor in their promotion, as a higher proportion of non-senior than senior interviewees had university degrees. Of the total group, 46 were in the Northern Territory Public Service in 2007 and 30 were former employees.

Table 1 organises the 76 interviewees by their senior/non-senior status and whether they were currently in the Northern Territory Public Service or were former employees in 2007.

Table 1: Seniority by Northern Territory Public Service (NTPS) employment status

<p>| NTPS employment status in 2007 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current NTPS</th>
<th>Former NTPS</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior in NTPS at some point in career—‘senior’</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never senior in NTPS—‘non-senior’</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s research.

From before the time of Northern Territory self-government until 2001, the Northern Territory was governed by a Country Liberal Party majority. The first Labor Government was elected in 2001. The interviewees had commenced employment fairly evenly across these political periods. Of the 46 interviewees who were in the public service in 2007, 19—more than 40 per cent—had been recruited before 1990 and six had 30 years’ continuous service. That there had not been more attrition over the decades suggests that quite a few careers had endured the political upheaval of the Northern Territory’s only change of government. But if there was a core of longer serving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander officials in the Northern Territory Public Service, it is difficult to put a precise character or figure on it.
If a public servant was still in the service in 2007 after more than a decade of employment, it meant that he or she had stayed in place over different political periods. This could indicate a commitment to stay. In this category were 31 interviewees, but there were few clear successors to those whose long careers were coming to end after 30 years of self-government.

Considering the Northern Territory’s tight social and professional networks, it is conceivable that the 53 senior-level interviewees constituted a significant proportion of those who had ever worked for the Northern Territory Government as a senior public servant. But this book is fundamentally about the people behind the numbers. Working for the Northern Territory Government meant participating in the government of their place. This was expressed as some kind of right, entitlement or even obligation. Even though the public sector dominates the Northern Territory’s relatively small employment base, working for the Northern Territory Government was more than just a job. Many who stayed thought of themselves as role models to others. We shall explore the criteria by which political theorists judge descriptive representatives to be good representatives and by which the interviewees judged themselves, but this book will not judge them. The approach we take will be descriptive and probing, and will place the highest value on critical self-reflection by the participants.

Through the instrument of Labor’s 2002–2006 Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy, the Northern Territory Government recognised that disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not present ‘literally or in fact’, and sought to remedy that absence by soliciting the advice of those who were more able to fulfil the requirements of merit selection for public service positions. Like the invitations that followed, and like Indigenous public sector employment policies elsewhere in Australia, the Northern Territory Government’s invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people contained no foretaste of the tensions within the very idea. The invitation was upbeat: join us, let us count you, contribute to policy and decision-making and reap the rewards of long service.

So Indigenous employment policies ask Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to help build the evidence base for a representative bureaucracy. Beyond the obvious material security of their positions as public servants, we shall consider the extent to which Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander employees could also make a plausible case to themselves that they were doing something worthwhile for the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.

Guide to the book

We shall see that the Northern Territory Government’s invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is quite ambivalent. No democratic government can invite people to contribute to the public service on the basis of their social identity without potentially placing them in tension with their professional obligations as public servants. At the same time, once it has acknowledged significant plurality among those it governs, no democratic government can afford not to make the invitation.

The invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in the administration of the Northern Territory contains the expectation that once present in the public service, they will do some kind of representing. Hanna Pitkin dared her readers to ‘capture an instance of representation’ (Pitkin 1967: 1), but a fork in the disciplinary road limited subsequent research to the electoral sphere. By staying in the public administration account, those who tested the idea of representative bureaucracy also spoke among themselves. Ideas about doing representation that might have predicted tensions in the public service did not stray in. Theorists of political representation tended to find the (oversimplified) state bureaucracy an unlikely site for legitimate representation (for example, John Dryzek 1996: 479–80) and those in it simply victims of cooption (see Michael Saward 1992). American theorist Susan Bickford acknowledged the ‘intuitive possibility’, as I do, that ‘citizen identities can be enacted’ within the state context (Bickford 1999: 92; see also Cooper 1995). But most of the theorists who went on to venture into non-electoral spheres only looked as far as mechanisms for citizen participation at the outer edges of the bureaucracy, for example John Dryzek’s development of the idea of ‘discursive’ representation (Dryzek & Niemeyer 2008).

Some theorists are now untying representation from electoral processes and moving beyond the descriptive/substantive distinction. One example is Saward’s later development of representation as
a ‘precarious and curious sort of claim about a dynamic relationship’ (Saward 2006: 299; see also Saward 2009), in which the ‘representative claim’ works to constitute the community that is the subject of representation. Another example is Andrew Rehfeld’s recasting of the dilemmas of political representatives as those of public decision-makers (Rehfeld 2009). The tension between needs and wants, which we will see was a central tension for the interviewees, is often at the core of difficult policy decisions. We will test these insightful developments through the interviews.

Having reconfigured the state from an amorphous monolith to a series of sites with which employee/citizens engage with discretion, we can now see something that is of central importance for building more representative bureaucracies. This is that public service employment may legitimately produce instances of political representation. This point was acknowledged by feminist theorists Marian Sawer, Sophie Watson, Anna Yeatman and Hester Eisenstein when they used the terms and tools of political representation to understand the role of government employment in the advancement of feminist political agendas in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s (Eisenstein 1996; Sawer 1990; Watson 1990; Yeatman 1990). Australian Indigenous feminist intellectuals have tended to disassociate themselves from white middle-class feminist agendas, arguing that these agendas mask white women’s racial privilege (for example Moreton-Robinson 2000: 32). But it is unfortunate that the feminist theorists’ insights into gender representation did not spark analysis of the distinct issues raised by Indigenous representation through government employment. In 2001, when Sawer called for ‘thicker’, more descriptive accounts of parliamentary representation in Australia (Sawer & Zappalà 2001), anthropologist and historian Tim Rowse observed in the Australian literature the assumption that Aboriginal people living traditional lifestyles had limited capacity for democratic participation. Rowse traced this assumption to narrow concepts of representation and a divergence between the disciplines of social anthropology and political science in Australia (Rowse 2001).

The cost has been high. In spite of our reliance on the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to the government bodies that are responsible for the substantive representation of Australian Indigenous affairs, we know too little about the roles Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play in them.
This book will show how a representative identity may be formed in the vagary and indeterminacy of administrative discretion. Indigenous employment policy invites Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be present in departments and, once there, to conjure the absent by participating in policy development and problem-solving. When they spoke of representing the intended beneficiaries of Aboriginal-specific policies and programs, the interviewees were active representatives in the sense of defending their portfolios. When they revealed other audiences for their work, they implied other kinds of representing. In this book, the question of who is representing whom is always relevant and the answer is always context-dependent. Representation is a relationship, and it cannot be easily relegated to the inside or outside of departments. Bureaucrats are citizens, and some straddle the inside/outside divide through their communities and organisations. Descriptive representatives do not have geographic constituencies like electoral representatives do, but there are implicit membership criteria. As the political theorist Melissa Williams observed (1998), these can include memories of historic dispossession.

We shall hear in the interviews that just being present and talking about it entangles senior public servants in the efforts and tensions of governing. This book will not take their descriptions of programs and responsibilities as self-evident truths but as ideas that all public servants learn to voice about the nature and causes of problems, what is to be done and who should do it.

Representative bureaucracy could be quite confounding from the point of view of many Indigenous Australians. Representative bureaucracy’s invitation contains the contradiction: we embrace your statistic, but we cannot necessarily embrace you. We shall see that self-identifying Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander public servants were granted some of the privileges of inclusion, but rarely that of serving non-Indigenous populations. Through the interviews, we shall see much more besides. No assumption is made that a public service career would either intensify or erase an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person’s connection to their absent constituencies. The interviews assumed that competent and professional Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander senior public servants might have enduring relationships with, even political commitments to, other Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people that they might exercise responsibly.
and with due attention to the other ethics of public service besides representation, just as other public servants might do in relation to other constituencies.

Sarah, the interviewee whose words opened this chapter, could justifiably believe herself licensed to speak for her community. This would be especially so if her employer held enlightened ideas about the merits of social identity and actively sought to understand Northern Territory Aboriginal people more fully. What are Sarah’s options if she does not feel heard? She might speak more assertively, running the risk of strident advocacy. She might speak less, abandoning the opportunity to contribute her social identity and feeling token. She might find some other frame of reference. The political theory shows that one can never only be an employment statistic. One is inevitably an agent of an imagined absent constituency. Can one choose not to represent others? Who descriptive representatives are (their representativeness) obliges and commits them to certain kinds of speaking (their representations) in relation to others (the represented). The interviewees will show us that their very identities obliged and committed them to actions that were sometimes beyond their choice.

The issues raised in the book are relevant to wider debates about the problems of minorities and their relationships with government. If readers find my approach descriptive, or perhaps parochial, that is the nature of ethnography. It is my contribution to a body of theory and debate in minority–government relations that has largely drawn on experiences outside Australia. That literature has skimmed too lightly over politics in the public service. I hope my selective application of sophisticated theories of representation to the everyday world of my interviewees will inspire further scholarship into minority–government relations, including representative bureaucracy, and embolden Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in Australia.

The book will progressively situate the interviewees in their geographical, historical and political context. The Northern Territory is part of Australia’s vast northern frontier, with over 1.4 million square kilometres covering nearly one-fifth of the Australian mainland. The Top End of the Northern Territory, where Darwin and Katherine are, encompasses northern wetlands and tropical savannas. These graduate southwards into the hot, dry deserts of Central Australia.
through Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. The Top End and Central Australia depict commonly recognised points of geography and administration. Idiomatically, there is no ‘south’. Northern Territorians reserve that term, sometimes disparagingly, for the more populous cities and regions of south, southeastern and southwestern Australia, where they feel that people sometimes forget or misunderstand Australia’s far north.

Chapter Two spans 100 years of government effort to attract and report on the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees across the Northern Territory landscape. This effort intensified when the Northern Territory achieved self-government, but the invitation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to participate in government is one of long standing. It has also been one of long-standing ambivalence, and this ambivalence set the tone for the response. The research found that participants were in orbit between government and non-government roles. Their mobility in and out of the public service created a ‘turnstile ticker’ effect, as one interviewee said, that kept the Indigenous public sector employment statistics reasonably stable but made targets elusive.

In Chapters Three and Four, the interviewees tell how they accepted the Northern Territory Government’s invitation to help make it more representative of their people. We will hear how and why they accepted the invitation and what limits they placed on their acceptance. We will explore the dilemmas that made them reluctant to speak as representatives. Read together, these two chapters give a sense of the workplace issues that initially compel, but ultimately turn some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants away, which they do either by leaving the public service for a while or staying ‘under the radar’, as one interviewee described her subtle withdrawal.

Chapter Five presents the interviewees’ reframing of the invitation to speak by describing themselves as role models. We will hear the intriguing ways in which role models represented Aboriginal people to government, and how some strong and committed Aboriginal senior public servants purposefully represented the government to their communities. We will look at the life issues and political
conscience that motivated such moves, and explore more fully the dimensions of the relationship between those present and absent from the administration of government.

Chapter Six sums up the research and its significance for those trying to build public institutions that better reflect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations they mean to serve. We will move beyond the theory to understand role modelling as political representation—a move by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants who wanted the government to see their people in a better light. The book concludes with some suggestions as to how government could build better relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians through public sector employment. These suggestions are ventured cautiously because in truth, better relations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians can only be built directly with them. Through the interviews, this book will tell you that.