The limits of acceptance

Those who self-identify and who have not resisted the subsequent drawings on their Aboriginality will have stroked well out into the depths. They will have strategies to keep their heads above water in busy bureaucratic currents. It’s not quite what they expected, but they have the skills to survive—until the tide turns. Who pulled out the plug? The water has become shallow and salty. Some swimmers are high and dry, shocked. Some still in the depths are pulled out to sea.

Some might enjoy this metaphor for the change of fortune that any bureaucrat could experience, from the buoyancy of success to feeling dumped, isolated or misunderstood. Others would distance themselves from the image of victimhood that the metaphor indulges, preferring to see themselves as wary and wise, deft at the bureaucratic game, cards yet to play. Most would fall somewhere in between—while they might acknowledge misreading the politics, they might not rule out the possibility that their representation of problematic others in their population could tarnish perceptions of their own performance. The signs were opaque, and some interviewees expressed deep existential uncertainty over their worth in what was always a localised experience in their own corner of the public service.

An ambivalent invitation is not easy to accept in any categorical way. There were limits to the interviewees’ acceptance, which they marked out often as they recounted moments of moral anxiety, fallback, wry humour, cool observation and bittersweet retreat.
Their reluctance as representatives was often a kind of demurral, a matter of polite objection, avoidance or misgiving, rather than downright decline.

Creating space for others through trusteeship could feel futile if the policy failed or the proper consultation did not eventuate. Standing in for, or speaking as, others through substitution was ethically dangerous when it was transparently unauthorised. Interviewees were constantly shifting their stance between the two positions. Some blamed the state for their discomfort, whereas keener practitioners of the bureaucratic arts preferred to manage their discomfort through carefully timed speaking and constructive argument. As even the willing and enthusiastic ran the gauntlet of Indigenous politics to make something worthwhile of their public service opportunity, they always faced the prospect of policy inefficacy and/or feelings of illegitimacy. When those feelings ran high, some interviewees declined the invitation. But all who declined did not leave, or did not leave straight away. Some stayed, treading water in subtle withdrawal. But some who changed their position to decline left the public service for that reason.

Downsides of trusteeship: ‘Is that what Aboriginal people think?’

The trustee is trusted to act opportunistically, to use his or her judgement to do what cannot be done or seen from the outside, and respond as circumstances allow. The interviewees were generally willing to contribute to government in this way, but for many there was a turning point when they experienced a downside.

We have seen that nearly all the interviewees had found themselves in Aboriginal-specific careers. Here, they soon became the repository for everything ‘A-word’ and a handy source of ‘Indigenous spin’. Over one-third of the interviewee group found themselves the reference point for all things Aboriginal.

While some interviewees were philosophical about Aboriginal-specific careers, others questioned the expectation that they take on the burdens of other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Even if they wanted to take on the burdens of their people at
work, they questioned the assumption they would do so. Some saw self-identification as the problem. Among the 50 self-identifying senior interviewees, 35 also gave reasons why a person might choose not to self-identify. Self-identification came with conditions. Some called self-identification a ‘tag’ that allowed colleagues to infer that an employee had won a position on the basis of Indigeneity and not merit.

Recall there were 53 senior interviewees, including three who did not self-identify. From here, the three interviewees who did not self-identify are back in the story.

**Ushered into Aboriginal-specific roles: ‘You’re always going to be looked at and labelled’**

To be ushered into Aboriginal-specific roles signalled to some interviewees that they were viewed as not competent to tackle the problems of other citizens—that their value was only racial, and that they were not up to the opportunities afforded other public servants. When asked what if anything would make her leave the public service, one interviewee replied: ‘You see some new person come in from down south and all of a sudden they’re … flying high.’ Relatively inexperienced whitefellas from south were given the responsibility for Aboriginal programs, with no reciprocal responsibility for local Aboriginal employees in relation to the wider Northern Territory population. ‘Everything is like a fight’, she said.

Jay’s effort to resist an Aboriginal-specific career was the dominant theme of his interview. Here is his caustic self-portrayal as he imagined how his department introduced him to newcomers:

> This is Jay. He does all the Aboriginal stuff.

Jay self-identified without hesitation, as he wanted to acknowledge his race and to build the Indigenous employee statistics, but he explained that he had mounted a prolonged assault on the expectation that he would always manage his department’s Indigenous issues:

> I’d love to be in a job that isn’t Indigenous-specific but the big problem with that is people know how well you can do your job with the Indigenous stuff. So you’re always going to be looked at and labelled as that’s what you’ll be doing. I’ve got [two diplomas] and did the public sector management program and yet when I rang up about
a job to do with a policy thing, the director for that nearly fell out of his chair saying, ‘I didn’t think you’d be interested in that, I thought you just liked doing the on the ground stuff.’

‘Perceptions is probably the worst thing’, Jay said.

Jay did not see himself as representing other Aboriginal people in any specific sense, yet he still felt that ‘anything I do will be perceived as being an Aboriginal action’. He added:

You’re more or less just doing it to cover yourself in saying, ‘I don’t represent, my views don’t represent the views of Aboriginal Territorians or Aboriginal Australia.’ Now regardless whether you say that right up front, everybody listening to you as a black person talking about Aboriginal issues, they are going to see you and think, ‘Is that what Aboriginal people think?’

Jay was haunted by the circularity of this phenomenon. His department had sponsored his attendance at the Kigaruk course in Aboriginal men’s leadership that had received acclaim for its support of men like him—field-oriented, at the lower rungs of seniority and finding it difficult to win promotions. While Jay said he had gained from the camaraderie of the course, he felt it had not materially assisted his career.

Jean was one of the three senior-level interviewees who had not self-identified. This, she said, was because she preferred to ‘fly low under the radar’. Not self-identifying was Jean’s specific strategy to withdraw from the expectation that as an Aboriginal public servant she could only service her own population. Jean held a strong position on Aboriginal-specific roles. She had moved into a generalist job for this reason, but she was worried her occupation of the new job would trigger its reframing to an Aboriginal-specific job:

If you just want to step back and do something that you can do quite easily and comfortably … I’ve actually fought hard to actually have that role seen as not based on anything to do with being Indigenous, it is just a role and that speaks volumes to other people.

Jean said that by working in a role in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not the primary or sole clients, she was making a stand for competency. She had led a high profile program in the past, in which she had worked to encourage her people’s compliance with a major service in which her responsibilities were
Territory-wide. In 2007, her work was directed towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but only as one among the population sectors she served:

In the government if you’re an Aboriginal person who works on Aboriginal things, other people see you in a particular way … it’s about sending messages.

Jean was sending messages to her detractors about the competency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, because:

Sometimes it pops out of their mouth, you know, that they’re surprised you write so well.

Working in a generalist position and not self-identifying were Jean’s representational strategies. ‘I do represent them [other Aboriginal people]’, Jean said, ‘by having made an unspoken comment about operating in a job that … doesn’t deal with Aboriginal programs as such’.

**Oversimplification: The ‘A’ word**

… anything that has got an ‘A’ or an ‘I’ in front of it comes your way all the time because nobody knows what to do with it.

With this comment, Sophie captured the view of many interviewees that their presence made them the reference point for all things Aboriginal. Aboriginal public servants were expected to take on issues that were in the ‘too hard basket’ for the relevant area of government.

Sophie’s throwaway line, ‘nobody knows what to do with it’, is suggestive of the daunting complexity of remote servicing. Aboriginal-specific programming can seem to absolve other areas of government from the responsibility for services to Aboriginal communities. And some interviewees observed that the distinct issues of remote servicing, such as the size and dispersal of remote communities, were lost in the large amount of airplay given to the ‘Aboriginal problem’ in their department. An interviewee from the health portfolio questioned ‘Aboriginal dementia services’. This interviewee, born in the bush, noted that treatments and support services for dementia experienced by Aboriginal people needed to be culturally attuned and suited to the context, but did not call for a different medical science.
Repeatedly, interviewees made the point that segregating Aboriginal services and programs led to the diagnosis of some problems as solely racial or cultural when they were symptomatic of other problems. In Sophie’s judgement:

It’s about taking the word ‘A’ out of the front … Anyone who sits at the management board of this agency and doesn’t have Aboriginal issues as their key and core problem and concern to do, shouldn’t be sitting in the job because I have to put ‘A’ in front of it for them to do it. They should be doing that based on the need.

Sophie was trying to persuade the executive management group of her social services department to focus on evidence of socioeconomic disadvantage, rather than take on Aboriginal issues merely in response to the presence of senior Aboriginal public servants. In a similar vein, another ‘identifying senior officer’, as Jade described herself, declared:

If you do identify as Aboriginal, and you’re the only person in a particular area, everything gets dumped on your plate.

But without Sophie’s policy perspective, Jade blamed her extra duties on having self-identified. Whatever they saw as the reason, a number of interviewees felt they were asked to solve impossible problems by colleagues who underestimated what they were asking. Like a salve for the government’s uncertainty, their presence seemed to distract the public service from Aboriginal people in need, fill gaps in programs and comfort those who questioned the policy settings. Some said they would prefer to hear admissions of defeat than encounter disingenuous confidence by government colleagues who did not have a deep understanding of the problems of their people.

Daniel was one of a rising generation of younger professionals who had been raised in remote communities through their parents’ employment. Daniel’s mother was originally from the region in which she had taken Daniel as a school-aged child. Daniel had been educated in a number of remote community schools, and had now returned to help improve services in his mother’s region of origin. Daniel was working in the regional office of a large service delivery department, where he was managing a team of field staff who were developing an Aboriginal community workforce. Daniel felt he was considered fit for
‘anything Aboriginal’ and nothing else. Here, Daniel specifies his skills and capacities and tells how he felt about being allocated ‘anything Aboriginal’ in the distribution of responsibility in his workplace:

A lot of them [his managers] don’t know that I’ve had a fair bit of remote experience; I’ve been out bush all my life. I speak three languages … I’m told I’m part of an exec [executive team], but I feel I’m shut out from a lot of things as well, you know that I could give valid input [to] in terms of operations out bush … I do a lot of reading plus I’ve got the main clientele. I mean I grew up all my life around them, I mean I feel I’ve got things I can share there too, that could help with our operational aspects of service delivery, but I feel that I’m just ‘anything Aboriginal’. Anything with ‘Aboriginal’ on it, I mean I get the hint.

In return for taking his responsibilities—‘our’ operations—seriously, Daniel was dismayed to have received race-privileging responses. These left him feeling that the skills and experience by which he assessed his self-worth were of little relevance to this workplace. Daniel felt token. His presence seemed to authenticate the work of his office, but his opinion was not respected. His use of the passive voice suggests that he saw this disrespect as a structural problem that was not specific to him:

You at times you feel like you’re a token. You know you bring along validation and not always is your opinion respected.

So Daniel found himself validating Aboriginal acquiescence in an already decided program of activity. He attributed his feeling token to his decision to self-identify, but felt he had no choice about that. For Daniel, working for the Northern Territory Government continued a family history of political commitment:

I’m proud of my heritage … I’m proud of my mother, she’s my role model—a very strong woman. She’s done a lot of great things for Aboriginal people over the years.

Daniel continued to self-identify, but he did not believe it was helping his career.
The compulsion of ‘spin’

Many interviewees had responded to calls to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to participate in voluntary activities that would build the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the public service. Daryl had established and chaired an Aboriginal employment reference group following the abolition of the position for an Aboriginal employment specialist in his large service delivery department. If the position was needed, then why had it been abolished, he asked, or why had not a human resources specialist been allocated the duties? When Daryl had dropped the extra responsibility for time with his family, he was disappointed it had not been picked up by another part of the department. He commented on the lack of a ‘driving force’ for the delivery of Aboriginal servicing needs.

Daryl felt that he was often expected to give the ‘Indigenous spin’. He spoke of the potential for conflict of interest on interview panels, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were invited to comment on the competence of others on the basis of racial likeness alone. Daryl preferred to assess job applicants against selection criteria. Daryl wondered why he worried about this issue more than he thought non-Aboriginal colleagues did. Some saw the ability to produce ‘spin’ as a rite of passage for seniority. In the following comment, Daryl presents ‘spin’ as advising on sound dealings with, and therefore ‘sort of’ representing, ‘the broader remote or regional community’:

> People put a lot of trust in you to put our spin on what’s best on how things can be done in such a way, so you are sort of representing … the broader remote or regional community.

Time after time, interviewees who were asked for an Aboriginal viewpoint rubbed up against the apparent inconsequentiality of the question to those asking. It seemed to matter little to those around them how or what they answered, yet how and what they answered were extremely important to the interviewees. This tension made the everyday workplace request for an on-the-spot, extracurricular viewpoint feel coercive. It was difficult to refuse. Asked whether they had ever felt they should represent other Aboriginal people to a greater extent than they did, interviewees tended to highlight that
self-identifying and working for Aboriginal policies and programs had signed them up for more than they had intended. Even though self-identifying is a private act, ticking the box seemed to oblige Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to represent their population more actively than if they had not ticked it.

Could Aboriginal employees only ever contribute to the public service as Aboriginal people?

**Substitutive moments: ‘I’ll ask Bertie, he’s Indigenous!’**

In work-based conversations around meeting tables and in corridors and tea rooms, many interviewees felt pressed by well-intentioned requests that they articulate ‘the Aboriginal view’. ‘You’re jumped on straight away’, said Lois, a non-senior interviewee in a regional office. Bertie caricatured non-Aboriginal colleagues as thinking to themselves: ‘I can’t pronounce this Indigenous word. I’ll ask Bertie, he’s Indigenous!’ He continued the caricature by anticipating his response: ‘Would Bertie know? What language is he?’

This simple, everyday occurrence contained the problematic expectation that Aboriginal people present in the public service would fill the place of absent others. This expectation was seen by many interviewees as callow and presumptuous, and it was roundly derided by all who discussed it.

‘Behind all the applications of the descriptive view to political life’, wrote Pitkin when introducing the idea of substitution, ‘hovers the recurrent ideal of the perfect replica’ (1967: 86). We shall see through the incidents below how substitution played into the idealisation of Aboriginal people. Plain-speaking Spike set out the key features of the substitutive moment graphically:

> You will sit in meetings and that and it’ll be about an issue—I’m just trying to find an example—you’d be talking about a certain place and about issues in terms of Indigenous people and then they’ll look at you and say what do you reckon? Now why? It’s about everybody having input.
Q: You feel singled out then?

A: Yeah, because I’m the Aboriginal person in there and whether it’s because they want the information from me or [want to know] how I feel about it—that shouldn’t have any relevance. It should be because they’re [his largely non-Aboriginal work team are] working as a group. It should be the group’s input, not one person’s. You feel that. I feel that sometimes. That they’ll ask a question and then they’ll flag it with you because you’re Aboriginal.

Interviewees’ objections centred on a series of assumptions they observed colleagues making: firstly, that Aboriginal public servants were objects of consultation; secondly, that they were repositories of a uniform, incontestable Aboriginal expertise; and thirdly, that they personified the problematic policy subject.

Substitutive moments were hard for senior public servants to refuse. Let us watch how these moments arose and how the Aboriginal senior public servants in this research responded.

Objects of consultation: ‘Hear from [the communities] firsthand’

The following excerpts from Jay’s interview outline the process by which a sense of trusteeship towards other Aboriginal people could entice an Aboriginal public servant into substitutive terrain. We have seen Jay struggling with the sense that his Aboriginality was career-limiting. Here, Jay imagines his colleagues’ equivocation about trusting his advice, on the basis of his mixed descent origins:

Nobody looks at me as partly white. I’m seen as partly black. Until I start claiming to be Aboriginal and speaking for Aboriginal people, then they start saying, ‘Well you’re not really an Aboriginal.’

Jay went on to describe a typical expectation:

It’s your usual classics, you know you can get asked what Aboriginal people want and you go back to your line of, ‘You need to go out and ask Aboriginal people yourself.’ I don’t know what they want, so many people give you different answers …

Jay’s usual reply was to recommend consultation with Aboriginal people, and thus deflect the pressure to substitute himself for them. But, he continued:
And then when you’re in a discussion about an issue and you put your point of view across, that’s [seen as] an Indigenous perspective.

Substitution seemed inescapable. There was no deflecting it. Perceived as inauthentic one minute and as a provider of the highly prized ‘Indigenous perspective’ the next—then again as inauthentic, as we see from Jay’s continuing account:

… and if the person disagrees with it, that’s where it comes out every time without a doubt. They will bring it up that, ‘Ah okay, so that’s your view but you’re not really Aboriginal … I’d like to know what an Aboriginal person thinks, a real Aboriginal person.’

Jay was not describing a single incident but a condition of his job.

You go to workshops, meetings here, senior officer meetings every Wednesday morning, this morning we had one. The discussion comes up and just the word Indigenous comes up and everybody looks straight at me and [he imagines saying]: ‘You know I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about!’

Q: How do you respond?

A: Oh, I’m at the stage now where I don’t. So they’ll look at me and I’ll look back at them with a blank face …

Jay worked for a scientific research department. There was no overt conflict in his workplace. He spoke of warm relationships with managers and colleagues. But as the single Aboriginal person in his workplace, he had trouble finding a comfortable way to represent others. Jay could not avoid speaking as though he was ‘Aboriginal people’. In the end, Jay could only resist the subtle pressure to substitute for the absent by arranging a ‘blank face’.

Bob, a non-senior employee in Alice Springs, was concerned that if he allowed himself to be recruited to an internal Aboriginal staff forum, his department could claim to be consulting with the Aboriginal community:

Q: Have you ever felt the government is expecting you to be a representative?

A: Sometimes yeah, I’ve been put on some things.
Q: What’s an example of that?

A: … Oh yeah, it was talking about communities and stuff like that, how they want to re-set ‘em all up [speaking of the NT Intervention] and they [the department] asked us [Aboriginal staff] … I thought, well, that’s strange, they never really asked us before … They wanted to get the Aboriginal staff on board and I was thinking, ‘Well, they must be trying to sound like we consulted with Aboriginal people.’

Bob concluded:

Yeah, so I’m very wary about that sort of stuff, because I prefer them to actually go and talk to people out in the communities, hear from them firsthand.

Bob had participated, but had adopted a tactical reserve, and was uncommunicative when invited to substitute for those whom he felt should be heard ‘firsthand’.

Some interviewees who discussed substitutive pressure referred to themselves as a ‘sounding board’. Sarah referred to ‘when people use me’. In such instances, she said:

I’ll say, ‘Well, let me think about it’, and when I say that, then that gives me [time] to go back and talk to people outside so, and that’s with anything I do … I always go back and get clarity from wherever, whoever—other Indigenous people, especially older people.

Sarah was buying the time to consult with Aboriginal communities herself.

The call of expertise: ‘One … point of view and you’ve got it!’

Substitutive pressure arises from being connected and knowledgeable. Graeme observed:

You are considered the guru and nobody is an expert in our culture, nobody is.

Peggy too was cautious of the temptation to speak of the views of other Indigenous people. She said that she was willing to ‘generalise to put a point across’. If she had specifically consulted with them,
she ‘might be able to represent some people’, she said. But that was her limit. As she put this: ‘I don’t think you can represent all other Indigenous people.’

Daryl, on the other hand, was happy to provide an ‘Indigenous perspective on policy’ if there was a proper process for asking him:

I think that it’s a good thing. Sometimes it’s a bad thing if it’s not what they want to hear. Nobody wants to be a rubber stamp for anything but I think … if there is a process for getting an Indigenous perspective on policy and I think it’s probably important to try and sort of formalise it …

For Daryl, it was good to contribute his perspective as long as he had consulted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other colleagues about what was needed. He saw this as good government practice. He suggested that departments should adopt:

… a process of steering to a particular area of the department for a bit more in depth evaluation or what are the issues on a policy, rather than just give it to one person saying, ‘What do you think?’

Daryl created the time to consult with colleagues by saying, ‘I’d like to talk to people first about this. You’ve put me on the spot.’

Georgia tells us how she avoided certain aspects of the role of representative:

There’s some things that I will run a mile, run away from. If people expect me to get up and do these whole big PD [professional development] things on culture, that sort of stuff … people do, they really, they just assume that we’re kind of all the same.

Having come from a southern city, Georgia explains:

I can talk about it generally, but I just didn’t grow up in that situation, so that’s where you’ve gotta call the right people in, and I understand and respect that.

Like Daryl, Georgia objected to being put ‘on the spot’. She had observed many times the temptation to give offhand replies to critical issues, and had deflected such invitations in her major service delivery department:
Well, they might be just one-off things really, sort of, ‘I want you to think about this.’ Well, you haven’t even given a person a chance to have a read … if it’s important, show a little bit of respect by giving someone a bit of a lead in. But they just think, ‘Oh okay, that person will be able to think then and there on the spot.’ If it’s something that’s really quite critical, often we’ll just throw in a comment, but it’s not always well considered.

Warming to her subject, Georgia exclaimed:

It’s taken as truth! … Just seek one Indigenous person’s point of view and you’ve got it!

‘We don’t know every issue’, she warned. Here Georgia sets out her criteria for a more rigorous approach to Aboriginal inclusion:

You’ve got to have inclusive practice to actually invite and open it up for input. It can be structured. It can be structured so that you’re getting the right information, but there aren’t the inclusive practices and the department suffers dreadfully from cronyism and that sort of thing, which is really sad, but no, the inclusive practices just aren’t there.

She added: ‘People can tell when they’re not really being listened to.’

Deborah would have agreed. ‘Just because people have got black skin, they don’t know …’, she said. Deborah spoke wryly of the powerful temptation of speaking when one knew that one was going to be universally and uncritically believed:

Because I’m a black woman, they just agree with everything I say. I could tell them the sky is grey. But it’s blue. How can it be?

How can it be? In substitutive moments, the public service was looking for the affirmation of a relationship, and not new knowledge.

Wrong gaze: Becoming the problematic policy subject

An interviewee who did not consent to being individually characterised or quoted made a uniquely astute observation: that differentiating oneself from other public servants enabled an Aboriginal public servant to be gazed upon as the problematic policy subject.
Here the substitutive moment takes an interesting twist. Self-identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants are the subjects of Indigenous public sector employment policies. Recall that a representative must be like but not too like the represented—if a representative is too like the object of representation, then it is not representation. As the subjects of Indigenous public sector employment policies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants are simply themselves. It is only when they channel the absent that there is representation. But in the shifts and currents of everyday workplaces, the subjects of Aboriginal policies and programs—the homeless, the alcoholic, the unemployed jobseeker and even the self-identifying Aboriginal public servant—haphazardly roll into one. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants might well be bewildered at the consequences. Offering to help government take care of Aboriginal people, the government looked back at them.

The obligations of trusteeship easily triggered the substitutive moments that so challenged interviewees’ personal ethics and compromised their concern for communities. Paradoxically, accepting the representative role—self-identifying and drawing on identity in Aboriginal-specific programs—seemed to undermine their contribution. Yet accepting this role was the very reason many of the interviewees had joined the public service. Here were the limits of their acceptance.

To remain afloat, interviewees practised the bureaucratic arts with consummate skill. To make their presence tenable, they modulated it. They constantly judged whether the absent were competent or available to speak on an issue. Sometimes, it was worth going in to bat for a proper communication process between government and remote communities. Sometimes, they judged that it was better to anticipate the views of communities before someone else did. This way, they could stay representative without themselves becoming the problematic policy subject.

Declining the invitation: Stories of exit

Some interviewees felt so cornered by the obligation to act as Aboriginal people in the public service that despite having once accepted it, they came to decline the invitation altogether. This could happen at any time. It could be a privately held position without the employee
leaving; we have seen many instances of embryonic argument that did not escalate to the point of resignation. But here, we will explore some instances of decline that led to exit from the public service. In each case, the exit signified a broken relationship from the interviewee’s perspective.

These vignettes may be read as the exit interviews these interviewees were disappointed not to have been offered when they left.

Disagreements over Aboriginal employment policy

Forgotten walk-off

At one time, Julia had been the most senior Aboriginal public servant in the Northern Territory Government. Julia had participated in the ‘staged departure’ from the Public Service Commission in 1988. By 2007, a number of the interviewees did not know about this incident. Unlike the Gurindji people’s famous walk-off from Wave Hill Station in 1966, in protest against working conditions and the occupation of Aboriginal land, Julia’s administrative ‘walk-off’ barely raised an eyebrow after a brief airing in the parliament and local media. Reflecting on the incident and her subsequent Commonwealth career, this long-time public servant and activist spoke of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees just ‘sitting there’ in workplaces that did not accommodate their practical advice:

They’ve got to do business different but the only thing that they’re doing different is that they’ve got the person sitting there … God knows don’t bring your ideas and don’t really try and change the way we actually approach our business and how we engage with the community.

In the Australian Public Service some time before, Julia said:

I was never called on once to actually give an Aboriginal perspective … It’s like they want to increase Aboriginal people in their service because a lot of their clients are Aboriginal, so they’re trying to bring some on with that perspective but … [Aboriginal people are] the last person [people] that they’ll actually ask …

Julia was back in the Northern Territory Public Service in 2007, where she was finding no place for skills and knowledge she described as ‘bi-cultural’. She had found a way to re-enter the public service
of her place of origin by quietly assisting communications between the government and Aboriginal people in remote communities. She was to leave again soon for a position with an Aboriginal organisation.

A more modern exit
Since Northern Territory self-government, the Public Service Commissioner and later the Commissioner for Public Employment has assembled team after team to promote Indigenous employment. In 2007, the eventual dissipation of these teams had created a kind of diaspora of former Commission staff throughout the departments.

Yvonne was part of this diaspora. When she had been invited to review and develop an Indigenous employment policy, Yvonne described herself as having represented Indigenous people—her term—‘in a very broad sense’:

I certainly did it at [the agency] in that I was able to influence, policies and programs we developed for Indigenous people in my position as a senior officer, so this was expected of me as the senior Indigenous person in that organisation … I would either agree, recommend or approve something or I would question it and say, ‘No I don’t think this is right for the betterment of this or for the general program.’

Yvonne distinguished between influence and advocacy by adding:

… but I always made it clear that I never advocated on behalf of Indigenous people … and I never spoke on behalf of a family or group or clan; never.

But Yvonne’s Indigenous audiences were relatively undemanding, as her traditional attachments lay outside the Northern Territory.

When asked to describe what she had found hardest in her time in the public service, Yvonne described agreeing to a text written by someone else that painted a rosy picture of Indigenous employment. She had felt that others would think the text represented her views. Yvonne ‘just couldn’t’ agree, but she did not leave at that point. She took the advice of her boss, who counselled her to choose the battles she had a chance of winning, and found a way to disown the text. When Yvonne did eventually leave the public service it was for a different reason: the departure of this boss, who had been her mentor, and with him
any chance that their program would be continued. Yvonne could face the unpalatable text but not the prospect of revisionism under a new chief. Representing ‘in a very broad sense’ had been workable for Yvonne, but she could not remain a senior public servant once she lost her influence.

‘Walking the tightrope’

Bruce had left the Northern Territory. He was vexed at this outcome for a local Aboriginal man with professional qualifications, executive experience and a desire to contribute to the public service. His traditional connections extended from the north to the centre, but he was now residing interstate, ‘living off my country’ after a 20-year career in the Northern Territory Public Service. Starting as a trainee in the 1980s, Bruce had ‘travelled the whole of the Territory’ to rise through the clerical grades to become a senior project officer and an acting director—‘although in areas involving Indigenous’, he added. Earlier he had been a field officer in community development, one of the government’s ‘eyes and ears’. Bruce had been a casualty of the Aboriginal Liaison Officer upgrading and had self-funded his professional study to change his prospects. Offered a cadetship in the final stages of his degree, Bruce was disappointed:

No one [in my workplace] wanted to see my marks or anything. I was taking the money, but I could have been failing.

His worst fears had been realised when he was ‘shafted in a sense’, as he put it, when he was not given the chance to use his new credentials on return to the public service.

Bruce was then elected to a representative position as the chair of an Aboriginal council, an opportunity he described as ‘awesome’. In this role, he was proud of having obtained a large amount of funding for social compliance programs by persuading his colleagues in the council to sign off on an agreement with the Northern Territory Government. He recalled assuring these colleagues, who were wary of the government:

It’s not just about words, you know. It’s about government functioning better.
‘We showed good faith in getting this money’, Bruce said. According to the agreement, the money was handed over to the government in return for an in-kind contribution to the same value. But ‘they never ever came to the party’, Bruce said. His next move was purposeful. He re-entered the Northern Territory Public Service, he said, ‘to know exactly what sort of in kind they were giving’. Bruce accepted a newly created position in which he had carriage of the government’s side of the agreement and the charter of ‘looking at new ways of doing things’. He recalled saying to the official who recruited him:

I’m not sure how serious you are about this … I’m going to give you my full honesty.

Once in the job, Bruce realised that ‘the money was gone’. He stayed in the public service for a time, but:

In the end, people were just going around me because I wouldn’t agree to some of the stuff they were putting up … After a while, they were not hearing me.

Bringing the trust of Aboriginal organisations into the public service, Bruce had felt that his contribution was priceless. However, he had been questioned by superiors about his continuing membership of a number of boards, and eventually decided that he was ‘more needed on those boards’ than he was in the public service. He:

… just left after [20 years] with the government and didn’t have an exit interview, nothing …

Bruce saw himself as more principled than some:

I could have sat there and collected my $92,000, my phone, travelled around the Territory and do whatever I liked and drove a car too and had a free car park, but hey, you know, are they for real or just using me as a picture, just sponsoring me how they want to?

His conclusion?

You can’t go to work really wanting to help blackfellas … If you get into the government, it’s all about give them what they want and maybe have a few of the things that come.

It was not unusual for interviewees to be headhunted—indeed, Bruce was soon to be enticed back into a much more senior role. Nine interviewees had been encouraged into seniority by being
headhunted. Attracted by the prospect of being ‘agents of change’, some had been left to fight losing battles with immediate supervisors lower down in the system when their senior executive mentors moved on. Bruce said that the government expected Aboriginal employees to represent Aboriginal interests, but that:

They [departments] just don’t take it seriously, you know.

Finding the government’s invitation shallow was not in itself a reason to leave. What made Bruce leave the public service was feeling dispossessed of a role he could have played. His ties and credentials as a local Aboriginal person went far and deep, but at that point in his career he had concluded they were of no consequence in the Northern Territory Public Service. As he put this thought:

We’re buried to whitefellas.

Bruce’s program concerned matters of the most problematic and violent kind for Aboriginal communities, but he was unable to protect the resources that had been earmarked to help. Bruce had remained firmly grounded in the community relationships that past workplaces had encouraged him to build, but the department that had triggered his resignation was uncomfortable with these relationships. As Bruce summed up what had happened:

If you try and walk the tightrope, one group’s going to have a go at you. The Indigenous mob just criticise you. The other group [the bureaucracy] will go around you.

He concluded: ‘So it’s really difficult.’

Bruce would have endured the tensions in his role if departmental colleagues had been sensitive to them. But from Bruce’s perspective, departmental colleagues had discouraged the balancing act that sustained his community relationships and benefited the public service. Bruce’s resignation reflects too taut a rope. At the moment when Bruce needed to show the Aboriginal community that the government trusted him, he encountered collegiate anxiety. He refused to be trivialised, at least in full view of his Aboriginal public.
‘Better outside’: The state effect

Hanna had been a social policy executive in a central agency. She had been irritated by the assumptions of non-Indigenous senior colleagues that she might misuse her family connections with local Aboriginal parliamentarians:

> I could have very easily picked up the phone and rung any one … But I never did.

Hanna had not drawn on her relationships with local Aboriginal parliamentarians, nor indeed her relationships with national Indigenous leaders, but she did not believe her restraint had been noticed: ‘I don’t think it’s recognised. I don’t think it’s respected or acknowledged’. Referring to her knowledge and understanding of the ethics and ways of the public service, Hanna mused, ‘Maybe we’ve been conditioned and trained too well’.

Here is Hanna’s perspective on the family connections with Aboriginal parliamentarians that had concerned her colleagues:

> [Aboriginal] Members of Parliament are incredibly aware of it and very conscious of it in terms of where the boundaries are, what you can and cannot do, and likewise I think it’s absolutely well understood by the Aboriginal members of the public sector. I think people are very careful about it …

Many interviewees spoke of managing connections to Aboriginal parliamentarians. Such connections were common in the tightly knit Northern Territory polity. Like many Aboriginal public servants, Hanna was always managing her local connections. The misplaced wariness she experienced from colleagues was a source of frustration:

> I’ve been offended actually by being reminded by people of what my role was, and to have been … let known … that I needed to be careful about my relationships.

Hanna had come to the public service as a senior person with a public profile from years as a respected Aboriginal advocate:

> I’ve always worked in the area of, well, policy, advocacy, that kind of work, and I guess there was a certain expectation on my part that there would be an opportunity to really engage and to make a contribution.
But the message she had received, on arrival in the Northern Territory Public Service, was ‘tone it down, tone it down’, she said. Hanna had found this difficult because ‘the fact is, I know my stuff’. She noted with disappointment: ‘I thought that it would have been seen as a resource.’

Hanna saw herself as drawing ‘practical knowledge’ into government, and she explained that her skill base:

… comes from drawing from practical knowledge and experience of what works and what doesn’t on the ground … You know, if it’s not grounded in people’s practical realities, then the chances are it’s not going to work.

Hanna explained her position on representing:

I didn’t actually feel that I was there representing other Aboriginal people per se. I think I saw my role [in the Northern Territory Public Service] as presenting relevant information and insights and understandings that perhaps may not have otherwise been considered.

With this mild agenda of public service contribution, Hanna had met ‘absolute and utter frustration in my inability to actually get Cabinet submissions to Cabinet’. An instance involving a remote community employment program had triggered her resignation. ‘I recoiled at the lack of critical thinking,’ she said, ‘the bureaucracy itself … [is] almost wilfully obstructing any kind of reform’. What had driven this seasoned advocate to depict an inanimate object as wilful? Here is Hanna’s crystal clear articulation of her reception as a senior Aboriginal public servant:

It’s like you’re meant to be there as this process worker … rather than this real appreciation of … particular skills or abilities or networks or whatever it is you have.

Hanna had decided she was ‘better outside of government’. From the outside, she felt she could do what she had thought she would be able to do on the inside. ‘I can go and meet with the senior bureaucrats and with departmental heads and so on’, she said. ‘I have that flexibility to cover the field in a much more strategic kind of way, and a constructive way.’
Reviewing the reasons for her departure from the Northern Territory Public Service, Hanna concluded that the idea of contributing to public service policy and decision-making was ‘a really unrealistic assumption and expectation’:

If you think that one or two or a handful of Aboriginal people are going to make one iota of difference … We’re working within the dominant paradigm … There’s a whole culture here that’s been built up in the NT Public Service over the last 30 years. The capacity to change the way in which that culture operates, I think, is a big ask.

Public service senior executives are encouraged to challenge the status quo, take risks and innovate to solve intractable Aboriginal policy problems. Hanna left for two reasons. One was that she could see no prospect of the public service trusting her enough that she could be influential over Aboriginal policy—the reason she had entered. The other was the state effect. Hanna had encountered a bureaucracy that contained and limited those whom it marked as representative, just as it would contain and limit those who argued with that representation of them. Unwilling to be so contained, there was simply no reason to stay.

The exits described here were all triggered by intellectual disagreement, on top of a sense of inefficacy and rising dissatisfaction at feeling like the convenient Aboriginal policy subject. These interviewees had insisted on being heard on Aboriginal issues, and that insistence had led them out of the public service and into the Indigenous sector.

The Indigenous sector orbit: Resolving ethical ambivalence?

Of these four former public servants, two went straight into senior roles in the Indigenous sector, where they quickly became public interlocutors with the government. The other two tried employment in other governments before making similar moves. Each had been encouraged to make special contributions to the government, particularly those who had been personally approached to take up senior and influential positions. Each had ended up in conflictual relationships with less amenable colleagues. Some had found their knowledge snubbed and their loyalty tested.
Are we any clearer what part, if any, ethical ambivalence played in the extent of mobility that the research process revealed between the public service and the Indigenous sector? HC Coombs, CD Rowley and other public intellectuals of the self-determination era saw Aboriginal public sector employment as a training ground for the ‘black bureaucracy’, or Aboriginal representative organisations, where they proposed that Aboriginal people would build and could sustain an external political identity. CD Rowley proposed that the supported growth of Aboriginal representative organisations would help build a ‘legal carapace’ to protect the vulnerable from the whims of policy (1980: 241). In their own organisations, Aboriginal people could be consulted without the conflicts of identity—Rowley called it ‘de-Aboriginalisation’—that came with government employment (Rowley 1976: 361). Rowley’s argument was not that the public service should not be representative of Aboriginal people, but that once they were in the public service it was too hard for Aboriginal people to retain their identity sufficiently to represent their communities.

The mobility between the spheres suggests that the public service has, if unintentionally, provided the anticipated training ground for more clearly representative Aboriginal organisations. This seemingly forgotten purpose of public sector employment, to improve the administration and governance of the Indigenous sector, is important. Political scientist Will Sanders has drawn attention to the potential of the Indigenous sector as an order of government (Sanders 2002; see also Rowse 2002). Anthropologist David Martin has written of the role of Indigenous sector organisations in facilitating ‘strategic engagement’ between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the formal institutions of government (Martin 2003). Despite reduced public funding over the following decade, anthropologist Patrick Sullivan has argued more recently that the Indigenous sector continues to warrant recognition as a distinct sphere of governance—distinct from other non-government organisations as well as from government—by being a source of political and social identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Sullivan 2010: 1). There are also important continuities between the spheres, as I have argued, when we recognise that ‘government at a distance’—the term coined by liberal theorist Nikolas Rose (Rose & Miller 1992: 180–1)—is still government (Ganter 2011: 391).
In support of this view, the interviewees did not describe a purely external political identity, but an orbital one in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants were courted by both sectors as an asset in the government’s engagement with their people. As long as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants were respectful of the concerns and priorities of their employers, they could move easily across sectors, and through this mobility forge an identity that was relatively autonomous of both.

**Conditionality and grounding**

Fifty of 76 interviewees, two-thirds of the entire cohort of senior and non-senior public servants, spoke of having placed some personal condition on their employment in the public service. They had done this by articulating a personal principle or standard of contribution for deciding whether they would stay in the public service—for example that they had achieved a particular level of influence by a specific time, or a promotion or development opportunity. They watched the public service closely, shared information about opportunities and considered their options carefully. Nearly everyone set limits to their acceptance of the government’s invitation to be representative, so voicing limits was not in itself a reason for moving to the Indigenous sector. We have seen that some of those who did move, came back. No position was fixed. Some who were disgruntled or destabilised by events in their public sector career only left to retire. For example, Matthew, one of the fall-outs from the Aboriginal Liaison Officer upgrading, did not ever become senior. He was still in the Northern Territory Public Service in 2007, where he was supporting youth programs in his town. Matthew said during his interview that at one point in his long career as a field officer in various welfare-oriented departments:

> I got the wrong end of the stick because I stood up for my communities.

Matthew expressed enduring pride at the action that precipitated his ‘shafting’, and viewed it as a personal victory that he had outlasted those who had given him the ‘wrong end of the stick’.

Some interviewees spoke of finding work more ‘grounded’ in the Indigenous sector. Some found the Indigenous sector a safe place for identity-building when the bureaucracy ceased to feel real.
Leena, whose story we shall hear in the next chapter, said that Aboriginal public servants should be able to ‘step into community organisations’ for ‘time out’. Local Aboriginal organisations were places ‘where you like the frameworks around you’, places that ‘strengthen that sense of who you are’. Wanda had resigned to establish an Indigenous sector organisation. Louis, of whom we will hear more later, had already done both. While some saw the Indigenous sector as desirably ‘grassroots’ and more authentically representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, others found it the poorer employer for being under-resourced and less orderly than government. Wherever their views rested on this continuum, the interviewees did not romanticise the Indigenous sector. While many questioned their efficacy in the public service, they also acknowledged that sometimes in the public service their formal duties were clearer, their career opportunities were better and the processes more transparent. It was all a matter of timing and circumstance.

Simon had been an Indigenous sector leader and political advocate, and was a trusted government adviser when he was interviewed. Simon saw no solid boundaries between Indigenous sector organisations and the public service, only permeability. He saw this permeability between the two contexts as facilitating Aboriginal representative accountability:

I think they need to be here [in government] and some people need to be out, keeping others accountable … people out there and people on the inside.

Some interviewees saw the Indigenous sector as the place where they could come to terms with a difficult career history or gain the seniority they had not achieved in the public service. One of the former field officers, Davey, had joined the revamped Aboriginal Liaison Officer service in the mid-1980s. But moving into one of the senior positions had made Davey feel foolish. Here, he laments his sense of futility as the ‘eyes and ears of government or something’:

Really you just walked around and had a look and went back to the office … You feel stupid.

Returning to the office after such community visits, Davey had been unable to implement what he had learned and felt that his field knowledge was inconsequential. ‘You’d be pulled back, pushed back’ for presenting alternative viewpoints from the bush, he said. Davey
was the energetic Chief Executive of an Aboriginal organisation at the
time of our interview. He was one of the 10 non-senior interviewees
who had become successful in the Indigenous sector. Seven of 23 non-
senior interviewees said they had left the public service expressly
because they had felt unable to achieve a position of influence. Six of
these seven were among the 10 who were in the Indigenous sector
in 2007; only one had moved elsewhere.

Another former field officer, Nick, had broken through the ‘glass
ceiling’ to achieve a senior administrative position in the regional
office of a public service department, but said that once there, he
had not been offered higher management opportunities. He was
granted leave to take on the leadership of a local Aboriginal service
delivery organisation. After a successful term, his request to extend
these arrangements would be approved, he had been advised, if he
‘didn’t do anything that would embarrass the minister’. Nick had
‘flatly refused’, he said—not because he had intended to abandon his
political judgement but because, like Hanna, he had felt underestimated
by the insinuation.

Overnight, like Davey and indeed Bruce, Nick had acquired a new
level of influence when he joined the Aboriginal service delivery
organisation. In this passage, Nick contrasts being ‘CEO of an NGO
[non-government organisation]’ with being a bureaucrat:

There’s a whole heap of different things, as a CEO of an NGO, you
wouldn’t do as a bureaucrat, so having that knowledge and experience
I should be able to come back and make a greater contribution …
I’m more wary now about joining the public service and just being
a foot-slogger.

Nick was clearly in orbit between the Northern Territory Public
Service and the Indigenous sector. He was honing his bureaucratic
skills through the Indigenous sector posting to do what Bruce had
done: return as a more senior public servant.

The orbit in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander careers suggests
that the boundaries between the government and the organisations
delivering services on its behalf are more permeable than each sector
would claim. To speak from the Indigenous sector was one way to enact
a representative identity, but to speak from a senior position in the
public service was more highly prized. There was a ricochet effect as
the inadequacies in one sector propelled Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander career-seekers into the other. Generally, the Indigenous sector was not the interviewees’ preferred employer. Even if they craved the raw energy of the Indigenous sector’s political independence, they appreciated the greater orderliness and better working conditions of public service departments. Once there, we now know that they tussled endlessly with the tensions of representing and struggled to feel accountable to their people.

Ethical ambivalence may well have swung interviewees between the public sector and the Indigenous sector. If so, it kept them swinging in what political scientist Jonathon Malloy called ‘colliding worlds’ in his examination of the relationship between identity groups and government in Canada. Malloy found a ‘permanent identity of ambivalence and ambiguity’ among aboriginal participants in government policy agencies, and noted that these participants did not necessarily accept the Canadian Government’s sovereignty over them (Malloy 2003: 111).

While some of the interviewees in this research likewise questioned the government’s sovereignty, they did not always find the moral high ground outside government. The search for representative accountability and social meaning was a constant in the interviewees’ careers, whichever sector was employing them. Their mobility was strategic, a way of positioning themselves for the greatest efficacy and policy influence.

**Entitlement**

Meet Edith again. She had been referred by another interviewee because she was known to be dissatisfied after a series of temporary, senior-level contracts with the Northern Territory Public Service. Working in the Indigenous sector in 2007, Edith had an intense desire to join the public service on a permanent basis. In this marvellous rhetoric, considerably abbreviated, Edith compares the public service she desired with the Indigenous sector where she was located in 2007:

> I would love to get a position in the NTPS [Northern Territory Public Service] and have my five weeks’ leave a year and take them without worry that I can’t take them ... the government outsources this tender ... [and] expects NGOs to do it with half the resources and stands over the top of them and when they get criticism, they blame the NGO, they say, ‘Listen, we’ve outsourced that service…’
As Edith then portrayed the dilemma of ‘sitting pretty’:

… I would have to compromise the thoughts of people like me saying: ‘What are you mob doing in there? How are you helping your people? Are you there to help your people?’

Edith was emphatic that working conditions were secondary to something more important. She was asking to contribute to the government of her place:

I am entitled to contribute at a senior level in the town that we grew up in.

However, in an eloquent reminder of the feelings of many interviewees about the sense of being ushered too quickly and too finally into Aboriginal-specific roles, she requested in her imaginary conversation with the Northern Territory Public Service:

Don’t sit me in Indigenous sections.

So Edith laid out her condition for accepting the role of public service representative—hypothetically, since she had not been made an offer. She wanted to be a self-identifying representative Aboriginal permanent senior public servant. Were she to be invited, she did not want her contributions pre-judged. Edith’s eloquent plea was for something we have seen was almost impossible for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander public servant: not to be ‘sat in Indigenous sections’. With her comment that ‘we’re all married to each other now’, Edith expressed her wish for the public service to acknowledge the Northern Territory’s complex demography. After a long history of mixed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and settler descent, she was asking: why not embrace that history, rather than singling out Aboriginal people as the chief policy problem?

Here is the argument so far. Those who effectively navigated their acceptance were not naïve or unaware and hapless tokens but mindful professionals who were alert to the fine line between contribution and argument. They trod it carefully, motivated by a sense that this was the effort needed if they were to be influential. In so doing, what made the public service workable as a source of employment for many interviewees was the prospect of keeping space for the absent. The problem was that being public servants often took them into that uncomfortable space. Trusteeship worked until the desire to defend
Aboriginal people tipped into substitution and Aboriginal public servants found themselves speaking as though the absent would never be present, indeed speaking over their silent voices. Trusteeship worked until liberties were taken and Aboriginal public servants felt they had become the problematic policy subject. Disaffected employees reduced their presence, blanked their features. Few declined the invitation outright, although over time many moved quietly into the Indigenous sector, awaiting a good opportunity to return.

This chapter opened with the comment that the interviewees sometimes found it difficult to know their worth in workplaces. The signs were opaque to them. Some were genuinely perplexed as to how seriously to take the invitation to be representative. Listening as their interviewer, and replaying their accounts later, it occurred to me that some were taking the representative invitation more seriously than it was meant. The invitation was superficial and callow, even if the invitees wanted it to mean something.

But regardless of the expectations of the participants in a representative bureaucracy, blithe calls to representation are unacceptable if they cannot in all practicality be met.

Where were the limits of acceptance? For the interviewees, the limits of acceptance were at any point where acceptance trifled with their Aboriginal relationships. These limits were reached, indeed breached, in ordinary public service workplaces, when the interviewees found their history too forgotten or the absence of vast numbers of their people too unseen.