Speaking truth to theory

... the road to justice must be found, often by desk-bound, prosaic and repetitive routines, through those bureaucratic tangles which increasingly restrict and frustrate the rest of us and the world at large. The same tangles and routines will continue to be used by those who oppose change, inside the bureaucracy and outside it (Rowley 1978: 207).

Research can surprise you. But the findings of this research would not have surprised CD Rowley, who wrote his prescient words about bureaucratic and political entanglement nearly 40 years ago. Exploring the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who became senior public servants in the Northern Territory in the years to follow, I found representative agents with expectations of influencing their people’s future. These agents moved easily and often between government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations funded by government to deliver services to their people. Inside and outside the bureaucracy, these representative agents, both desk-bound and field-based, participated in the prosaic and repetitive when they stood for, stood up for, and spoke for others. They spoke to the government as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when they felt they had to, and they spoke to their people as the government when they thought they should. I found them fundamentally reluctant to represent their people under all the terms on offer, but prepared to represent their people nevertheless. They were connected to each other and to their communities as well as they could be.
I found theories that made sense of their dilemmas and theories that did not. Least helpful was the theory of representative bureaucracy that sits behind Indigenous employment policies, because it has never explained how the presence of minority groups makes a difference to government. Although the interviewees sometimes felt they were ‘just bums on seats’ to the government, they presented themselves as the active agents of others. Most helpful were theories of the political representation of historically dispossessed groups, which acknowledge the centrality of the relationship between representatives and the absent, or the people they represent.

No doubt the intensity and flavour of the representations discussed in this research were shaped by the representational options available to the interviewees as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in 2007. We do not know the counterfactual case in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are able to run their own affairs with full electoral representation, but we could predict that this opportunity would engender other, more clearly accountable representational styles. As it is, some of the interviewees found themselves doing what political representatives do when they make present those who cannot be present themselves. They constructed the absent as constituencies, while managing their speaking with the ethical restraint that is expected of public servants.

I had a second round of conversations with some interviewees in 2010, and some are still in touch at the time of writing. In 2010, Edith was still hoping for the permanent public service role to which she felt entitled. Jay was still doing ‘the Aboriginal stuff’ in his department, although I have heard that he ended up leaving for a more influential position on the outside. Deborah said she challenged her superiors more than she used to, and felt more appreciated. She is still there, a mature and well-respected professional insider. Carly told me she still wrote like she talked, but she did not mind as much. What bothered her more was being advised not to ‘let passion get in the way’. ‘I’m still trying to understand that’, Carly said. ‘If we don’t have passion, we’re just doing it any old how.’ I have since heard of her career success in her regional town. Sophie indicated she was comfortable with my use of her interview, although she was waiting with interest for the final product. She read the thesis, and I look forward to discussing her reaction to the book. Since then, some interviewees’ careers have skyrocketed. From the anecdotal evidence, many are still in orbit between government and the Indigenous sector.
The ambivalent invitation

The invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to join the Northern Territory Public Service has felt profoundly ambivalent to many of its recipients. Indigenous employment policies have invited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to represent their communities. Bureaucratic discretion permits this kind of representation, whereas public service norms weigh against it. The interviewees recounted inner conversations in which they grappled with the tensions of their role, knowing that without their presence, absent communities would have no voice in the administration of government.

The public service has both welcomed and denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It has welcomed them by inviting them to confirm their Indigeneity and contribute to policy and decision-making throughout its ranks. It has denied them when it has left them to flounder in unenlightened workplaces. The problem of representative bureaucracy is not that it is improper for public servants from identified populations to represent others, but that all public servants represent others. This happens daily, in meetings, in emails, at desks. The invitation rings hollow when people from identified populations have to tough it out at the discretion of managers who are uncritical of their own norms. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants who participated in this research preferred colleagues who could look beyond their own backgrounds and see them.

We have seen deep history in the relationship between Aboriginal people and government in the Northern Territory. Some interviewees attributed their work ethic to earlier generations of government workers. The terms of the invitation were very different back in 1911 when the Commonwealth used Aboriginal labour to help in the control and protection of the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal population, but that history was very much on the interviewees’ minds. Many of their parents and grandparents had emerged from the protectionist and assimilationist eras as ‘released half-castes’ when Aboriginal people of mixed descent were given access to public housing in Darwin and Alice Springs in the 1950s. Some interviewees were the steady trickle of domestics, labourers and mission workers who had aided the Northern Territory Administration during the early years
of Commonwealth control. The idea of representative bureaucracy coincided with the policy era of Aboriginal self-determination and the language of Aboriginal empowerment in the 1970s. The Northern Territory was granted an inheritance on self-government in 1978—an incidental, embryonic representative bureaucracy of some 1,100 Aboriginal employees, many of them temporary or community-based. In seeking to mirror the Northern Territory’s social composition over the next 30 years, the Northern Territory Public Service encountered repeated instances of personal agency. We heard the stories of Matthew and the other Aboriginal Liaison Officers who were squeezed out of their positions; Julia and the trainers who together abandoned a project for a principle; Yvonne, Bruce and Hanna whose decisive departures left them smarting; and many others besides.

Many thousands of Aboriginal people living in remote communities in the Northern Territory exercised another kind of agency by not replying, perhaps not even hearing, the invitation to join government. In 2015, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee numbers were only a little over their level of more than 30 years ago. Disappointing as this sounds, we have no way of knowing what their numbers would have been without the invitations of representative bureaucracy. It is possible that without any targets, policies or strategies, the Indigenous employee statistic might have disappeared altogether.

The statistic is a measuring tool, nothing more—and an inaccurate one at that. An employee who is seen to display the phenotypic characteristics of Indigeneity adds to the perception of a representative public service regardless of whether or not he or she self-identifies. Same Indigenous face, different impersonal brochure, it doesn’t matter if you don’t know the person and don’t notice the repetition. We have seen that the presence of a person who is known to be Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander has an effect whether or not he or she self-identifies, and even if he or she is silent and opaque. And that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander employee who isn’t seen to display the phenotypic characteristics of race struggles to add to perceptions of the representativeness of the public service or even be heard. Pitkin was right when she said that in its purely passive form, descriptive representation only depicts and informs but does not act, and may equally be achieved by an inanimate object (Pitkin 1967: 80).
So in striving to be representative, why does a bureaucracy invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to self-identify? The answer is that the representation that is invited in strategies and brochures and counted in the statistics is fundamentally about bums on seats. If the other kinds of representation that are implied by the call for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions are not measured, we are left to assume they are not materially important to government.

The reply

The 64 Aboriginal senior public servants whose statistic inspired this study really had formed 2.2 per cent of the senior public service by 2006, and an intriguing, inexorable consequence of their seniority, as we know from interviews with some of them in 2007, is that these public servants saw themselves as role models to others. They managed growing Aboriginal workforces, not only health workers, teachers and police aides but new brokers in communications and local economies, interpreters, community rangers and others who looked to them for a voice. They tuned in to each other at work, returned to the familiar domesticity of longstanding interracial families every evening, played sport, went camping on weekends and returned to their communities of origin when they could.

The organic interviewee recruitment process revealed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants’ occupation of a relational space that was both collegiate and combative. The 76 interviewees were located in schools, clinics, prisons, rehabilitation services and policy units where they dealt with education, health, housing, local government and essential services, business services and the problems of Indigenous public sector employment. Interviewees who had left government were in land councils, academic faculties, community-controlled health services, representative bodies and the private sector. In government, their commonest role was to build their own employment numbers. They were also key hands at helping make Aboriginal people more serviceable, and helping government feel it was reaching their communities.

This book has situated Aboriginal senior public servants as both the agents of government and the obligated members of communities. To accept the invitation to represent their people in government was
to navigate an identity that was governmental and relational. They willingly contributed their empathy, knowledge and connections to improve Aboriginal policies and programs. They faced the continuous flow of discursive pressures this brought. They were protective when they believed that Aboriginal people who were absent from government could not exercise their own agency. They exercised the options of political representatives. They were trustees for those who looked to them for assistance in navigating government. Some were ambassadorial when they explained the behaviours and motives of other Aboriginal people. Trustees spoke for others, creating the space for communities who could and should be there and suggesting how the government could relate to them more directly.

Their trusteeship felt ineffective to some interviewees, when their department ignored their advice. Sometimes they found it felt more legitimate to speak as others. But substituting for others also seemed to collude in their absence. Substitution could feel disingenuous, if Aboriginal voices on the inside took the place of outside voices who could have contributed if asked properly. Whatever Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander public servants said, the interviewees found it received as the ‘Aboriginal viewpoint’. Mostly, they found ways to moderate the expectations of colleagues and client communities within the general limits of acceptance. Sometimes, swimming the currents of trusteeship and substitution moved them to argument. Some felt marginalised, distrusted and ineffectual, and left for more clearly representative positions in the Indigenous sector.

Many shifted the terms of recognition to role modelling. In this disposition, we heard interviewees imagine the regard of absent communities. We heard them acknowledge that being in the government of their place sometimes gave them authority over their people. We heard some decide to accept this authority, knowing that if they didn’t accept it then someone else would—one who might not understand their communities so well.

Although the interviewees differed in the intensity, volume and style of their reluctance to speak for or as others, they had all felt compelled at some stage to do something meaningful with the opportunity. They had vernacular terms for the problems of political representation. The dilemmas of speaking were well-trodden ground. Role modelling enabled some to speak to the represented. Role models proposed
themselves as grounded, locally oriented and politically committed Aboriginal Territorians. Some fulfilled their political conscience by guiding Aboriginal communities towards social compliance. The interviewees were generally uncomfortable with the public service patronising their distinctly Aboriginal contributions by calling their contributions cultural—but only the culturally empathetic could do what they did. If we see Aboriginal senior public servants as citizens and not just bureaucrats, as hard-headed criterion-seeking self-critics and not unthinking recruits to a government agenda, we see the political dimension in their role modelling. Here was an alternative to the merely symbolic and rhetorical, and a significant counterproposal: to be included in the government of their place, as a matter of entitlement and birthright. Role modelling was the active assertion of their modern selves.

The interviewees’ authority to be so engaged with their people came from tied-in lives. Their authority was not absolute or uncontested, and nor was their modelling. People questioned them. They explained, discussed, justified, withdrew or pushed on, in engagements that were not always consensual but were at least dynamic and grounded. The interviewees showed that the guiding authority for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants is knowing that they, as those present in government, could still have been absent if it were not for fortune. The Aboriginal public servants in this research were willing to be the voices and agents of social discipline as long as they could draw on their reserves of empathy, knowledge and connections and do it properly.

The interviewees would acknowledge the dilemmas of group or ‘self-representation’—that promoting social identity over contribution can encourage competitive claims to identity (Williams 1998: 11–14; see also Kymlicka 1993), and can reduce accountability through the assumption that all those who claim a particular identity think the same way. Defining a representative by the duty to serve a bounded category can inhibit the search for common ground and the public good (Phillips 1995: 22–4; Williams 1998: 4–8). The interviewees articulated these problems and more besides. They found self-identification creating ambiguous distinctions between them, they felt compromised by speaking for others who should be present and found their contributions inhibited by their social identity. Hence their reluctance as representatives—not that this stopped them.
The representatives in this study had to participate in government if they were to improve the construction of others. Their reluctance does not disprove Saward’s point about the representative claim constituting the community (Saward 2006, 2009), but supports that point by showing how it was done.

When Phillips acknowledged that ‘who the bureaucrats are (their gender or ethnicity or race) can have a decisive impact on what they propose’ (Phillips 1995: 185), she was conceding that her politics of presence could be extended into the context of representative bureaucracy. But this throwaway line was as far as she went in applying her important theoretical insights beyond the electoral sphere. The interviewees knew the politics of their presence in the bureaucracy only too well, and some would argue that it was not necessarily better to be present.

Phillips defended the presence of descriptive representatives in democratic institutions on four grounds. First, it raises esteem for members of historically disadvantaged groups to see others in influential positions (role modelling). Second, it is not fair for advantaged groups to monopolise public institutions, when others might make better trustees of the interests of historically disadvantaged groups. Third, descriptive representatives can contribute ‘overlooked’ perspectives. Fourth, institutions can show legitimacy if they include the members of groups with different orientations (Phillips 1995: 167–8). The interviewees echoed Phillips’ arguments: it was important for other Aboriginal people to see them in positions of influence (they could be role models); it was unfair for non-Aboriginal views to prevail (Aboriginal people made better trustees); their perspectives were not already in evidence in the public service (their presence was a daily reminder of overlooked perspectives); and they were fundamentally different from the dominant public service staffing population (they couldn’t contribute if they weren’t there).

Role modelling was the interviewees’ primary self-account. So why did Anne Phillips see role modelling as the ‘least interesting’ reason for descriptive representation (1995: 63)? Phillips’ offhand dismissal was that role modelling has ‘no particular purchase on politics per se’ (1995: 63)—but perhaps she underestimated its political purchase. Mansbridge followed Phillips, leaving role models to their ‘usual treatment’ as matters of ‘individual psychology’ and
showing doubters that descriptive representation’s ‘social meaning exists outside the heads of the members of the descriptive group’ (Mansbridge 1999: 651).

I argue that role modelling is more significant and interesting than this.

Why role models are interesting

These theorists were arguing with other theorists who dismiss descriptive representation as de facto, lightweight and undemocratic. Role modelling was the least persuasive reason for having descriptive representatives, to Phillips and others, because they were trying to influence those who had no faith in the competence of descriptive representatives. Phillips and others were theorising fairness and justice, not describing a real world struggle by a set of descriptive representatives who were trying to be heard, as we have in this book.

In reply to Phillips, our real world descriptive representatives have spoken. Their mere presence in government is not enough. It’s only a start. Recalling Sarah’s opening words: they also need to be heard. Otherwise, they really are just bums on seats—and that is unacceptable.

Virginia Sapiro is known in some circles for the observation that interests become interesting only when they are politically relevant and therefore ‘representable’ (Sapiro 1981: 703). But to whom do interests need to be relevant, to make them interesting to political theorists? Can the test of ‘interesting’ be that interests are politically relevant to marginalised people? It is of great political relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander itinerants when their people in government move them on from sleeping outside suburban grocery stores and hairdressing salons. And it is surely of great political relevance to government when its own public servants tell it they are entitled to their place in government and are fit to govern. In the politics of recognition, colonised peoples seek liberation from a ‘demeaning picture of themselves’ by demanding explicit recognition of their cultural difference through claims that are political (Taylor 1992: 36–7; 65). Role modelling is a claim for that liberation. And this claim has consequences for those trying to build a workforce of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, because role models bring access to others.
The problem for political theorists is that ‘the word “symbol” often bears the unspoken modifier “mere”’ (Mansbridge 1999: 652). Those who believe symbolism is ‘mere’ might find otherwise if they search harder in the nexus between democratic institutions, the people who inhabit them and the people with whom they cohabit in their lives outside work. Social anthropology excels in this terrain. Applying the postcolonial theory of social anthropologist Michael Taussig, we might see that at the same time as appropriating the aims of government, role modelling caricatures the imperfections in the norms of settler Australians. Role models who exhorted compliant behaviours from their communities established likeness by being local, and established distance by being didactic. These role models cooperated with the liberal vision, but they were not mindless simulators. Some critiqued the government mercilessly. Role modelling simultaneously fulfilled role models’ sense of connection with others, and confirmed their standing in government. Role modelling is suggestive of the mutually reinforcing sameness and difference—‘mimesis and alterity’—Taussig described as the ‘magic of the state’, in which colonised peoples parody colonial behaviours at the same time as adopting them (Taussig 1993).

As anthropologist Francesca Merlan noted in her sensitive ethnography of Aboriginal–state relations in Katherine: ‘representations of Aboriginality … come to affect who and what Aborigines consider themselves to be’ (Merlan 1998: 150). The role models in this research participated in the making of representations about Aboriginality. Role modelling gave the government efficacy. These employees helped authenticate the government’s ‘normalising’ vision for Indigenous Australians, and thus helped reproduce the government’s account. But this is not all. At the same time, role modelling confirmed for all to see that the government needed public servants with connection to the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander constituency that the government lacked.

When role models defended an upgraded image for Aboriginal people, their role modelling was substantive political representation. This is what makes role modelling interesting.

It remains to consider the interviewees’ position on another question—whether and if so how, role modelling compromised or realised their understandings with other Aboriginal people. The assumption that institutions reflect the people they serve merely by having people from
those populations present, is as flawed as the theory of representative bureaucracy. It just doesn’t happen that way in circumstances in which populations have experienced colonisation and historic dispossession, and in which racial identity is at stake. Mere presence works for the middle-class professional person who competes on a level playing field with other middle-class professional people from similar backgrounds. Phillips acknowledged this reality, although she still urged women to participate in institutions as professional people and not as women. Special privileging was undermining, she argued, and not being present meant trusting women’s representation to men (1991: 90). Phillips concluded that descriptive representatives who can, should press their ideas, even if this meant being elitist (1995: 176–8). But we have seen that doing this was not so easy for Aboriginal public servants.

Recall that good descriptive representatives gain authority not just by being present but by having strong mutual relations with the dispossessed—relations in which they strive to impart what needs to be known, interact fulsomely, explain themselves and hear from others.

Let’s hear from the interviewees on elitism and on the mutuality of their relations with the dispossessed.

**Compromised elites? ‘We need you in government!’**

With management comes responsibility, comes a whole package of behaviours in the way you operate. You get into a—paradigm, I guess, in the way you see things …

Sandy was an executive. Her eyes were wide open. She acknowledged the trappings of seniority and her embeddedness in the bureaucratic culture that bestowed them. Neither Sandy nor most other executive-level bureaucrats would have completely dismissed the twin charges of compromise and elitism. They advocated, with care, and accepted that a level of tokenism was inevitable when working for government. Aboriginal senior public servants are irredeemably elite to those below them, and by inference also to those outside the public service. They cannot become senior public servants without accepting government. But to speak of compromised elites is to judge a complex political identity on a single dimension.
Normative theorists tell us when it is legitimate to speak for others. This is when it would be remiss not to do so, and when the speaker cannot arrange the presence of others. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants encounter these circumstances often. Legitimate speaking resists the impulse to know for others. Legitimate speakers interrogate their advantage and take into account the likely effect of speaking. It is too easy to call ‘sellout’ when office-bound Aboriginal senior public servants, distanced from their communities, are on the spot to have the last word in policy discussions. Senior administrative positions are not readily available in the government’s service outlets close to the ground and significant local projects are outsourced to external providers. Sure, Aboriginal senior public servants incidentally endorse and legitimise the work of departments when they participate in the diagnosis, management and evaluation of Aboriginal problems. They do acquire powers of definition that are not available to those who are absent and have no voice in the bureaucracy. But the interviewees articulated deeper struggles: should they leave that defining to their colleagues, or might other Aboriginal people benefit from their contribution? Often, after thinking it through, they relished interceding.

Some outside government would begrudgingly admire Aboriginal senior public servants for their ability to do what one interviewee called ‘unpalatable’ things. It is plausible to see them as exemplars of self-discipline and morality when they are prepared to stand out from the crowd. We have seen that they could not rely on the esteem of peers. Many believed the public service did not recognise what was salient about their identity, or their commitment to public service ethics. They received few meaningful accolades and had no direct evidence that they were held in anyone’s high esteem, since those they represented could not readily acknowledge their commitment. They had accommodated government, and they knew their numbers were not shifting. But by striving to channel others by being grounded, localised and part of a Territorian Aboriginality, Aboriginal senior public servants could judge themselves meritorious.

There was no unanimity over the criteria for judgement, and there was no single Aboriginal authority. However, some saw their self-discipline and tutelage as connection with the absent. It would not be difficult to imagine community members finding relief in hearing Sandy’s protectiveness for those suffering from neglect and violence,
or urban itinerants appreciating Edith pointing out to the police that their women and children needed a place to stay. Family members must have heard Simon on the way government works. Aboriginal public service recruits and remote community workers must have benefited indirectly from those who defended and explained them to the public service, who showed them how best to receive its services. Jerome’s rehabilitative programs could not have alienated already-alienated lives any further. Even Deborah’s inebriated office intruder now knew what to do, from someone who understood how to tell him: leave and sober up. Aboriginal people could be frank with each other. There was little romance or idealisation in this relationship. These interviewees were neither the ‘bleeding hearts’ of Lea’s ethnography nor black facsimiles of Kowal’s ‘White antiracists’. These interviewees stepped in where the politically correct feared to tread, drawing on their relationships to aid the government of their towns. Exemplifying self-discipline, they would reason that Aboriginal people had to speak this way to be heard within Aboriginal relationships.

Corrective governing was one way in which a succession of committed Aboriginal senior public servants could ensure that policing was not only done to their people. Should they have recoiled from policing roles, allowing others to prosecute their people for public drunkenness or violence, or tackled such behaviours themselves, working with local organisations on solutions to the rampant homelessness that lay behind? These interviewees chose the latter. They got their hands dirty. As they articulated the costs and benefits of participating in the administration of policies affecting Aboriginal Territorians, their deliberations were not false consciousness, but reflective of the sensitivity and inner knowledge an effective operative brings to difficult work. Recounting conversations with hard-living relations, interviewees spoke of negotiating their authorities carefully and not lording it over people by elitist tactics. When they spoke of engaging their families and communities in conversations about these authorities they evoked a sense of mutuality and respect, albeit that they often felt these values went unseen by their employer.

Two interviewees, young men who had both lived rough lives, had had their aspirations to seniority foiled. One was in Alice Springs, one was in Darwin. Both had family in town. Hear their hopes of government and their interactions with their communities in these passages from their intense, searching interviews.
Vincent arrived at his interview hot, dusty and late, having had to change a tyre on his four-wheel drive in the long journey from the homeland he had established to start a new life for his family. In the public service, Vincent had come to feel ostracised for his personal politics, so he had left. His job had been to open communication channels between the local Aboriginal community and the government. As colleagues from a former office, we had some shared understanding of working in government. Here, Vincent describes his moral courage and a deep commitment to service.

So you have to be like a man of your own words I guess and you have to like tread a fine line … because you get dragged into domestic violence, or disputes with other families or things like that. You’ve got to be able to stand above them and say, ‘Look, I know these families are fighting but I’ve still got to conduct my job and I’ve got to get on with these [families] too.’ At the end of the day, I’ve got to be able to sort of move between these groups, so I can’t afford to sorta like take sides. I can say, ‘Hey look, I’ll sympathise with you but I can’t fight your battles for you because I need to be able to make a living and conduct myself and I need to work with the other group that you’re fighting with.’ Otherwise I become inefficient.

Vincent’s high personal standards included that his efficiency as a public servant, of which he was immensely proud, was never at the expense of community relationships.

Jett had been seconded to a non-government organisation to cool his heels following angry outbursts at work. In Jett’s view, years of substance abuse and alienation qualified him to a place at the top of decision-making:

It’s put me two feet in front of a lot of other people in regards to what I know [about] … how to go about fixing the social problems. That ain’t just done at grassroots level … That’s why I need to keep going up because for me to make real effective change in regards to Aboriginal people, I’ve got to be up there, at the table with them when they make the decisions …

‘You blackfella,’ Jett told me Aboriginal people where he came from had said to him, ‘We need you in government!’ That, Jett said, made him want to ‘do the right thing by Aboriginal people’. A year after the interview, Jett had finished cooling his heels and was ‘back at the table’. He emailed me another recounted conversation in 2008,
in which it seems his hard-won knowledge of the correctives for Aboriginal self-abuse had both horrified and impressed non-Aboriginal colleagues:

I sit in amazement at people who sit in a meeting—say nothing, agree … then after I have said something that goes against the grain … say ‘that’s good what you said, you are right’ …

Jett continued to wonder what his colleagues’ ambivalence suggested about the point of his contributions, and left again. I have heard he is now back.

Vincent and Jett both wanted seniority, but both encountered resistance from other colleagues when their mentors moved on. From different geographies and personal stories, their commitment to Indigenous improvement was as clear as their belief that public service seniority would be worth the compromise—if only they could achieve it.

Some interviewees found some of their colleagues less grounded than themselves. But there was no arbitration on this point nor systemic responsiveness to levels of grounding, in the public service around them. There was only the understanding and connection each brought to jobs they felt privileged to have. Unlike the political theorists, Aboriginal senior public servants in the Northern Territory didn’t have the luxury of avoiding intimate associations with government policies and programs. Being seen as elitist came with the job, even though they were themselves subject to the representational powers of those above and around them in the public service hierarchy. They could choose to help on the terms available, or alternatively do nothing. To the charge of compromised elitism, they might look back over the history of their people and answer that their people had known far worse things than compromise. These were indeed mutual relations, in which the interviewees strove to impart what needed to be known, to interact fulsomely, to explain themselves and to seek out opportunities to listen to others.

There is a final criterion. Recall that a good representative relationship must contain mutual recognition. The parties must respect each other’s membership in the group, even if they are situated differently within it. Representatives and the represented must recognise one another. This may be through historical connection and the sharing of fates.
As a final step, we need to consider how these may be present in the bureaucracy today, where the government self-account has been determinedly ahistorical.

Sharing fates in the bureaucracy today: ‘We’re what’s on the ground’

Representative bureaucracy came to the fore in Australia in the 1970s, at a time when the discretionary/deliberative view was prevalent and values-based public service openly acknowledged. During the 1980s and 1990s, the New Public Management style of government reinvigorated the rational/technical view of bureaucracy—but in a new form, as departments served economic-rationalist priorities by contracting services to external providers. After decades of outsourcing, New Public Management (see Hood & Peters 2004) is still the guiding account in many parts of the public service in Australia. But past accounts never completely fade away. In 2010, more than 30 years after Coombs first promoted the idea of a socially diverse public service, the Australian Government was still proposing that ‘the APS should mirror the diversity of the broader population’ (Moran 2010), regardless that the government no longer offered the direct delivery work that had attracted some in the broader population. And New Public Management is under review as scholars like Charles Sabel argue that governments are, or should be, decentralising through ‘experimentalist’ approaches that acknowledge local discretion and support ground-up learning (Sabel & Simon 2011). These approaches are reviving the discretionary/deliberative account.

The discretionary/deliberative and rational/technical views of the public service are both still true, and still in tension. Descriptive representatives might blend in well in the flatter, more flexible structures of today, but find their ground-level and issue-specific contributions undervalued in parts of the public service that reify the holistic, the short-term and the generic. In support of this hypothesis, Julia made a telling comment on public service managerialism:

A bureaucrat working in … [any] public service now, in Indigenous Affairs, they almost want you to be content free.
Recall that Julia and her colleagues had protested at the separation of policy from its underpinnings in practical implementation. This long-term activist described Aboriginal employees as just ‘sitting there’ in workplaces that did not value pragmatism.

Sharing fates conjures something inescapable, enduring and historical. This seems at odds with Julia’s image of under-utilised Aboriginal people in ‘content free’ bureaucracies. But it is the case that the interviewees had long memories, and they spoke of families with even longer memories. Their families had endured relations with government that contained profound and prolonged distrust, and the interviewees were mindful of this history. In their minds, their fates and the fates of the Northern Territory’s remote population were profoundly linked. They felt needed. There is support for their intuition in political theory. According to Mansbridge, the need for descriptive representatives is strongest when historic distrust calls for repairs to communication and disadvantaged groups have ‘uncrystallised interests’ (Mansbridge 1999: 636–8). We have seen prolonged distrust in the Northern Territory Government’s relationship with the Northern Territory’s original inhabitants. Aboriginal Liaison Officers, the government’s ‘eyes and ears’, were asked to facilitate communications between the government and their people from the first moments of Northern Territory self-government. The Northern Territory’s remote Aboriginal communities have evidently not crystallised their interests, as they are still the objects of policy’s soul-searching. Under Mansbridge’s criteria, the interviewees were indeed needed. Northern Territory Aboriginal constituents do qualify for the special justice of having descriptive representatives among the bureaucrats who serve them—regardless of the tensions involved in their work.

Vulnerable populations are entitled to representation by the best in the business. Just being a group member might not qualify someone for the responsibility of representing the unarticulated interests of the disposessed. Asking provocatively, ‘Will Just Any Woman, Black, or Latino Do?’ Dovi argued that the represented should be able to judge representatives on the content of their work (2002: 738). Dovi advises us that how descriptive representatives represent is more important than why they do it.
It is rarely possible for the represented, so deserving of descriptive representation yet so distant from government, to see the content of the policy work that is about them. Some interviewees were sensitive to this void, saying they had no authority to speak for other Aboriginal people in government. When they did venture to contribute their voice, they felt their lack of accountability to the absent keenly. When considering how representation's key requirements of authority and accountability were met in the circumstances of this study, it helps to think of representation as Iris Marion Young came to understand it, as a relationship that ‘moves between moments of authorisation and accountability’ (Young 2000: 129). Authorisation and accountability do not need to be synchronous or even current, but they do need to have a source. The idea of diverse and scattered connections, supporting diffuse and indirect authority and accountability, resonates well with the lived reality of bureaucratic representing that was articulated by the interviewees. Their representations were not based on clear instructions and immediate sanctions, but on the sum of their knowledge and connections. Were there any sanctions over these representatives? If they paid no heed to their people or their history, they risked mutual recognition in the relationship with their people.

A sense of sharing fates may provide the authority for the kinds of representation enacted and discussed by the interviewees, including the corrective governing of others. The interviewees knew that absent policy subjects could not know or judge them to the same extent that they could know and judge their absent policy subjects. But the interviews show us senior Aboriginal public servants tussling with their political conscience and trying to achieve a sense of reciprocity in their impossibly non-reciprocal relationship with their absent policy subjects. Behind their use of standard public service expressions like beneficiary, client and program recipient, their stories and descriptions invoked enduring interactions. Role modelling was their way of connecting with their policy subjects. Role modelling confirmed their worth in a public service that did not seem to recognise them as other than different. When role models modelled particular comportments in their corrective governing, they could have been trying to create the conditions for mutual relations with the dispossessed. If they judged themselves the poorer when they were not in a relationship of mutual
recognition—when their represented absent did not know them—we see that Aboriginal senior public servants were accountable to a sense of shared fates.

In good enough representation in a bureaucracy, those present would share aims and fates with the absent and feel accountable for the quality of the present–absent relationship. There is nothing in the present-day bureaucracy that would prevent this being true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, either in theory or in practice. Indeed, their orbit between government and the non-government authorities that do government at a distance suggests it. Those in orbit were making strategic use of the relationship between the government and its service providers. Here, emerging from the tightening belt of government contracting, was an enthusiastic and committed cohort of professional managers who looked for the chance to work more seamlessly than government itself could, by influencing policy and implementing it as well.

History provides the evidence that structures of discrimination have been reproduced over time, Melissa Williams tells us, whereas memory ‘highlights the subjective side’ as marginalised groups come to terms with that history in their present (Williams 1998: 177, 181–7). While the sense of past wrongs among the interviewees was profound, they were prepared to look at pragmatic present solutions as long as the government was connecting with their people. A common history made the interviewees part of a collective local Aboriginal identity, indeed a political community. Their career stories were like the scattered pieces of a puzzle—which makes the patterns that emerged from them all the more profound. The political theory helps us again here. Williams describes ‘Communities of shared fate’ in which the relationships that are ‘ethically significant’ may not be consciously chosen but are understood by those who are in them (Williams 2009: 43, italics in original). A community of shared fate arises from ‘imagining a set of human beings as socially related to one another in the past and the future’ (Williams 2009: 45). If legitimacy is not agreed in this community, it is at least contested. If people even agree there is a ‘story to be told about this relationship’, that is a start (Williams 2009: 45). If stories compete, there is no neutral position and no arbiter, only ‘imaginative judgement’ from the community (Williams 2009: 51).
Williams was speaking of global citizenship and we are considering a prosaic circumstance in Australia’s far north and desert heart. Nevertheless, the interviewees evinced theories of identity and action that suggest the sharing of fates. They felt part of a collective history in which their commitment had a place. In keeping with Dawson’s theory, the difference in education levels between the present and absent in this study had indeed intensified rather than diminished the interviewees’ sense of sharing fates with a community in which so many were absent from the public service.

So the public servants in this study remembered, respected and fulfilled mutual relations with their people by seeking to influence the process and content of policymaking. Many interviewees were the single exception in remote-living families. Some worried that their adolescent children were being attracted back out into youth gangs. The fact that their efforts were not always recognised or successful adds weight to their legitimacy as the representatives of their people. We have seen that they judged themselves the poorer if their relationships were not grounded. Localness was a virtue, but groundedness was a necessity. Proximity to the ground and exposure to the inner workings of government positioned them uniquely. In government, they watched one another with unsentimental camaraderie. They saw themselves sharing fates with the absent. They evinced a collective historical memory and an ethic of practice both imaginative and concrete enough to qualify them, at least in theory, as participants in a community of shared fate. At its highest level of abstraction, this community of shared fate was not the community of Indigenous Australians but the community of Aboriginal Territorians.

In working to build Aboriginal people’s institutional presence, coordinate their policies, facilitate their partnership, secure their compliance and deliver their services, Aboriginal senior public servants were clearly agents of the postcolonial enterprise. But being blackfellas in the bureaucracy had not silenced them. Absent before, present now, Aboriginal public servants are, in the well-chosen words of Rowley, the ‘twice involved’ (1978: 206).

Perhaps this is what Matthew meant when he said something profound. Recall Matthew, non-senior but long serving ‘eyes and ears’ since the first moment of Northern Territory self-government, who was asked if he was a ‘radical black’ in the same year Rowley published his words.
Matthew’s interview was full of anecdotes and rich commentary on the public service characters he had known. He said his own profound words over an ordinary cup of tea, without the fresh hot damper he joked we should have been cooking on the fire for his historic storytelling—which he insisted not be conducted in either his office or mine but outside, in the breeze. He said:

We’re the engine room, mate. We’re what’s on the ground.

This study has embraced the structural and the subjective in the interviewees’ navigation of the expectations and opportunities of representative bureaucracy. It is through the interviewees’ accounts of doing representative bureaucracy, and not through representative bureaucracy’s time-honoured self-serving account, that we now know how representative bureaucrats create a sense of government.

Meeting Indigenous employment targets: A ménage à trois

The Northern Territory Government continues to urge that the employment of Aboriginal people in the public service matches their proportion in the general population, through the standing invitation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions to the administration of government and the periodic setting of targets.

In 2010, the Commissioner for Public Employment reissued the 2012 target of 10 per cent that had been set by the Generation Plan of Action in 2007. Ten per cent by 2012 must have seemed a modest and achievable aim from the 2010 Indigenous public sector employment level of 8 per cent, just as 10 per cent by 1982 must have seemed modest and achievable to Chief Minister Everingham in 1980. But Indigenous employment had not reached 9 per cent by May 2015, when Chief Minister Adam Giles promised to double the numbers to 16 per cent by 2020 (OCPE 2015: 6–7). This was three years after the return of the Country Liberal Party. Giles’s promise repeated former Country Liberal Party Chief Minister Everingham’s double-up target of 20 per cent by 1990 and former Labor Party Chief Minister Martin’s double-up target of 20 per cent by 2017. Lining up the targets in this way, their glibness is breathtaking. But policy is always aspirational.
Under Chief Minister Giles, the Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy 2015–2020 announced the even more ambitious aim that ‘Indigenous employees will hold 10 per cent of senior management/executive roles in the NTPS by 2020’. Senior Indigenous public servants would form a higher proportion of the Northern Territory Public Service’s positions than Indigenous public servants have ever occupied since Northern Territory self-government. This was a stretch target indeed.

Chief Minister Giles dedicated $0.5 million to a small Indigenous team to pick up the baton of past efforts, working with a new Commissioner for Public Employment, Craig Allen. In May 2016, Commissioner Allen was passionately committed to building Indigenous employment numbers throughout the Northern Territory Public Service. He believed the Strategy would help him get there. ‘When you embark on one of these journeys, you’ve got to stay the course’, he said, ‘and there will be detractors’ (personal communication, 25 May 2016). Rather than inviting contributions to policy and decision-making, the 2015–2020 Strategy aimed more judiciously, but still ambitiously, at ‘a public sector that reflects the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of the Northern Territory community it serves’. The Strategy recognised that the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is an internally mobile and stable labour pool, and that this population constitutes 70 per cent of public service clientele (OCPE 2015: 6). Those implementing the Strategy seemed to be heeding the lessons of the past by taking the targets seriously, encouraging a more honest engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, improving attraction and retention and introducing new career strategies.

The first annual progress report for the Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategy 2015–2020 reported a one per cent increase in Indigenous employment (OCPE 2016). Commissioner Allen attributed this result to the introduction of ‘special measures’ recruitment, in which an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employee who met the selection criteria was awarded any level job in any role—with no expectation of only serving the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population—and a simplified selection process that encouraged greater numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants. Commissioner Allen hoped to be the first Commissioner to
achieve the 10 per cent Indigenous employment target. Chief Minister Giles, himself Indigenous, stayed in touch through a reference group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior public servants. There were now two groups, one for Darwin and one for Alice Springs. A secondment program between the Northern Territory Government and non-government organisations was being trialled. A four-year investment of $1.35 million was announced by the Minister for Public Employment to support cross cultural awareness, mentoring, performance conversations and to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff together in an annual forum (Styles 2016).

In August 2016 there was a change of government in the Northern Territory, back to Labor. Time will tell if the hospitality towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior public servants stays on course and the Northern Territory Public Service achieves its social mirror—and hears Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But meeting Indigenous public sector employment targets is one of the most confounding challenges for all governments in Australia today, and while the Northern Territory’s particular challenge is unique, the Northern Territory Government is not alone in the pressure to announce targets. The Australian Government’s National Partnership on Indigenous Economic Participation of 2009–2013 required all the States and Territories to sign up to public sector employment targets to help halve the gap in employment outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians within 10 years. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has responsibility for the next reforms, and through the Employment Parity Initiative ‘aims to increase the number of large Australian companies with a workforce reflective of the size of the Indigenous population’ (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2015). In November 2015, the Australian Public Service Commission launched the Australian Government’s own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy. The Strategy aims to match the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander proportion of the Australian population, increasing Indigenous employee representation across the Commonwealth public sector to 3 per cent by 2018 (Australian Public Service Commission 2016). Progress is being monitored by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and published on that department’s website, as well as in other Australian Government agencies’ annual reports.
The history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment in the Australian Public Service has its own twists and turns, but there are strong parallels with the Northern Territory experience of unmet targets (see Australian National Audit Office 2014). There are also parallels in the challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to contribute meaningfully in the workplace. Confidential interviews with 34 current and former Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in a recent study by Nick Biddle and Julie Lahn found a number of factors with a strong bearing on their decisions to leave. These included Australian Public Service entry programs ‘overselling’ the ability of Indigenous public servants to make a difference to policy, ‘political expediency’ overriding their contributions and Indigenous public servants having to be the ‘messenger of bad news’. Biddle and Lahn identified lack of career development, limited avenues to respond to racist attitudes and ‘being undervalued’ among Indigenous public servants’ reasons for leaving. As in my research, Biddle and Lahn’s interviewees discussed feeling token and wanting to have more influence over policies and programs. The Indigenous sector was a common destination for those who left, and some who left did not rule out returning (Biddle & Lahn 2016).

Some interviewees in my research who had worked for the Australian Government pointed out the similarity of their experiences across governments. Some had found working in Canberra, the national capital, too removed from their communities. Sandy acknowledged her mentoring in Canberra, but she had missed home. Julia observed that her experience as a senior public servant in the regional office of a Commonwealth department had been just like ‘the situation in the NT Government at the moment’:

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 someone with that perspective but it’s [Aboriginal people are] the last person [people] that they’ll actually ask for.

It is for others to discuss their experiences in the Commonwealth environment. This book is about the relationship between some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the government of the Northern Territory of Australia, and I hope it inspires researchers to conduct detailed contextual studies in other times and places.
For now, let’s listen again to Sarah, the senior public servant born in the bush whose plea to be heard opened this book. Sarah had something else profoundly important to say:

Our views, our experience, our knowledge, our understanding, our relationship means nothing to the group of non-Indigenous people who’s running this show—who’s making decisions about Aboriginal people.

Sarah’s plea might well be directed to all Australian institutions seeking to become more reflective of the populations they serve.

‘Our relationship’, in Sarah’s statement, was the representative relationship between Aboriginal public servants and their communities. The relationship is representative because it involves Aboriginal public servants who are present in bringing forth the absent. This rapidly becomes a relationship of representation when Aboriginal public servants are invited, or feel compelled by their jobs, to speak for their people.

In her employment relationship with the government, Sarah was asking the government to take into account her relationship with other Aboriginal people.

There is a third relationship. This is the constituency relationship. This relationship is between the government and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Sarah asked the government not just to have a truer engagement with her but also with remote Aboriginal communities, in the constituency relationship it should have with them. She expected this of herself, and she asked no less of the government. When Sarah questioned ‘whether we’re just numbers, we’re just bums on seats’, she was looking to be an important part of the government’s relationship with Aboriginal people, and not the unimportant part she felt. Her test of whether the public service could be serious in its dealings with Aboriginal people was whether it could be serious with her. She was not looking to substitute for absent people, but to be acknowledged and allowed to speak as a local Aboriginal person who had been profoundly affected by the past policies of child removal, who was now present. Like many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, Sarah did not want her presence to substitute for the
governments’ constituency relationship with communities. Rather, as an employee who was also a member of that constituency, she was willing to help government improve that relationship.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants are in all three relationships: they are in the representative relationship with their people, they are in the employment relationship with the government and they are also in the constituency relationship between the government and their people. In this ménage à trois, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are only too aware of the protocols for daily survival, and government departments could learn much from their navigation of hazardous terrain. Here might be the sum of the interviewees’ message to government, and indeed any institution that wants to relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: ‘You need to ask our people what they think, not just ask us. But we can help you ask them properly.’

The message for theory is the message for government: a bureaucracy can only be truly representative if it remembers who is being represented. Sarah’s presence in government was circumstantial, the product of events that started with her removal from a campfire at the age of three. She did not always feel like a public servant. She could not always distance herself from her policy subjects. She always remembered the represented. She would not speak of generic ‘remotes’, but insisted on being specific. She laid out an encyclopedic knowledge of Northern Territory communities, their traditional ownership and settlement histories. This was her ground. She neither understated nor overstated the personal loss that framed her identity. She simply modelled a process for the government’s engagement with her people, and hoped to be treated to engagement of that quality herself. If she wasn’t treated to that quality of engagement, she could still speak up for others’ right to it. This would ease her conscience for being the one, in her representative relationship, who had a job in government.

To achieve their targets, governments make an invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: enter our institution, self-identify and contribute at all levels across our departments. This research has shown that the invitation is hollow unless government learns to listen to those who try accepting it. Like the very idea of representative bureaucracy, Indigenous public sector employment policies contain no theory of action. Somehow, the presence of Aboriginal and Torres
6. SPEAKING TRUTH TO THEORY

Strait Islander people means they inject their knowledge and views and—hey presto!—there emerges a government that reflects and understands the people it serves. Indigenous employment policies are long on promise and short on strategy. They do not ask workplaces to examine their norms, understand why people leave or follow where they go. They show surprisingly little curiosity about the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants. Governments in Australia say they want to engage with Indigenous Australians, but miss the texture and meaning of the relationship that is within reach.

I am sometimes asked to give advice about how governments in Australia can do better in meeting the targets for Indigenous public sector employment. Let’s take each relationship in turn.

The employment relationship

Meeting targets is not merely a matter of recruiting more entries, but of intercepting the outflow. Indigenous employment targets cannot be achieved while the flow of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees is as much outbound as inbound. With the movement of people in one door and out another, employment numbers are only kept buoyant by the turnstile ticker effect. The numbers remain steady, but the incumbents are forever changing. The only way to intercept the outflow of employees and allow the numbers to build is for government to learn how to retain Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. This means acknowledging the tensions of representative bureaucracy. It is not possible to dissolve tensions that are deeply embedded in the structures of government, if those structures cannot be changed. It is better to embrace the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. If the orbit is inevitable and the statistic is the prize, then governments should get on-side. That is, keep the door open for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees who leave to work in the government’s outsourced service-delivery arm, place a value on that work, and thus set up their return. This way, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander numbers and contributions will grow.

The invitation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to enter the employment relationship should not overuse the word ‘representation’. The interviewees would ask government departments to say what they mean: if they mean to seek a population-proportionate number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, say so
and say why. If an employee is expected to bring community knowledge into government, check if that is possible and ask for it. If an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person is needed on an interview panel or other committee, be clear what role he or she is to play. If a local solution is needed, invite locals into the conversation. Most importantly, hear what they say.

The representative relationship

The representative relationship is different. The government is not a party to this relationship. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants who have accepted the invitation to join the administration of government manage their own relationship with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They know their place in this relationship, and do not necessarily discuss it in the workplace. They will be protecting their relationship with vulnerable people and, like all public servants, will generally be acting mindfully within public service ethics and the terms of their employment. The representative relationship is only revealed under conditions of trust. It may be sturdy, it may be fragile. It should not be disrupted by others. This relationship is a matter for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The interviewees said often that their relationships and culture were their business. Their message might go something like this: never assume that the perspective of one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander employee is the view of that person’s group or of the Indigenous population more generally. Recall Jay’s satirical take on colleagues who leaped to the assumption: ‘Is that what Aboriginal people think?’ When he tried to point out the problem, colleagues took that to be what Aboriginal people thought!

The representative relationship is of very great value to government, because those who are absent—whether they are looking for a career, or are just unemployed and disaffected—look to those who are present, their role models, as their guide.

The constituency relationship

Finally, to the constituency relationship. During and since the interviews, I have been tested over and again—for my honesty with the interview material, my silence on the identity of interviewees, my willingness to broach difficult subjects like the importance
of competency and the misuse of culture, and my commitment to conveying the findings of this research. This book is based on relationships of trust. If I have inadvertently broken any of those with anyone, I may not be told, but my work will have no credibility with the affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The same applies to government departments that invite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into their workplaces and do not hear what they say, or try having conversations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees that those departments should be having with communities. Government may not be told, but it will have no credibility with the affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The message is simple. If the words of 76 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Northern Territory are anything to go by, then attend to the relationship and the rest will follow. The interviewees were clear on this point: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees would stay in government longer if the government worked harder on its relationship with their communities. A better constituency relationship—the third relationship—will lead to a better employment relationship, a better representative relationship, and better government.

At the very least, governments in Australia should heed Sarah’s plea:

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

Even as they leave the public service, there are things Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people might want to tell a government department that knows how to ask. Interviewees said time and again that our conversations felt like the exit interview they had never been offered.

The ‘missing ingredient’ in the policy focus on ‘normalising’ Indigenous Australians is ‘an understanding that Aboriginal conditions of life are not a remote problem to be solved, but an extension of settler conditions of life’, concluded Patrick Sullivan in his finely-tuned consideration of Indigenous–government relations in Australia today (2011: 122). That is, government needs the relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as much as they need the relationship with government. Both parties are already in it. But as we now know, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in it twice when they take on the mantle of government.
A conversation starter

This book has situated the political identity of Aboriginal senior public servants in a policy narrative and in a time and place. It has drawn extensively on normative political theory, not to judge Aboriginal senior public servants but as a guide to their working models.

Why is it important to understand how bureaucratic representation works? Finding a balance between contradictory needs and wants is the central dilemma of any political representative. It matters very much to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who decides the complex and painful matters affecting their people. This is why descriptive representation is important, and this is why descriptive representatives need to be up to the task.

Through the interviews, this book found Aboriginal senior public servants who were neither tokens nor advocates but practising representatives. As representatives, they were good enough in the circumstances. Mindful of their responsibilities as public servants, and seeing themselves as sharing fates with the absent, they used opportunities in the cracks and crevices of daily work to give voice to their people. They stood up for Aboriginal people in the corridors of power. They preferred not to speak in place of the absent, although they did so when necessary. To rise to the complex occasion of administering government, they were prepared to defy political correctness. Most were not content to bring forth the absent by just sitting there: they tried to influence the democratic structure in which they worked, to make it possible for the absent to become more present. This is why they did jobs that made them feel they were failing and worked in bureaucratic cultures that sometimes asked the wrong questions. Indeed, by submitting to the public service criteria of merit and impartiality that inherently did not favour their backgrounds, by risking the disparagement of those for whom the true Aboriginal person is only ever disadvantaged and the committed Aboriginal person is only ever righteously situated outside government, they were more than good enough. If we had the analytic tools, we might cast them as exemplary representatives. They were as good as representative bureaucrats could be.
For a community of people to be a community of shared fate, it needs to have a story that has ethical significance to the community (Williams 2009). If the community believes in the story, it is true. No one else can judge this but the people in the community—in this case, the community of people who are in the representative relationship. Although their place of employment did not do enough to seek out the views of the represented, the relationship between the interviewees and their absent suggests representation. Or at the very least, diversely positioned interviewees had a story to tell that was ethically significant for them and for those they reached. In this community of shared fate, members sought out the interactions that let them believe in their accountability.

In closing, we will avoid the normative political theory and settle for low-lying pragmatism. At the very least, this book has acknowledged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are on the side of service provision and not just service recipients. As public servants, the interviewees in this study were more willing and more complicit in government than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are usually portrayed. They were as quick and discerning as any good policy adviser, and potentially more determined to make a difference.

Recall Rowley said 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). Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants might feel the opposite, after watching and participating in more than 30 years of unconvincing representative bureaucracy. Hoping to be received as public servants, they might be dismayed to be received as representatives. But let’s not generalise, and instead present representative bureaucracy’s antithesis by giving voice to the committed individualism of someone who had experienced abandonment by both his community and his public service. Despite his ambition, Louis had not made it to seniority; he found writing hard and only spoke ‘very simple English’. He did not see himself as a representative. Indeed, he went on to find a new, more private life elsewhere, in which I hope he is happy. Back in 2007, Louis forswore the idea of representing anyone with a finer use of English than the most celebrated orator, when he said:
I can’t, because I’m only me. And I don’t expect anyone else to represent me, either—because I can’t find any other Indigenous person like me, that’s why.

The interviewees were as diverse and contradictory as any people could and should be.

How compelled are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including those who already populate government structures, by the invitations of Indigenous public sector employment? Do they feel they embody the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations sufficiently to bring the unreachable and non-compliant among them into government?

I suggest that many are not remotely convinced by repeated posturing about their so-called rising numbers. Not all will be persuaded into the tight corners of representative practice by the invitation to contribute to policy and decision-making about their people. They certainly would not all see themselves as representatives, even after reading this book. However, many will continue to be drawn by a sense of history, conscience, ambition or need to participate in the representative bureaucracy of their place. If the hospitality they receive is ambivalent, so be it—they know worse things than invitations that say one thing and mean another. They might reply in kind, meeting ambivalence with ambivalence. Or they might answer with a return invitation to their government and to those who doubt or romanticise them, or don’t even notice they’re here: take our service seriously. The rest is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to say.
This text is taken from Reluctant Representatives: Blackfella bureaucrats speak in Australia’s north, by Elizabeth Ganter, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.