

9. An unlikely secretary — a boy from the outer agencies¹

Mark Sullivan

Upon graduating from the University of Sydney with a degree in Economics, Mark Sullivan joined the Australian Taxation Office in 1971 as a cadet taxation officer. Over the next thirty-seven years he would enjoy a decorated career in both the private and public sectors, holding several prominent positions including head of corporate services at the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS; 1986-88); CEO of the Australian and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC; 1999-2001); Secretary of the Department of Family and Community Services (2002-04); Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (2004-08); and President of the Repatriation Commission. Mark Sullivan was appointed CEO of ACTEW, the ACT's government-owned water utility, in 2008.

My time as CEO of ATSIC was the best and worst job I had in my life, both at the same time. But it must also be said that the highs of that job far outweighed the lows. Like others who have become involved in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, it was an experience that was personally rewarding, knowledge-enhancing and friendship-building. To engage with and listen to the Dodsons, Pearsons, Yuis, Ross's, Perkins, Andersons, Scotts and the many community leaders across their lands was enriching.

It taught me the value of storytelling and the importance of wrapping a message or two within that. So I thought here I should recount a story of a career within the APS, a career a little different to many of my colleagues who lead the departments of state and agencies that make up the Australian Public Service.

My motivation to join the APS was simple. The notion of receiving a wage to continue my studies as an accountant full time and then be guaranteed a position as a tax assessor in the ATO was too good to resist. It's funny how many find it the opposite. So I joined as a cadet taxation officer in Sydney. I was a product of a determined recruitment strategy by the ATO. My career plan was to be a company tax assessor, a Clerk Class 6, not to be confused with an APS6. Even my provider of interim employment, Price Waterhouse, thought this a good idea, adding that a seat would always be available there if it didn't work out.

¹ This speech was delivered in July 2008 at a formal function organised by the Australian Public Service Commission.

With the benefit of hindsight

As happens in the APS and in particular the ATO, I met and fell in love with Bronwyn, a fellow tax assessor with a keen eye for detail. We married and left for the smell of the wood or oil fires of Canberra; a shift into the operational life of a big organisation, working in small project groups on both minor and major projects. We never really saw the top of the tree, the Commissioner. But we did see the Second Commissioner, Patrick Lanigan – brilliant, eccentric, mad, visionary – possibly all.

He changed Tax. A simple goal, collecting tax, not lodging returns or raising assessments, became his mantra. And he succeeded. Malcolm Fraser appreciated it. The ATO raised several hundred million more than the budget estimate – nothing these days, but enough then to see him promoted to Director-General, Social Security (later retitled Secretary). Lanigan did another thing. He had embarked on a large scale junior management development program with the ATO which he immediately imported to DSS. I had gone to DSS recruited by a branch head, who had been recruited by Lanigan. Again I was a beneficiary of a determined policy of skills development.

Lanigan departed, but DSS went on. I was leading project groups on larger and larger projects. I developed a reasonable reputation in DSS, which was difficult for an ex-Tax person. My career changed again in Brisbane when I met the then state Director of DSS in South Australia, Ron Brown.

Ron complimented me on my reputation, even described me as a bit of a hot shot – which I naturally concurred with – and then asked how many people I had ever managed. It was a dead giveaway when I asked if I could count myself. Possibly as many as four, I said. He made an offer I couldn't refuse – the management of DSS offices in South Australia, hundreds of staff and a personal commitment to develop me as a manager.

A growing number of people seemed willing to take an interest in me. Tony Ayers and Noel Tanzer in particular. I was prepared to take opportunities and the risk of moving cities at the same level to take on the challenging tasks.

I moved to SBS to a job destined to abolish itself. Nick Shehadie, on the recommendation of Ron Brown, had asked if I would like to work at SBS for a couple of years. His worry was the place ran as three organisations – Radio, Television and Corporate and the latter pulled all the strings. He wanted me to set about enlivening Radio and Television and significantly reducing the role of Corporate. It was different, it was fun and again I learned plenty.

At the end of this, I knew I couldn't go back to DSS so I resigned and joined a multinational, Wang, a name we all knew then. They were one of the world's hundred biggest corporations, as were Digital and Prime and now none of them exist. Microsoft and Apple were just start-ups. Wang taught me about a

revenue-focused organisation. I learned that multinationals, particularly those a little fat and lazy, were as difficult a bureaucracy as any and came to reflect and appreciate the wonderful opportunities provided by the APS. This stage represented my half-time break and I could not wait for the second half.

That started in Immigration where I stayed for over a decade. I enjoyed every day of it in an organisation I considered one of the finest I had seen at the time. Three times I have worked in portfolios where a lack of politicisation generally through a reasonable level of bipartisanship helped drive a culture of achievement. Immigration was the first, ATSIC the second, and Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) the third. Introduce the political act, experience great divide in the approach of government and opposition and you see a fundamental shift in organisation culture and performance. Immigration has been to hell and back, ATSIC no longer exists, but fortunately DVA survives and prospers in a relatively harmonious political position.

In Immigration I learned to lead. While I still had the support and guidance of people like Helen Williams, it was now my turn to be looking out for and developing leaders of that agency and the APS of the future. As we come to appreciate the development we are granted, the onus shifts to us to develop the next generation of leaders. My personal development continued through participation in the inaugural Leading Australia's Future in Asia and the Pacific (LAFIA) development program. Exposing the APS leadership to Asia was a highlight.

Immigration was a chance to see the world and I saw it. Rarely the Peter Stuyvesant posts, but always interesting. I learned to eat for my country; to consume a couple of wonderfully sautéed cockroaches in China. If you are interested they eat like you would imagine, a squish and then chewy. Or the wonderful taste of snake blood and bile washed down by a thimble or two of Mao-tai. You would do it for fun but for work even better, and it was all great preparation for an RSL chicken and three veg sub-branch dinner.

It was also a chance to see what diplomacy was about. The strategy which led the Chinese government to accept the return of unauthorised boat arrivals in the 1990s involved many. Dennis Richardson led it, Chris Conybeare directed it, and I played a supporting role. To see the work of the then Ambassador, Ric Smith, the then Consul-General, Murray McLean and Immigration people in China taught me much about negotiation in a diverse cultural setting. Often the sweat trickled down your neck as you carefully explored the relationship between boat returns and Tiananmen Square incident students remaining in Australia. An exposure to the foreign relationship aspects of public service is a must. The broader involvement of the APS in bilateral and multi-lateral relationship is a very positive way of exposing many more to this aspect of the life of the APS.

With the benefit of hindsight

Finally, Immigration introduced me to interaction with the media. Gerry Hand asked me to be the voice of Immigration – I responded as you would expect: ‘Yes, Minister’. Boat arrivals, detention centres, high profile cases, HIV, Kosovo: you name it, I learned to talk about it. The late Paul Lyneham trained me. Confidence in dealing with the media is a developed skill providing an extra arrow in the bow, or bullet in the gun. When Peter Harvey arrived to do a boat arrival story at short notice, he told me that News had assured him I could provide both the questions and the answers – I took a bit of reflected pride in that. What surprised me even more was that 15 years later on a beach at Gallipoli he remembered. Like politics, the media and the APS are intertwined; the secret is to understand the division and where to draw the line.

In 1999 I was approached to consider the position of CEO of ATSIC. I immediately declined. Why? As I explained to the recruiter, I was a student of the sixties and seventies. I had a menu of demonstrations and causes. Vietnam, apartheid, canteen food, the full range. While I was being active on many issues I had never taken an interest in Indigenous affairs. I had no more than a couple of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander acquaintances and no Indigenous friends. And I felt the CEO should be Indigenous. End of the issue I thought. But with the persistence of the recruiter, the encouragement of Gerry Hand and the then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, John Herron, twelve months later I was the CEO of ATSIC.

Pride in achievement is important for anyone. For me, ATSIC bought many proud moments, the highlights of which were:

- the building of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent within the organisation where at one point 80 per cent of the SES within ATSIC were indigenous, too many of them now lost to the Commonwealth;
- the point where ATSIC’s relationship with the Australian government and the states and territories was at its best, despite major policy differences;
- a capacity to pursue the agenda of the board and work to the government on its agenda of ‘practical reconciliation’; and
- the Indigenous contribution to the 2000 Olympics and centenary of federation and the proper pursuit of native title.

ATSIC’s demise was unfortunate. It had been an experiment unique in the world. It gave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples a voice within the framework of government. It offered a place to work within the Commonwealth for Indigenous young people as exciting as an ecologist would find the environment. And most importantly, on most fronts it delivered with the resources it had. Its housing and infrastructure programs and its management of native title were first-class.

The demise was also predictable and reasonable. The ATSIC Act set up a framework where policy clash between ATSIC and government was anticipated. As CEO the Act provided that the officer must obey lawful directions of the board; there's nothing unlawful about pursuing a treaty or an apology for the Stolen Generations. It was a government agency governed by the CAC Act and others. But the ATSIC Act gave the Minister the right to determine ATSIC's budget distribution. So a minister could say no money to be spent on treaty. The CEO and administration handled this delicate balance and from its inception they had managed this but the pressure was there. When you add the fact that the elected senior leadership carried too much of the weight of criminal and ethical suspicion, their behaviour at times gave their detractors heavy ammunition. ATSIC, the organisation, lost its capacity to operate the fine balance between its obligations to the board and to the government. Once that was lost it fell out with much of its board, the organisation was split, and it lost many of its Indigenous staff, particularly leaders. I greatly admired those who stayed on and understood those who did not.

It was a proud day when I sat in the gallery of the House of Representatives and heard the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader say sorry to the Stolen Generations. The world didn't end, but this country made a huge stride.

The Northern Territory intervention is the subject of much debate today. My view, now that I can say it, is its boldness and scale should be applauded. For the first time, the scale of approach to the issues facing our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities has been recognised. A focus on primary health, particularly children, and housing is an excellent start. I remember being in Wadeye talking to one of the community leaders, a woman. She showed me her house and said her place was in the kitchen. She meant it literally. She slept there. She said it was a good strategic point to watch the house occupied by sixteen others. And we wonder why education suffers, sexual assault occurs and some seek comfort in drugs, legal and illicit.

We need to maintain the boldness. We need to get the support of Aboriginal community leaders. We need to remember the wonderful positives that come from embracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and practice and to recognise the enormous efforts being made by many communities themselves. We've made a good start on the government's bold targets, particularly around mortality; we need to finish the job.

Thinking again about APS development, the experience gained by the many executive level officers working within Aboriginal communities will be something that benefits them greatly and will bring a new dimension to policy advising on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues in the Commonwealth.

With the benefit of hindsight

So finally, to my move to a secretary and seven years later a move out of the APS into the commercial, but regulated world of water and energy. Before I became a secretary, many said I would not make it. Not in a malicious way, but as keen students of form they advised that for a career public servant the lack of central agency experience was the death knell. I remember arguing with Max Moore-Wilton that as CEO of ATSIC I was part of the Prime Minister and Cabinet portfolio and had worked in a central agency. He abused and disabused me in a very short time. I liked Max, and I still do. I made the mistake of seeking feedback halfway through my term in ATSIC. He set about abusing me and blaming me for everything he could think of; many things far removed from the realm of ATSIC. My defence was swept away. I left somewhat dispirited and told Bronwyn that my career was over. Jane Halton was the first to tell me that I had been 'Maxed', that he had enjoyed it and felt I had given plenty. The next day I saw Max at a function and he embraced and thumped me. I thought there was still a chance for a boy from the outer agencies.

My memories of being Secretary of Families and Community Services (FaCS) and the Department of Veterans' Affairs are different. The breadth of FaCS was amazing and even broader now. We crossed segments of the community ranging from pre-natal through death. We administered huge appropriations. We were involved in every cross/whole-of- government issue. We worked with, struggled with, and usually got there, in our work with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) who never seemed to agree with our stakeholders' view of us being too hard and rigid. We somewhere between owned, directed, collaborated with or did as Centrelink wanted us to do – again I believe, reasonably effectively. My attachment to the staff of FaCS was strong. They had my admiration and support and they treated me well. They taught me what a non-blokey agency *was* like and what a non-blokey APS *could* be like.

DVA taught me about many new things. What a wonderful organisation. At one level the only piece of operational World War II infrastructure left while at another level coping with the pressures and impact of a regularly deployed defence force engaged in a diversity of operations. Most are surprised by its size and breadth of operations. Its data holdings are enormous and their potential assistance in understanding health and ageing in this country is yet to be fully understood. A longitudinal understanding of the health of up to one million World War II enlistees is there for the taking.

I understood the language of stakeholders. DVA taught me to live with real stakeholder engagement. From a grand organisation like the RSL to the veterans email forum – including the 'mad galahs' – makes you understand what they expect. Again, at DVA I found a strong and positive people culture. On average it members were four years older than the APS, or as I put it, 10,000 years more

experienced. It was a large complex service delivery operation challenged with a changing business model – fewer and fewer veterans, more complexity, less resources. A challenge for anyone.

As I learned much about indigenous affairs, I also learned much about our military heritage and the ADF. The resurgent interest and pride in military history and commemoration is a good thing and continual challenge. Government rightly expects DVA to manage this aspect of its work. It may be to ensure the annual commemoration in Gallipoli meets the emotional and physical needs of those who attend. It may be that in the path to reconciliation with disaffected Vietnam veterans we commemorate battles like Long Tan, Coral and Balmoral. It may be that when some WWI diggers are unearthed in a rural community where they fought and died we solemnly re-inter them, or how we deal with the discovery of a mass grave at Pheasant Wood or the remains of the Cruiser Sydney. DVA delivers.

More importantly, when someone has to explain to a recent widow how the Australian government will compensate and care for her and her children, DVA does it with compassion and care.

Thirty-five years in the APS is a long time. Embarking on a new career I will carry and benefit from much of what I have learned here. The Australian Public Service has changed greatly over that time and will continue to change. We are part way through a change that has departments and agencies respond to issues through their ministers as part of the Australian government, not as an independent entity striving for the result that may suit it best. It is not long ago when we did not see the need to act cooperatively. Today we do and are learning how to do it. In my world welfare reform and indigenous affairs were examples of the new world starting to work. The COAG agenda has quickened the pace dramatically. This is one of the most positive changes I have seen.

Speed at one level is a curse. We have heard of the pressure of 24/7 news coverage and it is part of the picture. But the community demands more and more speed – a terrible case of child neglect needs a new national child protection response; the neglect of a response to climate change shocked into action by the drought means a decade of work is condensed into a year. Peoples' skills, energy and motivation are tested in such a heady environment. And we know the danger of speed – errors, inadequate research and analysis and possibly bad policy. We also know that the machinery of government service delivery often moves slowly. More than once have I been part of advice to government that says we can do the policy analysis this week, the legislation next week and we can implement it in two years. And I am not having a go at my friends in Centrelink. Speed is not a good or bad thing, it is just a fact of life. But seat belts,

With the benefit of hindsight

air bags and stability control are things to think about when speed is involved. For us the safety devices are work-life balance, physical health and emotional and mental health.

Ministers and their offices are a subject many have talked about. I have worked closely with over a dozen ministers and their offices and without exception I was able to establish a good relationship with them. Ministers have to be the risk takers, the policy promoter within government, the manager of the constituency, the MP and the participant within executive government. If they are well served by their department, they will be well informed in their role. If they are well served by their office, they will be across the portfolio. If they delegate the onus, it's with them to have trust and faith in their delegate. It is sometimes an enigma that the department will only trust its most experienced and knowledgeable to interact with its minister – as they have grown into that position of trust so too should the group of advisers around a minister. With few exceptions you cannot walk into any new world and be perfect immediately. Recognising that is sometimes a challenge.

While we have maintained a position of an employer of choice, it is now and will become a greater challenge to keep it going. The demand for labour, the ageing of our workforce and the efforts to improve our participation rates all mean a different approach to meeting our labour needs. While I feel job satisfaction is easy in the APS, it needs concerted efforts in recruitment, personal and professional development and the continual reinforcement of our position as an ethical, dynamic and diverse place of employment to succeed. The APS needs to view itself always as a whole; we narrow ourselves too much if we don't. And we need to recruit and develop with the service as a whole in our sights.

I believe the APS is strong, healthy, apolitical and robust. It is also challenged. It must do even more in succession planning. It must proactively scout for talent and through development and opportunity bring people to the fore at a younger and younger age. It must recognise that its policy development skills continually need re-honing and broadening but that at its core government services are delivered by large organisations meaning the APS's people skills must be world's best. It must test and retest whether the advantages of agency independence may have been maximised and whether the advantages of size, volume and consistency have a novel advantage while avoiding the disasters of such expeditions as whole-of-government IT outsourcing. Where the balance lies is the science of soothsayers.

For me the opportunity to serve has been a remarkable one. Many people have assisted me. The only one I will name is my wife, Bronwyn, who met me within a month or so of joining the Tax Office and who today stands by my side. I love her greatly and acknowledge the burden she has in me.