

# 14. There's a telegram for you – fashioning Australia's unique model of public administration<sup>1</sup>

Ken Matthews

*After graduating from the University of Sydney (BEC) in 1974, Ken Matthews embarked on his career in public service with the Department of Defence in 1975. There he stayed for eight years before transferring to the Department of Industry, Technology and Commerce in 1983, where he was responsible for advice on manufacturing industry policy and technology policy. He next joined the Department of Primary Industries before in 1997 heading the Wik Task Force in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, providing advice to the Prime Minister on Native Title. The next year Matthews was appointed Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, and in 1999, Secretary of the Department of Transport and Regional Services, a position he held until 2004. From 2005 until his retirement in 2010, Ken Matthews served as the Chair, Chief Executive Officer, and one of the seven government-appointed commissioners of the National Water Commission.*

In January 1975 my wife Margaret and I stepped off a plane after backpacking around Europe in the months since we finished university the year before. We were handed two telegrams (they still had telegrams then). The first offered Margaret a job as a teacher in Hoxton Park in the western suburbs of Sydney. The second offered me a job with the Department of Defence in the Australian Public Service in Canberra.

Frankly, I could not remember having applied for a job with the Department of Defence. Indeed I had spent the last few years at university 'railing against the machine' and protesting against what *Rolling Stone* magazine called the 'military-industrial complex'. To this day I suspect there had been a mix-up in the Defence recruitment mail room. My fit with Defence was, on the face of it, so poor that one of my startled friends asked which side I would be fighting for.

Margaret and I discussed our telegrams for all of fifteen minutes before we decided to give Canberra and the Australian Public Service a go – at least for a while. There was about that much science to it. The rest is history.

---

<sup>1</sup> This speech was delivered in October 2010 at a formal function hosted by the Australian Public Service Commission.

With the benefit of hindsight

So it was we went to Canberra and I went – sceptically – to work at the Department of Defence. But I was quickly struck and swept up by an ethos I just had not been expecting but which I found enormously stimulating. Defence turned out to be an organisation with a set of public service values and ethics handed down through generations of fine public servants. Here was an organisation whose vision was truly national. Here was an organisation that had to make hard calls, an organisation that managed billions of dollars, millions of assets and tens of thousands of people. Here were issues that were in a very real sense about the destiny of our nation. Here for the first time in my life I encountered an organisation which insisted on intellectual, analytical and systematic rigour. And here was an organisation which was actively searching out the best and the brightest new young staff. They also took me.

What followed for the next 36 years was the privilege of being involved in six portfolios – Defence; Industry, Science and Technology; Primary Industries, including agriculture; Prime Minister’s (for Indigenous issues and some years later, back again for water); Transport and Regional Services; and Environment (for water again).

I have served the governments of seven prime ministers, and have been lucky enough to form powerful working relationships, and sometimes firm friendships, with ministers on both sides without any of them ever knowing my own political leanings. Indeed, throughout my career in public service I have kept this a closely-guarded secret, something which I believe has benefitted my relationships with ministers. I have also been fortunate enough to serve, at secretary or statutory chair level, six portfolio ministers and countless junior ministers and parliamentary secretaries. Plus of course, many more at levels before I became CEO.

I have been privileged to have been involved in some of the great public policy issues of Australia’s last 36 years – tariff reform, reform of the car industry, the collapse of the former Soviet Union, development from a zero base of the biotechnology industry, mining impacts on the environment including mining at Coronation Hill, ecologically sustainable development, September 11 and counter-terrorism, native title and Indigenous disadvantage, how best to deliver our multi-billion dollar infrastructure program, the second Sydney airport, reform of our agricultural industries, science and technology policy, national energy policy, natural disasters preparedness, water policy, regional development and regional disadvantage, and trade policy – among many others.

Claiming to have been involved in trade policy is a slight exaggeration. I include it only because once when I was in China I was more or less pushed into a room by the Australian Embassy to informally spruik to a key Chinese vice Minister for Trade what was then a breathtakingly bold idea of a Chinese bilateral trade

agreement with Australia. I suspect a visiting Transport Secretary was seen as sufficiently senior – but at the same time sufficiently remote from DFAT – to fly the kite without causing diplomatic embarrassment if the Chinese turned us down. To our delight the vice minister showed immediate interest, and although the wheels have since turned slowly, this trillion dollar idea is coming to pass and all Australians will one day benefit in a big way.

But my main point about this long list of terrifically interesting public policy issues is that I have indeed been fortunate, probably privileged. I have sometimes said to new recruits to the Australian Public Service that had they joined instead for example a medium sized manufacturing firm in Sydney, the most strategic decision they could hope to take – if they worked their way right up the greasy pole over many years – would be to decide whether to establish the new factory in Wollongong or Geelong. But by joining the APS, new recruits are almost immediately exposed to public policy choices which are worth billions of dollars and which influence the daily lives of millions of Australians. First year recruits will often see 'their' issues on the evening television news; public policy and the APS can be big picture, stimulating stuff. Stuff that matters.

I have been fortunate enough to lead and manage as CEO, organisations as large as 3000 and as intimate as 50. As I have moved through them, I have had the opportunity to experience the full spectrum of public administration work: intelligence and research, policy development, administration, regulation, program management, people management, organisational leadership, intergovernmental negotiations, assessment, audit and evaluation, and even a modest public advocacy role in the work the National Water Commission does to press the case for water reform.

## **Regional Australia**

But rich though that diet was, partly because of my background as a boy from the bush I never lost my personal interest in policy issues as they impact on rural, regional and remote Australia and the people who live there. It is no secret I grew up on a farm. I still know a Jersey cow from a Guernsey, I can still ride a horse and I attended a regional high school. I could even probably still milk a cow – if paid enough. I learned to debate in a rural youth club, I have seen country towns rise and fall, commodity cycles turn and turn again, and droughts come and go. When I married Margaret I inherited a lifetime of free advice from her extended family about what needs to be done by the government for regional Australia. And with the benefit of that advice stiffening my back after many a long weekend, I have continually been dispatched back to Canberra with renewed insight and resolve.

With the benefit of hindsight

Thus having worked on issues in agriculture, mining, environment, natural resources management, water, regional services, and regional infrastructure, regional Australia has been something of a unifying theme for my career. In fact as I stand here tonight and the drought is breaking, commodity prices and the terms of trade are at historic highs, both major parties are committed to dealing with our shameful Indigenous disadvantage (usually regional and remote Indigenous disadvantage), and we have a new government brimming with commitment to regional Australians, it is clear that I can with a clear conscience pack up, retire and say to myself, 'Job done. I can go now'.

I wish that were really so. A serious message I wish to discuss here is that regional Australia is a much bigger policy and delivery challenge for the Australian Public Service than most public servants so far realise. We joke that Sydney differs from Melbourne, but compared to metropolitan Australia, our regions have so much more variation and usually, so much less resilience. When a job is lost or an industry folds in a regional community, the options are much more limited than in the cities and the human and community consequences greater.

The challenge for public administrators is therefore more than simply to introduce one parallel 'regional' policy to complement our traditional metropolitan-oriented policies. Many of our policies and programs will have to be comprehensively regionalised and localised – to multiple regions and localities. How well equipped is the APS to understand multiple regional perspectives when we have grown up with a much more homogeneous metropolitan world view? How will the public service gain an accurate understanding of the needs, aspirations and opportunities of the many different regions of Australia? In my view it would be weak to rely only on parliamentarians and ministers to tell us what we should know. They may have their ears to the ground, but we will need our own channels too, into, and out of, Australia's regions. We do not have them today.

I also ask myself whether we will be able to adjust our usual analytical tools to accommodate regional policy requirements. I ask that because one of the policy achievements of which I am proudest is the progress we made during my time in the Department of Transport when we introduced a national transport infrastructure planning process – then known as AusLink but since carried forward under other labels. I am proud of it because it introduced some well overdue simple principles to infrastructure decisions – principles such as an insistence on cost-benefit analyses before transport investment decisions, mandatory comparison of alternatives before decisions, and the development of longer-term strategies before decisions about individual infrastructure projects.

These principles have not always been observed by governments since, but they were, and are, good principles. Yes, we still have a way to go, but our AusLink white paper – which was an initiative of the APS – began the inexorable

movement away from decades of using infrastructure as shameless election bait and towards strategically planned, benefit/costed investments in the economy and society.

But how well these same principles work for regional Australia may be another question. For example in most cases, a dollar spent on a metropolitan ring road carrying tens of thousands of cars a day will be found to be a dollar better spent than on a lonely country road. In the future, the APS will need more sophisticated project selection methodologies to capture the non-monetary, community and externality values of the rural road. There is more to this than just political judgment by ministers.

What else might the APS expect in our 'new paradigm' of priority for regional Australia? Like metropolitan Australians, regional Australians over the next decade will be looking for more accessible agencies – on the screen, on the phone and in the home. Like metropolitan Australians they will increasingly expect more timely services and correspondence. Time frames for email are obviously different from 200 years of snail mail and the public service cannot afford to be the last national institution to be responding in snail mail time frames. Like metropolitan Australians, regional Australians will expect more personalised and tailored public services. They will want to know by name their contact officers in the APS and will be impatient with agencies' constant re-organisations and staff changes. They will also be impatient with apparently artificial functional separations between different agencies, and for that matter, different levels of government. Governments will have to organise themselves to be more unified externally and to 'keep the spaghetti behind the counter'.

However, unlike metropolitan Australians, regional Australians will more than ever be expecting government services to be localised and spatially delivered. They will want their services to be tuned to their particular communities and their regions. On the one hand they will expect to be able to participate in decisions about their regions. On the other they will sometimes startle the city-based Australian Public Service by exhibiting consultation fatigue (because so often in smaller communities it is the same people who must front all the consultation processes). They will be looking for governance arrangements that maximise decision making and accountability in the local area – where they are comfortable – not back in Canberra where we are comfortable.

The APS will also need to be ready for a certain amount of pent-up frustration in regional communities. I detect parallels between the situation today and in the years leading up to the emergence of the One Nation Party in the 1990s. I was at that time working for a National Party minister. The rising tide of anger in regional Australia had not yet been recognised by the commentariat outside regional Australia but every time I dealt with regional people or opened regional

With the benefit of hindsight

newspapers (and you must do both every day in the Department of Agriculture!) the language was stronger, the temperature higher and the alienation more evident. I became increasingly alarmed but could not persuade others that there was a real issue emerging.

In the end, I clipped fifty angry headlines from regional and local newspapers. I took the clippings and sat with my minister for an hour and talked him through them. Later that week he launched a political response to what was essentially a rural revolt – just in time to meet One Nation head-on. To his great credit, and this would have been hard for a National Party minister, the minister publicly acknowledged his senior bureaucrat's early policy warning when we moved to different portfolios years later.

## **Other public administration suggestions**

Beyond regional issues, there are some other public administrative suggestions I can now luxuriate in inflicting on the public on the eve of my retirement. I shall articulate them as questions I suspect many public servants have already asked themselves in the honest hours of the night.

Firstly, is it inevitable that the APS must forever be in a state of structural and staffing change? Must there perpetually be a new face every time a client or stakeholder rings? We know it drives our stakeholders mad. We know it introduces management risk. We know it adds confusion, costs and time. We know it makes the service look inexperienced and shallow. We know these things, but we seem to accept restructurings and personnel changes as unavoidable features of the public service. We grumble to each other that just when our staff get good at their job they are promoted to start at the bottom of the curve all over again. But we keep doing it to ourselves. We know – as APS insiders ourselves – that this churn has high hidden costs. There are things that can be done: promotions in place; abolition of duty statements and functional statements; mandatory cost-benefit testing of restructurings; and so on. I wonder whether as a professional service we cannot do better than we are.

Secondly, do our recruitment and promotion processes always justify the investment? How often do these complex, time-consuming and resource-hungry selection processes actually lead to a different outcome? They can, but how often is the process more to boiler plate against objections by documenting mechanical process, rather than focusing on results – that is, the selection of the best person for the job? When we know the right answer from the outset, why do we not more often put our own name on the line and make ourselves accountable for the merits of our staff selections rather than the detail of the processes we followed?

Thirdly, and here is one to provoke my colleagues from Treasury and Finance, why do we continue to encourage governments to load so much into the annual budget process? Yes, it enables tradeoffs, and yes it facilitates macroeconomic management and parliamentary process. But it seems to me to have a high cost in terms of foregone political and policy opportunities. Policy initiatives well worth a front page spread in their own right find themselves on page six of a very congested budget supplement and sinking without trace by the following week. Worthy, but not critical spending measures can be seriously delayed because they are forced into a 'one shot a year' budget cycle. I suspect impact could be enhanced, quality improved, government timeliness and responsiveness restored, and pre-budget chaos reduced if clusters of related policies were to be routinely developed and announced at different scheduled times through the year.

Fourthly, have we developed internal probity and fraud control processes out of proportion to the objective need? Internal APS-specific probity and fraud processes are costly, constraining, time-consuming and frustrating for all involved. I wonder whether we should not be placing more reliance on generally available legal processes to deal with the very small number of crooks. Our processes are too often designed as though crime, corruption and unethical behaviour were endemic to the APS. They are not. Indeed, for me one of the inspiring features of the APS has always been the deeply embedded ethics, values and principles of the organisation's culture. In a way, so extraordinary was Godwin Grech that he was the exception that proved the rule. The most powerful way to avoid a repeat of this unfortunate chapter will never be internal processes. Rather, it will always be cultural clarity about just what is acceptable and expected around here – messages sent by an organisation's leaders.

And finally on this long list of self indulgent free advice, I wish to propose a more strategic question: are we becoming a 'docile and unassertive' service. Like a frog in boiling water, have we been imperceptibly persuaded to think of the APS not as the great national institution it is in its own right, but simplistically and solely as the instrument of the government of the day? Of course, we are the instrument of the government of the day, a fact I have spent many hours explaining to my staff over the years. Individual public servants cannot all independently pursue our own personal notions of the public interest. That is why Australians elect their representatives. Public servants propose; ministers dispose.

But I acknowledge that while the APS is the instrument of the government, it is also much more than this. In my view we need to find a better point of balance between accountability to ministers and responsibility more broadly. For example we do have a responsibility to keep pointing out uncomfortable truths even after the government has made its call. We do sometimes know facts and have access to analyses not easily available to the public or its elected representatives. We do have the history.

With the benefit of hindsight

It follows that we have a responsibility to argue forthrightly when politics is compromising good outcomes. I bet most public servants can think of instances where the decisions of the properly elected government were clearly and objectively not in the national interest. If we are serious as professional servants of the public it is a cop-out just to shrug and snigger knowingly and say that the elected government decides what is in the national interest. Yes, the public service is an instrument of the government of the day, but it is not mindless. Backing up and speaking up can be uncomfortable but we have a responsibility to keep doing it.

Have we become docile and unassertive in the way we put – or more accurately, fail to put – our biggest-picture national strategic views to incoming ministers? Are we (at least our line departments) waiting too long for political parties' policy announcements and then weighting them too heavily in their incoming ministers' briefs? By all means we should shape the colour and texture of our advice to the goals, directions and style of the government of the day. But it is too easy to merely build a line department's portfolio policy agenda only to the blueprint of an election platform often produced in a rush by political parties with much less depth than the APS – and much more constrained by the sensitivities of a political campaign. We can do more and better than that.

Have we become docile and unassertive in giving up when our advice once given is rejected? There was once a saying that advice given three times is courageous. There are several ways of running genuinely good ideas back into the system after a knock-back. Talented, creative, process-smart public servants can and should do that. Have we become docile and unassertive in our dealings with ministerial staffers? Despite the newish guidelines for ministerial staffers I still see many middle-ranking public servants bending unthinkingly to 'the office' mistaking these meretricious cameo-players for the minister. They are not.

Have we become docile and unassertive in Senate Estimates hearings? There is nothing wrong with being assertive in an Estimates Committee hearing; you are not a victim, nor on trial. In a sense an Estimates hearing is nothing more than one set of public officials questioning another. A public servant must be accurate and honest of course but there is nothing wrong with showing a bit of spine when required. Indeed my own view is that one reason the most senior APS people should be present at Estimates hearings is to provide air cover if a more junior colleague begins to struggle under fire.

Have we become docile and unassertive in media and academic debate? When we hear inaccuracies or downright lies on current affairs radio over breakfast should we not be getting the facts out there? I also think we have a responsibility to be more active on the conference circuit, including alongside academics. Yes, we need to be mindful of the public profiles of our ministers, and yes we need

to avoid partisan issues, but there is a lot our great APS institution can say that can be constructive and will advance the public debate. We do have a choice: we can sit back and complain about the standard of public policy debate or we can do something ourselves to improve it. To clarify what is legitimate in public comment perhaps we need a 'new deal' with our ministerial executive, parliamentary committees and accountability bodies such as the Australian National Audit Office.

Further, our top executives have a special role in the public debate. For example, although it has been contentious, I applaud my colleague Ken Henry's persistence in his regular public economic and reform contributions. These are respected, needed and heeded. Given the caning he has sometimes received, Ken might have given up long ago. But to his great credit, he has not.

Have we become docile and unassertive in speaking up for the APS itself? This obviously does not apply to Terry Moran, who spoke up for the APS after the (admittedly awful) insulation affair. But the prevailing wisdom in the media and the parliament is that the Commonwealth as a whole (the APS) cannot manage programs. Yes, the program management failures have been substantial and damaging to our professional reputation. But it is a shallow, intellectually indefensible conclusion to say that the feds should therefore be out of program management in all portfolios and for the indefinite future. An assertive APS would be saying so; for my part, that is exactly what I am saying here today.

On a more positive note for the APS, let me switch, in a schadenfreude kind of way to a story about the very popular institution of the Senates Estimates Committee. On one occasion, immediately following the collapse of Ansett Airlines, I was called as the sole witness to a Senate inquiry on the last day before parliament recessed – for an election I think. The opposition, the media and indeed most of the nation was outraged that Ansett had collapsed and were baying for blood. It was known that I had been up to my neck in the last weeks of work to manage the collapse. (Our departmental view was that it was a painful event but that the tide could not and should not have been resisted.) The smell of blood was in the air and I was dreading the hearings. Despite my hours of swotting overnight I knew that only misery could come from the day.

When I arrived my heart sank even further to see approximately twenty journalists including several TV cameras milling around excitedly to see and record the bloodletting. For once the senators seriously outnumbered the (single) public servant. It was clear that whatever I said would be national news and worse, would likely be taken up in Question Time later that day.

Well, I am pleased to report that despite some punishing questions, I was so painstakingly precise and detailed in my answers; so pedantically accurate,

With the benefit of hindsight

boring, dull, lengthy and comprehensively non-telegenic that I had the inward satisfaction of watching the disappointed media steadily drift away over the next hour, well before the questions got anywhere near anything dangerous. When the inquiry had finished, my minister's chief of staff, probably having roused himself from a deep Ken Matthews-induced sleep, rang to congratulate me. I have always considered it my modest little triumph of the dead bat over the fast bowlers.

## **'Ausminster' – Australia's Westminster system**

Consider now how the Australian Public Service interacts with the nation's parliamentary system. The Australian system of government is often referred to as the 'Westminster system.' The APS is not a pure Westminster system; nor is it, as is sometimes claimed, a 'Washminster' hybrid. It is already uniquely Australian – I sometimes refer to it as the 'Ausminster' system. The uniquely Australian features of Australian government administration which have evolved over time derive from many sources. These include the differences in the Australian Constitution from other countries' foundation documents. Legal case law has evolved in characteristically Australian directions. Parliamentary processes have evolved to meet uniquely Australian political and administrative needs. Uniquely Australian public administration institutions and processes have evolved. There is certainly a uniquely Australian 'culture' in the APS.

In my view we should be very proud of our uniquely Australian model of public administration. For me the fact that it has evolved far from its Westminster origins is thoroughly positive. It captures the dual ideas of the APS as a great, continuing national institution – but one which at the same time is responsive and ready to change – that is, a willingness to continue to adapt to Australian circumstances and national needs. Here in Canberra we should never forget that there is no special community respect for the centuries-old Westminster model. The Australian community wants a model that works for them in their current circumstances. We should be applauding not apologising for the progressive departures over the years from old models originating in old countries, and assertively affirming the resulting strengths of the younger, tailored Australian model of public administration.

And that model will and should continue to change. The case for necessary further public administration reform can be built around the uniquely Australian policy challenges ahead. The strength of Ausminster is its fluidity and capacity to continue to adapt to Australia's own

future. We have moved sufficiently close to our own Ausminster model I think it is time to stop using the Westminster misnomer.

## The Australian Public Service

Clearly, I am a fan of the APS. However it is no secret that at least outside Canberra, not everyone is. Public servants seem to spend too much of their time apologising. It was partly for those reasons that when I was the president of the Institute of Public Administration in the ACT over the period including 2001 we decided to make a concerted effort to improve the self image, and the public image, of the Australian Public Service. The year 2001 was of course the centenary of federation and therefore the centenary of the Australian Public Service. At the Institute of Public Administration Australia we decided to go for broke and organise an unapologetic celebration. After all, no-one else was likely to organise one for us.

To celebrate this occasion, we held what was then the largest ever dinner in the Great Hall of Parliament House. We saluted past and present public servants, including representative middle and junior level public servants invited along for the night. The [then] Governor General [Sir William Deane] himself immortalised the public servants of 2001 in a centenary plaque which you can find outside the administrative building. There were many other agency-specific events organised. For example, Defence built a monument to intelligence officers past and present – an anonymous group of public servants never before publicly acknowledged. We even startled the tourist visitors to Canberra by having APS centenary flags flying along Commonwealth Avenue for the week as though we were a visiting football team. It was a fun week but with a serious message. We were acknowledging 100 years of public service by the Australian Public Service. And not before time.

## Canberra

I wanted to say a word or two about Canberra. Though many of our public servants are not Canberra-based, Canberra is clearly the home of the APS. Canberra gets bad press. It is said to be out of touch, theoretical, unrealistic and elitist. Visitors, we are told, get lost in Canberra in many senses. They say that Canberra goes in circles; is a waste of a perfectly good sheep station; the best thing about Canberra is that there are good roads out of it; it is only three hours from Sydney and two hours from the coast; and so on. But Canberra to me is a critical part of the aforementioned unique Ausminster model. Canberra's business is government. No dinner party happens without a spirited exchange about public policy. Ideas move in and around the city much more easily than they would if our national capital were a five million person diversified urban giant.

With the benefit of hindsight

Australia may be a big continent, but it is a small nation governed from a small city. For that reason it is much more governable than for example the United States or Europe. From my own experience, when I have issues that need to be resolved – I almost always know the people involved – either in Canberra or in the state governments. Consequently, I can pick up the phone and if not resolve the issue then and there, at least have the opportunity to do so. But managing issues in that way is much less feasible in the US or Europe and would certainly be much less so without our Canberra. Government business works when the business of government is the business of the whole town.

Having said that, Canberra has come a long way even in the time Margaret and I have been here. Canberrans support – almost insist on – fantastic art, cultural and recreational opportunities, Australia's best educational standards, world class science and brain-based enterprises, flagship national institutions such as The Australian National University, the national collections and a burgeoning services sector based on consultancies (which are often themselves spawned from people and ideas from the national government). Canberra is a stimulating top-end intellectual environment. Canberra and the APS feed off each other and long may it continue.

## **The National Water Commission**

My most recent appointment has been as Chair and CEO of the National Water Commission. I approached then Prime Minister Howard requesting that appointment after two successive appointments as portfolio secretary. I well remember David Borthwick, then Deputy Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, being incredulous that a secretary would do such a thing – ask to move to a non-secretary role. He did not understand at all. I equally well remember David confiding in me years later that he was about to pull the plug on his own appointment as Secretary of the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. I reminded him of our earlier conversation; he understood well by then.

My six years with the National Water Commission have been among my most rewarding of all my years in the APS. The Commission is a unique creature in public administration. It is an independent statutory body formed for the express purpose of criticising the federal and state governments that created it. It exists to blow the whistle if the water reforms to which all Australian governments have committed are not delivered. Unusually, it has a public and media advocacy role – a role I have exercised with discretion and, I hope, judgment.

The Commission is at once a critic, as well as a player on the water reform stage. It provides not only policy advice, but also manages programs, initiates action and facilitates cooperation among water reform players. It comprises commissioners nominated by the states and others nominated by the Commonwealth. In a conspicuous breach of good governance principles, it produces a public report card on the achievements of the very minister to whom it reports. ('Talks a lot in and out of school. Could do better'.) It is definitely a bold experiment in the design of public institutions.

I am enormously proud of what the Commission has done. But I am more proud of how it has done it. The Commission has been scrupulously principled from the outset. It has criticised, yes, but always with careful attention to the evidence. It has been decent in its dealings with officials from the states and territories but has always told it like it is. It has worked hard and systematically on its stakeholder relationships. To this day it enjoys warm support from dark green environmental groups, red-necked industry groups, uber-rational science groups and soft, people-focussed community groups. It prides itself on its integrity.

Around the Commission table itself some of the commissioners have quite literally forgotten whether they were originally nominated by the states or the Commonwealth. They act, as required by their Act, in the best interests of the Commission, not their antecedents.

The National Water Commission is in some senses a mirror of my APS career. The APS values and ethos that so attracted me all those years ago when I followed my telegram to Defence permeate the Commission. It works on a vital national issue and is prepared to tell truths when they need to be told. The work of Commission staff has a hard edge: they insist on logic, rationality and evidence. But there is also a softer team culture of decency, affection for each other and respect, including respect for the many different water stakeholders. The commissioners, who run the place, are unfailingly decent in their dealings with the staff, who do the running. That sort of culture attracts able people. It attracts people who take ethics, values and decent behaviour seriously.

It has been a privilege to serve alongside such principled people for thirty-six years. It says something about the APS culture that so many public servants have attended this valedictory lecture despite the fact I am sure they have many more important tasks to address. But somehow, given the Australian Public Service collegiate culture we share and which we will pass on, I am not surprised.