Preface

'That won't take you long!' was the light but rueful refrain of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior public servants in the Northern Territory, on hearing I wanted to interview them for this research. There were indeed few of them, relative to the Northern Territory's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. In the face of continuing indicators of socioeconomic disadvantage in their communities, why had so few Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people joined government departments? After all, government develops the policies and designs the programs that fund the organisations that deliver the services to their people.

The very idea of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander senior public servant remixes the usual counterpositioning of coloniser/colonised, government/Indigenous people, actor/acted upon. Something new is suggested. One interviewee who had been drawn into the public service through the vague enticements of Indigenous employment policies in the sprawling, racially divided and intricately networked desert town of Alice Springs told me:

> We're not only seen as statespersons for government, we're also seen as statespersons for our people.

Statespersons for *both* government and his people? Kel, as I call him, went on to explain:

> We're not owned by this mob, we're not owned by that mob.

'Government' and 'our people' were distinct mobs, but they were both potential audiences for these 'statespersons'. This seasoned Aboriginal senior public servant knew his family and country and had lived most of his life in and out of his much-romanticised dry desert town; yet he felt disowned, his identity suspended between

'this mob' and 'that mob', government and community. Hearing Kel's words in the cool, comfortable office that belied the tensions of his role, I wondered what part issues of belonging and identity played in the relatively low numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior public servants.

This book is informed, enlivened and inspired by my 2007 interviews with past and present Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in Australia's Northern Territory. The interviews were no doubt coloured by unfolding political events. Just as our conversations began, the Australian Government declared an emergency intervention in the Northern Territory's remote Aboriginal communities—so the words quoted in this book came from people at a particular place in a particularly heady time. Then again, policy change has been one of the great constants in Australian Indigenous affairs. The issues raised by the interviewees could well resonate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in other times, places and work settings—indeed, for all with a stake in building more responsive and more democratic government. But the extent to which my interviewees' experiences are transferable beyond the Northern Territory is a matter for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to consider. If this book generates interest in the issues that lie behind Indigenous public sector employment policies, for those who develop them and for those who participate in them, I will have met my mark.

A word about myself. I had lived in the Northern Territory since 1984, and at the time of the interviews I had been a senior public servant in the Northern Territory Government for some 20 years. I was known in the Northern Territory community and could orient myself in the physical and political geographies of my informants' working lives. I had visited many of their communities and knew some of their families through genealogical research in my earlier work on land claims. This shared history deepened our conversations, but it sometimes divided us. For some, I had been—still was—the galling white middle-class colleague from elsewhere. This may be so, but I treasure our continuing association.

Setting up the doctoral research that underpins this book required substantial legwork and attention to ethics. The recruitment process approved by The Australian National University (ANU) Ethics Committee had been designed with personal invitations in mind,

but the Northern Territory Government's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment statistics only reported position levels and departments. Privacy laws prevented the Commissioner for Public Employment or any department from releasing employee names. Indeed, the Commissioner for Public Employment had no central record of the names of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. The integrity of the research relied on the appearance and reality of my independence from the government, but I needed permission to approach public servants personally. Thanks to championing by my industry adviser, Dennis Bree, the Northern Territory Government opened its doors to the research without asking for more than the protection of employees' privacy and a copy of the final thesis. Department chiefs accepted the terms: employees could be interviewed in departmental offices and meeting rooms during working hours without having to report their participation more officially.

Once these assurances were in place, I drew on collegiate relationships with a few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants for the first interviews. The social field revealed itself organically as I was steered towards an informal network of present and past employees. That an interviewee had been a Northern Territory Government employee at any time was straightforward enough to become a necessary condition of participation. Employment in a senior role was less easily established without an interview. If someone was referred to me, I asked for an interview. Prospective participants had time to consider the aim of the research and conditions of participation before we got to the point of invitation. Invitees were given advance notice of the questions before signing their consent. Interviewees chose the time, place and method of recording and were free to withdraw their participation at any stage, without explanation.

Despite the warnings, it took the best part of a year to set up and record 76 semi-structured, conversational interviews. Each interview was as long as it needed to be—usually one to two hours. We met in interviewees' fluorescent-lit air-conditioned offices and under corporate artworks in meeting rooms. Some preferred my quiet office amid the tropical frangipani at the ANU North Australia Research Unit in Darwin or the corkwoods and buffel grass of the Desert Knowledge Precinct in Alice Springs. Some nominated coffee shops or their homes, where we were memorably interrupted by a topical interjection from one interviewee's house painter. Some of the very

few interviewees who had moved interstate agreed to the telephone. One tracked me down on a return visit to the Territory. I felt inhabited by the interviews, hearing them, replaying them later, transcribing them, checking the transcriptions and listening again. The stories were of lives and careers different from my own, but they were made strangely familiar by the corporate history and bureaucratic language we shared.

The interviewees' identities have been protected. Pseudonyms are used throughout the book. Departmental functions are renamed to avoid recognition. At the request of interviewees, the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are used when referring to them in preference to the generic 'Indigenous'. Torres Strait Islander connections are only specified where interviewees emphasised those connections and where specifying them does not reveal any identity. Of course, some interviewees will recognise their own stories. Some have chosen to reveal their identities since the research, indeed a few have expressed interest in archiving their interviews for future public access. While I welcome that project, the original consent agreements protect all interviewees from any breach of privacy on my part. This condition is essential to the quality of the research and the relationships on which it depends, as the Northern Territory is a small place in which identities are easily revealed.

One person should be named here, although not as an interviewee. The Northern Territory community was devastated by the loss of a beloved friend and colleague when Karmi Sceney, a senior Aboriginal public servant who came from the Tiwi Islands, was killed in a light plane crash along with her husband and two Ethiopian daughters in 2012. I had first met Karmi, then Karmi Dunn, when we both worked in the Office of Aboriginal Development in 1992. Karmi went on to become the elected chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission's Yilli Rreung Regional Council before returning to the Northern Territory Public Service some years later as a senior consultant on Aboriginal education. Hers was a voice like no other. Karmi pushed the Northern Territory Government from the inside, calling out inconsistencies in policy, in particular inadequacies in Aboriginal schooling, and urging her people to be more active participants in government. When I re-entered the Northern Territory Government with the new title of Dr Elizabeth Ganter in 2011, Karmi was a critical friend and advocate for this research.

Initially wary, Karmi blazed my trail at the postdoctoral presentations and executive seminars that followed. Karmi urged me to go harder and further in communicating the work, and her terrible and untimely death committed me to publishing my findings.

The book manuscript would not have been started without a Research Fellowship with the ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR). Thank you to Matthew Gray, then director, for inviting me in; to later director, Jerry Schwab, for so generously supporting the publication; and to Frances Morphy, for unflagging editorial support throughout. Thank you to Julie Lahn and Nick Biddle for collegiate engagement on their related project about the Australian Public Service and to Janet Hunt, Katie Curchin, Inge Kral, Boyd Hunter, Marisa Fogarty, Denise Steele, Tracy Deasey and all other CAEPR colleagues for their interest, encouragement and friendship. Thank you very much again, always, my partner Will Sanders, for your constancy and intellect, and for showing me how writing can sing.

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For reasons of privacy, I cannot name the many outstanding public service colleagues, in the Northern Territory and in Canberra, whose frank insights and imaginative support of my academic work have contributed so much to this project, in early and recent times. I acknowledge every one of you and will happily sign your book.

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Settlement'. This project analysed the interplay between the supply and demand for services to desert communities (see Moran et al. 2009). Thank you to Mark Stafford Smith, Jocelyn Davies, Mark Moran, Patrick Sullivan, Sarah Holcombe, Ruth Elvin and later Nora Devoe, for helping my crossover into research. Although independently conceived and investigated, the contribution of my research to the larger Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre project was to question and complicate the assumption of government as supplier and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the demand side, only ever the consumers of government services. In a representative bureaucracy, the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants not only generates demand from within the nooks and crannies of government, but also involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on the supply side.

I am deeply indebted to Professor Tim Rowse of the ANU History program for his dedication to this project as my PhD supervisor, not to mention our meetings since as civilians (coffee then, whiskey now). I am very grateful to the other panel members, Professors Richard Mulgan and Diane Austin-Broos and Mr Dennis Bree of the Northern Territory Government, and to Professor Ann McGrath for taking on the roles of panel chair and submission-day photographer so enthusiastically at the end. I am also grateful to Francesca Merlan, Tom Griffiths, Nicholas Brown, Marian Sawer, Emma Kowal, David Martin, Julie Finlayson, Doris Kordes, Karen Downing, Christian O'Brien, Kristal Coe, Danielle Spruyt, Bentley James and Nicole Everett for astute observations and support at various stages of the project. I am beyond grateful to Melissa Lovell, Katie Curchin and Penelope Marshall for exposing this social anthropologist to the treasures of political theory.

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Now to Sarah Nelson. I met Sarah in the Northern Territory Department of Community Development in 1986. Sarah is an Anmatjerre woman from Stirling Station, also known as Wilora (meaning 'sandy country') in central Australia. In the many years since she quietly left the public service, Sarah has been friend and family. She is now a soaring artist, and I thank her very much for her generous permission to reproduce on the front cover her beautiful representation of the shapes in the sand.

Finally I acknowledge my two sons, William and Frankie Braybon, who lost their father to cancer in the early stages of this book. I salute their bravery and resilience and the memory of John William Braybon, who never gave up.

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