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Of ‘trifles’ and ‘manhole covers’: The practitioner–academic interface¹

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The occasion of John Wanna’s festschrift is an opportunity to review the breadth of his interests and research, and his activism at the interface between policy, politics and public administration. On that basis, we may also consider some of the key issues in the interaction between academics and public servants that John’s career highlights, while looking forward, of course, to his continuing involvement in driving and contributing to such developments.

It is perhaps worth noting that John’s career has broadly coincided with tectonic movements in the relationships between the theoretical and applied fields of political science, policy studies and public administration. The fraught relationship between political science and the field of public administration from which it emerged is a key aspect of that history. The need for a better relationship between scholarship and practice was raised in the very first issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly* in 1956. The editor stressed the need for administrative scholars ‘to explore empirical findings in the social sciences which may be pertinent and, when necessary, to translate these into administrative situations’ (quoted in Bartunek and

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Rynes 2014). But as the field of public administration narrowed down to a focus on 'public management' over the 70s and 80s, the distance between political science and public administration widened, with the debate between them rarely giving much attention to practitioner perspectives (Bartunek and Rynes 2014; Scott 2003; Kettl 2000).

In short, it may seem that not much has changed since a paper prepared for the Committee on Public Administration of the American Political Science Association in 1952 argued:

there is a feeling among political scientists ... that academics who profess public administration spend their time fooling with trifles. It was a sad day when the first professor of political science learned what a manhole cover is! (Martin 1952)²

Wanna's career is striking in its divergence from this history. He has demonstrated that professors of public administration do far more than fool with trifles; and not only has he forged a career in lifting manhole covers, in many cases he has jumped right in!

Wanna has insisted that 'the distinctive feature of public administration as a field [is] its dual reliance on practitioners ... and academics as contributors' (Scott and Wanna 2005). Moreover, he has been one of those rare scholars whose interest, enthusiasm and output have enriched all three fields: from providing the broadest overviews of the field of public administration (Scott and Wanna 2005; Wanna and Weller 2003), to his history of the practices of the first audit office (Wanna and Ryan 2003), or the implementation of accrual budgeting (Kelly and Wanna 2004);³ from normative debate, in his polemic over the appropriate role of public managers in the emerging era of public value management (Rhodes and Wanna 2007), to his close empirical studies of the appointments of secretaries (Weller and Wanna 1997), public expenditure (Wanna, Forster and Kelly 2000; Wanna, Jensen and de Vries 2003), implementation (Wanna, Lindquist and Marshall 2015) and so on.

In that work, he has not only been a leading researcher and communicator, but also has actively engaged and communicated with the public service. In this latter context, I had the pleasure of working with John on the first

² See Paul 't Hart's contribution to this volume for his experience of this attitude.

³ *Pace* Rubin's view that 'it is difficult to study budgeting as an academic without either a practitioner background or mindset' (quoted in Posner 2009).

annual research conference organised by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), held in Canberra in February 2006 in conjunction with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). The topic of that conference was 'Project Management and Organisational Change' (Wanna 2006) and the series continues to provide an opportunity for the application of research to significant issues in public administration.

As editor of the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* from March 1996 until the end of 2014, he played a leading role in making the synthesis between policy and administration 'the new paradigm', as Ahamed and Davis call it in their overview of the history of Australian scholarship in the field (Ahamed and Davis 2009), even though such a synthesis was considered implausible by earlier commentators.⁴ In so doing, he has followed his own precepts for good public policy scholarship: first, that it should engage with real problems without becoming 'sycophantic or clientelist' (Wanna 2003); and second, that the facts should always take priority over the commentary. Even as *The Age* portrayed him as 'a self-described moderate left-winger', sympathetic to Pusey's widely read critique of economic rationalism back in 1993, the paper noted his accusation that 'one of Professor Pusey's central notions is based on bad counting' (Walker 1993).

In sum, although not, strictly speaking, a 'pracademic' in the sense in which Posner popularised the term – that is, someone who has occupied significant positions as both an academic and a public servant – Professor Wanna has nevertheless played a significant role in 'translating, coordinating and aligning perspectives across multiple constituencies' (Posner 2009).

Given such a breadth of interests and his activism at the interface between policy, politics and public administration, the occasion of this festschrift is an opportunity to consider some of the key issues raised by the interaction between academics and public servants.

This interaction takes place in, and responds to, two temporal settings. The first involves the windows of opportunity regularly opened by short-to-medium-term reviews, such as the *Ahead of the Game* review in 2010 (Moran and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2010),

⁴ This synthesis was also exemplified in textbooks such as *Public Sector Management in Australia* (Wanna, Weller and O'Faircheallaigh 1992).

the Thodey review of the ‘capability, culture and operating model of the APS’ (Australian Government 2018), and by similar reviews underway or recently completed by state governments. This category also includes responses to catastrophic failures such as the Palmer and Comrie reports on detainees in 2005, the Hammer report on the home insulation program in 2015 and Peter Shergold’s wider review of implementation, *Learning from Failure* (Shergold 2015).

The medium-to-longer-term context involves the shift from new public management (NPM) models of public service to emergent new forms, such as new public governance (Rhodes 2016), digital or information-age governance (Wanna and Vincent 2018; Dunleavy et al. 2006), collaborative governance (Shergold 2016) and neo-Weberianism (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). The variety and complexity of these post-NPM models is compounded by the emergence of public sector models from outside the Anglosphere and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Legrand 2016; Pollitt 2015).

These two temporal perspectives are, of course, closely related. The public sector’s capacity for ‘continual intellectual renewal, through thought and design and implementation’ remains as relevant today as when this was a key theme of the Coombs Royal Commission on Australian Government Administration in the mid-70s (Rowse 2002), and will inform the longer-term trajectories I have mentioned. Future demands on and expectations of the public service from governments and citizens will naturally test its capabilities and require further reform measures. In both the short- and longer-term contexts, Posner’s prediction that ‘the nexus between academics and practitioners will become, if anything, even more important in addressing both research and education needs for the public sector’ continues to ring true (Posner 2009).

With those settings in mind, I derive the following learnings from my brief look at Wanna’s career.

1. Perhaps most importantly, academics and practitioners need to consciously and explicitly ground their collaboration in the norms, values and principles of public sector work.

That is not to suggest that these normative settings are unchangeable, universal or even necessarily enunciated and articulated. On the contrary, rather than assuming complexity away in *a priori* models of causation that have little interest in the very factors that make public

sector work distinctive, academics need to be prepared to recognise the complex, contested wellsprings of public administration. They need to understand and explain how its distinctive formal and informal rules, conventions and values, patterns of interaction, agency and legitimacy are routinely exploited and interpreted in the face of policy challenges, and how practitioners' behaviours and roles reflect the real dilemmas and issues they face.

In a recent interview, the eminent political scientist and economist Francis Fukuyama expressed astonishment that his university, Stanford, and American universities generally, have 'lost a sense of their role in training American elites about their own institutions' (Goldstein 2018).

Wanna's own work has embodied a counter-tradition, such as his examination of the way senior civil servants place themselves in a variety of Westminster traditions that shape their working life, how they re-engaged with and reinvented those traditions (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2008); and the need to embody those traditions in public sector responsiveness (Wanna 2008; Lindquist, Vincent and Wanna 2013).

In an editorial Wanna co-wrote with Glyn Davis in 1997 on teaching public administration, he advised 'a chance through study to read and discuss questions of purpose and direction is an important balance to daily demands' (Davis and Wanna 1997). Academics need to help public servants identify and become familiar with the arguments and counter-arguments around concepts like the meaning and measurement of public value;⁵ the nature and variety of the ways public servants relate to the political executive, such as through public sector bargains (Hood and Lodge 2006); the challenges and opportunities of alternative paradigms and models of public administration (e.g. Wanna, Butcher and Freyen's analysis (2010) of how the Australian welfare state has developed); how the institutions of our democracy affect, and are affected by, the public sector's work and role (Ventriss et al. 2019); and the role public servants play in maintaining a balance between institutional resilience and stability, on the one hand, and innovation and change in incremental and more fundamental forms, on the other.⁶

5 See, for example, Moore (1995, 2014) and Rhodes and Wanna's critique of the public value paradigm in Rhodes and Wanna (2009).

6 See, for example, Bovaird and Quirk (2016).

Wanna's aforementioned challenge to the role that the prevalent public value paradigm accords public servants (Rhodes and Wanna 2009) illustrates how these are matters of robust contestation and debate, not just technical transmission in a lecture theatre. However, if the provision of support for ministers in the future will require renewed value to be ascribed to traditional craft skills like counselling, stewardship, practical wisdom and political nous, and requires public servants to negotiate values, meanings and relationships (Rhodes 2016), these skills and the training to acquire them need to be grounded in the broader narratives, paradigms and discourses of public service.

2. Part of this re-engagement with public sector values and norms should include an engagement with public service history.

This point deepens the previous point's focus on the idea of the public service as an institution with its own trajectories and sources of equilibrium and change.

Wanna has consistently argued that the retrospective study of public administration has value, warning 'we should not be so focused on the issues of the day that we lose the capacity to contextualise those issues or to imagine alternative approaches' (Scott and Wanna 2005). Examples of such engagement in Wanna's case include his review of the traditions of Australian governance, and the role they have played in 'establishing and adapting the public sector' (Wanna and Weller 2003); and, a couple of years later, his review of Australian administrative history, responding to a concern from practitioners that the literature 'merely documents yesteryear and records where we have been, rather than giving us future insights' (Scott and Wanna 2005).

High rates of interorganisational mobility, porous organisational structures, regular organisational restructuring, the loss of traditional record-keeping practices and increasing co-design and delivery with the private and non-profit sectors make it difficult for public servants themselves to become the custodians of institutional memory.⁷ At risk, therefore, is an understanding of what worked and what didn't; how and why the norms and values I mentioned earlier have developed

7 As an empirical example of the argument put here, Stark's recent comparison of institutional memory loss in public sector organisations in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK emphasises the 'formal-institutional, the agential, and the contextual dimensions of memory' (2019).

over time; how these norms and values are reflected in organisations and institutions; why institutional cultures of policy design and delivery have evolved and why they might be different.

One potential role for academics in that environment is to work with practitioners to supply them with the tools (narratives, discourses, ideas), and the actual venues and practices, in which such memory work might be operationalised. Such work could differentiate between the administrative and policy histories of particular kinds of public sector work, such as regulation or network management; or follow the particular policy trajectories of, say, environmental policy, fiscal policy, social policy and so on.

3. Academics should engage with practitioners to help frame questions, problems and issues.

As I interviewed a very senior public servant in a state Department of the Premier and Cabinet for my research, I noticed that he had made notes against the questions I'd sent him in advance. When I thanked him, with some embarrassment, for taking the time to do that, out of what must have been a horrendous schedule, he graciously responded by saying that he should thank me for giving him the opportunity to step back and reflect on his work; something he thought all public servants should do, from time to time.

As 'the interpreters of interpretations' (Sullivan 2016), academics play a critical role in uncovering, and making such frames and discourses explicit and available for scrutiny by practitioners, particularly where there is a multiplicity of roles and discourses at play with little formal acknowledgement of their impact. Again, such interpretation can apply to broad fields in public administration or more specific policy issues and their history. As practitioners become aware of such frames, they also become aware of alternative ways of framing their practice. They become aware of the values and norms that their work has prioritised, and those that have been given less importance, or left out altogether (Schön 1983). An interesting example of such work can be found in Podger and Wanna's introduction to the collected valedictories of Australian departmental secretaries, in which they emphasise the variety of views these mandarins express on 'how the public service looks to them, on its performance and on the challenges confronting public administration into the future' (Wanna, Vincent and Podger 2012).

Such framing also helps practitioners understand the systemic linkages and connections that characterise their policy fields or programs, together with the consequences and effects generated by such linkages.

Public servants are working in a policy environment characterised by multiple and overlapping complex problems, a high degree of uncertainty about means and ends, few expert actors to whom practitioners can turn for technical solutions and weakened traditional hierarchical models of public sector organisation (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018). Responding to that environment involves a high level of competence in what White and McSwain call ‘the structuralist attitude’ (McSwite 2001, 113): understanding systemic and localised links, patterns, causes, norms, and being able to ‘discern (or be schooled to discern) the basic shape and direction, that is, the tendencies of the specific situations in which they [find] themselves’ (White and McSwain 1990, 9). As these authors point out, such competence is at least one aim of the case study method adopted in the US and by ANZSOG here, and needs to be accompanied by academic guidance and mentoring. A return to, or at least buttressing, the craft skills alluded to earlier would equally require the kinds of ‘theory competency’ academics might help practitioners acquire.

4. Academics need to collaborate with practitioners to help fit public sector organisational cultures to new tasks and roles.

In one of his articles on the debate over public sector regeneration, Wanna argues his role, and the role academics should perform more generally, is to be ‘a bit iconoclastic’; to ask ‘what rationales, reasons, precepts and assumptions are hidden behind the debate about regeneration?’ (Wanna 2005).

Politicians, academics and senior public servants have been drawing attention to the increasing ‘scope, pace and nature of change’ in the public sector ever since Wilson’s classic nineteenth-century essay noted that ‘the functions of government are every day becoming more complex and difficult, they are also vastly multiplying in number’ (1887).⁸ Few APS leaders in recent years have failed to call for greater innovation and risk-taking in the public service.⁹

8 More recently, cf. Reid (1983). Encel, Wilenski and Schaffer (1981) describe public administration becoming ‘more complex, difficult and messier’ because of expanding areas of government activity and citizens’ reluctance to passively accept government decisions.

9 Other paradigms, such as ‘collaboration’ and ‘joined up government’ in all its forms, have similarly been around since the early 2000s (Halligan, Buick and Flynn 2011).

As head of PM&C, Peter Shergold frequently remarked on the difficulty of changing cultures, compared with changing organisational structures and processes. This is where, it seems to me, an important academic contribution can be made.

The exercise of agency, within formal and normative frameworks for accountability and performance, is a critical ingredient in equipping public sector organisations and their employees to deal with the challenges their current and future environments present.

Yet for all that, the question of how innovation should be balanced and shaped by its public sector context is seldom raised, let alone detailed, in the frequent exhortations by prime ministers and senior public service managers to be more innovative and less risk-averse. For example, it is important to appreciate that a fundamental role of the public sector is to provide the formal, legal certainty of the rule of law and administration that allows individuals and businesses to operate with confidence. As Podger argues, innovation in the public sector is not the same as innovation in the private sector (Podger 2015).

Apart from the obvious conditions and resources required for organisational autonomy and the exercise of discretion, when we talk about 'innovation' we are really talking about the reframing vital as a precondition for ensuring public sector organisations are innovative, including framework goals and performance measures; providing sufficient autonomy to lower-level units to implement these goals as they see fit, and to propose changes to them; regular performance reporting and peer review; and periodic revision of the goals, metrics and methods (Sabel and Zeitlin 2008).

Consequently, agency involves a temporal orientation: understanding the routines and traditions of the past and their constraining, taken-for-granted schemas of action; the imaginative, idealistic projection of strategies into the future; and the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements about the demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). All these are matters that I have suggested should form a focus for the way academics and practitioners collaborate.

In conclusion, as the inaugural Sir John Bunting Chair of Public Administration at ANZSOG and The Australian National University, Wanna's name is indelibly linked to that consummate public servant, under whose leadership:

governments [were] effectively supported in a period of transition from a small, rule-bound and administratively-oriented service to a large, professionally and policy-focused agency capable of responding to a whole new order of demands from ministers and governments. (Bailey 1995)

Professor Wanna's contribution has shown us the importance of the academic–practitioner interface in effecting the next stage of that transition.

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