



Don Dunstan Oration
Monday 5 December 2011
Convention Centre

Hon Jay Weatherill MP
Premier of South Australia

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Acknowledgments

- Ms Elaine Bensted, President, South Australian branch of the Institute of Public Administration Australia
- Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

We acknowledge that this land we meet on today is the traditional land of the Kaurna people, and we respect their spiritual relationship with their country.

It is great to be here tonight to give the 2011 Don Dunstan Oration.

As we all know, Don was a great reformer – and never one to underestimate the importance of government and the public sector.

Right until the last, Don maintained his belief that government plays a crucial role in South Australia – the role that underpinned his dramatic changes to Aboriginal policy, social norms, electoral reform, environmental management - his transformation of South Australia.

Sometimes I wonder – if Don were to have a look at the public sector now – tour one of our departments – how much would have changed since the 1970s?

Certainly it would look pretty different. The typing pools have gone – we're all masters of our own keyboards these days. Let alone the mobile phones and other gadgets that strew our desks.

But – sadly - we remain a pretty conservatively dressed bunch - despite Don's best efforts for reform in this area.

More seriously, I think that - despite the superficial differences - the fundamental work of the public service remains the same.

And that is to serve the people of South Australia – to implement the policies and services that our community needs, and to work towards a bright future for our State.

Recently, I noted an article in The Advertiser that featured the public service as both the largest – and the most desirable - employer in South Australia.

This article pointed out that the reason that people want to work for Government – and the reason that people who do find it fulfilling – is that public service is the best way to make a difference to people's lives.

People become public servants because they want to help others. They are motivated by the idea of service.

Public sector performance

Perhaps the key question for me – and for all the leaders in our public sector is – do we meet these aspirations? Can public servants fulfil their best intentions?

Certainly there is no other time when we have had more need for this to be the case. Greg has already alluded to the complexity of the challenges – and the opportunities – that we face.

And perhaps the greatest challenge is that our work is crucial to tackle these issues – yet the pressure on our budget is unrelenting. We need the best – not the biggest – public sector.

Key to our performance - in difficult times and good - is our productivity.

Public sector productivity, is however, a little difficult to define exactly - unlike private sector productivity, which can be a simple measure of price assessed against costs.

Our productivity imperative is to deliver better results for our community.

It's the quality - not the quantity - of the services that we provide that truly define public sector productivity.

It's not just a matter of how many children we educate – but making sure that South Australians have high literacy and numeracy skills. It's not just how many health services we deliver – but how healthy our community is.

The measure of our productivity is the results we deliver for our community

We often hear of 'public value' – and to my mind, this is what is referred to – literally, the value to the community of the work that we do.

So, how do we realise this value – the true value of the public service?

And, more importantly, how do we make the most of the enthusiasm of our people to make a real difference – harness this so that the public sector as a whole is the best performing body it can be?

I want to suggest three areas for us to tackle – innovation, customer service and citizen engagement.

Innovation in the public service

South Australia has a proud history of innovation.

And there's no better time to remember this than in a lecture given in Don Dunstan's name.

Perhaps Don's greatest legacy for South Australia was the renewal of this great tradition after decades of conservatism.

Don showed us that we can be the State that leads – that we can make courageous decisions and implement new ideas. We can be the place that transforms innovation into practice.

I have no doubt that this tradition – the inquiring mind – continues to thrive in our public sector. The problem is that it is not always able to express itself.

Recently we have had John McTernan here as a Thinker in Residence exploring these issues.

I am looking forward to John's final recommendations – but I am sure that they will focus on ways that we can unleash and use the creativity and practical experience of our public servants.

John has made the rather telling point that if we call people 'bureaucrats' then that's how they'll act – bureaucratically. Language is important.

But I think John's most important observation was that we should not put the rules we create above all else – above initiative, above innovation, and above the dedication that so many public servants show in their work.

Of course, we have rules for good reason.

I am not suggesting that the rule book can be trashed altogether.

On the contrary.

We must ensure that high standards of accountability and ethical behaviour are not compromised.

But this does not mean – it must not mean – that our employees are denied the freedom to explore new ideas and, occasionally, to take a calculated risk where the promise of better outcome for our citizens justifies it.

We need to give all public servants permission to innovate...to work within a culture that does not focus on the risk of failure at the expense of new ideas.

After all, it is the interests of our citizens that motivates people to become public servants in the first place.

And we must always place our citizens at the heart of everything we do. So, we need to constantly ask ourselves if this is what we are doing.

Customer service

If somebody joins the public service, will they feel that they have come to the right place to support South Australians, or will they feel that surprised or disappointed that, in fact, citizens and their needs are not our main priority?

I think that we don't always get this right.

There can be a tendency for people who work in the public service to systems to look inwards, to become preoccupied with their internal machinations and many processes of their organisation.

This has not always been the fault of the agencies themselves; we have all had a part to play in bringing this about.

The growing level of public scrutiny, our increasing expectations of ever increasing performance within constant budgetary pressures, the sheer complexity of many of the issues we deal with have all contributed to this situation.

But a way must be found to reconnect with our citizens, to restore them to their rightful place at the centre of everything we do.

In recent years, there has been a strong emphasis on customer service within the public service - and this has been very helpful in focusing our efforts outwards – helping us to concentrate on the people who receive our services.

By way of an example – when we developed our Children’s Centres, in which we provide a range of services for children and their families under one roof – we deliberately approached the task by first identifying the needs of children in the community in which a children’s centre was located, and then developing the services that those children needed.

So it was not a one-size-fits-all model, but rather a model oriented to the particular needs of the citizens being served.

Engaging the community

But I also think that we need to move beyond the notion of customer service.

Because our citizens are not merely customers.

As a Canadian report into their public service described it:

“The customer...does not share common purposes with a wider community, but seeks instead to maximise his or her own individual advantage.

If a customer is unsatisfied with a transaction, he or she is free to abandon the relationship and is expected to do so.

A citizen, by contrast, is expected to work in concert with others, through democratic means, to alter the unsatisfactory state of affairs”¹.

¹ John C Tait *A Strong Foundation: Report of the Task Force on Public Service Values and Ethics* p31

The most effective way to provide services, to young and old, is to truly engage with the people receiving them.

The best services, therefore, happen when we work in tandem with the aspirations that people hold for themselves and their children.

We want to redefine the relationship between public servants and citizens from one based on dependency – to one based on a mutual exchange of knowledge.

I don't think this is a new idea – ask any teacher, and they'll tell you that the most important people in a child's education are their parents.

Ask any nurse and they will tell you that the person who cares the most about a patient's health is that patient.

We need government and citizens to work together on the design and delivery of public services.

And I use the word 'citizens' quite deliberately here.

Last week, I gave the Dean Jaensch lecture and talked about the need for government to make a greater effort to incorporate public judgement in our decision making.

But I also emphasised the need for mutual responsibility.

That we need our citizens to make thoughtful contributions – based on a willingness to understand the context in which we make our decisions, and the consequences of our choices.

I actually think that people are very responsive to this – that if they are asked respectfully to participate as citizens – then they will.

And I think that many of our public servants understand this as well. They see that a better relationship between themselves and the people they serve is possible.

What we need to do now is to find new ways to put this understanding into practice.

Conclusion - a new conversation with DPC

So to release the value of the public sector, I think that we need to focus on these three things - the importance of innovation, customer service and citizen engagement.

Of course, this means that we need to hear about your ideas on these matters – and as any Minister or Chief Executive will tell you – that’s not always easy.

John McTernan spoke most forcefully about the often slow and cumbersome process by which information can be fed up the line.

Yes – that process is often in place for a good reason – and we do need to ensure that the right people are accountable for the information and advice provided to Ministers.

But surely there are ways in which we can have other conversations.

Ministers cannot live on briefing notes alone.

During my time as Minister for Education, I put aside time each week to speak directly to school principals, and, I will say, I found this tremendously helpful.

During these conversations, principals were often able to tell me directly what was important to them – and also to flag upcoming issues or difficulties.

I don’t say this to sideline public servants – quite the opposite. In fact, I want to hear more from public servants, not less.

I want to foster a culture and an attitude within the public sector that your opinion does matter – and your ideas for change will be welcomed.

To this end, next week, I am starting a new conversation with my Department, the Department of Premier and Cabinet. I am going to use social media as a tool to talk directly to public servants in DPC.

I want to hear their ideas, their views and their thoughts on how we can best engage with our community in the design and delivery of our services.

I would like them to feel free to tell me about the experiences they may have had – possibly good and bad – and the ideas that these experiences have generated - in the most open way possible.

And I want to hear their views on suggestions that I receive– because I would also like this to be a conversation amongst many people – not just a dialogue with me.

I hope that this conversation will be the first of many, right across the public service – and beyond.

It will be a small start towards a new culture within the public sector. One where our public servants are valued, and have the confidence to make their voice heard.

It will be a public service with a new sense of freedom – freedom to voice thoughts – freedom to explore and try new ideas – and most importantly, freedom to pursue the aspirations that have inspired so many people to dedicate themselves to public service.

Thank you.

