

HAWKES ORATION

Delivered by Barry Chambers

IPAA Annual General Meeting, Darwin

2nd September 2004

Outgoing Institute President John Carroll, incoming President Mike Dillon, Members of IPAA and guests. Thank you very much for providing me this opportunity to deliver the Hawkes Oration at your Annual General Meeting this evening.

I first met David Hawkes in the late seventies while working for the Albury Wodonga Development Corporation. At that time David was a public sector industrial officer who was representing the interests of employees who were - and you won't be surprised at this - facing a downsizing exercise.

David was principally representing clerical staff but in a sign of things to come he agreed to provide advice to a number of engineers who were employed there. Little did he know how many engineers he would have to deal with later in his career in the Territory!

Many years later I came to know him again in the Territory and his enormous contribution to public sector administration here is widely recognised. I for one certainly appreciated his pragmatic advice and assistance on more than a few delicate personnel matters and the difficult industrial negotiations associated with major reforms in the Darwin Port Authority and the Power and Water Authority.

It is now just 2 months since I retired from full time employment in the NTPS and the recent opportunity to travel across Canada has provided me with some quiet time to reflect on a 37 year career in the public sector.

That period covered service in local government, the Australian Army, and in Commonwealth and Territory Government departments and statutory corporations. I won't bore you tonight with all the details. However, in hindsight if I had, as a young graduate engineer, decided in 1967 to embark on a career that provided involvement in a wide range of interesting projects and insights into economic and social development, I don't think I could have planned it much better. Of course no such plan existed and my career, like that of many others, unfolded as the opportunities arose.

Over my working life the policies which have driven the work we do in the public sector have changed enormously as governments of both major parties have come and gone at the national and state level.

Major social changes have occurred and the advances in IT have been incredible.

I have also had the good fortune to have been involved in the delivery of public infrastructure projects of many types, particularly in the Territory. Water supplies, sewerage schemes, roads, power facilities, ports, railways, housing and a range of public buildings were core business for much of my career. In latter years I have been told I'm going a bit green but I must say I am proud of that as I am convinced that development and conservation objectives are not necessarily incompatible.

All of this has contributed to a very interesting and rewarding career but, now in hindsight, it is not the details of these social changes and infrastructure projects that I recall the most.

My best memories are reserved for the many talented individuals and teams that I have met and worked with over that period. And I need to make it clear that I include many politicians and individuals from the private sector in this group.

The principal characteristics of these people are their honesty and integrity coupled with their skill and a passion to achieve something to better our society at large. In short these people not only do things right, they know the right thing to do.

As many of you know I do not accept a view promulgated by some in the private sector, and in some cases the media, that public servants are somewhat lesser as people simply because of their employment.

Indeed, it seems to me that far more private sector employees and managers end up facing the courts than public servants.

However we should not resile from the fact that the security and nature of public sector employment has left us with a legacy of individuals who at best work at a very low capacity and quite frankly should not be employed. Fortunately, this is a small minority but they absorb a very disproportionate amount of senior management effort.

I am also very pleased to state for the record that I was never offered a bribe or gift intended to influence a decision I might have to make. Nor indeed was I ever directed by a Minister or senior manager to take action that could be seen as unfairly interfering in the due process of public administration. Should that have happened my response would have been quite clear.

This does not mean of course that these things do not happen. I raise it merely to indicate that it is rare in the public sector and will later touch on whether we do too much to prevent it occurring.

During my recent trip I took the chance to read a book that had been recommended to me for some time. It is a great Australian story and the final two sentences are worth quoting.....

“I have lived a very good life, it has been very rich and full. I have been very fortunate and I am thrilled by it when I look back.”

The book, as many of you will recognize, is “A Fortunate Life” by A. B. Facey. While I do not claim to have endured anywhere near the hardships of Bert Facey his words very nicely summarise my feelings at this time. I certainly hope I can say that in another 20 years.

While the past does provide valuable experience and lessons that should – but which sometimes do not – provide a basis for moving forward, it is the present and the future which has most often occupied my thinking time.

So without detaining you too much longer I would like to briefly touch on some of the issues which I think are facing us now or which are emerging and will need attention very soon. I should say that these are the views of a non academic manager of large line agencies rather than from a central agency perspective.

The first one I would like to tackle is that wonderful word for all seasons and all occasions – accountability.

The dictionary says simply it is about being responsible to someone, or for some action. It gets scarier when the thesaurus lists answerability, chargeability, culpability, liability, responsibility. If I had known all that beforehand I would have thought twice about being an accountable Chief Executive Officer in the public sector !

But the reality is that CEO’s are held accountable for their agencies under various legislation such as the

- Financial Management Act, and the
- Public Sector Employment and Management Act.

It is also a fact of life that CEO’s are accountable to their Ministers and the Chief Minister through their employment contract.

But I have increasingly come to ask myself are there too many accountability mechanisms that have the reverse effect by the sheer weight of their numbers distracting one from the tasks at hand.

For example, some of the watchdogs on the performance of a CEO and the agency are the:

- Auditor General
- Ombudsman
- Information Commissioner
- Commissioner for Public Employment
- Treasury
- Department of the Chief Minister
- Public Accounts Committee
- Estimates Committee, and the
- Legislative Assembly.

In their own right each of these bodies has a real role but the collective effort in responding to them is enormous. We must seriously ask whether the return on this for the general public is really worth the effort, the cost and the distraction from effective mainline service delivery.

Perhaps it is time we tackled this and looked more closely at these bodies to determine if the costs and benefits are acceptable to the electorate. Some streamlining and reduced effort must be possible given that widespread corruption and mismanagement is not and has not been evident in the public sector.

As an example let me mention the performance measures that are now included in the Territory Budget under the Working for Outcomes framework.

As a CEO I was never asked a direct question about these by a Minister. Nor did I ever receive a high level query from Treasury about them. No member of the public ever wrote to me about them. Nor did I ever come across a line manager who felt that the use of these measures assisted the service delivery task in any material way.

So what on earth are they used for? Is the public sector too complex to be effectively measured in this way? Is there a better way to measure performance that meets the needs of our politicians and the general public ?

Perhaps a greater understanding by the public of what we do might help but this leads us to the point of more effectively engaging with the community in a way that we haven't tackled before.

Could a refined and expanded community engagement process be a worthwhile substitute for some or many of the apparently meaningless and costly accountability and performance measures that are currently imposed on the public sector?

I would like to think so as it could release significant resources for tackling the compelling economic and social development issues facing the Territory today.

In the public sector we are required to undertake many tasks on a daily basis

- providing frank and fearless advice
- implementing government policies and programs
- delivering services
- constructing and maintaining government assets
- living within our financial resources, and,
- managing people

I could speak a lot about all of these aspects but given my earlier views you won't be surprised that I have decided to talk about people tonight.

For me, managing people well has been the key to successfully undertaking all of the other tasks.

In my view, people are the most significant asset the public sector has available to it. Tonight however, I only have time to touch on a few aspects of people management.

I believe that a firm base for managing people has to come from the widespread establishment and acceptance of the need for high ethical standards in the workplace. The public sector must retain the lead in this area and set a target for private sector performance.

We are not alone in this as it is a national and international issue. During my recent trip I came across this article in the "The Ottawa Citizen" headlined:

"Public Works gets a course in ethics"

Some of these quotes sound awfully familiar.

"Staff... are also being told to think twice about accepting anything more than a cup of coffee..." – at least Mimmo is safe!

"...it is essential that we make an extra effort to regain the trust of Canadians..."

and,

"Our value to the Government comes from providing an unbiased objective service."

Recent efforts in the NTPS to improve our understanding of ethical behaviour must be pursued vigorously and, if necessary, expanded in sensitive areas.

In the Territory, like other parts of Australia we are facing a baby boomer drain and I am only one example of that process which is accelerating. It is as inevitable as death and taxes but how do we manage it to the benefit of all? The boomers don't necessarily want to spend all their time on the road or the golf course. But how will we engage with them and retain their experience in, and for the benefit of, the Territory?

We talk a lot about succession management but previous attempts at this have only been partially successful.

There is an urgent need to find a better way that has service wide support and commitment at CEO and government level. Targeted programs are needed to give a new generation of managers the broad experience that I believe is necessary to succeed in the public sector of the future. We also need to provide the mentoring support that is necessary to support such programs.

I also think we will need to accept that some selection and accelerated development programs may appear to be elitist and to impact on the merit principle. Nonetheless we must tackle these issues head on and move quickly.

An associated issue is the recruitment of new talent and retaining the good people that we already have.

It is my view, given the accountability imposed on them, that CEO's need far more power to recruit, reward and retain staff in critical areas of service delivery.

While the merit principle must remain as a foundation for our employment practices, the quickly changing world of politics and priorities mean that greater speed and flexibility is required in obtaining the skills we need.

We are increasingly dealing with the employment and development of Generation X who have far less regard for the old style public sector employment conditions.

They are seeking flexible work practices, interesting work and good rewards. If we don't provide this, much of our talent will move on and we won't be able to recruit replacements.

It has occurred to me in recent years that we may need a two tiered employment system. One based on an improved current model and a second which is contract based and very much at the discretion of CEO's.

We must not forget that the private sector in the Territory has similar problems and in moving to a solution I believe there are real gains for both sectors to work closely together.

The purists among you will probably say this is unacceptable, impractical and impossible. I can only respond by suggesting we need to change our current approach quickly or the problems we increasingly face in recruiting and retaining talent are likely to become worse.

While in Canada I also came across an interesting book – a children's book in fact – which reminded me of the benefits arising from simplicity and focusing on key issues.

It is called "The Hockey Sweater" by Roch Carrier and those who know Canadians will understand the passion they have for ice hockey. I dare say their below average performance at the Olympics will be totally forgotten if they win the approaching world ice hockey championships.

The opening paragraph of the book is beautifully simple.
"The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We lived in three places – the school, the church and the skating rink – but our real life was on the skating rink. Real battles were won on the skating rink. Real strength appeared on the skating rink. The real leaders showed themselves on the skating rink."

It occurred to me that paraphrasing that passage into a public sector context illustrates my point.

"The days of a public sector manager are long, unpredictable and complex. They revolve around three main issues – service delivery, financial management and people – but the real issue is managing people. Real progress is achieved by people. Real strength is required to deal with people. The real leaders are those who inspire their people to excel."

Thank you again for giving Kath and I this opportunity to join you tonight and for listening to the musings of a former rooster who is enjoying the move to a feather duster.

