



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Public Service Commission**

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**Speech**

**QUT Graduate School of Business Graduation Ceremony**

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Good morning Presiding Officer, Ms Leanne Harvey, Vice President (Administration) and University Registrar, members of the official party, ladies and gentlemen.

Graduands, we are here today to celebrate you, and your achievements, as you graduate from the Executive Master of Business Administration and the Public Sector Management Program. And we do so in a city awash with autumn – the leaves have put on their best colours for this occasion. The oaks and poplars cannot, however, outdo the evergreen Eucalypt – the most prolific tree in Canberra and a species native to Australia.

*Dowa Ngunna, Dowa Ngunnawal.* This is Ngunnawal country. And it is while reflecting on its beauty that I wish to thank and acknowledge the traditional custodians and caretakers of our country, and their elders. We have much to gain collectively from a continuation of the cultural and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So, with this in mind, I extend a special welcome and thank you to those Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people joining us today.

Today, I'd like to talk about leadership and in particular, leadership in service of the Australian people. The courses from which you have just graduated are designed to take you, as qualified managers, into the ranks of highly skilled leaders.

Whether you are leading in the public sector, the not for-profit sector, academia or the private sector – I'm taking a broad definition of leadership: in service of the public.

I would argue that the creation of public value is not the exclusive domain of governments and the public service. In a democratic context, regardless of the sector, we, as leaders, are striving toward a positive state of life that has the consent of the people. We are striving to meet the hopes and aspirations of all Australians.

All sectors contribute to this aim, although it may be said that public sector organisations have a unique responsibility to do so – however, they cannot do so alone, they must work with and through relationships with other sectors.

I am drawn to an explanation of public value by the Australian and New Zealand School of Government. That is, value is not just public because it's delivered *by* the public sector. It is not who *produces* it that makes value public, but who *consumes* it and how. Public value is *consumed* by the Australian people collectively.

It's about the goals and aspirations we have for our society as a whole. And I suspect, given your motivation to undertake the courses that you have, your sense of leadership is about influencing, guiding and building the capability of others to achieve a goal that, ultimately, is to create a better Australia for all.

Needless to say, you are doing so in an environment of ever-changing complexity. Novelist and tech writer Tim Maughan describes it thus: "From social media to the global economy to supply chains, our lives rest precariously on systems that have become so complex, and we have yielded so much of it to technologies and autonomous actions, that no one totally comprehends it all."

In public policy, we sometimes refer to the problems that emerge from this complexity as 'wicked'. Wicked problems have multiple causes, are dynamic, there is no clear solution or set of possible solutions. Often they are nested and interdependent.

COVID-19 and its national and global impacts are our newest wicked problem. I often have to take a moment to ask myself – are we dealing with an economic crisis, a health crisis, a mental health crisis, an ethical crisis, a social crisis?

All possible actions in response to COVID-19 have uncertain effects – the virus is intertwined with other problems in what seems like an unmanageable system. And yet, various citizen surveys tell us that expectations for managing this – an unmanageable situation – are high.

In fact, despite having weathered the pandemic with more positive outcomes than most other countries, there has been a sharp decline in trust across all Australian institutions. The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer tells us that citizens are not only looking to governments for societal leadership, but that they hold businesses accountable for issues that align with their values and beliefs. In the context of public value:

- 56 per cent of Australians will buy or advocate for brands based on their belief and values
- 57 per cent of employees will choose a place to work based on their beliefs and values, and
- 64 per cent of investors make financial decisions based on their beliefs and values.
- Eight in ten believe CEOs should be visible discussing policy with external stakeholders or work their company has done to benefit society.

The recent withdrawal of McDonalds from Russia is a case in point. When you are trying to contribute to a better Australia, sometimes, no matter how fast you think you are running as a thought leader, a public servant, a business owner, a service provider – citizen expectations seem to be ahead of you.

We know this because, in addition to our day jobs, we are all citizens. Since before Maslow defined our hierarchy of needs, as citizens, we have sought an environment that will enable us to realise our full potential.

One thing I do believe is certain amidst this apparent uncertainty is that positive progress relies on all of us, as people, realising our full potential. Australia needs bright, resilient, problem solvers, every day across all sectors, working together. And we need leaders who can harness this talent to solve our wicked problems.

Herein lies a very specific challenge. How to attract, build, retain and bring together talent.

The pandemic disturbance has exacerbated a labour market already feeling the pinch of talent shortages. You and I are not only competing with one another for the right people, we are competing across jurisdictions and international borders. According to one consulting firm's country-by-country analysis, if left unchecked, there will be a global talent shortage of more than 85 million people by 2030. That's three times more than our current population. Let's compare that scenario with the situation in Australia today. The National Skills Commission reports that 64% of recruiting employers experienced recruitment difficulty in April 2022.

Let me narrow this down to my own specific staffing needs. In my role at the Australian Public Service Commission, every time I advertise for a data analyst to join the Commission, there are 40 other employers looking for that same person. When it comes to cyber security, 250 other employers are looking for that person.

There comes a time when already-skilled off-the-shelf people are just not available. So it's clear that, in addition to investing in the education and training of our young people to create a talent pipeline, we also need to uplift the capability of our existing workforce.

For those who are already in the public service, we need to invest in lifelong learning. The APS Academy campus – our own learning and development offering is part of how we aim to do this. We will be rolling out data and digital literacy and foundation training to all public servants in 2023.

It's true that some of our people in whom we have invested will leave the APS and move into other sectors. Should we see this as a waste of our investment?

As a major employer in this country, we need to recognise the role that we play in supporting the broader labour market. Movement in and out of sectors creates a workforce with different experiences – better able to understand each other's worlds and to work together.

I believe that this mobility and a more porous public sector is necessary if we want work collaboratively and share our expertise for the greater good. In the APS, we have realised that we can no longer operate as 97 separate recruiting agencies.

We need a whole of APS approach. A year ago we released the first workforce strategy of this kind. It has three areas of focus:

- attracting, building and retaining skills, expertise and talent
- embracing data, technology and new ways of working
- strengthening integrity and purposeful leadership

However, the point I am making today is that if we think collectively about the interconnectedness of systems, and Australia as a whole, when it comes to solving wicked problems, a strategy that only supports the APS to attract and retain talent won't go far enough.

Collectively, as a nation, we need to build and attract the right people into roles that generate public value across the whole system and then work in collaboration with one another – bringing different perspectives and experiences to the table.

From the three areas of focus in our strategy, it is on purposeful leadership that I want to dwell for a moment, because I think that it underpins our APS strategy and also the idea of cross-sectoral collaboration. We will not entice people to help us tackle wicked problems, and to work collaboratively for public good, if we do not demonstrate purposeful leadership.

Being clear about who you serve is at the heart of purposeful leadership. In this context – it's the Australian people.

- 3.3 per cent of whom are traditional custodians
- 30 per cent of whom were born overseas
- 17.7 per cent who live with a disability
- 8 million of whom live in regional, rural and remote communities in Australia

Australia is made up of six generations and each generation has grown up against the backdrop of unique challenges and opportunities. To effectively serve a modern Australia, we need our teams to reflect the diversity of our nation.

As leaders, that's about creating an inclusive culture in each and every team across our organisations. An inclusive team is not only a team that recruits diversity – it goes beyond this.

It thrives on difference, actively seeking out alternative views and challenging itself to see the world through the eyes of others.

Wicked problems require a deep understanding of the roles of, and impacts on, all stakeholders. We all have a contribution to make and great leaders will build the capacity of others to contribute to the solution.

Your role as leaders, in the context of skill shortages and when faced with wicked problems, is to help your people take every opportunity to be informed, skilled, qualified, inclusive and future-ready.

And, as you have done, you can lead by example. You have taken the time to invest in your own development. I congratulate you for your commitment.

What now?

All of us who are committed to public service, in the broad definition that I have outlined, need to speak about the spirit of this service that drives us all, and the broad diversity of skills and experiences needed to make a difference to people's lives. Each of you are exemplars of a strong work ethic, and a determination to serve the community effectively.

I encourage you to embrace with confidence the challenges that come your way, and to instil in your teams the leadership ideas and values that you have learned.

Congratulations! You have a right to be very proud.