

Australian Public Sector Anti-Corruption Conference

Hosted by The Independent Commissioner Against Corruption with a theme of Meeting the integrity challenge: the power of innovation, diversity and collaboration, Australia's leading anti-corruption event brings together Australian and international anti-corruption experts to speak on risk identification and management, emerging trends and innovative approaches to combat corruption and heighten workplace integrity systems.

Date:	31 July
Time:	09:25-10:10am
Location:	Darwin Waterfront Convention Centre in Darwin, NT
Title:	Using a pro-integrity culture to drive trust and combat corruption
Audience:	Anti-corruption and other agencies, academia, the private sector and other practitioners
Format:	A 45 min keynote presentation (no Q&A) on APS public sector anti-corruption measures will be delivered by Deputy Secretary Rachel Bacon

Opening

- Thanks to Naomi and the NT ICAC team for inviting me to speak today.

Acknowledgement of Country

- I start by acknowledging the Larrakia people, whose traditional lands we are meeting on today. I acknowledge their continuing connection to country and culture, pay my respects to leaders, past, present and emerging, and to First Nations colleagues here today.
- I've been fortunate to have lived on Larrakia country for 3 years – no one can spend time in this amazing place without leaving a piece of their heart behind. It's a privilege to be here and to acknowledge how the Larrakia people have cared for this place for thousands of years.

- As First Nations colleagues have explained to me, acknowledging country is about reflecting, not only on the time we spend in this place, but also on the footsteps we leave behind.
- Reflecting on what it means to care for country and culture parallels our discussion about values and trust in the institutions we are all responsible for stewarding.
- Drawing lessons from First Nations people and culture gives us uniquely Australian insights into how we can steward nationally important institutions like the public service.

Speech continues...

- Building on the conversations from yesterday, I want to focus today on *why* we do what we do. What are we defending when we do our day jobs? What are we fighting for when we tackle corrupt activity?
- So I'm going to lift it up a level, and explore the relationship between trust in public institutions, democratic participation and integrity in the public sector.
- These three things are symbiotic – if we have integrity failings in the public sector, Australians will be less likely to trust our public institutions. And if trust in government is low, we risk lower engagement in the democratic processes our public institutions are established to support.
- The work we all do to preserve integrity matters deeply – not only because we want our public institutions to role model integrity – but because if they don't, we risk undermining the trust that keeps our democracy strong.
 - o This discussion and this conference are timely, as we have witnessed a series of recent integrity issues, the foremost outlined in the findings of the Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme.
 - The findings highlighted ethical failures in public administration: not abiding by the law; operating in siloes; not properly briefing decision-makers; and failing to ensure that empathy is front of mind whenever we design systems or make decisions that impact people.

- We know that Robodebt will continue to have lasting and tragic impacts on affected families and the Australian public.
 - These experiences put pressure on the public's trust in government and the public service as a whole.
 - The public service is committed to learn from the mistakes made and be held to account for this. We know we have more work to do.
- With these sombre lessons in mind, I'll start by exploring the concept of trust in government, and why I think it's a golden thread in the rich but complex tapestry of our democratic system of government.
 - I'll then hone in on how our collective efforts to promote pro-integrity cultures build and sustain this trust.
 - I'll finish by sharing some of the work we're doing in the Australian Public Service Commission to support both employee and systemic integrity across the Australian Public Service – a critically important national asset in Australia's democracy.

The importance of trust in government

- Trust comes in many guises. It is the backbone to positive relationships with family, friends and colleagues. It is a pillar for successful commerce. And it is critical for government to meet the needs of its people.
- When trust in government is low, society struggles to have difficult conversations in constructive ways. When trust is low, the public service can get into defensive mindsets and forget to bring empathy and humanity to our design work and administrative decision-making. And when trust is low, we can lose sight of our values.
- Conversely, when we live our values, we build trust. The APS values exist to ensure the Service conducts itself in ways that earn and maintain the trust of the Government, the Parliament and – ultimately – the public.

- When trust in government is high, there is fertile ground for progress and prosperity. People see their tax dollars contributing to services and systems that support all Australians. Medicare; public education; protecting our unique ecosystem; supporting emerging businesses. Governments can only create value for their people when the people are willing and able to engage with the system – and that happens most fruitfully when there is trust.
- High trust in government fosters a sense of civic duty and responsibility. Australians are more likely to volunteer, participate in community initiatives, and engage in political processes when they believe their government is acting in their best interests. Active citizenry strengthens democracy.
- Conversely, we've seen how low trust in government can lead to a range of harms across society. This was recently apparent when people in some parts of the world doubted their government's intentions and made them less likely to comply with public health measures, such as vaccination programs or social distancing guidelines. This exacerbated public health crises and undermined efforts to protect the community.
- We understand the nature of trust in government through different lenses. Through our own personal interactions with government, through the roles many of us have as stewards of different parts of the system, and through centuries of deep thinking and philosophy exploring the concept.
 - o Rousseau's social contract theory provides a provocative exploration of the relationship between citizen and state.
 - o According to Rousseau, citizens forgo certain freedoms, money and property to be subject to the state. This is done with the expectation that the state will use its power to benefit the public. For this to work there needs to be trust. Citizens trust that they will receive more than they give up, and the state trusts that citizens will maintain their side of the contract.
 - o The world of 1762 was not simple, but it would be an understatement to say things have become more complex. The scale of the modern nation state,

changes in local and global economies, and modern technologies that support misinformation and echo chambers have grown the distance between the public and its governing bodies. The greater the distance, the greater the need for trust and confidence in public institutions.

- Complex global challenges require collaborative solutions, economic uncertainties demand effective leadership, and citizens increasingly rely on governments to provide essential services and address inequalities.
- Representative and responsible governments are founded on the principle that public institutions exist to serve the public interest.
- It's a mutually reinforcing, reciprocal relationship. For Australia, if the government and the public service as a whole is understood to be trustworthy, the public is more likely to comply with policies, accept government decisions and actively participate in Australia's democracy.

Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy Survey Report

- In June 2023, the Government launched the *Survey of Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy*, which we undertook to support the work of the Strengthening Democracy Taskforce in the Department of Home Affairs.
 - We surveyed a nationally representative sample of 5,000 Australians, followed by a second wave of 1,000 people in November 2023.
 - This trust survey examines a variety of key drivers that shape views about democracy: levels of civics education, social capital, wellbeing and contemporary life events.
 - As might be expected, greater civics education in high school is correlated with higher satisfaction with democracy.
 - On the other hand, women, low-income individuals, the unemployed, and residents in regional areas report lower satisfaction levels.
 - People who have experienced negative life events, such as having a mental health condition, a physical disability or facing financial hardship,

also report lower satisfaction with democracy and lower trust in public institutions.

- The survey provides a picture of civic engagement and current barriers to democratic participation in Australia.
 - Civic engagement is low – only a quarter of the respondents reported participation in any civic activities in the prior 12 months.
 - Barriers include a lack of interest, a belief that participation won't make a difference, and a lack of time, as well as concerns including corruption, integrity, fairness and foreign interference.
 - If these barriers and concerns are not overcome, there is a risk that those dissatisfied with democracy will disengage from contributing constructively.
- Our public report provides both deep and nuanced insights:
 - Ninety-five percent of respondents believe in the importance of democracy, with 80% saying it is worth trying to fix any problems, and 59% satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia.
 - Half think the law is applied impartially regardless of who you are (50%), and that the judicial system is free from external influence (55%).
 - Yet just under half are concerned that corruption is widespread in Australia's democratic institutions and processes (49%), and only two in five people believe there are enough checks to prevent abuse of power.
- The main things I take away from our survey work are that our democracy is under pressure on multiple fronts, but we all agree it is worth fighting for. And that there are tangible things we can do to strengthen trust in government and, through this, our democratic resilience.

Trust and quality

- We know from our data that the quality of public services is a cornerstone of public trust.

- This is highlighted in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) *Trust and Public Policy* report: alongside social tensions, the effectiveness and responsiveness of public service delivery significantly influences citizens' perception of government legitimacy and trust.
- Our monthly *Trust in Australian public services survey* indicates that there is a clear relationship between citizen trust in services and service quality – measured by citizen satisfaction in the services they receive.
 - Trust conveys expectations about needs being met, while satisfaction is a product of the extent to which services live up to those expectations.
 - This survey has found 61% of people report they trusted Australian public services in 2022-23.
 - The Commission's findings suggest that while accessing services drives public trust by itself, other factors like demographic characteristics, life events, general trust in others and the overall life satisfaction people feel from the services can also greatly influence people's trust in public services.
 - Showing the relationship between trust and service quality, 91% of people who trusted services were also satisfied with them, while 30% of people who distrusted services were still satisfied with them.
- The Survey also provides important insights to show where we are doing well and where we can improve.
 - We know that people are most satisfied with their direct experiences with staff, and with the information that they receive while accessing services.
 - However we also know that people were least satisfied with the bureaucratic nature of public service processes.
- Reasonably, people want services that are easy to use and give them what they are after.

- We can use our data on trust and satisfaction to both highlight our service delivery successes and warn of threats to our ability to deliver – including due to diminished perceptions of integrity.

Work to strengthen trust in government

- Australia's commitment to preserving trust and advancing democratic principles is reflected on both the national and global stages.
 - In November 2022, Australia joined more than 40 countries in adopting the *Luxembourg Declaration on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy*.
 - The declaration includes ministerial action plans on combating misinformation and disinformation, enhancing representation, participation and openness, and governing in a sustainable way.
- While our challenges are shared around the world, compared to many other countries, Australia has a strong base from which to build and do better.
- In their 2024 report: the *OECD Survey of Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions*, the OECD found that:
 - Australians' trust in the federal government increased significantly from 38% in 2021, to 46% in 2023, exceeding the OECD average of 39%, which places Australia in the top 10 out of the 30 countries surveyed.
 - At the same time, perceptions of public service integrity improved, with expectations that public servants would refuse a bribe to speed up a service increasing from 36% to 41%.
- Between 2021 and 2023, Australians' perceptions of trust drivers, i.e. fairness, reliability, openness, responsiveness, and integrity all improved on average. We were only one of two countries showing improvements across all five drivers since 2021.
- Research such as this highlights that the integrity of our institutions is a foundation of trust in government. But as I mentioned at the outset, integrity in Australia's public institutions has been under pressure. I know from my

recent visit to the OECD that many countries are looking closely at Australia to see if our efforts to strengthen integrity will ease this pressure in ways others can emulate.

Public Service Amendment Act 2024

- Let me then turn to some of the things we're doing to drive pro-integrity culture in Australia's public sector.
- Ensuring the APS 'embodies integrity in everything it does' is the first priority area of the Government's APS Reform Agenda, announced in October 2022.
- Of the 59 initiatives across various stages of delivery, 19 of those fall under the integrity priority, and none is more significant than the passing of the *Public Service Amendment Act 2024*.
- The Act makes deep and lasting changes to the *Public Service Act 1999* to help the APS better serve the Government, the Parliament and the Australian community.
- While not all parts of the integrity landscape need to be legislated – for instance we need to remain adaptive to emerging technologies – there are other areas where locking in improvements is important to signal our ongoing commitment to delivering a pro-integrity culture.
- Recent changes include:
 - o Adding a new APS Value of Stewardship for all APS employees to uphold.
 - o Requiring agencies to regularly undertake independent and transparent capability reviews.
 - o Establishing long-term insights briefings, publicly conducted, on topics that matter to the Australian community.
 - o Requiring agencies to publish their APS Employee Census results and responding action plans.
 - o And clarifying that Ministers cannot direct Agency Heads in employment matters.

- These amendments strengthen the core values of the APS, build APS capability and expertise, and support good governance, accountability and transparency.
 - o And they are not the end to this effort – more work is underway to look at systemic improvements to our governance and integrity system, whether they be legislative or non-legislative.
- The Government’s amendments acknowledge that a firm legislative framework for fostering a pro-integrity culture will help strengthen the trust of the public.

Stewardship

- To hone in even further on these recent changes that enhance integrity – the insertion of the new value of stewardship in the APS Values is significant. It highlights that every single public servant has a role and responsibility to steward the Australian Public Service. In doing so, the new Value asks each of us to exercise judgment every day when doing things that can enhance or undermine the integrity of the institution we steward. This is not a tick a box exercise.
 - o The Act defines stewardship as:

‘the APS builds its capability and institutional knowledge, and supports the public interest now and into the future, by understanding the long-term impacts of what it does’.
 - o An APS that embodies stewardship is one the public can trust will advise on and implement the priorities of government with integrity, over a longer time horizon than 3-year political cycles.
 - o Stewardship reflects a communal commitment, to leave behind a service that is stronger and more just.
 - o Part of the APS’s role as a steward is good record-keeping – ensuring there is an accurate and complete account of actions taken and the reasons why. Many reviews, inquiries and audits have highlighted how incomplete records are detrimental to the integrity of the service. Record-keeping enables

accountability, and encourages sound use of public resources, in turn supporting the public's trust and confidence in government.

MyGov example

- The Government is also working to strengthen the integrity and useability of the systems we use to support service delivery – *myGov* being a recent case in point. *MyGov* has quickly grown into an indispensable piece of national infrastructure. It supports joined-up service delivery, resulting in better experiences for Australians. With logins ranging from 1 million to 1.4 million a day (as at September 2022), more people use *myGov* each day than use public transport.
- It is the main conduit for the public to contact and access dozens of agencies and services, providing secure and rapid access to a whole range of Government content and supporting capabilities.
- But *myGov* is not perfect.
 - o There are problems and challenges.
 - Australians have difficulty finding what they need and 'getting things done'.
 - Australians who most need support often have the greater challenge.
 - There are practical issues related to managing accounts, and verifying digital identities.
 - o A *myGov* User Audit was released in January 2023, paving the way to deliver practical changes to improve the user experience and perceived integrity of the system.
- The public's appetite to engage with government and its services online is based on trust.
 - o Trust that:
 - the technology will be consistent, safe and secure
 - the service will cater to the diversity of people using it, presenting accessible and intuitive options, and

- that the service will deliver what it promised.
- There is no single solution to boosting the integrity of this platform.
- Work is underway to:
 - improve the interfaces and citizen experiences,
 - to strengthen the back-end to maximise security and minimise technical challenges, and most importantly,
 - to develop and design better services in the first place.

Pro-integrity culture

- But legislation and systems on their own are not enough. Recent reviews highlight the role culture plays in ensuring public servants navigate the shades of grey in ways that enhance, not undermine, integrity outcomes.
- For the APS, we define integrity as ‘doing the right thing at the right time’ to ‘deliver the best outcomes for Australia sought by the government of the day’.
 - In practice, this means our behaviour matches the APS Values and we are accountable when it does not.
- Many of you play an important role in ensuring the public service implements the Government’s policies lawfully. However, legality is only the minimum standard.
 - To have a pro-integrity culture, we need to ensure APS staff not only uphold their obligations but are empowered to model the highest ethical standards of behaviour.
- Integrity in the APS is about the pursuit of high standards of professionalism in both what we do and how we do it.

APS Integrity Taskforce and Integrity Roadmap

- In February 2023, the APS’s top leadership body – the Secretaries Board – established an Australian Public Service Integrity Taskforce to provide a ‘bird’s-eye’ view of the APS integrity landscape.

- The Taskforce found varying levels of integrity maturity across Australian Government agencies that highlighted both gaps to address and good practices to cross-pollinate.
- The Taskforce's final report delivered in September 2023, titled *Louder than Words – An APS Integrity Action Plan*, provided 15 recommendations focussing on culture, systems and accountability that nested over 50 actions for agencies and departments to implement.
- These recommendations combined with the recommendations from the Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, and a suite of integrity-related APS Reform initiatives, to build the APSC's *Integrity Roadmap* that was released in May 2024.
- The Roadmap supports the Commission's efforts to prioritise and sequence work to steadily embed integrity improvements as business-as-usual.

The Australian Public Service Commission has a role to play in supporting both employee and systemic integrity

- This brings me to my final point: the Australian Public Service Commission has a role to play in supporting both employee and system integrity.
- Under its statutory functions, the APSC strengthens the integrity architecture of the APS at a whole of system level by setting and ensuring standards for the conduct of the public service.
- Under its stewardship role, the APSC works closely with the Secretaries Board to drive pro-integrity initiatives at the whole of service level.
- And through forums such as the Capability and Workforce Committee under the Secretaries Board, the APSC drives initiatives to strengthen psychological safety – a foundation to building and sustaining a pro-integrity culture.
- Psychological safety describes a workplace culture which empowers people to step into difficult, confronting, uncomfortable, but fundamentally important conversations with each other, to address the issues that really matter.

- This means building a foundation of respect and trust which enables robust interactions to take place without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career – ultimately enabling both individual and organisational accountability.

Accountability and recognition

- Now I would argue the responsibilities of Australian public servants are more varied than in any other organisation in the country.
- Within this broad remit, the APSC has a critical role in driving accountability and recognition of performance.
- Driven foremost by the *Public Service Act*, the APSC clarifies the obligations that can both inspire positive change for our community, and hold to account those who go against our system of laws, rules and standards.
 - o At its core, this work includes the development, maintenance and promotion of the Code of Conduct.
 - o But it is also about awareness and adherence to the multiple legal frameworks that underpin and govern our activities.
- As public servants we need to be accountable for how we spend taxpayers' money, how we administer grants, how we deliver services to the public and how we treat each other in the workplace.
- An institution – particularly one as large as the APS – that emphasises accountability in all of its forms is one well-placed to being trusted by the public.
- By having a clear set of expectations and system of accountability, we are able to foster an ethical culture – a culture where the right decision is not just one that follows legal compliance, but one that strives to do good.
- These expectations start from the top, and included in the *APS Integrity Action Plan* is the Commission's work to embed the *SES Performance Leadership Framework*, which provides a standard set of minimum requirements that must form part of each Australian Public Service agency's performance practices for SES employees.

- The Framework has been introduced to strengthen behaviour and outcomes-based performance management.
- By formalising a requirement for behaviours to be considered equally with outcomes, we are setting the expectation that how we deliver things in the APS is just as important as what we deliver.
- In this context, the Framework confirms that excellent performance in what is delivered cannot be used to offset or minimise deficiencies in how those outcomes are achieved.

Future integrity safeguards

- Just as we design a system that encourages and enables the best, we also need to design a system that safeguards against the worst.
- As highlighted by the Thodey review and the Robodebt Royal Commission, we need to build public confidence that government institutions are managed in ways that uphold the principle of integrity.
- As an example, the second stage of the APS Reform agenda has a package of reforms focused on building a trusted public service through additional initiatives such as:
 - introducing own motion powers and expanded inquiry powers for the APS Commissioner to initiate reviews and investigate alleged Code of Conduct breaches.
 - developing an APS Integrity Data Dashboard that maps pressures and assesses integrity maturity levels by building on existing indicators and metrics.
 - modernising the review of workplace decisions in the *Public Service Regulations 2023*, to strengthen regulation of agency compliance with the merit principle for promotion reviews.
 - Strengthening transparency of agency customer feedback.
 - And implementing a balanced approach to managing post-employment conflicts of interest for Agency Heads, SES and designated APS positions.

Conclusion

- So, to finish where I started – we do what we do because it matters:
 - o your work defends the integrity of the public sector
 - o this integrity is foundational to the public’s trust in government,
 - o and this trust is the cornerstone on which our very system of government is based.
- Maintaining a constructive relationship between trust in public institutions, democratic participation and integrity in the public sector is a complex challenge.
- But their interrelated nature also presents an opportunity – through the work we do, we all have a role to play in leaving the service better than how we found it. And in this, we are privileged to heed the lessons from the oldest living culture on earth and think carefully about the footsteps each of us will leave behind as we strive to improve and protect the institutions we are proud to serve.

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