Reluctant Representatives: Blackfella Bureaucrats Speak in Australia's North

Elizabeth Ganter (Canberra: ANU Press; Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research: Research Monograph No 37, 2016, ISBN9781760460327 (paperbook), 210pp.)

Elizabeth Ganter has done a great service in bringing to light a critical analysis of representative bureaucracy as it applies to Aboriginal public servants in the Northern Territory.

She exposes massive tensions in the concept of representation as it applies to our First Peoples. The experience of Indigenous public servants leads Ganter (2016:20) to conclude unequivocally that governments are in an impossible position:

No democratic government can invite people to contribute to the public service on the basis of their social identity without potentially placing them in tension with their professional obligations as public servants. At the same time, once it has acknowledged significant plurality among those it governs, no democratic government can afford not to make the invitation.

The book is amongst the first sustained studies of the unique role of Indigenous public servants in the Australian setting. It draws attention to the target and classification rollercoaster that has been experienced in the Northern Territory that has seen its recorded number of Indigenous employees lurch wildly depending on definitions and whether trainees were included, but settling around the 1200-1300 mark in the 1980s and 1990s. While the Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory and the representative target the government has strived to achieve is 10%, the actual level of indigenous public servants seems unable to exceed 7.8%.

Why do we care?

Public service commissions across Australia have sought laudably to ensure public services 'mirror' the people they serve. They set targets to ensure representation but along the way fail to articulate how representation is meant to operate in practice.

Is it a case of 'bums on seats' with Aboriginal public servants meant to replicate the rational, technical, impartial, non-partisan Weberian ideal-type bureaucracy so that the public service can have people 'with a black skin do white things' (2016:8)? Or are Indigenous public servants intended to apply discretionary and deliberative authority through culture and community connection in order to have representation inject authentic service and bureaucratic transformation?

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Ganter observes that both versions of representation are accurate. The former is passive while the latter is active but both are theoretical constructs. Ganter's research – providing poignant and frank accounts from some 76 individuals from the Territory - shows that there is far more to the story.

One cannot simply focus on the 'representatives' themselves but also on *who* and *what* they are representing. The relationship between representative and the public service is fraught, but so too is that between representative and communities they 'represent'. Ganter distinguishes here between representation as *trusteeship* versus *substitution*. The former gives space for unheard voices to speak (to speak *for*) while the latter seeks indigenous public servants to speak *as* the minority group. This matters, because the former tends to uphold community links whereas the latter promotes the dominant culture seeking affirmation of a relationship with a minority group in order to grant authority.

Focusing on numerical targets for Aboriginal employment assumes self-identification when Ganter makes clear self-identification cannot be taken for granted. Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants deliberately do not self-identify in order to avoid being typecast into 'Indigenous' roles and being forced to speak for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or provide indigenous perspectives. Some saw such identification as career-limiting, if not damaging.

Obligations to represent a mythical 'universal' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander view are destructive and offensive to Aboriginal cultural diversity. Being disowned by their communities is a stark possibility, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants attempt to service the often opposing needs of their bureaucratic and community 'mobs'. Aboriginal authenticity is questioned one minute and prized the next (2016:99). Participants recounted being the 'token black' or struggling with racist inferences that they had won positions based on their Aboriginality rather than merit.

The burden of these obligations and paradoxes are high. Participants spoke of identity trauma, exit decisions to provide coping mechanisms or settle ethical dilemmas, and privatizing their Aboriginality in order to advance Aboriginal causes.

The role of Aboriginal public servants can be draining as well as misunderstood. Role modelling for aspiring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recruits is a significant part of their commitment, as is uncompromising service to community. To lessen inherent tensions, many had recourse to serving in locations and roles close to their place of origin. This helped soften the paradoxes and pressures and enabled improved value alignment to inspire retention. But wherever and in whatever role they worked, the key to authenticity was relational community connection. As Ganter (2016:176) puts it "Localness was a virtue, but groundedness was a necessity".

Is there a future for the ideals of representative bureaucracy when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? Ganter's (2016:183) research indicates three key areas where

Indigenous employment strategies could be improved to move them away from her depiction as “...long on promise and short on strategy”:

- (1) Be clear and transparent on what is meant by representation in the *employment relationship*;
- (2) Note that the *representative relationship* of Indigenous public servants to their peoples is unique and the government is not party to it but should honour it and should not seek to disrupt it; and
- (3) Acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees will stay longer working in government if governments works better at its *constituency relationship* with their communities.

This prioritization of relationship is fundamental. Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are already in relationship – one that demands attention and healing – but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people “are in it twice when they take on the mantle of government” (2016:185). What Ganter reminds us is that quota-filling representation is neither panacea nor magical antidote. A more sophisticated and respectful understanding of representative bureaucracy is demanded.

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