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Title: A Line in the Sand 50 Years On: Commonwealth involvement in Indigenous Affairs

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As DPMC and Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) partner this year to mark 50 years of Commonwealth involvement in Indigenous Affairs, we are poised at a critical juncture for courageous change.

Throughout 2017, DPMC and ANZSOG delivered an international conference – in partnership with the University of Sydney – and two Chatham House roundtables. These events fostered discussion and promoted action within our public service and tertiary education sectors aimed at improving and reconceptualising public administration.

Australia has a long way to travel to begin to recognise and celebrate what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have to teach and share about public administration.

Recognition and celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions is an important endeavour; not only for improving policy making applying to Indigenous communities but also the future of public administration as both an academic discipline and profession in this country.

As policy makers and educators we know that lasting structural change and cultural shifts are needed in the Indigenous Affairs space. In our conference and roundtables throughout 2017, we were keen to ensure that our contribution was neither a one-off tick and flick exercise nor yet another talkfest that produces nothing of real action.

Part of our commitment is inviting public discussion and professional outreach through forums such as the Australian Journal of Public Administration (AJPA). We invited four prominent Indigenous and

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non-Indigenous authors to contribute practitioner controversy pieces to document key themes, debates and issues in what public administration has to learn from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, 50 years on.

Sana Nakata is clear that the 1967 referendum necessitates the remaking of Australia as a nation, notably prioritising the central place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We can no longer mask our history or pretend that our future can continue to be built on failure or ignorance. Australia needs Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their gifts and wisdom. “This is what Australian policy-makers grapple with every day: the grief of our history, the demography of our present, and the uncertainty of our future”.

The framing and sustainability of administrative arrangements to support necessary Indigenous voice and representation in governance and public administration has been fraught; subject to destructive churn and the damaging legacy of an experimental approach. Will Sanders documents his historical analysis of Commonwealth Indigenous Affairs as “formulaic cycles of striving, disappointment and moving on”. He bemoans the lack of “settling” over “striving” and “disowning”. His diagnosis is grim... but positive change is not impossible.

Angela Leitch explores the power dynamics that expose Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to culture shock, demanding extraordinary resilience and communication skills as they bump up against dominant ways of being, knowing and doing that contrast starkly with their lived Indigenous experience. As a matter of course, these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants must navigate this ontological terrain both inside and outside the public service.

Leitch reminds us that the context in which cultural fluency is promoted today as a requisite skill is one of unequal power and hegemony. Non-Indigenous public servants have obligations to pursue cultural fluency and experience culture shock themselves. However they have the privilege of choice and they rely on the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to guide them through the process. “This setting is often invisible to non-Indigenous... APS officers who see their culture as the norm, their policies as culturally neutral, and themselves as culturally objective”.

To be truly transformative in reconceptualising the public service as a site of nation (re)building we have to acknowledge the challenges and opportunities of Indigenous public service leadership. Indigenous ways of being and knowing demand authentic acknowledgement and embedding rather than tokenistic filling of representation targets.

Ian Anderson AO speaks to issues of institutional memory and relational accountability. He emphasises the frustrating cycle of churn in Indigenous stakeholder-public sector bureaucratic relationships, acknowledging many of our solutions are simplistic. They require improved understanding of the concept of representation beyond a quota-filling target approach. Relationships really do matter. “A key to strengthening policy relationships across the Australian Public Service (APS) is to increase the number of Indigenous people working in the bureaucracy. Another is to build the capability of non-Indigenous public servants to develop strong Indigenous relationships”. Opportunities to grow relationship capability will require us to look outside the public sector and be more innovative and open to transforming practice and structures beyond traditional bureaucratic paradigms.

We thank the authors for contributing their time, expertise and wisdom. As non-Indigenous women connecting in different ways with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, we acknowledge respectfully the privilege and the obligation to honour the traditional ownership and stewardship of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across our country, including in the space of public administration where we are reminded of our current failures and the need for positive change.

As you ponder their words, we encourage you to begin to reflect on critical questions:

What is our line in the sand? What are we prepared to have done with what we produce, with what we invite and encourage? How will this information be used? Who will benefit? What are we giving back to the people whose knowledge we share, whose voices we give space to speak?

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