

IPPA Seminar: Reclaiming the Cutting Edge in Public Sector Management

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For 25 years or more the SA public sector was a leader - a national leader in public administration and a leader of innovation and development in the state. For the last 15 years, however, it has struggled to reshape after a host of reforms. Now it is faced with a new form of governance – the SA Strategic Plan which outlines the Government's commitments, a public sector reform agenda and the new cross government committees, funded by government with mandates to deliver outcomes outside the silos of department structures.

Featuring Monsignor David Cappo, Chair of the Social Inclusion Board and Dr Nick Poletti, Executive Director of the Public Sector Reform Unit. The speakers will also join an interactive panel discussion with other experts in the field.

Speech Notes: Monsignor David Cappo

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this important gathering of the South Australian Public Sector.

Between 1970 and 1980 I was a member of this sector. In 1970 I left my theological training and joined the State Public Service for what was to be a ten year interruption in my priestly studies. Jobs were plentiful. I was interviewed and processed and began as a Clerk with the then Department for Social Welfare and Aboriginal Affairs.

In 1971 I was accepted into a 12 month welfare officer course run by David Kranz up at what was then known as McNally's Training Centre. I was then placed at the Elizabeth District Office of the newly named Department for Community Welfare. I was encouraged to undertake my degree in social work at the old Institute of Technology on a part time basis while working with a team of welfare officers.

The Public Service I experienced was filled with innovation and new directions. It was nurturing of me, and my supervisors kept my ongoing and future development in mind. Support, supervision and formation were values deep in the culture of the Department I experienced.

I have much to thank the Public Service for, when I look at my professional development. I hope that my words today are also helpful in the ongoing development of the public sector.

The 2001 Census identified that on any night of the week, at least 100 people are sleeping out in the Adelaide Parklands. Sleeping rough. Sleeping in cars or tents and having nowhere else to call home. This is a mobile and changing population. Some are homeless for a few nights or weeks. Others for months

or years. Some are homeless for the first time. Others are continually moving in and out of homelessness.

Eighteen months ago, this 100 people per night included 12 people with very high and complex needs who had been homeless long term. They lived chaotic lives badly affected by alcohol and other drugs. They had been banned from most homeless services because of their abusive and sometimes violent behaviour. They were well known to the Police and were often arrested.

Having identified these 12 people with very high needs among the inner city homeless population the Social Inclusion Board was determined that concerted action be taken to ensure positive outcomes for them. At the same time, we were very conscious that these people's needs should be addressed by mainstream services. We did not want to set up an alternative service system for them.

One of the responses in the Boards 14 point plan to attack homelessness was the appointment of a senior social worker to be employed with the Exceptional Needs Unit in the Department for Families and Communities. This public sector employee was given a mission – find these 12 high need clients and ensure they got the services they needed to get out of homelessness.

Today, 9 of these people have a roof over their heads and we are working hard to ensure the same outcome is achieved for the remaining three. The story of how this was achieved is just one success amongst many that are associated with Social Inclusion initiatives. And it illustrates how public sector responses can be reshaped to take action in a joined-up way to achieve real outcomes for people in need.

What are the elements that have allowed for this success – and others like it – to emerge from the public sector's implementation of the Social Inclusion Board's recommendations? Successes that are spread across all 74 of the initiatives in our work on drug programs, homelessness and school retention.

Firstly, there was a **good flow of frank information**.

When the Premier Mike Rann established the Social Inclusion Board and the Economic Development Board he made it clear to Robert Champion de Crespigny and me and our respective Boards that he wanted frank and fearless advice. We have always sought to provide just that.

More generally, however, our early experience was of a public sector struggling to be frank with us. Not because there is a lack of candour among public servants. My impression is that some people were not accustomed to providing frank and fearless advice outside of their branch or division structure and certainly not outside of their departments. Also, after more than a decade of reform upon reform the service seemed a little 'punch drunk' and unsure of how to respond to the demands of the new Rann Government and its unique and innovative Boards.

Major change has occurred since then. My reading of the situation is that more and more, Chief Executives are being kept up to speed by their departments who in turn let us know what is happening. There is more transparency. Indecipherable bureaucratic jargon about process is gradually being replaced with plain English commentary on outcomes. A new culture is developing so that when there is a problem we can more readily discuss it forthrightly and work on solutions together.

Increasingly the Social Inclusion Board is able to provide critical commentary back to Ministers and Chief Executives without departmental officers being offended or defensive, and the reverse is true. The Board and the SIU will receive critical commentary in the belief that this is the best way to identify solutions that will make a difference.

The second element of success was **planning for action**. Particularly for action across traditional boundaries.

An excessive focus on risk management inhibits planning for action. Many senior staff now seem to be breaking through this powerful force.

The original targets the Government gave to the Social Inclusion Board concerning homelessness and school retention – like the targets in the SA Strategic Plan – demand action-focused thinking and planning.

They demand a single-minded emphasis on implementation. There is no place for weighty tomes filled with passive language about what might be done at some time in the distant future, after further investigation and research.

Planning and implementing action across traditional boundaries is hard work. In the world of “core business”, service delivery agencies fear being left holding the bag, as it were. As a result, there can be a terrible stand off, where the range of service agencies, each of which should be involved, waits for another agency to make the first move.

An example of a terrible standoff involved one of our high need group of 12 long term homeless persons. Let's call him Patrick. Since 1997, Patrick had over 1,000 admissions to hospital (about \$1 million worth) and clocked-up over \$100,000 in debt to the SA Ambulance Service. No one felt they had the authority to take a risk to solve Patrick's problems. However, within the social inclusion initiative in response to this high needs group, once Patrick's history was brought to the attention of Jim Birch, Chief Executive, Department of Health, cross agency solutions began to develop.

Patrick has now had the aged care assessment he should have had some years ago. He is living in a Housing Trust Unit and is supported to remain there with an aged care package and an Exceptional Needs Unit package. He has significantly moderated his drinking and I am advised that in the last couple of weeks he has started to attend AA meetings.

The Social Inclusion initiative demonstrates that where an individual or organization takes responsibility for assessments, coordinating and brokering services, an integrated response can be provided. Systems that hamstring the best efforts of dedicated public servants can be swept aside.

A further element that has allowed for success in the public sector's implementation of the Social Inclusion Board's recommendations has been **assertive responses**. This has required leadership. It has required empowerment of departmental officers. Most of all it has required clarity of purpose.

Until Premier Mike Rann drew a line in the sand and said we are going to reduce homelessness there was a surprising lack of clarity concerning the purpose of some homelessness programs.

The stated purpose was to "support" homeless people. But in the absence of a clear statement as to what was meant by "support" it tended toward the softest of meanings. As a result we had homeless support programs that could not say how many homeless people they had housed. Indeed housing homeless people was not an explicit focus of the work. Homeless people were assessed. The harms flowing from their street based lifestyle were ameliorated as much as possible. They were referred to other services that did a new but similar assessment... and so the story went.

The Government's target provided an important spark for leadership. An essential reference point. If we are going to reduce rough sleeping by 50%, every State program, project and agency coming in contact with homeless people must be clear about how its efforts contribute to this goal.

This in turn calls for high calibre service planning and evaluation skills. Rigorous assessment of program logic. Capacity to manage change processes. These are core competencies required of central office staff. Competencies to be valued across the service. People with these skills need to be promoted. New graduates and employees need to be trained in them.

Armed with this clarity of purpose for homelessness programs, senior public sector managers are in a better position to responsibly delegate authority to departmental officers. They in turn can be much more assertive in negotiating contracts with other service providers and in providing direct services.

The fourth element to our successes to date has been **the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach**. This has been the area of greatest challenge. Even within single departments multidisciplinary responses have been difficult to implement.

Another of the high needs group of 12 is a person I'll call "Henry". He is a 31-year-old Aboriginal man who was adopted by a non-Aboriginal couple at a very early age. Henry has a long history of polly drug use, including misuse of prescription medication, cannabis, speed, alcohol and metholated spirits. He

commenced experimentation with drugs at the age of 9 years. He has significant psychiatric problems.

Henry has made numerous unsuccessful attempts at drug rehabilitation. Because of these previous failures and his continuing psychiatric issues, it is difficult for Henry to access drug rehabilitation programs. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that many drug rehabilitation programs are not able to manage a psychotic episode while continuing the rehabilitation process.

Henry's experience highlights the often one-dimensional nature of our planning processes. We have excellent drug rehabilitation programs. We have excellent mental health services – some dimensions are in short supply, but what we have is high quality. What our service system struggles to supply is an integration of these programs for those who require it.

Where mental health and drug rehabilitation interventions can be integrated the outcomes are so positive for clients. The decision as to when this sort of integration is needed is best taken at the local level. The Social Inclusion initiatives have allowed this local decision making to happen. This is supported through the allocation of modest amounts of discretionary funds to facilitate integration when there are challenges.

A fifth and final element to our successes is **innovation**. Where public sector employees have been prepared to innovate, to try something new, success has often followed. I am not talking about wholesale experimentation with the unknown. The key to success is incorporating new elements or new ways of doing things into existing strategies, based on rigorous program logic.

The greatest inhibitor to innovation is the rhetoric of evidence base. The limited evidence base available to us is the result of haphazard and unrelated decisions by funders and academics about what to research. Many good and effective interventions have never been researched. By insisting that all policy decisions be evidence based we greatly reduce the scope for activity. We inhibit creativity and risk-taking.

Some important aspects of our Social Inclusion work has been based on informed guesswork and expert hunches. This has been enriched by the limited evidence that is sometimes available and driven by the imperative to make a difference in the lives of excluded people.

The successes from this common sense approach demonstrate that cutting edge public sector management does not always follow evidence based policy.

In closing, I would like to leave you with a few thoughts.

Firstly, the new governance model introduced by this Government is sometimes seen as 'a bur in the saddle'. The leading role of the three key Boards, the SA Strategic Plan, the public sector reform agenda and the cross government committees have caused discomfort in some circles. But what I

propose is that the new governance model is ultimately about democracy. About greater transparency. Greater accountability to the electorate for the day-to-day operation of government. It positions the community as more of an active partner in the great endeavour of public administration.

Secondly, I do not believe public sector reform is an end in itself. The same should be said about being at the cutting edge in public sector management. If they are not about providing improved services to the community, better access to them for the most excluded and more effective use of the community's resources over which we have stewardship, then public sector reform and being at the cutting edge of public sector management is not worth the effort.

My experience of the South Australian public sector at close quarters confirms my belief that it is populated by a wide range of people with enormous dedication and skill. We have a unique opportunity to tap this potential.

If we, as leaders, can demonstrate our capacity for frankness, action-oriented planning and assertive implementation; if we can show what it means to innovate; to work across traditional boundaries and in a multidisciplinary way - then we will show the way to deal with the rapidity of change that surrounds us. And then the potential of the South Australian public sector to be cutting edge will be realised.

Thank you.