# ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE IN PUBLIC SERVICE ROLES: REPRESENTATION, RECOGNITION AND RELATIONSHIPS IN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRACIES

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This article considers findings from two studies that explore the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in Australian government bureaucracies. The studies were conducted with different disciplinary approaches (history, political science and anthropology) and were carried out in different public service settings. The aim in bringing the two studies together is to reflect on key common findings and thematic implications as contribution to the nascent research field examining Indigenous involvement in this form of work.

The first study involved detailed engagement with senior Northern Territory public servants over an extended period (Ganter 2016), while the second briefer study was conducted with a range of former and current employees of the Australian Public Service (Lahn 2018). Ganter found parallels between the experiences of Aboriginal public servants and descriptive political representatives whose role requires their membership of historically disadvantaged groups. Ganter applied theories of political representation to advance our understanding of representative bureaucracies, or bureaucracies that seek through

employment policies to reflect the communities they serve, in Australia.[1] Lahn's findings pointed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants having unmet expectations in relation to the opportunities available to contribute substantively to policy development and improved outcomes for Indigenous people and communities, alongside perceptions of being under-valued and underutilised within government. Both studies point to a need for considered engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants concerning their role within the bureaucracy.

## Public service employment

For some decades national, state and territory bureaucracies in Australia have invited Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to become public sector employees. Australian public sector bureaucracies now have strategies to encourage and measure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation (see Smith 2013: 225), and all government departments and authorities are subject to legislation requiring them to prevent discrimination through Equal Employment Opportunity planning. Government employment intentions have often been expressed through population-proportionate targets. Public sector strategies for Indigenous recruitment generally explicitly or implicitly present an assurance that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees will be able to make a substantive contribution to government policies and programs. The Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy (APSC 2015) states emphatically that 'it is vital to improve the representation of Indigenous Australians in the [public sector] workforce if the Commonwealth is to capably respond to the needs of the community' (APSC 2015: 1; see also PMC 2017; APSC 2018). Successive Northern Territory Indigenous Employment and Career Development Strategies have more explicitly linked representation to improvements in service delivery through Indigenous employment contributions (OCPE 2018; see also OCPE 2002, 2010, 2015).

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[1] Dovi (2017) provides an excellent summary of the key concepts, issues and approaches in descriptive political representation. For a review of the literature on representative bureaucracy, see von Maravić *et al*. (2013), and for a review of representative bureaucracy in Australia, see Smith (2013).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have responded by seeking employment across a range of Australian government bureaucracies. According to the most recent Census, almost 20,000 Indigenous people are employed in public administration nationally, making government Australia's second largest employer of Indigenous people (ABS 2017). Despite these total numbers, retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees is an important ongoing challenge for all levels of the public sector. Significant efforts are made to retain employee numbers in order to meet employment targets. In the case of the Australian Public Service, a recent Australian National Audit Office report on the period 2009-2013 found that 'despite the resources put into recruitment and retention initiatives…agencies are not gaining employment outcomes commensurate with their efforts' (ANAO 2014: 23).[2]

Academic efforts to understand Indigenous experiences of government employment and draw implications for theorising bureaucracy and bureaucratic representation have been patchy. Important material emerged in the 1970s (see Perkins' 1975 autobiographical account; Loveday 1982, 1983; Wilenski 1986), but until relatively recently the Australian scholarship tended to position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as subjects of government rather than actors within government. Research now emerging in several national contexts, including Australia, is generating insights into the multi-layered situation of Indigenous people employed by government, the nature of bureaucratic work and complex issues of identity and representation (e.g. Dreise 2017; Durie 2003; Dwyer 2003; Larkin 2013; Leitch 2017; O'Faircheallaigh and Althaus 2015; Radcliffe and Webb 2015). Trends in disciplinary interests are one factor, such as the recent uptake of ethnographic approaches within the field of political science (for example Rhodes 2005) and the renewed interest within anthropology on bureaucratic practice as an aspect of social relations in contemporary nation-states (for example Lea 2008). In addition, there is the increasing presence and voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at senior levels of the public service (Anderson 2017; Savage 2017).

An emerging literature about the everyday workings of bureaucracies is challenging characterisations of bureaucratic institutions as inherently obfuscating, colonialist and deserving of moral critique (e.g. Bear and

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[2] See Biddle and Lahn (2016) for a comparison of Indigenous and non-Indigenous employee retention rates.

Mathur 2015; Heyman 2004). Recent ethnographic studies of government workplaces and ministerial offices (e.g. Crewe 2017; Rhodes 2005) allow us to see internal workings up close, opening up new understanding of bureaucracies as places in which forms of agency continue in the face of significant structural constraints. These studies foster more nuanced understandings of the activities that constitute, reproduce and may potentially transform bureaucracies. Such scholarship offers a more complete picture of the lived realities of those employed in state bureaucracies, and in relation to the two studies under discussion here, assists in comprehending the complex situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bureaucrats in a post-settler nation like Australia.

## The two studies

Ganter's (2016) study of representation in the bureaucracy draws on interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander senior public servants in the Northern Territory in 2007. The transfer of a substantial number of Aboriginal public servants to the newly formed Northern Territory Public Service from the Commonwealth's former administration in 1978 had allowed the Northern Territory Government to join national efforts at building more representative bureaucracies by regularly reporting on Indigenous public sector employment.

The research set out to test how convinced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants were by the Northern Territory Government's self-account, through employment statistics, as an increasingly *representative* bureaucracy, particularly when it came to the substantive representation of issues and interests. Participants, located through a process of personal referral, were invited to reflect candidly on their careers, personal histories, source of identity and sense of influence in government departments. Confidential face-to-face semi-structured interviews generated a substantial body of data. Of the total of 76 interviewees, 53 had been employed at a senior level, 10 of these at executive and senior executive levels. The average length of service was 5-9 years, but nearly 25% had more than 20 years of continuous service, while more than 40% of current employees had 10-20 years of continuous service.

Although public sector careers were usually for substantial periods, the referral process revealed a high level of mobility between the public service and non-government organisations funded to deliver services to

Aboriginal communities—the so-called 'Indigenous sector' (Rowse 2002, 2005). Nearly 40% of referrals were to former employees who were now working in Land Councils and in Aboriginal health, housing, legal, research and community organisations. Some sat on the boards and committees of these organisations. Some worked in Indigenous-focused or Indigenous-owned businesses. Some owned their own businesses. Ganter's research found that half the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants recruited between 1990 and 2001 had left the public service by 2007. Of the 33 senior public servants interviewed in 2007 – working across all departments – another ten had left and one had already returned in 2010. Ganter notes that in 2015, five years later, six more had returned and again left, and that the Indigenous sector was still a common destination (Ganter 2016: 49; see also Ganter 2011).

The study found that the Indigenous proportion of public servants was more a reflection of continual recruitment than good retention (Ganter 2016: 183). It concludes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants often experienced the invitation to self-identify and contribute to policies and programs as hollow and unconvincing, but that many still felt compelled to participate – possibly, Ganter suggests, as a way to put forward the interests of their people in the absence of clearer means of doing so through external representative bodies. As Ganter (2016: 54) explains, the source of authority for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants to speak for their people is informal and often unclear. Yet it was a constant expectation on the part of their colleagues, and a temptation for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, to speak for their people. Ganter depicts the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in her study as 'reluctant representatives', finding them inevitably engaged in the representation of their communities when working in Indigenous affairs.

Ganter suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants felt most comfortable when acting informally in the role of a trustee who possesses a general authority to bring his or her autonomous judgement to bear on the interest of others, similar to the role of all public servants. They were least comfortable when that trustee role became one of substituting for the voices of their people who they felt should be consulted directly. 'Substitutive moments', as Ganter (2016: 97-103) calls them, arose when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants felt obliged to speak as 'objects of consultation' within their departments, which might give rise to representing a universal

Indigenous expertise or, worse, the 'problematic policy subject.' Many study participants found ways to avoid the indirect consultation they felt was being asked of them at these times, such as by positioning themselves as role models. Those who saw themselves as role models avoided the pitfalls of representing their people in government by promoting the benefits of social discipline, education and careers to youth, the unemployed and the disengaged (Ganter 2016: 155-6).

Ganter points out that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in three distinct relationships when in government employment: their *employment* relationship with government; a *representative* relationship with their people; and the *constituency* relationship that exists between government and all Indigenous Australians (Ganter 2016: 183-5). She suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants might stay longer in government employment if the public service was more attentive to its constituency relationship with their people by consulting with their people more effectively. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants might help facilitate the constituency relationship by guiding consultation with communities, but they are generally unwilling to act as substitutes for communities. At any rate, Ganter observes, the high career mobility of her participants – their tendency to leave the public service for jobs in Indigenous organisations and later return to the public service – may be seen as fulfilling part of an early vision for Indigenous public sector employment to support Indigenous organisations (Ganter 2016: 112).[3]

Lahn's (2018) research involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who had worked within the Australian Public Service (APS).[4] This research was conducted in the context of a long-term trend of high turnover and early exit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff from the APS (ANAO 2014). The research aim was to address four key foci through a series of in-depth interviews: what motivates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to join the APS?; what factors influence

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[3] One of the early intentions for Indigenous public sector employment, as envisaged by H.C. Coombs and C.D. Rowley in the Royal Commission into Australian Government Administration and associated reports, was as training for employment in Indigenous representative and service delivery organisations (see Coombs 1977: 188; Coombs 1984; Rowley 1976: 361).

[4] This research was conducted as part of a larger multi-methods study for the Australian Public Service Commission (Biddle and Lahn 2016).

their decisions to leave?; what factors influence their decisions to remain?; and what forms of employment do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants engage in after departing from the APS? Participants were largely self-selecting and nearly all interviews were conducted one-on-one, either face-to-face or via telephone. In total, 34 current and former public servants participated in the research (16 women and 18 men). The average length of interviewees' APS employment was 9 years; the shortest length of employment was less than one year and the longest length of employment was several decades.

All but three participants described themselves as the first member of their extended family networks to be employed in this sector. Their collective experiences of APS work were diverse and encompassed both policy contexts and 'frontline' interaction with clients across 13 individual departments and several statutory agencies. All major classification levels of APS employment were represented: Australian Public Service (APS) 1-6, Executive Level (EL) 1-2 and Senior Executive Service (SES). Participants entered the APS in a range of ways, including by applying for an advertised position, by completing a civil service examination (which is no longer available), through cadet and graduate programs, and through traineeship schemes that have Indigenous-specific cohorts.

It emerged that no single cause accounted for the decision to exit public sector employment among participants; rather, the decision tended to be triggered by a combination of factors. One key factor involved the reality of public service work not matching the impressions held prior to joining, which were often encouraged through processes of recruitment and/or participation in specific entry programs. A second key source of frustration linked to exit was the degree to which political considerations seemed to override other elements of policy-making and implementation. A variety of career and supervision issues was raised, though with no overriding focus. Issues included a perceived lack of opportunity for development or advancement; underutilisation of skill-sets; stories of career stagnation and difficult or exploitative managers; and a lack of understanding of Indigenous cultures by colleagues. Participants saw these issues as undermining effective program delivery and giving rise to poor management of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff.

Perceptions of racism and bullying also impacted on some participants' sense of being valued by the APS. While those interviewees generally

expected to encounter this in the APS (as a workplace like any other), they felt constrained in their options to respond. They considered reactions from individual managers inadequate and viewed internal processes for dealing with the issue unprofessional and deficient. A strong perspective emerged that it was better not to react or seek redress. The combined effect of these areas of difficulty was to undermine participants' sense of being valued as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees, as being involved in positive policy initiatives or delivering genuinely useful programs. A strong perception underpinning the decision to exit was that opportunities for creating genuine impact through bureaucratic work seemed elusive or remote.

If the shared experience of public sector employment among participants was to be summed up as a single general concept, this would be *unmet expectations*. This includes expectations about how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants would be treated by the APS and about the potential value of their individual contributions as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Participants expressed disappointment at the limited scope to 'make a difference,' not only to the wellbeing of Indigenous people and communities but also to the effectiveness of the APS in dealing with Indigenous issues more broadly. The study suggested a real frustration among these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees that their knowledge and experience in Indigenous matters was not sufficiently respected or utilised in relation to the conception, design and delivery of Indigenous policy by government. Narrative themes of being *undervalued* and *underutilised* reflected how participants felt about obstacles to exercising agency as an Indigenous public servant. This was reflected in pointed queries concerning the fundamental rationale that underpins government efforts to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the APS, and the commonly expressed assertion this should involve something more substantive than 'just targets' (i.e. meeting mandated proportions of Indigenous employees).

## The importance of relationships

The different jurisdictional and administrative settings, and disciplinary and theoretical frames, gave rise to distinct findings but some unifying themes. Two key insights might appear superficially at odds. One

highlights the challenging dynamics of representation faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in a sub-national bureaucracy relatively close to the constituencies it serves, and in particular the uneasiness associated with being positioned as a substitute for well-developed relationships with local Indigenous constituencies. The other, in a national bureaucratic setting more remote from service delivery, involves aspirations for greater recognition by the bureaucracy of potentially relevant understandings, insights and experiences that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees may bring to the Indigenous policy area. The two conclusions could be glossed as (a) apprehension that an Indigenous presence in the bureaucracy may be assigned too *much* weight (resulting in a neglect of constituency voices); and (b) frustration that too *little* weight is given to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees (and their lived connections to Indigenous social worlds).

Importantly, both sets of findings converge strongly around the critical thematic issue of *relationships*. Both illustrate the nuanced exercise of agency by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants navigating the complex roles and demands of bureaucracy while seeking to contribute to positive outcomes for Indigenous people and communities. And in both cases, too, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bureaucrats clearly voiced a desire that the administrations of which they are or were a part took more seriously their relationship with them by creating space for discussion of their role in relation to substantive outcomes, rather than treating them as mere 'bums on seats.' In both study settings, the opportunity to discuss their role in making policy more effective was generally absent. And among both groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, having this opportunity was viewed not only as a litmus test of the government's seriousness in dealing with Indigenous people and communities, but a chance to make a valuable and meaningful contribution to the general situation of Indigenous people and communities. In short, the two studies suggest inadequate engagement by bureaucracies with the range of issues concerning representation and recognition can impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants and detract from their experience of government employment.

On this point it is useful to consider a recent article written by the current Deputy Secretary of Indigenous Affairs in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Ian Anderson. Anderson points to the importance

of relationships in developing good policy in the sector. A critical focus, he notes, involves the character of relations between stakeholders[5] and bureaucrats, which need to be of 'high quality', engendering 'a sense of trust and mutual respect' (2017: 406). Anderson maintains that an increase in the total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants alongside an acceleration of their participation and leadership in policy development will underpin such relationship-building. This is a noteworthy publication, in part because it articulates some specific terms in which the contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants in the Indigenous policy arena is envisaged: they bring a capability for developing better relationships with Indigenous stakeholders. Anderson (2017: 406, 407) notes of non-Indigenous public servants that efforts will be required to 'build [their capability] to develop strong Indigenous relationships' and identifies a need to refine the selection of non-Indigenous public servants 'to ensure they have relevant relationship capability.'

Anderson's article offers a rare instance of high-level clarification concerning the substantive contribution Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants can make to Indigenous policy. It confirms the concerns expressed by Lahn's and Ganter's participants, particularly where he notes the need for greater recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees' capabilities and the importance of ensuring a place for constituent voices in the dynamics of representation in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants are inevitably involved. One participant in Ganter's (2016: 181-182) study emphatically expressed her readiness to assist the bureaucracy in precisely this fashion – to improve its relationship with Indigenous communities (rather than being positioned as a substitute voice for such communities). Outward-looking forms of engagement of this kind carry considerable potential for constructive and beneficial outcomes for government and Indigenous Australians, as well as for the conditions of employment experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants.

Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees in externally-oriented forms of 'high quality' relationship-building with Indigenous communities will not address all aspects of the complex representational

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[5] This includes a range of sector actors such as NGO's, academics, Aboriginal organisations.

issues surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants. Circumstances will continue to arise in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants are positioned to speak about other Indigenous Australians, and their participation in policy development will inevitably involve some in the construction of subjects who are seen as 'other' to mainstream Australia. Issues of recognition are equally complex, responding to and reflecting shifting Australian and international conceptions of the ethical, civil and political significance of Indigenous identity. These carry a host of implications, not just for the conduct of public administration and policy-making but across a range of public (and private) sector institutions and organisations (cf. Lazzeri and Caillé 2014). As a consequence, it is vital that bureaucracies give priority also to internally-oriented processes of relationship-building with their own Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees.

## Embracing 'creative tension'

The two studies featured here noted limited opportunities in bureaucratic settings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees to discuss with employers their own understandings and perspectives concerning their role as public servants. Some initiatives have emerged in the form of Indigenous employee networks, internal reference groups and policy advisory groups. We suggest a further opening up of spaces for relationship-building between the bureaucracy and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bureaucrats at all levels is a necessary measure. Importantly, there is no single or ideal form that these spaces should take. The process of elaborating terms of recognition and representation in relation to the lived experience of multi-layered positionality among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants will involve less 'technical fix' than ongoing conversation, both among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bureaucrats and between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander bureaucrats and others in government bureaucracies.

This process will not be free of tensions or of profound and challenging questions. A report of a recent gathering of senior Indigenous bureaucrats (sponsored by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet) noted the existence of a 'drive and desire to make a difference' among many delegates as an expression of the 'deep bonds and responsibility Indigenous public servants hold with their communities' (ANZSOG

2018: 5). It also acknowledged the potential for such aspirations to conflict with existing public sector norms, notably: 'a public-service culture which prizes bureaucratic impartiality, and…the ethos of service to the government of the day' (ANZSOG 2018: 5). The report raises the possibility that 'significant change to the norms and practices of the public sector' may be required if the public service is to draw on Indigenous expertise in leadership roles (ANZSOG 2018: 7). The extent to which this is possible remains to be seen. One impacting factor may be the increasing importance given by public administrations in many liberal democratic states to the notion of 'cultural competency,' and its role not just in meeting commitments to effective and efficient provision of public services but also in the implementation of representative bureaucracy and as a fundamental 'characteristic of good government' (Norman-Major and Gooden 2012: 3; Riccucci 2016: 45-6.[6] At the same time, conceptions of 'cultural humility' (see e.g. Foronda *et al*. 2016) challenge more instrumental approaches to training in cultural 'core competencies' by emphasising dialogue, self-reflection and responsiveness – of entering into relationship *with*, rather than receiving education *about*.

Recent writing by an Indigenous senior public servant Joy Savage (2017: 2) in *The Mandarin*, an Australian Government-supported vehicle for public sector commentary, points to the 'creative tension' that can exist between non-Indigenous and Indigenous leaders with different knowledge, understanding and staying power, and the value of relationships that work through this tension to transform public policy in Indigenous affairs bureaucracies and elsewhere. Savage (2017: 2) also stresses the importance of efforts to 'grow the cohort of experience (Indigenous and non-Indigenous)' through 'engagement, listening, learning, adapting, reflecting and working alongside First Peoples' as a critical component in propelling positive change. Evocatively, Savage (2017: 2) suggests that public service practitioners 'need to feel "on the edge", a "tinge of discomfort" as we go about creating fresh ways of working.'

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[6] For example, the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' 'CORE' (Core Cultural Learning: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia Foundation Course) (AIATSIS 2017).

## Conversation and dialogue

The two studies featured in this article involved different settings and distinct analytical foci. Yet, common to each was the complex, multi-layered position occupied by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants, whether in relation to concerns about representation of others or recognition by the public service of their aspirations, knowledge and capabilities. In both cases, at the heart of the issues being raised in the interviews was a concern about relationships – the character of the processes through which government engages with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whether inside or outside the bureaucracy. When Australian bureaucracies hire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, government enters a relationship in which it already has history. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants have repeatedly attested that their work as bureaucrats can involve 'walking in both worlds', that is, navigating commitments to community and culture on the one hand, and the normative standards in the public sector on the other. Deepening constituency relationships between government and Indigenous Australians would likely impact on the experiences of public sector employment, but in itself will not address the full range of demands and difficulties Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public servants may face. Opening up internal spaces for conversation, dialogue and relationship-building between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees and bureaucracy is vital in moving forward.

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