



# ANZSOG Senior Indigenous Public Servant Forum Report

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## About the artist

ANZSOG commissioned artwork for its 2017 Indigenous Affairs and Public Administration Conference by Bigambul artist Jordan Roser. Jordan Roser is a proud Bigambul man based in Redcliffe, Queensland.

A third-generation artist who endeavours to continue his families legacy in the arts and promotion of his culture through contemporary designs and themes. His work tries to reflect the modern experience and emotions of the new generation of Australian Aboriginal people through colour and storylines.



Here is what he has to say about the artwork commissioned, titled "Timeless":

*"I have tried to capture in this piece the importance of our culture and people to this country, our country. Our peoples journey through time on this land has been guided by the spirits of our ancestors. From the time of creation through to colonisation and now into the present day, our land and lives have changed dramatically.*

*The constant change and movement that Government policy direction and practices has had on our people and culture has been significant and felt deeply through the generations. It's now been 50 years since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were finally recognised as citizens in the Australian constitution rather than flora and fauna. Only 50 years since we weren't considered to be plants or animals in the constitution that was written for this land.*

*Over time and through many changes and hardship our people have remained strong and our culture has survived even during times that Government policy and practices have attempted to erode it. We can't go back and change these experiences now. We can only recognise the impact of the past on the present and continue moving forward to try to influence change where it is needed.*

*So, it's time we come together to discuss how we can move forward together in unity and respect. To talk about how things can be done better for and with our people into the future.*

*Much respect to our elders who will be attending this conference I hope their voices and their wisdom will be heard."*

To contact Jordan Roser: <http://www.facebook.com/mirrabookadesigns> or [mirrabookadesigns@gmail.com](mailto:mirrabookadesigns@gmail.com)

# Context

In 2017, the Commonwealth Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) came together to run a series of events marking 50 years since the 1967 referendum.

That referendum recognised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Census and gave the Commonwealth the power to legislate Indigenous affairs policy.

Fifty years on, significant progress has been made in improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in representing First Peoples in the public sector.

However, significant work remains in building positive and respectful links between governments in all Australian jurisdictions and Indigenous communities.

Throughout 2017, PM&C and ANZSOG ran three events intended to build networks, share knowledge, interrogate our history and past mistakes, and work towards positive outcomes for Indigenous communities.

In October 2017, PM&C and ANZSOG hosted senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic administrators from across Australia, to explore how universities can support Indigenous representation in the public service.

That roundtable was followed by a second event, the conference **Indigenous Affairs and Public Administration: Can't we do better?**, held in October 2017 at the University of Sydney. This conference brought together over 300 Indigenous and non-Indigenous representatives from the public sector, the community sector and academia, from Australia and New Zealand.

The damage of repeated churn to the machinery of government in Indigenous affairs was a common thread running through the conference. As Martin Parkinson, Secretary of PM&C, explained in his 2017 Wentworth Oration, "In 50 years, Commonwealth administration of Indigenous Affairs has cycled through 21 different ministers, and 11 different structures under them".

Beyond the damage of repeated machinery of government churn in Australia, positive change in the way government interacts with First Peoples in Australia requires a relationship that acknowledges past wrongs and is based on recognition of the value and contribution of Indigenous culture, history and knowledge.

Acknowledging the work that remains to be done in the New Zealand space and its specific and unique context, speakers at the Can't we do better? conference from the New Zealand National Museum, Te Papa, pointed to the success of biculturalism and its potential as an approach to bringing Māori knowledge into the public sector.



# Purpose

It was in the context of these events that the Indigenous Public Servant Forum brought together – for the first time – 65 senior Indigenous public servants from Australia and New Zealand. The purpose of the Forum was to establish cross-jurisdictional networks and share experiences of both challenges and success.

The Forum was focused on tackling issues relating to:

- Indigenous representation and retention in the public sector;
- improving First Peoples' leadership through the Senior Executive Service (SES) in Australia and New Zealand, and;
- understanding how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Māori can – as public servants – improve the way government engages with Indigenous culture, knowledge and communities.

Professor Kerry Arabena from the University of Melbourne facilitated the Forum. Kerry, a descendant of the Meriam people of the Torres Strait, brought her expertise and background in public health, administration, community development and research to her facilitation of the Forum.

The tone of the Forum was set by the Welcome to Country by Ngunnawal Elder, Aunty Jude Barlow and an introductory celebration of Indigenous culture through a musical performance from Belle Whyte, a descendent of the Murrawarri people of north-western New South Wales. Discussion at the Forum was visualised by a graphic recorder, whose recordings are included in this report.

The Forum was a first step, establishing the networks and a safe space for the group of senior Indigenous public sector leaders to frame the discussion. The following report provides a thematic summary of some of that discussion. The program provided opportunities for a number of invited speakers to deliver themed material and other sessions allowed for more free-flowing conversations among delegates.

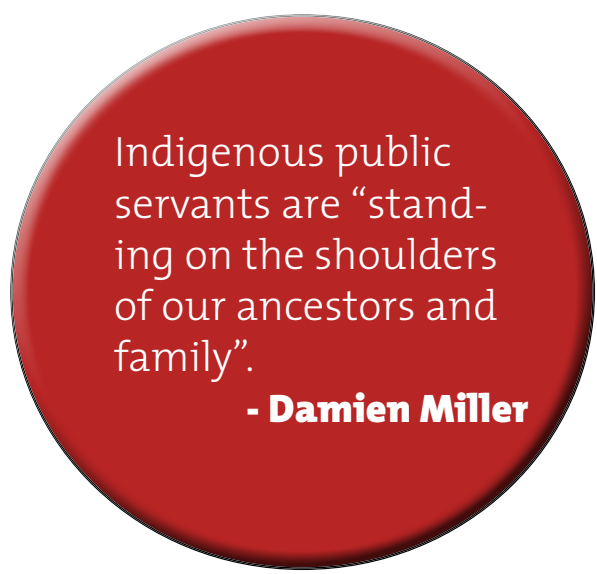
It begins by outlining the successes, opportunities and potential of Indigenous public sector leadership that were highlighted during the Forum.

The report then moves on to some of the individual challenges delegates shared with the group.

Much of the discussion was concerned with the way the public sector needs to change to respond to the challenge of stronger representation and leadership from First Peoples as well as more productive relationships with Indigenous communities.

The report summarises these discussions.

Drawing on the stories, experiences and reflections of the Forum delegates, the final section proposes some key issues to frame continuing discussion and the development of an outcomes-focused approach for the proposed 2018 Forum.



Indigenous public servants are “standing on the shoulders of our ancestors and family”.

**- Damien Miller**



# Opportunities

Indigenous public servants, who possess immense talent and a diverse range of skills, and who understand the history and the communities from which they come, are a source of massive leadership and potential in both the Australian and New Zealand public sectors.

Repeatedly, delegates discussed their desire to positively shape the work of government, by providing better advice, and building stronger links between the public service and communities of First Peoples.

## **Remembrance, aspiration and commitment**

Gangulu man and Assistant Secretary (Public Diplomacy Branch), The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and formerly Ambassador to Denmark, Damien Miller, opened the Forum with an address that focused on the strengths of Indigenous public sector leadership, conceptualised through the three pillars of remembrance, aspiration and commitment.

Damien emphasised the role of remembrance of his parents' and grandparents' past in shaping his identity as a public servant. The past holds significant trauma for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Māori.

For Damien, the past must be acknowledged and embraced. Indeed, drawing on those experiences – and trauma – can be a source of strength. In Damien's words, Indigenous public servants are "standing on the shoulders of our ancestors and family". This sentiment was repeated throughout the Forum, with many delegates reflecting on the privilege and the gift of being Indigenous.

Damien also described his aspiration to make a difference for his people and country as a defining feature of his career and identity as a public servant. This was a golden thread that ran throughout the Forum, with many delegates articulating their drive and desire to make a difference for community.

The deep bonds and responsibility Indigenous public servants hold with their communities represents a major strength and source of potential. Promoting Indigenous leadership and representation in the public sector is a chance to capitalise on these strengths. In an area of public administration where policy – often lacking the necessary relational basis for proper understanding and empathy – can be a source of suffering and trauma, public sector leadership driven by aspirations for positive change is critical.

However, this is also a source of tension. In a public-sector culture which prizes bureaucratic impartiality, and following the ethos of service to the government of the day, the aspirations of Indigenous public servants can come into conflict with public sector norms.

Damien drew delegates' attention to the legacies of trailblazers, including Charlie Perkins, Pat Turner and Tom Calma, who cut a path for those who followed them. Through their example, they demonstrated that managing the tension between responsibilities and aspirations as Indigenous people and identities as public servants is possible.





Today, significant progress has been made, and we have many more Indigenous public servants shaping the public sector than in the day of Charlie Perkins. However, if we take the Australian Public Service (APS) as an example, significant work remains to achieve proper representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all levels of the APS.

In his opening address, Damien explained that although Indigenous Australians make up around 3 percent of the total population, they represent only 2.7 percent of the APS, and are located mainly in the APS2-5 range. By contrast there are only 27 Indigenous people in the SES, representing only about one per cent. This story is common to many jurisdictions. Although there has been progress, Indigenous representation among the leadership of the public sector is currently not adequate if we desire to have a fully representative public sector.

Dr Martin Parkinson AC, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, has set out the [business case](#) for inclusion and representation of Indigenous people in the public service, stating that diverse organisations are more innovative, creative, and successful than homogenous ones. John Lloyd, the Australian Public Service Commissioner, has committed to making the APS a [welcoming environment](#) for Indigenous people. This would include: recognising Indigenous cultural qualities, demonstrating trust as an employer of Indigenous peoples, valuing the richness of diversity that Indigenous peoples bring to the APS and for Indigenous employees to have a sense of belonging in the APS.

These statements from the leadership of the APS demonstrate that there is a commitment to make positive change, and a solid grasp of some of the challenges that all public sectors face in making that change. The next step for the public sector is to ask how we move from an articulation of what needs to be done to achieve better outcomes, towards realising those outcomes.

For Damien Miller, a key component in achieving outcomes was commitment to influence outcomes and make positive change, influence the thinking of government in Indigenous affairs, and be involved in all aspects of nation building. Even in mainstream roles in the public service, First Peoples can bring pride in their Indigenous history and aspiration to improve the lives of their community. History, commitment and pride were key concepts in delegates' discussion of Indigenous leadership.



Palawa man and PM&C Deputy Secretary (Indigenous) Professor Ian Anderson AO, in addressing the delegates, posed the question; “what marks today’s Indigenous leaders out from other groups of the public service, what do we share?” In exploring what the group shared, delegates discussed the unique characteristics of Indigenous leadership, and the opportunities for positive change in the public sector in developing that leadership.

Definitions were diverse and varied. Some of the characteristics shared amongst the group described Indigenous leadership as: more nuanced and broad than western leadership, team based, consultative, as drawing on emotional intelligence, and responding to and uplifting others.

One delegate explained that “Indigenous leaders are often quiet leaders – unassuming and taking a low status.” Another delegate described Indigenous people and leaders in particular as possessing a high-level capacity for associational thinking, which makes Indigenous leaders highly empathetic and good at problem solving.

## Challenges for the individual

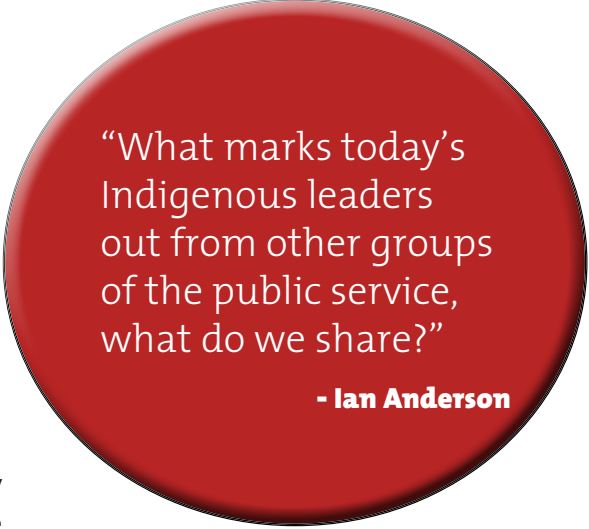
Delegates to the Forum described the challenge of ‘walking in both worlds’, where leadership requires fulfilling commitment to land and people while working within standard public sector norms.

Many delegates explained how Indigenous people entering leadership roles in the public sector are not fully prepared for that responsibility, and the “powerful role they have to play in shaping government and public policy over the next 50 years”. A major challenge moving forward will be in creating a public sector that facilitates and leverages the unique skills and responsibilities of its Indigenous public servants by recognising the potential to move between both worlds.

This may require significant change to the norms and practices of the public sector. However, it will also be a radical step forward in drawing on the expertise of Indigenous leadership – fully representing that leadership through the public sector – in mainstream and Indigenous specific roles. Sonja Stewart, Craig Ritchie, Brendan Thomas, Terry Garwood and Neil Willmetts held thought-provoking discussions about the relative merits of mainstreaming and Indigenous specific roles. Many conveyed their own experiences moving between these positions.

There are significant opportunities to leverage the leadership of Indigenous public servants in mainstream roles. This has tremendous capacity to inform outcomes for First Peoples through mainstream services. How Indigenous public servants are supported to operate and leverage their identity within mainstream roles remains an area rich for possibilities. Although Indigenous-specific agencies and positions are important and have a place, the public sector also needs to create space for Indigenous people and policy in the mainstream and be open to transformation of mainstream institutions.

One participant indicated the issue is complex and it is not the only way to frame the issue – it is more about what cross-fertilizations exist or can develop. Another indicated the pathways between Indigenous-specific positions and SES roles are not always clear.



“What marks today’s Indigenous leaders out from other groups of the public service, what do we share?”

- Ian Anderson

## Personal responsibility of Indigenous leadership

Delegates perceived a personal responsibility to make the public service more diverse and responsive to the needs of First Peoples. One method of improving the responsiveness of government to the needs of Indigenous communities would be to diversify representation in the public service through greater recognition of Indigenous leadership.

Such recognition would have significant positive impact in building trust and stronger relationships between Indigenous peoples and government across Australia and in New Zealand. Trust and strong relationships between government and community are often signaled as critical to positive change in the public administration of Indigenous affairs. Delegates to the Forum reiterated that recognition and representation of Indigenous leadership at all levels of the public sector is a critical component of building trust and strengthening government-community relationships.



Michelle Hippolite, Chief Executive of Te Puni Kokiri, (pictured) reflected on the relationship between Indigenous people and the public sectors they are part of, explaining that:

*Indigenous people share common struggles, including land, language, culture and [the struggle for] recognition. Yet we work inside the government. In order to strengthen the confidence of Māori in government, we need to understand the systems we work in and then work effectively to produce change.*

Michelle explained that in her time in government she had seen issues around integrity, due process and trust in how the non-Indigenous public sector leaders had dealt with Māori affairs in public policy. Part of the reasons to work inside government is to hold these leaders and processes to account, and in doing so make a positive change. However, this is not an easy task. As Michelle reflected:

*How do we perform our roles to further our ends? We are, after all, only a small cohort who have chosen to work inside government. We often don't have access to all the information or the key decision-makers. So, we need to have strategies to work with our organisations, our colleagues and other people. We also need to hold onto our cultural pride and insights, have confidence and share different experiences. Finally, we need to focus on positive impacts for those in the community we are trying to help.*

In speaking to delegates, Yorta Yorta man Ian Hamm expanded on Michelle's discussion about working within the system. Ian explained that beyond influence within the system, Indigenous public servants also have influence in community through their positions in the public sector.

Camille Lew Fatt from Darwin conveyed how significant a challenge it is to represent or be a bridge to community because of the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their views. This brings the additional responsibility of helping to build community skills and helping the community empower themselves. This can mean helping community understand how to maximise impact when engaging with a minister, as well as building relationships across the public sector. Ian advised that community's relationship with government is overly vulnerable if it is based on only a handful of relationships with Indigenous public servants. Ultimately, Ian explained, "we are limited if we only think of our influence as within the public sector".





## Walking in both worlds

Many delegates spoke of their experience as Indigenous public servants requiring them to ‘walk in both worlds’. As a part of a set of institutions that are at their foundation Western, Indigenous public servants are required to understand how to operate in this space.

Whilst operating in this institutional setting, First Peoples must also balance or maintain their commitment to community and culture. It is well documented that one of the major challenges for governments in Australia and New Zealand is recognising and respecting Indigenous culture and knowledge. Delegates to the Forum noted that this tension between government and community is reflected in their lived experience as public servants. As active members of Indigenous communities and the public service, Indigenous leaders face at times a challenging balancing act concerning community expectations for policy such as Treaty in the Australian case, against the political realities of serving the government of the day.

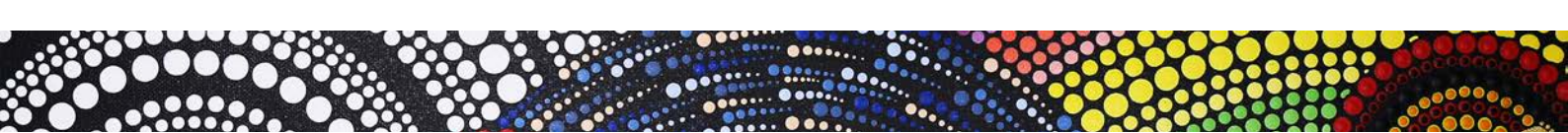
Indeed, Indigenous public servants face persistent, real and serious obstacles to exercising leadership. As a corollary to this, delegates from all jurisdictions discussed the feelings of being isolated, an outsider or even an imposter. However, many of the delegates to the Forum described this tension as a strength, not a challenge. They emphasised how they draw on their ability to walk in both worlds as a source of strength, where they can bring different perspectives and a unique connection to community to improve the work of the public sector and the policies promulgated and implemented by government.

There was nevertheless a recognition that, for many Indigenous people who joined the public service, the necessity of having to walk in both worlds is a serious challenge that can be difficult to overcome. Subsequent to discussions of Indigenous leadership and identity as a source of strength which drives First Peoples as public servants, some delegates questioned this focus and understanding of Indigenous identity, asking “Why can’t we have senior executives that just happen to be Indigenous, why do we label ourselves that way?”. This speaks to a desire, from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Māori leaders, for Indigenous values and leadership to be normalised in the public service.

A critical area for public sector innovation will be to devise ways to facilitate and improve First Peoples’ movement into the public sector, and their rise throughout the ranks of the public service, without encountering unnecessary cultural barriers where individuals feel their commitment to community comes into irreconcilable conflict with their work within the public service.

The ‘two worlds’ character of public service for First Peoples can create barriers in their capacity to translate their expertise to the mainstream public sector. Delegates discussed the necessity for Indigenous public servants – particularly at the leadership level of the SES – to learn skills around communicating to non-Indigenous public servants and mainstream agencies about their expert, first-hand knowledge of Indigenous affairs. These delegates discussed the skill-set of persuasions and taking feedback in a way that enhanced their effectiveness in the public sector. This was reiterated by Yuin man Jason Ardler who explained that dealing with non-Indigenous public servants who may have very little understanding or empathy for the policy area – having no lived experience with Indigenous people and communities – can be a major feature and challenge for Indigenous leaders.

However, it is important to remember that the imperative and responsibility for leveraging the two worlds of Indigenous leadership is not for Māori or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders alone. Agencies have a responsibility to promote resilience among Indigenous staff, and to be pro active in building pathways for Indigenous leaders to emerge and lead change.



There is also an imperative on agencies to build the capacity of non-Indigenous public servants to learn history, intercultural skills and to promote the contributions of Indigenous public servants and Indigenous ways of knowing and being as a force of positive transformation for public service processes and institutions.

### Driving positive change from inside the public service

Delegates discussed the notion that it is far better to be inside the tent than outside if you want to affect change. Leveraging the knowledge and experience of our Indigenous SES is a critical part of the public sector's ability to achieve the outcomes identified through policy processes in Australia and New Zealand, and deliver on the expectations set by the wider community. However, the discussion among delegates signaled that this is a contested space that is difficult to navigate. This was demonstrated in some of the questions raised as part of the discussion, which included:

- how can you leverage from influential positions inside the public service to change outcomes;
- how radical should Indigenous public servants be;
- what are the challenges of being a public servant who is driven by the desire to make positive change, and;
- does this clash with the obligation to serve the government of the day?

Drawing on their personal experience, one delegate explained that, “a big issue we faced in child protection was the question of how far can Indigenous leaders and their teams break out of the standard norms to improve actual outcomes in child protection on the ground.” This begs the question of where and when do indigenous leadership practices come into tension with standard public sector norms, and how can First Peoples negotiate that tension to maximize influence in an authentic way?

## Challenges for the public sector

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Delegates discussed the need to achieve stability in the machinery of government for the administration of Indigenous affairs. This requires structuring government so that decision-making is responsive to community concerns and engages First Peoples.

Beyond this, delegates expressed their concern that government needed much longer-term – up to 20 years – timeframes for the implementation and evaluation of policy. Many of the challenges facing First Peoples, particularly in remote communities, are systemic and require substantive shifts in government's response. Breaking out of the cycle of constant machinery of government changes, learning from the past, and moving towards solutions is critical, as the public service has a major role to play in improving the condition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and Māori in New Zealand.

A key area of public sector responsibility framed throughout the Forum as important in fulfilling government's responsibility to positively impact Indigenous communities included better recognition of Indigenous skills and competencies with the aim to restore communities' faith in the government and to build trust with Indigenous people more generally.

A significant reflection, and frustration, of many delegates was the acknowledgment that, although the problems in the government's approach are longstanding, the public sector has often failed to learn from mistakes and move towards solutions. As one delegate expressed:



*A challenge for the public service is that, after this much time has passed, we know there are no simple solutions to the policy problems facing Indigenous people and communities. If there were [simple solutions], we would not be facing the problems we are facing today. So, governments and the public sector cannot assume they have the answers or solutions, or that they know the aspirations of our people. They need to keep in touch, maintain contacts and relationships, keep the channels of advice and communication flowing.*

Stronger relationships built on trust between government and community will be essential in overcoming the deficit frame through which much public policy deals with Indigenous people.

Jason Ardler reflected that, as he moved from the mainstream of the NSW public sector towards Aboriginal Affairs, he was confronted with many worrying deficit narratives of Aboriginal people as disadvantaged, victims and perpetrators.

Deficit narratives not only negatively impact policy-making, implementation and evaluation, these narratives also shape public sector organisations' view of Indigenous people as public sector leaders.

Many delegates repeated the aspiration that Indigenous leadership would be mainstream and business-as-usual in the public sector.

Normalising Indigenous leadership will require overturning deficit narratives as the typical frame through which government approaches communities. Instead – it was suggested – governments could focus on the strengths and success of Indigenous people and communities, encouraging the co-production of policy and the engagement of more First Peoples as actors within the public sector at the SES level.

Reflecting on the recognition of Indigenous leadership, one delegate asked, “how does the public sector nourish and cultivate cultural heritage, or at least create space for this?”

Delegates from all jurisdictions also discussed the need for the public sector to be more proactive in creating career pathways and retention for public servants. The public sector must be active and not passive in seeking out Indigenous people and supporting them into the SES.

“How can we break out of the incestuous pattern of recruitment/appointment of like-by-like, people with the same backgrounds and skill sets and ‘third generation public servants’”.



## Where to from here?

This inaugural Forum was important in building the network and creating space for an open and cross-jurisdictional conversation defining problems and identifying challenges. There was significant appetite amongst delegates for the next Forum to have a solutions-based approach, drawing on the Forum delegates' expertise and knowledge to identify paths forward for government to make substantive and lasting change.

Many Australian delegates highlighted the importance of Treaty and options to support this, especially in light of New Zealand experience. There was an express desire to openly engage with options in this space in future Forums. This will allow positive Trans-Tasman insights to be achieved and for delegates to identify ways to promote recognition and self-determination through their public service activities.

The following section provides four areas that could form a basis for an outcomes-focused discussion at the 2018 Forum:



### **Creating career pathways, retention of Indigenous public servants and development of Indigenous leaders**

The 2017 Forum made clear that the public sector must be active and not passive in seeking out Indigenous people and supporting them into the SES. As Te Puni Kōkiri Māori leader, Tui Marsh (pictured), put it:

*"Aboriginal issues should be everybody's business. Indigenous values should be reflected in agency values. We need to get across the message that we can be more than support staff, we can also run organisations."*

### **Recognising Indigenous knowledge in the public sector**

One component of improving recruitment, retention, and representation of Indigenous people across all levels of the public sector will be recognition of Indigenous knowledge and leadership values.

### **Moving from narratives of deficit to success**

Public administration and Indigenous Affairs is beset by a deficit frame where Indigenous communities are viewed through a prism of deficit as they connect with government through service deliveries including health, criminal justice and education. Tui Marsh framed the need to shift away from this deficit approach thus: 'Hopefully we can get to a position where Indigenous people don't want anything from us except good laws, fixing bad laws and generating resources for the community'.

In the Australian context, there was a call for better communication of experiences and progress across jurisdictions, particularly between the Commonwealth and States, and for a more connected and complementary approach between jurisdictions.



## Achieving a balance between 'ignoring the Indigeneity of First People' and expecting Indigenous public servants to be the 'sole representatives of a pan-Indigenous culture'

A more balanced approach by the public sector would require a deeper understanding on Indigenous leadership, so that First Peoples in the public sector could perform their roles as Indigenous leaders and members of the public sector without experiencing feelings of isolation.

Delegates to the Forum discussed the challenge of being asked to be the representative of a Pan-Aboriginal culture, which is both isolating and unhelpful.

A public sector with a more nuanced understanding of Indigenous leadership and history would better understand the diversity of Indigenous communities, and would have the capacity to recognize or even encourage its Indigenous leaders to 'walk in both worlds'.

This is perhaps the greatest challenge for the public sector, because it not only requires a great deal of engagement and learning to better understand Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Māori ways of knowing and being, but will also require a substantial cultural shift for the public sector.

