

**New Insights and new possibilities for public service leadership, Robin Ryde provides a rare glimpse into a unique international action learning project<sup>1</sup>**

## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the findings of an unusual international endeavour which combines action research with leadership development for 40 senior officials from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. The four nation “Leadership Across Borders” programme co-delivered by the governments’ business schools of each country, set out to explore and understand some of the most significant facets of public service ranging from citizen engagement to whole-of-government complexity, and from the economic downturn to crisis management. Over the 10 months of the programme the senior group engaged with heads of the public service, leading academics, delivery experts, leaders of civic society and scores of street level service users. This paper highlights the critical importance of understanding complexity and the role of ‘systems thinking’ in dealing with modern problems. But it also points to a new order of innovation required of leaders if they are to bring value to problems such as deprivation and global financial crises, and if they are to successfully bring about citizen-centred services in increasingly complex societies.

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## AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The four nation “Leadership Across Borders” development programme, which combines development with action research, is an unusual and powerful example of what can be achieved when senior people from different countries come together to explore public service leadership challenges. The programme that ran over the course of 10 months in 2009 tackled head-on a number of critical issues facing public service. These included the global financial crisis, the new order of complexity of public service, the centrality of citizens in public service design and, amongst other considerations, the need for public service transformation. But in all of these areas the focus of the programme was what these issues mean for leadership, and specifically, how the practice of leadership might need to change in order to deal with these distinctly modern set of challenges.

The context too of this programme, that of viewing the issues from the vantage point of senior leaders from four different countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK), provided rare insights into areas of common practice and also alternative ways of seeing public service challenges. In addition of course to the quality of analysis this provided, the experience served to expand and deepen a valuable global network of ‘Westminster model’<sup>2</sup> public service leaders.

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<sup>2</sup> The **Westminster system** is a democratic, parliamentary system of government modelled after that of the United Kingdom system. The term is derived from the Palace of Westminster, the location of the Parliament of the United Kingdom. The system is a series of procedures for operating a legislature. It is used, typically in an adapted form, in the national legislatures of most Commonwealth and former-Commonwealth nations, beginning with the Canadian provinces in the mid-19th century as well as in Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica, India and Singapore. Key characteristics of the Westminster system typically include a head of state, a head of government (or head of the executive), known as the prime minister (PM), premier or first minister, senior members of the executive in the form of a cabinet, a parliamentary opposition and various established procedures for monitoring and recording parliamentary discussion, for example, in Hansard

This paper sets out the context of the programme and the broad range of learning that was derived. Standing back from this work and focussing in on the key areas of examination and discovery the clearest and strongest messages arising from the programme fall into three categories.

The first set of observations covered in this 'thinkpiece' relate to **how public service leaders make sense of the challenges they face**. The reason why this presents itself as a major consideration is directly as a result of factors such as the increased pace of change in the external environment, the level of complexity of the public service landscape, the positioning of public servants between citizens and politicians, and the steep rise in expectations of how public services should perform. Many of these sources of complexity might easily be recognised in policy challenges such as climate change, obesity, and social deprivation, but in fact they are represented across the board. It is this degree of 'messiness' that requires leaders to think hard about how best they can bring value to the issues for which they have responsibility .

At the heart of this is the deceptively simple issue of how to frame the challenges faced. The learning derived from the programme centred on the need to place complex issues in a deliberately broad frame and in doing so to pay particular attention to the interconnections and 'coupling' of variables within the system and the coherence of the actual and potential public service response. Practically, this requires leaders to conceive of 'the problem' in ways that might extend beyond the boundaries of their organisation and into other reaches of the public and private sector, including internationally and to society at large. In doing this leaders need to skilfully deploy innovative lines of inquiry into problems that will open up the issues for broader analysis both for themselves and for others. Examples of this approach include the use of systems thinking and appreciative modes of questioning, such as looking for cases, however rare

they may be, of progress and success in the face of difficulties. Ultimately the aim is for leaders to create the conditions for innovation in thinking through to solutions and in to foster empowerment in taking action.

A second set of observations were focussed on **the need to bring in a greater number of voices into public policy design and delivery**. This was expressed in terms of the need for genuinely authentic engagement and dialogue that would help to deliver better evidence for decision-making, that would improve the acceptance and sustainability of the resulting policy decision, and the powerful benefits of bringing together different stakeholders in the system so they too can see the complexity of the system and the interconnections within it. Specifically in relation to the topic of citizen-centricity, the research undertaken on the programme pointed to the merits of adopting approaches similar to methods found in the field of social anthropology which involve seeking to understand the lives that citizens lead and how they apprehend their challenges and their relations with government. This ethnographic approach emphasises the principle of 'walking in the shoes' of citizens for a sort while to drive out a different understanding of the issues. While at one level this might encourage leaders to consider how best to improve existing public services, the approach explored many instances where solutions lay either in public services playing a facilitative role for citizens to tackle their own challenges, or through removing public services from the picture altogether. It was found that starting from the perspective of the citizen rather than with the service or services could release innovation and new possibilities, as well as offering a greater level of empowerment for citizens themselves.

A final set of observations related to **how capabilities of public servants and societies at large need to be built**. In addition to the learning, for example, derived from the programme about problem definition, systems thinking and citizen-centricity which would be



good additions to the capabilities of public servants, the message for leaders is about their role in facilitating organisational as well as societal learning and operating in ways that liberate innovation in order to adapt to rapidly changing times. The fundamental finding from this is that the context that public servants work in and the problems that societies face have changed dramatically and public service leaders need to give more attention to sense making, facilitating creativity and solutions and systematically building capabilities at all levels of society. In all of this the 'power of assembly' that leaders possess in bringing together stakeholders offers a very powerful route to success.

The remainder of this report brings out the texture and some of the detail of this unique development experience. The participants involved in all four countries now not only form a global network but also an international as well as in-country resource for further development and application of these ideas.

## Introduction

"Leadership Across Borders" (LAB) is a unique leadership development initiative that brings together 40 senior public servants from 4 nations<sup>3</sup> to learn about, and make sense of, some of the greatest public service challenges. In doing so the programme endeavours to work as a 'learning think tank' to create learning, but also to explore and test possibilities for how public service leadership of today might need to change. It is these characteristics of multinational participation and the combination of learning with research that makes the programme so unusual, such a rich source of ideas and an ideal vehicle to drive new thinking into public service leadership.

The programme is designed and delivered in collaboration by three 'schools of government' namely the Australian Public Service Commission, the Canada School of Public Services and the UK National School of

<sup>3</sup> Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK

Government. It is sponsored and personally backed by four heads of public service in Australia (Terry Moran), Canada (Wayne Wouters), New Zealand (Iain Rennie) and United Kingdom (Sir Gus O' Donnell) and with added high level support from heads of government departments in all four countries.

In bringing together these diverse participants with one another and in turn in connecting them to a host of academics, practitioners, politicians, industry figures, media representatives and real live dilemmas, the programme focuses attention on a small number of key themes with particular relevance to modern public service, specifically:

- Leading through complexity and crises
- Leading for citizens, and
- Leading major transformation

All four countries chose to participate in part because they share a common "Westminster" system of government (albeit applied in sometimes different ways). This provides a strong platform for thinking about these and other themes and an excellent comparative base. Furthermore, the messages arising from this work should have applicability to all four countries and potentially others that have similar governmental systems.

The backdrop for the 2009 Leadership Across Borders programme - the focus of this study - was the unprecedented circumstances of the global financial crisis and as such each country was invited to offer up its own experiences of the origins, the impact and the implications for public services in real time, as the crisis itself unfolded. The observations highlighted in these pages are flavoured by this experience.

This paper is intended to capture some of the journey relating to the 2009 Leadership Across Borders programme and in doing so the most salient learning from the programme as experienced and developed by the participants. While this document is presented as a



'thinkpiece' it has practice firmly in mind and, as well as a place for capturing thoughts and ideas, it is hoped that public service leaders, and indeed the sponsors of this programme, will see common endeavours and see possibilities for other ways of apprehending the leadership challenges they face. This is one step in the process of the dialogue needed to recast public service leadership according to the distinctly modern set of challenges and dilemmas faced.

## **Sources of ideas and provocations**

A broad range of individuals and organisations have offered their ideas and input to the programme. But in addition to contributors in the form of management thinkers, academics and subject experts in each country learning experiences were also delivered in the form of 'live case studies' which parachuted the participants into real life public service issues<sup>4</sup> and encouraged them to come up with ideas and solutions to the challenges faced. In each country's live case study between 20 and 30 site visits were undertaken to offer perspectives on the issues examined. Furthermore, the participants themselves brought in their own experiences and expertise which were tested and developed throughout the programme and explicitly during what were called 'Learning Insights' think tank sessions.

## **What is challenging about public service leadership?**

The challenges faced by public service leaders have a surprising degree of similarity regardless of the country within in which such leaders work<sup>5</sup>. The operating

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<sup>4</sup> In Australia the focus was on 'the start to life' looking at pregnancy support, maternity services and early years support with particular emphasis on vulnerable and indigenous populations. In Canada the live case study looked at the provision of 'housing finance' in a global financial crisis. In the UK on attention was given to 'citizen centricity' for harder to reach groups particularly those experiencing deprivation.

<sup>5</sup> Within countries that operate according to a "Westminster" system of government

environment for all four participating countries is best described as one where expectations of what public servants should deliver continually rise, where complexity of the task grows, and where changes in priorities, resourcing and the responsibilities of government occur with increasing regularity. If there ever was a time when public service was a slow paced, predictable and tame environment this time has now long gone. The leadership responsibilities of public servants can range enormously, and as illustrated by just a few participants on this programme, the areas that were managed ranged from agricultural policy to debt management; from the creation of new governmental systems (for example, Scotland) to capability-building; from border protection to counter terrorism; and from programmes to tackle substance misuse to indigenous affairs (for example in Australia and Canada).

But within each of these and other areas the specific challenges of leadership coalesce. Amid all this complexity leaders struggle to hold their focus on the immediate pressures and demands of the job while at the same time focussing on more strategic, often longer term, priorities. In the words of Stephen Covey<sup>6</sup> this dilemma is about tackling both the 'urgent' and the 'important' with the attendant risk that leaders too often get drawn into the 'urgent' forsaking their more strategic obligations. But in the public service environment this tension presents itself on an almost daily basis as Ministers and politicians often have shorter careers and shorter timescales in mind than public servants; where the public service is under 24:7 surveillance from the media; where inspection, audit and regulation is delivered by and to public servants at all levels of administration; and where interest and lobby groups get ever more powerful and skilled at putting public services under the spotlight. This level of scrutiny and media attention is not experienced to the same degree beyond the public service and while

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<sup>6</sup> "First Things First", Stephen Covey, Simon & Schuster Ltd, 1999 (new edition)



industry and the NGO sector have their actions 'audited' in different ways, the public service, in pursuit of the principles of transparency and accountability, must let in spectators, critics and scrutinisers to all that it does. In turn leaders must eternally manage the tension between the unpredictability of what the urgent will bring, and the need to give their attention to what is important.

As public service leaders' face rising expectations, the required speed of response is shortening. The global financial crisis and the H1N1 pandemic provide just two illustrations of the pressure on leaders to act quickly. But as well as the more obvious crises there are longer-burning and potentially more significant events including (and taken from a long list) ageing and pensions, shifting demographics and obesity. These types of demands are both aided and exacerbated by the advent of new communication technologies such as email, the internet, Blackberries and other mobile communication devices. In this vein, a more personal set of concerns that were frequently voiced, were simply about the limited time and resources available to leaders to deal with the diversity of the jobs that participants held. Some participants knew that they needed to spend more time 'walking the floor' and connecting with staff but felt constrained in their ability to do so as meetings stacked up like aircraft on their way into London Heathrow. Others understood the importance of, and were successful in, building the capabilities of their staff so that "the leaders of tomorrow are much better than the leaders of today"<sup>7</sup> but often more immediate pressures come into sharper focus. Many leaders identified their organisations as possessing structures that were too rigid to assist them in acting quickly in the face of short timescales and crises. Flexibility, agility and pace were the qualities some senior leaders felt were insufficiently represented in the organisations they led.

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<sup>7</sup> Sir Gus O'Donnell in his address to the 2009 Leadership Across Borders cohort, Marriot County Hall, 11 June 2009

Not only is the fuse on many public service priorities somewhat shorter, but the ability of leaders to affect change and exercise their responsibilities is under pressure too. This is because many more of the concerns of public service today are dependent on effective collaboration between different departments and levels of government. In fact, many problems not only require public service collaboration but demand the alignment and support of civic society and the private sector. Take for example, climate change. For success to follow there needs to be coordination of central/federal government activities dealing with areas such as industry, transportation, the environment and housing. But there also needs to be local/provincial level alignment in relation to matters such as refuse disposal (private and commercial), planning and energy usage. But it doesn't stop here because to be fully effective domestic governments need to be working with large industrial powers and CO2 producers such as the U.S, China and India. Climate change though is not alone. It sits alongside numerous other policies ranging from deprivation and social exclusion to home ownership and housing finance - all of which have multiple causes and multiple reasons to collaborate.

The powerful challenge that this leaves leaders with is how to exercise influence beyond formal lines of authority; beyond the 'organisational levers' that senior figures can get their hands to, and also in a financial environment where many government departments are drawing in and understandably re-prioritising according to the core of their own businesses. Interestingly, many traditional models and modes of leadership development have implicitly treated leadership as a top-down activity and one that occurs within organisations. Many of the challenges encountered by today's public service leaders are of a different kind and are related to success in external influence, systemic thinking and in the creation of more informal coalitions in support of common objectives.



A final set of issues uniquely in the domain of public servants is that of the shifting sands of politics affected, in many countries, by the tenure of the governments concerned. For example, during the course of the 2009 Leadership Across Borders programme the Australian government was relatively new into office, the UK government was looking to a major election with the Labour party potentially reaching the end of its tenure, and in Canada a 'minority' government was in power. In New Zealand a change of government occurred in the November before the programme commenced. At the best of times Ministers and politicians present public service leaders with challenges (as is to be expected), but a degree of skittishness, in some countries, characterised many of the dealings with public servants by Ministers. In other systems there was notable impatience and challenge present in the relationship between government and the public service. But in both sets of cases this impacted on the ability of public service leaders to maintain a focus on the long term, to drive forward change and to be assured of continued support for their decisions.

## **It is not complexity we should fear, but simplification**

In the discipline of leadership a lot of attention is rightly given to the need for leaders to state and communicate their messages simply. Our employees are busy. The rate and frequency of organisational change quickens day by day. The world around us is continually undergoing transformation. The marketplace of messages is competitive and becoming more crowded. In this environment the premium on the ability of leaders to articulate their intentions simply is very high. In this sense simplification is a very worthwhile pursuit.

However, public service leaders are looking down the barrel of ever more complex situations that may cause us to wish that such challenges were simpler, and, more dangerously, may even cause us to act as if they were simpler. But the learning from the Leadership Across Borders programme demonstrates with absolute certainty that leaders need to better understand

complexity and sharpen their skills in managing, rather than reducing, it. This is said in the context of many changes including a developing ethos for all four countries of citizen-centricity, which invites the public service to organise itself for the convenience of citizens rather than for its own convenience. This, by its nature, creates a much greater level of complexity than we have had in the past and forces collaboration between a multiplicity of public service bodies and stakeholders previously able to operate in largely separate worlds. In the UK, the work that was led by Sir David Varney<sup>8</sup> illustrated salutary instances where citizens had experienced the bereavement of a family member and had to interact with different parts and levels of government some 17 times (reporting the death, engaging on taxation, consulting on pension arrangements, seeking advice on allowances and support etc). In the initiative that he led, David Varney sought to take the complexity of dealing with government away from the citizen and charge the public service to deal with it instead.

## **Framing the challenges faced**

In Canada, housing finance has taken the attention of public servants not least as a result of the global financial crises which originated from the sub-prime collapses across the border in the U.S. A challenge such as this can be seen simply as an issue for lending institutions and the regulation and support that is provided by government. Framing the problem in these terms leads us to think (legitimately) about, for example, whether the government might take steps, as

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<sup>8</sup> Sir David Varney had been adviser to the UK Prime Minister, former Chair of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, former Chair of O2, former Chief Executive of British Gas and held other positions in industry. The work he conducted related to citizen-centricity was under the 'transformational government' initiative. David was closely involved in the "tell us once" agenda designed to simplify the experience of interacting with government for citizens



it has done in Canada, to securitize borrowing through government-owned mortgage insurance, and whether changes to personal taxation arrangements might alleviate some of the difficulties of obtaining mortgages for first time buyers. These and other strategies are entirely sensible and have to be part of the response that is given.

However, when the frame of analysis is broadened other, more complex, issues come to the foreground. For example, the H1N1 flu pandemic affecting most countries of the world has hit particularly hard in certain communities. Some of the “first nations”<sup>9</sup> people and their communities have suffered more cases of the virus which has been exacerbated by low standards of housing in some communities and high levels of over-crowding. Housing finance for these groups becomes a more complex issue and one that is entwined with health, cultural and regional issues. Also Canada has a diverse and multi-cultural population which sees a large number of immigrants enter the country each year to take up work and residence. Obtaining finance for such groups can be very difficult as credit records (which would exist if they were in their home countries) cannot be accessed and used to provide the confidence that lenders need to proceed. This opens up further connections between housing finance and government departments dealing with immigration and all that this entails. Finally, shifting demographics and in particular the emerging influence of the ‘Generation Y’ population might necessitate a re-think in a number of areas from the presumption that home ownership is a desirable state. It is argued that Gen Y populations are more inclined to have less stable, more peripatetic lifestyles involving travel, career breaks etc which pushes back against the premise of home ownership in favour of home rental. Additionally, the growing importance of ecological responsibility and

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<sup>9</sup> **First Nations** is a Canadian term of ethnicity which refers to the aboriginal peoples located in what is now Canada, and their descendants who are neither Inuit nor Métis

the energy implications of housing and property ownership, perhaps calls for another connection in government between the finance function interested in support for lending, and the environment department and agencies approaching the issue from a different perspective.

To ignore this type of complexity, at least in the framing of the challenge, is to ignore the differing lives that citizens lead. Public service therefore, and the leaders of it, need powerful skills of problem definition before they even think about reaching for the levers that they have close to hand.

*The leadership lessons relating to problem definition that we might draw from this can be summarised as follows:*

- *Leaders should take it as their role to frame complex public service challenges in deliberately broad terms, and in doing so seek to understand the system within which policies and citizens live*
- *Leaders should create the space they need to complete their analysis of the system, its components and interconnections, and resist the temptation and the pressure to jump in too quickly with the wrong remedy*

## Posing questions that liberate solutions

Professor Keith Grint of Warwick Business School (UK) is clear about the differing roles that leaders must play if they are to be effective. In his work he distinguishes between different orders of problems and the responses that each require<sup>10</sup>. With ‘critical’ and ‘tame’ problems, Grint respectively identifies ‘command’ and ‘management’ as the appropriate style of response. At

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<sup>10</sup> Academic paper “Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: the role of the leader”, Prof Keith Grint



times of crisis for example, the situation needs to be assessed, decisions need to be reached quickly and actions need to follow. In such a scenario Grint argues that it is legitimate for people to be commanded to act accordingly. In relation to 'tame' problems he states that 'management' is needed; In these instances, the problems faced are ultimately solvable - they may have been dealt with elsewhere, they may require 'working through' or there may need to be new rules, protocols or processes created but, ultimately, they can be tackled.

It is in relation to a third level of problem where Grint calls upon leadership, and leadership of a particular sort. And this is where problems are complex or 'wicked' and the solutions are unknown (and possibly unknowable). Grint argues that one of the characteristics of a 'wicked' problem is the subjectivity that exists in relation to the problem and solution. Put simply, "what kind of problem you have depends upon where you are sitting and what you already know"<sup>11</sup>. The leadership style that Grint calls for here is one that is very distinct from both 'command' and 'management'. Here he places leaders in the role of asking questions (rather than giving answers), highlighting the importance of relationships (to understand the constituencies of the system) over structures, and reflection on the nature of the challenge rather than reaction.

During the Australia module of the LAB programme, research was conducted into a number of 'wicked' problems (as well as crises) ranging from radical measures taken to intervene in the handling of indigenous affairs in the Northern Territory to policies that were designed to give Australians the best start to life (viewed from various different perspectives including health, maternity, adult education, vulnerable groups and others). The learning derived from these and other activities in the UK and Canada, centred on

how leaders can best engage with, and formulate questions for other stakeholders in the system to share perspectives and above all to open doors to new possibilities. Brenda Zimmerman in her work relating to the large scale problem of HIV and AIDS in Brazil offers some excellent techniques in the art of engagement and questioning.

Drawing on the appreciative mode of inquiry from David Cooperrider and other management thinkers, Zimmerman invites leaders not to opt for the default of deficit-focussed analyses of situations. Her example of a form of questioning that made an enormous and highly unusual difference to the plight of AIDS sufferers in Brazil, involved turned starting questions posed by the World Bank such as "what will be the resource and drugs cost of treating the infected population" into questions such as "how can we reduce costs so that we can provide treatment to all who need it?" and "what methods of communication will convey drug therapy routine to even a homeless, illiterate patient?". In doing so this triggered a series of events that saw Brazil taking the bold step of offering free drugs to all patients and, in pursuit of the national interest, then facing down the drug companies who had of course developed and patented the drugs in the first instance. Furthermore, to overcome the difficulties of conveying treatment regimes to sufferers who could not read, local 'trustworthy' community members were charged with handing down the appropriate advice. This placed responsibility and power back into the hands of communities.

*The leadership lessons relating to posing questions that we might draw from this can be summarised as follows:*

- *Leaders should consider the mode they need to be in when dealing with 'critical', 'tame' or 'wicked' challenges*

<sup>11</sup> Academic paper "Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: the role of the leader", Prof Keith Grint, p.12



- *When dealing with complex issues, leaders should give attention to how they formulate questions in order to deliver solutions, and in particular take care in opting for 'deficit' formulations that do not drive out innovation and possibilities*
- *Paradoxes and divergent questions can be powerful ways for leaders to open up creativity*

## **Proactively and authentically engaging with stakeholders to better understand the system**

Having broadened the frame of inquiry and positioned questions in ways that release creativity, leaders are much better placed to do their work. But, a critical set of activities remain that public service leaders, particularly those at the federal/central level, feel are underutilised, and these relate to the process of engaging with stakeholders, and early on in decision-making.

The benefits of leaders engaging broadly are considerable, and are about being able to:

- Improve knowledge of the issues considered
- Build relations with groups and people that could be part of/co-creators of the solution
- Gain a greater appreciation of the complexity of the system
- Draw out a diversity of perspectives, and voices that are different from 'the usual suspects', and
- Foster situations where creativity is more likely to flow

Despite the demonstrable benefits, engagement of this sort is difficult. The reasons for this are many and varied; some are more 'rational' in that they refer to the time needed to consult properly and the risk of

unduly raising expectations. Others relate to the issue of timing and the question of when best to involve stakeholders in a decision-making process. But, it is another set of less 'rational' reasons that perhaps lie at the heart of the challenge and this is about the 'messiness' of bringing together different and sometimes opposing perspectives, the nervousness some leaders may have about showing the limitations of their understanding to stakeholders and the difficulty of controlling the outcome of such discussions. When reflecting on their own practice, many of the public service leaders represented on this programme, acknowledged these and other factors that tended to draw them away from engagement and back 'towards their desks'.

However, the learning derived from the LAB experience was clear on this. Engagement, for all the challenges that it brings, needs to be proactively pursued with a wide range of stakeholders, it should be undertaken in an honest and authentic manner, and it needs to take place early on in the process of policy development. In looking at the approach in Australia to ensuring that Australians have a good start to life the LAB cohort highlighted the need for the system of providers of health care, of advice, those representing community interests, lobby groups, expectant mothers, NGOs, birthing centres and more to bring their perspectives together. This in turn requires public service leaders to facilitate this, and for the leaders that are responsible for the different pieces of the jigsaw (health, communities, social exclusion, transportation etc) to think and act collaboratively. Attention for leaders needs to be directed outward (to stakeholders) and laterally (to other public service leaders) if engagement is to deliver the significant benefits it has to offer.

*The leadership lessons relating to engagement that we might draw from this can be summarised as follows:*

- *Leaders should pro-actively utilise their 'power of assembly' to bring together the different constituencies within the system to increase*



*understanding for themselves and for the actors within the system*

- *The style of public service leadership that supports engagement well is a collaborative style working laterally across boundaries, departments and agencies*

## **Viewing leadership as 'ethnography' in order to put citizens first**

The notion of 'citizen-centricity' in the delivery of public services can carry with it a number of presumptions about what citizens require, if anything at all, from government. Charles Leadbeater, former adviser to the UK Prime Minister, offers his description of three ages of engagement with public services which begins to explore the changing desires of citizens. These ages refer to a time of 'I need' when government met fundamental needs of the public in standardised and fairly basic terms, such as the provision of no-frills National Health Service spectacles. Following this was the time of 'I want' where the public felt empowered to demand higher standards and greater personalisation, perhaps in ways comparable to private sector providers. The third phase, one we are living through now, is the age of 'I can' – a time when due to the internet, vastly improved communications, and more empowered individuals, the role of public services and government requires a major re-think. In the 'I can' era people are much more able and inclined to deal with their own challenges, whether as individuals or communities. Leadbeater argues that to start by focussing on existing services provided to the public and to then look for ways to sharpen and improve them, is the wrong place to begin. He proposes that public service leaders should instead seek to understand the lives of citizens and, acting in the role of social anthropologists, appreciate their experiences and the meaning that they give to their lives. Armed with this grasp of the lives that people lead, attention can then be given to existing or new public services, or to the deeper question of whether the public service should be involved at all.

One area that the LAB cohort researched using this mode of inquiry was in relation to the sometimes difficult challenges of families and individuals in chronic crises. The specific communities and areas examined ranged from inner London boroughs experiencing differing degrees of deprivation to towns outside of the capital such as Swindon. The participants were brought into contact with actors at all levels from central to local government, from social entrepreneurs to lobby groups and importantly they gained insights into the lives of people with difficulties – insights into how they see themselves, their day-to-day tasks, their shopping routines, how they view 'the state', how they interact with one another and much more. The approach had an ethnographic quality to it with the intention of immersing the participants, in the time they had, in the lives of others.

The observations arising from this as well as the methodology itself were powerful and illustrated in many ways the 'I can' principle. For example, work related to the experience of ageing<sup>12</sup> which followed a similarly anthropological route of enquiry, sidestepped many of the usual assumptions about the elderly needing direct state support relating to health or welfare, and instead it was led to the experience of 'loneliness' and what this signified. The solution to this challenge, conceived as one characterised by loneliness and isolation, was addressed by Westminster Council through a teleconferencing service that would regularly link up and connect older people together to empower them to compare experiences, to share concerns and ultimately to create solutions of their own. The outcome of this is that older people with supportive relationships stay fit and out of costly health and social care for longer.

This example highlights one of the arguments provided by Leadbeater in his thinking about what citizens want -

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<sup>12</sup> With guidance and input from **Participle**, a social entrepreneur venture focussed on working with communities to bring about innovation and solutions to problems, and in helping to re-design public services



“I don’t want a service, I want support and the tools to self-manage”. The added benefit, of course, of adopting the ‘I can’ principle and the search for ways to facilitate and empower citizens, is that this fits well with the public services of many countries currently facing severe financial constraints.

*The leadership lessons relating to ethnography and citizen-centricity that we might draw from this can be summarised as follows:*

- *Leaders should start from the lives of citizens and communities and work backwards to the questions of which public services, if any, should be provided*
- *Leaders in the ‘I can’ age should focus their energies on facilitating, empowering and supporting citizens to solve their own problems*

## Some challenges for citizen engagement

Undoubtedly, citizen-focussed public services is a movement that is here to stay, and all participants on the LAB programme had observed first hand or lead changes that had brought the citizen closer to the centre of the stage. There are numerous examples of how this has been done well. In Canada, the establishment of ‘Service Canada’ in 2005 was an explicit move “to improve the delivery of government programs and services to Canadians, by making access to them faster, easier, and more convenient. Service Canada offers single-window access to a wide range of Government of Canada programs and services for citizens through more than 600 points of service located across the country, call centres, and the Internet”<sup>13</sup>. In Australia citizen engagement occurs in a variety of circumstances, ranging from consultation to engagement on issues about which the public are less

aware, such as cattle and tuberculosis. In New Zealand, examples include work with a large number of people serving on juries to understand their experiences and what would incentivize them and other potential jurors to participate in the future. In all four countries steps were being taken to engage civic society (referred to variously, and including, the ‘third sector’, Non-Governmental Organisations and social entrepreneurs) to a greater extent to enable such organisations to connect to citizens often building on pre-existing relationships with groups and communities.

While there is no reason to assume that this trend of citizen engagement won’t continue, public service leaders report some degree of unease about the legitimacy of venturing even further into this space. This is partly because the democratic process has already provided, to some degree, for the views and opinions of the public to be heard and represented. It is also though because in some areas the issues considered, particularly those related to the behaviour of citizens, quickly become contentious and political. An example of this might be in relation to teenage pregnancies which for some governments, particularly for the UK, involves explicit policies focused on prevention which in turn may sharply contrast with the wishes of many would-be teenage mothers who see pregnancy as a desirable state – and not something to be prevented through state intervention. Furthermore, when playing diverse faiths and cultures into this equation the issue becomes harder for public servants to engage in a way that is non-partisan.

One opportunity though that a closer relationship between citizens and the public service presents, and of course the understanding that this facilitates, is the quality of the dialogue that can then occur between senior leaders and their Ministers on important issues. Critical to this is a need for leaders to foster an environment where front-line public servants are equally motivated to draw in the views and experiences of citizens and share this data across the organisation

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<http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/about/index.shtml>



and in particular with senior leaders. The benefits in terms of the increased evidence base on which decisions can be made, and the more positive relationship between state and citizen that arises as a result, make this a prize worth pursuing.

Another challenge to successful citizen engagement is that of the varying degrees of willingness by citizens to engage in the first instance, and the predictable characteristics of some of those that engage. The work of Social Anthropologist Mary Douglas, highlighted by both Professor Paul t'Hart in Australia and Professor Keith Grint in the UK illuminates some of the difficulties inherent in inviting in the voices of the citizen. Mary Douglas proposes that societies represent four sets of interests and meta preferences (called 'cultural archetypes'). She describes these as:

- 'Individualists' who favour rational choice, the power of the market and will make decisions, based on self-interest, on whether to engage or not.
- 'Hierarchs' who have an inherent belief in the system and the role of rules and legitimate power in tackling problems. Such individuals have faith in government and its ability to respond and will engage accordingly.
- 'Egalitarians' who search for fairness and equality with their chosen form of engagement to challenge and to criticise. This flavours how they approach engagement.
- 'Fatalists' are often the hardest to reach and to bring in to the engagement process. This is because they hold the belief that they cannot change anything and it would be time wasted if they attempted to do so.

If leaders accept these archetypes, then important implications follow. Of the four groups the voices that we might most readily hear and respond to are those of the Hierarchs. They respect the position and purpose of

public servants and perhaps in many ways are more like us (public servants). It is the other three categories that need to be factored-in to strategies for engagement. Fatalists may not appear at all on the engagement radar. The Egalitarians become harder to hear the more vociferous they become. And the Individualists will flit in and out of engagement activity according to the benefit delivered to them for participating.

An awareness of these cultural archetypes can be useful for public service leaders as a reminder to them to reach out to and attract the views of citizens that are not normally heard.

*The leadership lessons relating to the challenges of citizen engagement that we might draw from this can be summarised as follows:*

- *While public service leaders may experience some unease in venturing too far into the 'political space' in order to draw out citizen views, the resulting evidence-base can be enormously useful in sharpening dialogue with Ministers and elected representatives and the policies that follow.*
- *Leaders should take care to manage their engagement with citizens in ways that will draw out the diversity of cultural 'types' and work particularly hard to hear intermittent (Individualist), quiet (Fatalist) and challenging (Egalitarian) voices.*

### **Circumstances that create the conditions for change**

The setting for the 2009 programme was a series of high profile crises namely the global financial crisis, the H1N1 pandemic and, for Australia at the commencement of the programme, the worst bushfires in history which spread across the state of Victoria taking 173 lives and injuring 414 people<sup>14</sup>. Crisis was a

<sup>14</sup> The **Black Saturday bushfires** were a series of bushfires that ignited or were burning across the Australian state of Victoria on and around Saturday



theme that both shadowed the programme and was dealt with explicitly in the content. Picking up on Professor Keith Grint's earlier distinction between critical, tame and wicked problems, we rightly can conceive of these and other crises as firmly in the 'critical' frame and as such events warranting decisive and quick leadership action. Anything else would simply be negligent but, of course, this is more easily said than done.

For the LAB cohort there was another dimension to crisis, which was about what can be learned from these and other experiences, and what this might mean for leadership and transformation.

The research into crises conducted by the cohort was guided by Professor Paul t'Hart who introduced a variety of perspectives on crises. One such analysis was undertaken on the experience of the Heysel football stadium disaster in 1985<sup>15</sup> which presents many elements that we might too see in other modern. The disaster at the Heysel stadium had multiple causes ranging from pre-existing tensions between fans to poor physical infrastructure, and from inflexible leadership to lack of innovation in the response. The learning from this is rich and it tells us about the importance of:

- Looking at the whole system and its interconnections
- The degree to which events and variables are loosely or tightly coupled

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7 February 2009 during extreme bushfire-weather conditions, resulting in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire.

<sup>15</sup> On 29 May 1985 at the European Cup Final Liverpool faced Juventus with 60,000 spectators and >1 billion live viewers. The disaster was sparked prior to match by aggressive English fans crossing perimeter fences into 'Italian' section, Italian fans trying to escape without exit options. As a result 39 fans were killed and 450 wounded

- The variability in definitions of a given situation or crisis

If we take any modern large scale dilemma or crisis and run them through these three observations we can see where many of our challenges lie. For example, the global financial crisis was a systemic problem with a large number of interconnecting parts. Due to the very tight coupling between the lending practices of institutions across the world, the collapse of banking institutions occurred in just a matter of months. In this case the butterfly flapping its wings in the U.S took no time to cause ripples and chaos in financial centres across the globe. Perhaps the greatest contributing factor was the variability in, and lack of, agreement of the enormity of the problem. Whilst most countries saw signs of the looming crisis there was insufficient agreement on its size and scale, and in some quarters disagreement as to whether the crisis would strike at all. But the same set of circumstances apply to global warming, in particular the lengthy period of time taken to agree that there is a problem in the first place. The H1N1 pandemic is another example displaying incredibly tight coupling which saw the disease spread from Mexico in the spring of 2009 to 66 countries causing 117 deaths in just a matter of weeks<sup>16</sup>. Obesity might be another as we look to the relationship between a multiplicity of systemic factors such as diet, environment, degree of deprivation, physical activity, modes of transportation, education, cultural diversity, food producers and eating habits – all of which have a bearing on the degree of obesity likely to develop. Here, the tightness of coupling between these variables matters too, for example, the busier our working lives become, the more readily we resort to fast foods.

The lessons to be learned from these examples are about managing the tension that exists between the pressure to act quickly and authoritatively contrasted with the need to build a picture of the situation that properly reflects the degree of complexity involved. In

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.spreadofh1n1.com/>



many ways this has echoes of the tension highlighted earlier in this paper by Stephen Covey regarding the leaders' role to attend to both the urgent and the important.

## The importance of framing at times of crises

There is also merit in looking not only at how leaders might respond to crises but how leaders identify and use 'crisis-induced opportunities' for policy innovation and institutional reform.

In Australia, an example researched by the participants is that of a controversial decision that was taken in 2007 by the federal government to intervene in the Northern Territory's handling of claims of widespread sexual abuse in aboriginal communities. The intervention took many forms including the mobilisation of some 600 soldiers and detachments from the Australian Defence Force. The intervention was positioned as the response to a crisis which warranted swift and resolute action. Prior to this the government of the Northern Territory had published a report titled *Little Children are Sacred* to highlight the problem and to outline recommendations for action. Of the ninety seven recommendations offered by the report only two were implemented by the federal government. This illustrates the schism between federal and territory level government on this issue as well as the tensions inherent in the situation.

Opinion on the wisdom of the federal government's response is sharply divided with strong supporters and equally strong critics. Some dissenters from the action argued that the situation was not a crisis at all and that the forthcoming election was a factor in the federal government's decision to take such high profile action at that time. But what is undeniable is that the presentation of the situation as a crisis legitimised the powerful response that followed. And one lesson here, perhaps amongst many, is the power and choices leaders have at their disposal to frame the challenges in

front of them in ways that can open up different possibilities.

One current opportunity that has pertinence for all four of the countries involved in the LAB programme, is how best to make use of the global financial crisis in order to bring about transformation and beneficial change, a question that runs alongside the immediate task of managing the consequences over the coming years.

## Building the capacity for transformation

If it is not already apparent from everything that has occurred in recent history, the world is one of frequent crises, unpredictability and interconnectedness within which the role of the public service is ever more unclear. The Honorable Jocelyne Bourgon, former Clerk/head of the Canadian public service, has a very clear sense of the role that public servants should play going forward. Bourgon argues for leaders to build greater capacity in society to anticipate, innovate and adapt. This, she proposes, is required at many levels and is about three key forms of capacity:

- *anticipative capacity* to scan future events and to make sense of those that have already occurred
- *innovative capacity* inviting governments to tap into the collective intelligence of societies and to foster social innovation, and
- *adaptive capacity* to build resilience in the event that shocks arise regardless of what governments might do to prevent them.

Taking these requirements to their conclusion encourages public service leaders to build the strengths of their employees, to build more capable organisations and institutions and to help make citizens similarly innovative, adaptive and anticipatory in their actions.

Brenda Zimmerman has part of the answer to this gauntlet thrown at the feet of public service leaders.



Zimmerman proposes the use of what she calls a 'min spec' requirements strategy that can be set by leaders to leverage better results, to build capabilities and to bring about transformation. With this approach leaders are asked to do the hard thinking and due diligence in specifying for their people a very small number of well chosen requirements in tackling key challenges. The theory is that this then releases innovation and possibilities that otherwise might not have been imagined.

One example of this approach is a 'min spec' referring to patient safety used by the Missouri Baptist Hospital that specifies that a) fix what you can, b) tell what you have fixed and c) report what you cannot. Another example developed by Ritz Carlton Hotels which, after considerable deep thinking that the final 'spec' can only hint at, was a specification that stated a) all employees will respond to the needs of their internal and external customers, and b) any employee who receives a customer complaint owns the complaint until resolved.

This approach speaks in particular to managers and leaders who find themselves over specifying their requirements and often the method by which they can be achieved. Employees and stakeholders alike would describe the 'max spec' route as one that is often more familiar and one that does not foster creativity, does not build capabilities, and does not create accountabilities that will be owned by anyone other than the leaders setting the specification.

To further build capabilities leaders should look to fostering environments and creating experiences for their employees and stakeholders to learn. This includes, but extends well beyond, training and formal education. Following Bourgon's proposition, leaders should facilitate attempts by their employees to anticipate and make sense of the changes the world is experiencing, many of which have been highlighted in this document, and in doing so be more likely to predict those events that are likely to follow. Leaders should support learning about the intelligence that is held

across society that needs to be captured and shared, and in doing so help employees, institutions and citizens to learn about the importance of innovation. Leaders need to help others understand how they can be more resilient and prepared for the pressures, events and crises likely to strike. And leaders should, in the words of Noel Tichy and Eli Cohen, develop a 'teachable point of view'<sup>17</sup> so that leaders elsewhere in their organisations and across the system are better able to meet the challenges faced. In this sense we are inviting leaders to see themselves as teachers and capability builders.

*The leadership lessons relating to the challenges of crises and transformation that we might draw from this can be summarised as follows:*

- *Leaders should be alert to the systemic dimensions of many critical events and crises and in tackling them pay attention to the coupling of variables in the system and the diversity of definitions that such events are likely to attract*
- *Leaders should be aware of the choices and power they have to make use of crises and critical events to achieve positive outcomes*
- *Leaders should work to build the capabilities of their people but also the strength and innovative capacity of the organisations, institutions and citizens in society*

## **Concluding Remarks**

For a programme like Leadership Across Borders that deals with such a broad range of public service issues, the messages that will be taken away by the participants and the readers of this paper will inevitably vary widely. The ideas presented here can only capture a fraction of the insights that have been developed

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<http://www.noeltichy.com/HowLeadersDevelopLeaders.pdf>



through the programme and if anything this paper is offered as a stimulus and in some instances a provocation for leaders to think differently. But despite the multiplicity of ideas and perspectives offered by the programme, there are a small number of observations that have proved central to the LAB experience and these are about:

- how public service leaders make sense of the challenges they face. *The key ideas here are about leaders framing the issues they face broadly, the importance of seeing the system with its interconnections, the possibility of coping with complexity by using minimum common rules to achieve coherence and the remarkable power of innovative lines of questioning.*
- how a greater number of voices need to be brought into public policy design & delivery. *The key messages here are about the critical role of engagement in bringing in many voices and the need to sometimes 'walk in the shoes' of the citizen (rather than assuming what they need) as a means of understanding the best role that government can play*
- how capabilities of public servants and societies at large need to be built. *This is achieved through better engagement, better posing of the challenges faced and through leaders being able to facilitate learning and innovation in their organisations and beyond.*

The programme will continue to adapt and bring to the foreground contemporary issues and challenges for examination. As we move into the next phase areas that may warrant deeper exploration relate to the need for greater understanding, in both directions, of Ministerial pressures and the organisational imperatives faced by senior officials. These two worlds still remain largely separate and whilst there are sound reasons for separating politics from administration greater success

lies in greater shared understanding. Another area worth deeper analysis is the role that senior leaders might play in seeking to change the behaviour of citizens. An example of where this has been attacked with some vigour is the decision in many countries to ban smoking in public places. And of course this holds the prospect of further extension to other policy areas such as obesity, pregnancy, energy use etc. - all of which offer complex practical and ethical challenges for senior government leaders. A third area worthy of inquiry on a programme such as the impact now and in the near future of the internet age generation -the new employees that aren't looking for a job for life, the generation that are harnessing the power of the internet, the generation that do not feel deference towards the current batch of political or administrative leaders.

The LAB programme 2010 has these and other challenges to consider with the single aim of preparing a stronger cadre of public service leaders who in turn will help to build more capable, adaptable and responsive public services.

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TURNING RESEARCH INTO ACTION

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