

SSC Graduate Welcoming Event – 18 October 2019

Future of Public Policy and Programmes

Ko Putuaki te maunga
Ko Whakatane te awa
Ko Maatatia te waka
Ko Ngati Awa te iwi
Ko Brook Barrington ahau

Kia ora koutou. Good morning.

My name is Brook Barrington and I am the Chief Executive of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. I am also head of the Policy Profession.

And I am most decidedly NOT going to talk to you about the Future of Public Policy and Programmes!

Instead, I am going to make a few points about (a) Public Service, (b) what it is to be a Public Servant, (c) some resources might be useful to you as graduates, and (d) the art of leading and being led.

Then we can have a crack at a Q and A session.

A Public Service

First and most importantly, welcome. You are starting your public service careers at a remarkable point in history.

Things once taken for granted are being challenged, everywhere: newspapers; the high-tide mark; political bipartisanship; inflation; hierarchy; the Brave Blossoms.

Good things keep happening, sometimes (but not always) because of us: medical advances; digital advances; rising literacy; declining poverty; artificial intelligence.

Bad things keep happening, sometimes (but not always) despite us: the hard to reach remain hard to reach; the gender pay gap continues; income inequality is growing; inter-generational challenges such as family violence, sexual violence, health outcomes and education outcomes remain chronic.

In short, we are living through a peak time of change and complexity, at home, in our region and internationally, and it all feels rather frothy.

What a remarkable time it is, then, to be serving the public. To strive to understand the anxieties and needs of citizens and communities – in all of their diversity. To harness a wider range of tools and skills and perspectives – and collaborators. To support the good and deal to the bad, meaningfully, sustainably, respectfully – and in ways which add to the store of national good.

B What it is to be a Public Servant

It is this last point - adding to the store of national good - that I now want to turn to.

You have joined a team, a division, a group, an entity, agency, department or Ministry.

You have also joined an institution, called *the* Public Service.

Institutions of all sorts have rather fallen from grace, driven down by a combination of bad behaviour, poor communication, misplaced

modesty or caution, ineffectiveness, or simply by being a concrete artefact in a virtual world.

So let me speak up for the institution you have just joined.

In a frothy world, it is important to have some anchor points. Free and fair elections. An independent judiciary. A non-corrupt police force. Freedom of speech and assembly. The Official Information Act. A robust and respected fourth estate. And a politically neutral, merit-based, objective, free and frank, lawful, professional, empathetic and effective public service.

But the public service is not merely (or even) legislation or precedent or bricks or mortar. It is you. And me. We and all of those we work alongside are the public service. Without us, it is nothing. At the same time, it must be more than any one of us alone.

It is by pooling our spirit of service – our commitment, skill, imagination and ambition for the people of Aotearoa New Zealand – that we provide ballast and add to the store of national good in the midst of turbulence and uncertainty.

And a positive attitude and constructive behaviours are necessary but not sufficient. Our task is to serve people and to build the country, in all of its manifestations and diversity, by providing the best possible public policy advice, and then implementing that advice.

It is by this fruit that we shall be judged.

C Some resources that might be helpful

In setting about your public service careers, I want to mention some resources that might be helpful.

The first and most important resource is you. Be kind to yourself. Keep reading and learning, even when it's at the end of a hard day or long week. Develop empathy in your dealings with others. Be curious. Have a view. Figure out how you think (by talking?), how you communicate (written? oral?), how you best create (alone? in groups?). Be patient.

The second resource is your immediate colleagues and your immediate boss. Listen to those around you – it's surprising how much you can learn (and how many of your own ideas can be sparked) simply by truly listening to and understanding what those around you are really saying. And don't be scared to learn from your bosses – they have seen some things, and you can learn a lot from them even when they are wrong!

The third resource is your wider agency. Look for communities of practice and networks. Where they don't exist, create them. Keep an eye out for model pieces of work – then get hold of them and figure out what lifted them above the scrum. And every agency will have a notional amount of money set aside for your training and development. Make sure that money is spent, on you.

The fourth resource is the system. Keep this graduate cohort going as a way to build connections across the system. Look at the work done by the Policy Project (found on the DPMC website) and leverage the policy improvement frameworks and the policy toolkit. There are some basic principles of good public policy-making that are enduring, no matter what the fashions of the moment: precise problem definition; respect for what evidence and evaluation tell you; clarity of expression which reflects clarity of thought; the need to map interdependencies and stakeholders; and an objective understanding of intended and unintended consequences.

D The art of leading and being led

That brings me finally to a few observations about leadership.

Don't under-estimate the anxiety of your leaders. We like to be liked, too. We worry more about you than you might think. And we generally (but not always) respond well to constructive leadership from below!

Be alert to opportunities for stretching and growing, and when faced with competing career choices my advice, borne out by experience, is to take the harder choice.

You can be a leader from any position, not only by the quality of your own skills and interactions, but also by keeping those above you honest on crucial issues such as building safe and positive workplaces, diversity and inclusion, including diversity of thought, and making our public service and organisational values real.

And whether it is about you, those with whom you work, your agency or the system, strive to build and not break. That means treating people respectfully and with empathy. It also means that in whatever job you do, at whatever level, look to do just one thing for the good of agency, community or country that will endure long after you have left that job.

My final piece of advice is this: don't grow your career. Instead, *grow yourself*, as a person, as a public servant and as a leader. Your career will follow.

No reira, kia ora huihui tātou katoa. And now I'm happy to take and questions or comments.