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## Being Indigenous in the Bureaucracy: Narratives of Work and Exit

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# Being Indigenous in the Bureaucracy: Narratives of Work and Exit

## Abstract

Australia's civil service has had some success in attracting substantial numbers of Indigenous employees. But significant numbers also regularly exit the bureaucracy. Retaining Indigenous employees is recognised as an ongoing difficulty for government. This research with former and current Indigenous civil servants outlines factors they identify as contributing to decisions to leave the bureaucracy. A key finding involves their general sense of being underutilised and undervalued—that forms of experience and understanding as Indigenous people go largely unrecognised within government, which in turn constrains their potential to meaningfully contribute to improving government relations with Indigenous Australians or to enhancing the effectiveness of the bureaucracy more broadly. Work as an Indigenous civil servant emerges as a space of contestation with the possibilities and limits of statecraft.

## Keywords

civil service, bureaucracy, Indigenous professionals, workplace diversity, retention, Australia

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## Being Indigenous in the Bureaucracy: Narratives of Work and Exit

The research presented in this article explores aspects of Indigenous Peoples' experiences of work in government bureaucracy, specifically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who work or have worked in the Australian Public Service. The Australian Public Service (APS) is a national civil service that is involved with the public administration of a range of departments and agencies that are linked to the federal (Commonwealth) government in Australia. National legislation requires Commonwealth public sector organisations (including all government departments and authorities) to engage in Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) planning that addresses groups of people who have been excluded in the past. Indigenous Australians (i.e., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) comprise one of these groups. In addition, the APS is legally required to uphold and effect workplace non-discrimination and diversity principles in its employment practices.

While Indigenous peoples make up approximately 3% (670,000 people) of Australia's population, Indigenous employees currently only make up 2.6% of the Australian federal civil service (Australian Public Service Commission, 2015). This percentage highlights that the APS has not yet fulfilled its aim to reach parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in its workforce (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015b). A series of challenges have contributed to the APS' inability to reach this parity. Firstly, Indigenous civil servants have separated from or exited the APS at a greater rate than their non-Indigenous co-workers (Australian National Audit Office, 2014). Secondly, Indigenous employees have left the civil service earlier in their careers (Australian Public Service Commission, 2013a). Thirdly, these separations and departures have generally overshadowed successful recruitment of Indigenous employees, with recent net losses of Indigenous employees, suggesting, "agencies are not gaining employment outcomes commensurate with their efforts" (Australian National Audit Office, 2014, p. 23).

In this article, I respond to the pressing need for both research concerning Indigenous state employees' relations with postcolonial countries and for accounts that move beyond simple narratives of co-option or ambivalence (Radcliffe & Webb 2015). Aboriginal lawyer and academic Megan Davis (2016), for example, has observed that Indigenous civil servants can play a critical role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' efforts to engage with complex Australian politics and policy. She noted, "It takes a special kind of person to persevere with dedication and commitment to their mob" (para. 4), especially since recent governments have made a notable shift away from concepts of Indigenous self-determination.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, few studies have recorded the experiences of Indigenous bureaucrats themselves. This article provides some insight into these experiences, and points to future research directions in this important yet understudied area. To do this, I draw on interviews with current and former Indigenous employees of the APS. These interviews sought to investigate Indigenous employees' perspectives of APS work in order to better understand the range of factors that shaped their decisions to

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<sup>1</sup> "Mob" is a term that appears commonly in Aboriginal English and one that can carry several meanings (Adams, 2014), though it generally signifies a (extended) family network and/or group of people sharing identifying affiliations.

exit.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the findings presented in this article are likely relevant to industries beyond the public sector, insofar as attracting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees has been identified by a number of Australian industries (e.g., banking and mining) as a priority. This identification has led to the development of strategies for engaging and retaining Indigenous people (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2014; Constable, O’Leary & Roberts, 2013; Daly, Gebremedhin, & Muhammad, 2013).

### **Indigenous Experiences of Working in State Bureaucracy: An Emerging Literature**

There has been little English-language research examining Indigenous experiences of state employment. This is unsurprising given the dominant academic focus in postcolonial nations on both the circumstances of Indigenous disadvantage and the reduced opportunities for professional employment in rural and remote settings. However, emerging research concerning Indigenous Peoples in urban contexts in Canada (Peters & Anderson, 2013) and Australia (Kleinert & Koch, 2012) suggests that this is changing. As a result, Indigenous experiences with urban employment, social mobility, and involvement in professional forms of work have come into focus (Anderson, 2011; Lahn, 2013) alongside studies of Indigenous involvement in professions such as nursing (Usher, Miller, Turale, & Goold, 2005) and medicine (Anderson & Lavallee, 2007). Concomitantly, scholarship has started to address issues of inclusion and respect for Indigenous Peoples as they have been articulated under the umbrella of workplace diversity. This scholarship has paid attention to strategies and frameworks aimed at ensuring cultural awareness and cultural competency training (Truong, Paradies, & Priest, 2014), as well as questions of supervision and support for Indigenous staff (Burgess & Dyer, 2009; Scerra, 2012).

In the last 15 years, studies that specifically address aspects of Indigenous employment in the civil service have become more common (Almond, 2006; Barnett, Spoehr, & Parnis, 2008; Briggs, 2006; Durie, 2003; Dwyer, 2003; O’Faircheallaigh & Althaus, 2015; Radcliffe & Webb, 2015; Ryan, Ravenswood, & Pringle, 2014); among these, studies addressing Canada, New Zealand, and Chile have been prominent. In Australia, Larkin (2013) and Ganter (2016) have authored key studies, which have offered crucial insights into the complex affect that issues of representation and race have on Indigenous experiences of employment in government and how these issues can potentially contribute to high rates of exit. Four major areas of difficulty emerge: role modelling; cultural obligations; professional development and skills recognition; and stereotypes, bullying, and racism. Ganter (2016), who focused on senior Indigenous civil servants in Australia’s Northern Territory, has highlighted the uneasiness Indigenous employees experience when they are faced with others’ expectations that they act as role models and/or speak “on behalf” of Aboriginal peoples. In his work, Larkin (2013) has emphasized that racism and racialised hierarchies in APS workplaces are often unrecognised by senior bureaucrats. Other authors have noted that Indigenous Peoples’ cultural obligations to family and community loom large as moral rationales for entering and remaining in the government’s employ. Yet, these obligations often simultaneously place additional pressures on these employees in terms of the need to care to

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<sup>2</sup> The research findings discussed in this article were drawn from a multi-methods investigation of Indigenous exit from the Australian Public Service (Biddle & Lahn, 2016). The research was funded by the Australian Public Service Commission. Approval for the study to proceed was granted by The Australian National University’s Human Research Ethics Committee.

family members and communities (Australian Public Service Commission, 2013b; Barnett et al., 2008; Sully, 1997; Wakerman, Matthews, Hill, & Gibson, 2000). While the APS has developed provisions for cultural leave and flexible working arrangements, they are not always taken up by Indigenous employees, which suggests that current APS measures are deficient (Barnett et al., 2008; Hunter & Gray, 2013). Although existing research has pointed to the difficulties and discomforts experienced by Indigenous civil servants, it is necessary to focus more directly on what Indigenous civil servants themselves have identified as factors influencing their decisions to remain in or exit civil sector employment.

## Method

This study draws from a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with current and former and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees of the Australian Public Service. Its non-probabilistic, qualitative, and inductive methodology suits the exploratory nature of the research in seeking to elicit and identify a wide range of perspectives and experiences. Four key foci guided the study:

1. What motivates Indigenous people to join the APS?
2. What factors influence their decisions to leave the APS?
3. What factors influence their decisions to remain?
4. What forms of employment do Indigenous civil servants engage in after departing the APS?

Half of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and the remainder were conducted by telephone. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours, during which participants were encouraged to reflect on their employment in the Australian civil service.

In total, 34 people participated in the research, 16 of whom were women and 18 of whom were men. The average length of interviewees' APS employment was 9 years; the shortest length of employment was less than one year and the longest length of employment was several decades. All but three participants described themselves as the first member of their extended family networks to be employed in this sector. Their collective experiences of APS work was diverse and encompassed both policy contexts and "frontline" interaction with clients across 13 individual departments and several statutory agencies. All major classification levels of APS employment were represented.<sup>3</sup> Participants entered the APS in a range of ways, including by applying for an advertised position, by completing a civil service examination (which is no longer available), through cadet and graduate programs, and through traineeship schemes that have Indigenous-specific cohorts.

It is important to note that interview participants were self-selecting. This was beneficial insofar as it provided participants an opportunity to discuss their work experiences and difficulties; however, this recruitment method may have left out others who were less willing or uninterested in participating, resulting in other factors influencing departure remaining unexplored. Future longitudinal and real-time studies may address this limitation and identify the relative proportions of Indigenous employees

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Public Service (APS) 1-6; Executive Level (EL) 1 & 2; and Senior Executive Service (SES).

affected by the issues raised here. Most participants responded to messages that were distributed via a government employee email network; the message highlighted experiences of civil service work and decisions to exit civil service work as areas of research interest. Other participants made contact through other institutional and personal networks.

Participants included individuals who had already departed from the civil service as well as current civil servants who were actively seeking alternative employment in different sectors. A minority of participants were content to remain in APS employment for the foreseeable future, though they wished to express their views concerning colleagues' departures and the general character of civil service employment for Indigenous Peoples. It is perhaps noteworthy that many of those comprising this minority have departed the civil service since participating in the research.

A grounded-theory approach guided the data analysis. Interviews were fully transcribed and initial-level categories, which reflected the key ideas and terms, were created for each interview. Higher-order categories emerged through the comparison of these initial-level categories across multiple interviews. Broadly shared commonalities between higher-order categories were then identified and developed into the final core thematic categories.

All interviews were conducted in confidence and any identifying information has been omitted here. Given the relatively small number of Indigenous APS employees, particularly at senior levels, this necessarily includes reference to specific departments or agencies as places of work or individuals' duration of employment.

### **Findings: Indigenous Narratives of Work and Exit**

Across participants' interviews, five critical areas of difficulty that Indigenous employees experience in the APS emerged:

1. Overselling the bureaucracy,
2. Politics and policy,
3. Career and supervision,
4. Racism and response, and
5. Being undervalued.

Generally, no single factor accounted for a participant's decision to exit public sector employment; rather, the decision to exit tended to be triggered by one or a combination of the above areas of difficulty.

#### **Overselling the Bureaucracy**

All participants noted that, prior to entering the APS, they held inaccurate impressions regarding the nature of the work that was involved there. As a result, many participants felt that they were unprepared for the reality of the experience, which gave rise to a range of early negative reactions, including disappointment, disillusionment, and even dismay. Specifically, individuals who gained APS entry

through the graduate program described feeling strongly that they had been encouraged to develop expectations of their future roles that were at best unrealistic, if not highly exaggerated. Participants often used the expression “oversold” to describe this experience:

For the vast majority of the grads, who are getting a more generalist position, it’s oversold, and you’re told “you’re the best of the best” and when you experience the programs, you hit the ground, very different to what’s been sold. And that’s true for all grad programs. [Interview 5]

The rhetoric doesn’t match the reality of the work of the public service. All agencies try to promote themselves as the employer of choice but they get the people through the door and they might be nice for a little while but then you know once it’s all worn off 6 months down the track people get back to reality find out this is not what attracted me to your agency in the first place. [Interview 16]

Interviewees described their feelings of disappointment as incoming graduates and trainees as linked to the realisation that it can take many years of experience to reach positions of genuine “leadership” at senior levels of the civil service. Attendant to this realisation was the negative feeling that there was limited opportunities where participants could “make a difference” through their work with the APS:

Coming into the public service was like being sold the dream, about making a difference, enabling people at the grassroots to do the work, about how we were the people [who would enable that]. That was the impression we were given. And I’ve been on the other side [within government] looking at how they pump up the tires on these guys [trainees], selling the public service to them, telling them “this is the job you want.” [Interview 21]

When I applied for the graduate program I was very idealistic and was really sold that aspect of why I wanted to work for the organisation . . . I think people who come in do so with the idea of effecting change from the inside then get frustrated with how slow change can be implemented when they get in. And you think, “Oh I spent 12 months and I didn’t achieve anything and am I going to spend another 12 months and do the same thing?” [Interview 30]

The realization that advancing the interests of Aboriginal people and their communities was quite delimited, and would almost certainly be postponed years into the future, featured strongly in participants’ accounts of frustration with the terms of their employment.

## **Politics and Policy**

Interviewees frequently expressed frustration at the extent to which political considerations and expediency pervade the APS, insofar as both tended to limit or undermine their senses of being involved in positive policy initiatives or delivering genuinely useful programs to Indigenous people:

In the APS decisions are made in a way that are almost warped. In that they are made on political grounds . . . The whole way the APS operates is politically driven and that’s what pollutes the environment. And that then reduces the capacity of your interventions to be successful. And when you’re Aboriginal in the APS, and you’re working on those programs, that are the same as any other program in a way, except your attachment to those programs is much

greater, you really want them to work. I mean . . . you're working on an Indigenous program and the point is a social economic intervention to try to ameliorate disadvantage. [Interview 4]

Participants also noted that the impact of “politics” sidelined the special expertise and experience of Indigenous APS employees on Indigenous issues. For example, one participant cited the accelerated recruitment of non-Indigenous civil servants into Indigenous affairs during a controversial and intense period of government attention, called “the Intervention” (Altman & Hinkson, 2007), as an example of how people who were primarily interested in pursuing promotions—in a department that had become the focus of government attention, no less—worked to erode Indigenous employees’ ability to make specific contributions as Indigenous people. Furthermore, this situation made Indigenous employees feel less valued.

Several participants expressed the view that their personal and professional experiences and insights in relation to Indigenous issues were marginalised by broad political considerations. Participants linked this view to their strong dissatisfaction with specific policy directions or initiatives.

Sometimes you felt like you were talking to brick walls or bashing your head against a brick wall because what you are feeding up to national office would not be used or you just felt like you were so disconnected from policy ah and that sort of stuff and people just became cynical and more disillusioned. [Interview 30]

In particular, APS employees located in regional offices noted the negative consequences of being involved in executing, and at times publicly representing, what they regarded as poorly designed and implemented policy:

[Aboriginal] organisations got cagey, felt we were being misleading and you know, in the lead up to the [policy] roll-out there was a lot of talk about engaging with community, hearing their ideas, developing their ideas into projects and putting them up to fund, you know, be innovative and creative . . . And it doesn't make us look very trustworthy when that fell through. And that's with relationships that we've had for 10, 15 years, you know that you've built up with these organisations and that you've built up with these key people in these organisations. It was very damaging to that relationship and people's reputations. [Interview 30]

The interviewee quoted above felt that the impact of poor policy design and implementation was damaging to personal relationships with community stakeholders, insofar as it forced them into the deeply uncomfortable role of the “messenger of bad news”; this was particularly uncomfortable considering the participant had built relationships and connections with communities over a lengthy period of time.

### **Career and Supervision**

A range of concerns were raised under the theme of “career and supervision,” and there was no overriding or conspicuously shared issue across the interviews. A number of participants expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities they had to utilise their pre-existing skillsets and/or those developed through APS training.

I've become very frustrated and disappointed that all the skills I've learnt aren't being utilised to their potential and not for want of trying. [Interview 7]

Participants also noted experiencing career stagnation, encountering a range of problems regarding supervision, and feeling that there were few transparent mechanisms for career advancement. These experiences included the lack of adequate support from leadership teams. For example:

It's just frustrating. You go and ask the leadership team certain things about: "I'm going out in the community. I'm going to be doing this, this and this. Can you advise me on the next template for the reporting for them so I can integrate that into my conversation?" And you get told, "I don't know." That's really frustrating. [Interview 28]

In addition, these experiences included difficult or exploitative relationships with individual supervisors:

I felt like I was supporting [a supervisor] to do his job. And often I had caught him out taking stuff I had discussed with him and passing it off as his own and call him out at meetings just to let him know that I knew it was going on. You just get to the stage when you are sick of being a stepping-stone for non-Aboriginal people who work in Indigenous areas who want it on their résumé and sometimes are not doing it for the right reasons. [Interview 26]

People don't feel valued here for their experience and their knowledge. Here you feel like you're dictated to when we're actually the experts on Indigenous programmes but we're not having any input into anything. [Interview 16]

One aspect of supervision that drew a number of negative observations from participants involved supervisors' lack of familiarity or competency with Indigenous cultures. Participants noted that this created a range of difficulties ranging from undermining effective program delivery to poor management of Indigenous staff.

## **Racism and Response**

Participants frequently raised the issue of racism in the APS, whether they had experienced it personally or had observed it. Some spoke of racism as a form of bullying, while others saw racism and bullying as separate issues. Either way, instances of racism were viewed as directly undermining Indigenous employees' sense of being valued within the APS. It is interesting that interviewees often noted that encountering racism was expected, given similar problems existing in Australian society more widely. Even so, when instances did occur, participants found it deeply disappointing. One participant noted, for example:

In Indigenous affairs, we heard racist statements on a daily basis. One staff member was told "just let the discriminatory stuff go past you, it'll be right" by a non-Indigenous section manager. I've had other staff in tears when other people make open statements about "Aboriginal organisations being so hopeless" . . . When those kind of comments are allowed to continue on a daily basis . . . You are forced to operate in a space which doesn't value you at all. [Interview 25]

However, while participants noted that they expected to encounter instances of racism, they also expressed concern regarding how to respond to racism. This emerged as a key point of concern for participants, many of whom noted that part of being an Indigenous civil servant involved the tangible perception of being under scrutiny from non-Indigenous colleagues and, consequently, strong pressure not to appear “thin-skinned” or “angry.” As one participant put it, a real risk in reacting to racism is that “you come off looking worse.” Several participants were specifically concerned about negative repercussions from management.

If an Indigenous person takes offence then [the perception is] that person is being a little sooky<sup>4</sup> and that’s not dealt with. Like that person then goes to management and expects management to deal with it. But it’s not . . . but the perpetrators aren’t dealt with and the victim then becomes ostracised and seen as like, you know a little bit sooky and making trouble. Like they’re the ones with the problem. It becomes that damaging . . . it becomes about them, not the people making the comments. It’s never knocked on the head and there’s never anything that says you can’t do this ‘cause this is racism. [Interview 30]

A majority view emerged that it was generally better not to respond, and certainly one should not make a formal complaint, in order to avoid negative reactions or repercussions. Despite these significant obstacles, however, a small number of participants noted that they did make informal or formal complaints to their supervisors.

The perception and experience of inadequate, ineffective, and/or equivocal responses to instances of racism in the working environment led participants to again question of the extent to which the APS valued them as Indigenous employees.

### **Being Undervalued**

The fifth and final theme, “being undervalued,” has already been mentioned. A general effect of the critical areas of difficulty noted above was that they created a sense that Indigenous employees were not being valued by the APS despite being specifically sought out. For some participants, this sense was expressed very strongly; for others, it was something that they were still exploring.

Participants often queried what the APS sought to gain from its Indigenous employees as Indigenous people. What was the substantive intent of Indigenous recruitment? Was it to meet their diversity targets, or did it extend beyond numbers and percentages?

I don’t think the Commonwealth I don’t think they actually come to grips with why they want to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I think it’s a target and because they’ve been told they need a target that’s the only reason they do it. They don’t actually sit down and think about it. [Interview 15]

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<sup>4</sup> “Sooky” is a colloquial term used in Australia to describe a timid, shy, cowardly person or a crybaby (Macquarie Dictionary, 2017).

Part of the challenge is, do they understand why they want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff? Increasing Indigenous employment isn't just about the target. It's the experience and exposure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff bring. [Interview 25]

Many participants questioned the degree to which the APS had thought through the fundamental question of why Indigenous people were being sought as employees. The issue was raised that departments were simply responding to required targets, rather than carefully considering the potential contribution Indigenous people can make.

### **Discussion: “Making a Difference,” Indigenous Agency, and Statecraft**

The perspectives of the research participants shed light on factors that have influenced Indigenous civil servants' decisions to exit the APS; moreover, they provide some clear direction for efforts aimed at improving the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees. Beyond these things, though, their vivid accounts of public sector employment raised broader matters than those regarding decisions to exit or remain. Participants spoke powerfully of their intentions, hopes, and priorities in seeking APS employment, and offered insight into the obstacles and opportunities they encountered in civil service work. In doing this, they raised the important issue of agency—anticipated, potential, and real—vis-à-vis their engagements with statecraft.

The social sciences have long tended to characterize the state as a substantive and monolithic entity that contrasts with society, which apparently consists of a citizenry or the subjects over which the state exercises its powers of governmentality (Coulter & Schumann, 2012; MacClancy, 2017; Shore, Wright, & Però, 2011). Indeed, the interests of the state are frequently represented as distinct from, and positioned against, the interests of particular communities or specific groups within national populations. These kinds of depictions are similarly common in discussions relating to Indigenous people. Povinelli (2002) and Kowal (2015), for example, have both penned evocative and sophisticated investigations of late-liberal multicultural nation-states, such as Australia, and the profound impasses and unresolved tensions they have experienced in engaging meaningfully, positively, and equitably with the cultural difference and even “alterity” of their Indigenous populations. At the same time, these analyses often juxtapose Indigenous Peoples with state administrators and the state's implicit endorsement and elevation of non-Indigenous “normative publics.”

From this, it is helpful to question how such depictions of the state exist alongside the contemporary reality that Indigenous people *are becoming* state administrators working as civil servants in public sector policy and program delivery in increasing numbers both in Australia and in a range of other locations. If the state is re-envisioned less as a coherent, purposeful, and unified entity and more as an assemblage of different human actors and peopled institutions—especially ones whose multiple activities can reinforce and also *contradict* each other—then it becomes critical to give adequate attention to the experiences of Indigenous people working in civil service bureaucracy. Such attention can potentially reveal much about both the workings of statecraft and its multi-dimensional relationship with Indigenous Peoples.

My research reinforces what has been produced by other authors in this emerging field by suggesting that, when Indigenous people join state bureaucracy, struggles over representation, agency, and expertise inevitably follow. If the experience of public sector employment among the Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander participants in this study were summed up by a single concept it would be: *unmet expectations*—both expectations about how they would be treated by the APS and about the potential value of their individual contributions as Indigenous employees. In the language of participants, many expressed disappointment at the limited ability to “make a difference” and contribute to the wellbeing of Indigenous people and communities; they also expressed disappointment regarding the APS’s ineffectiveness in dealing with Indigenous issues broadly. Participants’ accounts suggested that, in order to foster a sense among Indigenous employees that they *can* “make a difference,” their knowledge and experience must be both respected and sought out, especially regarding the design and delivery of policies impacting Indigenous people.

This concern with “making a difference” and retaining a “commitment to their mob” (as Davis, 2016 has put it) has also appeared in recent studies of Indigenous professionals in Australia. These studies have highlighted Indigenous professionals’ significant senses of obligation to their communities and to Indigenous people generally, both in terms of choosing and succeeding in professional fields (Davis, 2016; Minniecon & Kong, 2005; Stewart & Warn, 2017; Upton, 2011). This sense of obligation has also been reflected in Ganter’s (2016) Australian-based research, specifically insofar as her research participants emphasized the “tied-in” (p. 163) character of their own lives in relation to the “absent Indigenous subjects” of government policy (pp. 169-171). Ganter (2016) has highlighted how the Indigenous civil servants with whom she spoke drew on their personal relationships and connections when they sought to incorporate greater levels of mutuality and respect in the governance of Indigenous people. They did this, she noted, while still working to ameliorate professional climates of elitism and excess state authority. Radcliffe and Webb (2015) have similarly pointed to “relations with ‘constituent groups’ in civil society” (p. 251) as a critical element to consider when assessing the character of Indigenous civil servants’ engagement with the state.

For participants in this research, relationships with communities and organisations were regularly described as playing important parts in their assessments of state employment as a meaningful arena through which to have a constructive impact on issues affecting Indigenous people. One participant explained:

You do get to see change when it happens. There is some really good work going on and some really good people with drive and ambition who want the betterment of their people, that’s the centre of what they do. You meet some really positive role models and that sort of thing, so the community engagement part is probably the most satisfying part, and you do meet some very committed people, some very good people in the organisations. [Interview 30]

In fact, a prominent reason participants gave for remaining in the APS involved their tangible and deeply felt personal involvements with work relating to Indigenous people:

I was thinking . . . “I’m doing good things serving people.” I was going to hang on to that. [Interview 17]

I think because we have that connection to our work [with Indigenous people], the deeper connection, I don’t think it’s as easy for us to move on and up. [Interview 28]

It is noteworthy that the second quotation links the importance of a sense of connection to reluctance among Indigenous civil servants to seek career advancement that might move them away from Indigenous issues. When participants felt linked to colleagues who shared their commitments, the desire to remain in state employment was stronger:

The one good thing was you had the support of your teammates around you and you were all trying to do something good. [Interview 23]

I think now that I've found a really good support network here in terms of a couple of the other [Indigenous colleagues]—I've found people that I can relate to. I've got friends that are non-Indigenous that I have as a support network, but this is a little bit different, this is that sort of cultural stuff. I don't know, we're all just on the same wavelength and we're all passionate about Indigenous communities. [Interview 26]

When this sense of positive connection was endangered, undermined, or directly damaged by employment with the APS, participants spoke about reconsidering their positions:

To start with I was proud of what I was doing. [But then] when I was at community events I would [just] say, "I worked for government." I wouldn't say I worked for [department x] because I was ashamed at where it was going. And the fact that there was so many Aboriginal staff especially out in the network, which are the face that the department provides to community, and we had no say. We could see that [policy] wasn't going to be good and it wasn't, but we tried to work with what we had and make it as good as we could and it didn't [work out well]. [Interview 23]

Ganter (2016) has made a similar point, noting that the high standard of professional efficacy embraced by one committed civil servant "was never at the expense of community relationships" (p. 170). In this sense, being committed to making a difference for Indigenous communities can be considered a source of both frustration and diligence for Indigenous civil servants, insofar as it provides a source of motivation to seek and remain in such employment as well as a reason to depart if these commitments are frustrated.

Radcliffe and Webb (2015) have suggested, "employment for marginal subjects inevitably raises questions about extent and scope for indigenous agency" (p. 251). Indeed, having the agency to create positive forms of change and to support material gains for Indigenous communities was often important for the participants of this study. Such agency, or lack thereof, could influence participants' decisions to depart or continue with state employment. This is evident from the following response of one participant, who explained their reasons for remaining in the APS thusly:

For me it's scale of impact. I can make a bigger change here with a small effort than I can with a NGO or somewhere like that. If I was working with a NGO [non-governmental organization], I could improve the lives of a couple of families but in my job here I can have a bigger effect on many more people. That's why I'm staying. [Interview 7]

In this instance, an Indigenous state employee critically appraises both existing forms of statecraft and their implications for their commitments to positive change for Indigenous people within the "agency-

curtailing spaces” (Radcliffe & Webb 2015, p. 249) such statecraft frequently involves. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander civil servants interviewed for this study were far from disciplined functionaries who have passively accepted state authority over the content of policy commitments. Rather, many were acutely attentive to the areas of inconsistency between government rhetoric and practice, and reached conclusions informed by their own commitments to Indigenous issues and concerns.

Participants in this study often positioned themselves as having more complete knowledge and nuanced insight about the needs of Indigenous people than policymakers or politicians—a positioning which parallels that of the Indigenous state employees discussed by Radcliffe and Webb (2015). But in the Chilean context about which Radcliffe and Webb have written, Indigenous professionals employed as civil servants expressed apprehension about the potential for “co-optation” (p. 255), whereby Indigenous expertise and knowledge could be functionally incorporated into regulated and disciplining state formations. By contrast, participants in this study generally expressed frustration at the lack of acknowledgement of their expertise and personal connections to Indigenous concerns, and actively sought opportunities to utilise both:

People don’t feel valued here for their experience and their knowledge. Here you feel like you’re dictated to when we’re actually the experts on Indigenous programmes but we’re not having any input into anything. [Interview 26]

People just feel so disrespected and not valued for their experience and knowledge of what we could do to make a change . . . We’re not getting listened to at all. Policy is made at a very high level by people who think they know but really don’t. And if we are ever asked to give feedback, it never seems to be considered. [Interview 27]

[Our] value being the difference in perspectives and insight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff bring. Fundamentally that value is where [current arrangements] are lacking. [Interview 25]

I suggest that the imperative to consider outcomes and shortfalls against a sense of broader obligations to make a positive contribution to Indigenous communities likely forms a key aspect of the unique position of Indigenous people in state employment. The ways in which individuals engage in this process is undoubtedly complex and certainly worthy of further research attention. Studies of policy approaches to Indigenous affairs in Australia have noted the propensity for governments and bureaucracy to either ignore or give nominal attention to cultural difference when devising policy and delivering programs (Dillon & Westbury, 2007). Participants in this study emphasized feeling *undervalued* and *underutilized*, which captures how they felt about the limits of their individual agency to “make a difference” as Indigenous civil servants.

A key evaluative conclusion is reflected in the participants’ pointed queries concerning the fundamental rationale that underpins government efforts to employ Indigenous people in the APS, and the assertion this should involve more than “just targets.” In this regard, it is useful to note a recent statement by two federal government ministers, which directly refers to the goal of increasing representation of

Indigenous employees across the Commonwealth public sector to 3 percent by 2018: “It is vital to improve the representation of Indigenous Australians in the workforce if the Commonwealth is to capably respond to the needs of the community” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015a, p. 1).<sup>5</sup>

By challenging the APS to clarify its approach to targeted Indigenous employment, participants in this study probed the veracity of the government’s narrative of a “capable response” to Indigenous needs. In addition, the participants highlighted the contradictions of this narrative when it is put into practice in the APS. In effect, they asked: Precisely *how* will Indigenous representation in the civil service increase the capacity of government to “respond to Indigenous needs” if the specific knowledge and experience of Indigenous matters brought to the civil service by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees are neither sought out nor valued? Embedded in participants’ questioning was their perspective that Indigenous participation in the civil service should be seen as enabling more direct involvement of Indigenous perspectives in the design and administration of policy that directly impacts Indigenous people.

### Conclusion

The arguments for engaging more fully with the expectations of Indigenous employees are compelling, particularly Dillon and Westbury’s (2007) affirmation, in their review of decades of Australian government engagement with Indigenous people, that “policies and programs that ignore Indigenous perspectives and social constructs inevitably fail” (p. 197). The Indigenous civil servants past and present with whom I spoke viewed their expertise in Indigenous matters as valuable resources that the APS routinely failed to either sufficiently recognise or constructively utilise. The extent to which this situation may change and what form such change might take remains an open question. Certainly, if change does not occur, efforts to recruit Indigenous people to the APS may continue to be viewed as a “hollow invitation” (Ganter, 2016, p. 182). At the same time, however, the increasing presence of Indigenous people in civil service employment underscores the necessity to move beyond structures that provide the state with a life and agency of its own separate from the diverse people and activities involved—what has been described as “the spell of bureaucratic disappearance” (Lea, 2008, p. 19). There is a pressing need for rigorous, thorough research that aims to understand the human actions that go on behind the scenes of bureaucratic work. Just as it is necessary to examine the programs and policies crafted, implemented, and forestalled by bureaucratic work, it is necessary to understand how the contexts and practices of statecraft (a) affect and relate to Indigenous civil servants, (b) constrain Indigenous civil servants’ efforts to work and effect meaningful policy change, and (c) facilitate Indigenous civil servants’ efforts to act agentially.

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<sup>5</sup> Two ministers’ offices were involved the media release (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015b; one of which occupies three ministries): Senator the Honorable Michaelia Cash, the Minister for Employment, Women, and Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service; and Senator the Honorable Nigel Scullion, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs.

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