

All Staff Address, Wednesday 11 February 2015

TRANSCRIPT

Ms Renée Leon PSM, Secretary of the Department of Employment

Thank you, Jamie and good morning, everyone.

I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the country on which we meet. I recognise their continued connection to the land. And I pay my respects to their elders – past and present – and to any Indigenous people among us today or hearing this Address on the live-stream.

Can I just share Jamie's enthusiasm for how great it is to be addressing staff across the whole Department for the first time from our National Office and to add my thanks to his to the people both in the Department and in the Shared Service Centre who've made this possible.

Before I begin with some remarks about what we have ahead of us for the year, I did want to share with you some notes that the Minister sent in recognition of the fantastic work that the Department does. And I'd like to mention that we didn't ask him to do this, he just did this off his own initiative because he is so appreciative of the work that the Department does, so he wrote to me and said, 'Dear Secretary, ahead of your upcoming Staff Address I wanted to write to express my sincere thanks and appreciation for the indefatigable work the Department and its officers over the past year. 2014 was an important year in the Employment portfolio and I have been delighted with the responsiveness and attentiveness of the Department and its officers in developing and implementing policy, and providing support to me, as Minister, through hundreds of briefs and dealing with thousands of pieces of correspondence and parliamentary questions on notice.

'Looking forward, 2015 promises to be even more challenging with the government focusing on creating more jobs, ensuring job seekers are job ready, reviewing the workplace relations system and improving return-to-work outcomes for injured workers.

'All within the Department should be proud of their achievements in creating more job opportunities, providing individuals with the dignity of work and ensuring an effective workplace relations and work health and safety system. I ask that you pass my sincere thanks to staff. I'm looking forward to working with them throughout 2015 to deliver on our shared aims of more jobs and great workplaces. Yours sincerely, Eric Abetz.'

So, really I just think you should all give yourselves a very well-deserved pat on the back for a very successful year and for having the confidence of your Minister in a way that inspires him to write an unrequested letter of thanks and looking forward to the implementation of the shared aims of the Minister and the Department. And of course with parliament starting this week, we are immediately feeling that the business of government has well and truly started up and that the busy and productive year the Minister flags is ahead of us.

I know that we're in a strong position to achieve our goals because of the success that we've had in 2014. Internally, we firmly established our identity, our values and our goals through things like the Strategic Plan and the Reconciliation Action Plan. And externally through the great success we've had. We ran a widely applauded G20 Labour and Employment Ministerial Meeting in Melbourne. We advanced the government's workplace relations agenda. And we introduced a suite of employment schemes designed to help get more people off welfare and into work. But it's no time to rest on our

laurels. We know the demands will keep coming and the external scrutiny will, if anything, only increase.

I have no doubt, as the Minister says, that 2015 will present us with a whole new set of challenges in both employment and workplace relations. And the Deputy Secretaries will say a little more about the content of those in a moment.

Briefly, some of the big tasks coming up include the introduction of the new employment services system, the expansion of Work for the Dole into a national scheme, helping to boost the number of job seekers signed up to the new employment programmes, working with the government to get Bills through parliament, and collaborating with our portfolio agencies.

And I know that you have, and after Sandra and Martin speak you will have even more of, a clear sense of the scale and complexity of the work that lies ahead.

What I want to talk about today is the collective qualities that we'll need to continue to be as successful as we've been and to carry out that work well. For me, the overarching feature we should be looking for in the Department is strong leadership.

Raising the topic of leadership doesn't mean you should all think, 'Oh well that's the responsibility of those people on the stage so I don't really need to listen to this bit.' Leadership concerns all of us and it's crucial to being the high-performing organisation that I know you're so proud to be a part of.

Some of you may have been at or seen on the intranet the address that I gave to the ELs at our Learning From One Another event in December where I shared the data from the Census that showed that your most influential leader is your immediate supervisor, not those of us in the senior executive. We have a leadership statement that sets out the kinds of behaviours and characteristics that I expect, and that you all are entitled to expect, of the leaders in the Department. Among other things, good leaders are inspiring, honest, accessible and positive, they communicate well, they build respectful and lasting relationships, they develop their people, they channel information and ideas from below and above, and they help colleagues draw meaning and connection from their job.

I hope you will all, in the leadership roles that you fill in the Department, really look at the Leadership Statement and how you can properly embody those characteristics and have a right to expect that those are what we all demonstrate and hold us to account if you think that we aren't.

Looking at the challenges that are looming in 2015, there are three particular qualities I'd just like to highlight that I think we all need to demonstrate.

The first is our outward-facing focus – the need to have good relations with stakeholders and through those to be properly aware of the external viewpoints. It's very easy when you're in a policy space especially with a lot of expertise as we have in the Department to end up in your own echo-chamber and not to realise that the people outside who interact with our system are in a position to give us useful feedback about the kinds of features that they'd like to see in the work that we do.

So, we do need to understand where our key stakeholders in both employment and workplace relations are coming from. And put ourselves in their shoes – try and see things from their perspective.

Sometimes they might criticise us for the way we do things or our systems, and instead of being defensive about that I'd encourage you to listen to what's being said. Sometimes the criticism won't

be fair or it won't fully informed, but it's often true that there is a kernel of truth, or some validity, in the external viewpoints about how we go about our business.

They might not be able to put forward a workable solution or the ideas that external players suggest might be too expensive or difficult to implement, but they will have done us a favour by identifying a genuine problem and giving us the impetus to examine the way we do things.

So, I'd encourage you to always be thinking 'How will our clients react to this? Is this serving the needs of the business community, of the employers, of the job seekers, of the people of the community who we're ultimately here to serve?'

Related to that, the second quality that I want to emphasise this year is the need for innovative thinking. And you've heard me talk about this before and flag the development of the Innovation Strategy which will come in about the middle of the year. But, essential to that is not just a strategy at the top levels and a kind of statement of intent. It's the way each of you approach your work and the mindset that you bring to it that will make us an innovative department.

We need to be prepared to look at what we do in a different way, whether that's on the basis of stakeholder feedback, or because we can see that we're not getting the results that we should.

We shouldn't just be attached to the way we've always done things and waste energy defending them if they're not working or they don't stand up to scrutiny.

That more flexible way of thinking and operating is already evident in work that we're doing. So for example, the pilot-work on "nudge" theory that the Department's doing to encourage people to comply with their job seeker obligations. The Job Seeker Participation Branch is testing some new forms of communication with the help of Employment Systems Group to see whether things like text messages and emails that remind people of what they're supposed to be doing are a more effective way of "nudging" them into compliance, rather than penalising them after the fact when they don't comply.

And so I only use that as one example, but it's just an example of how old ways of thinking can always be rethought for new methods that put results ahead of processes.

Of course, while I want us to be taking risks and prepared to do things differently, I don't want us to go so far the other way that we throw out all of our expertise and knowledge of what works, and our responsibility to manage programmes effectively.

We've contributed a lot to the government's target of cutting red tape and a large part of that has been through reducing the administrative requirements that we place on employment providers.

And we'll need to continue doing that, and I know that the people who are developing the new employment services system are critically examining every aspect of what we do to see if what we're doing has unnecessary red tape in it. That doesn't mean just throwing out controls. We obviously have to have smart changes. Changes that free-up providers from a whole lot of unnecessary restrictions, but still ensure that we've got the right kind of oversight to ensure that taxpayers' money is being properly spent.

We are, as so many parts of government, required to, and expected to, strike the right balance between effectiveness and accountability. And innovative thinking will be really key to that to make sure that we don't just layer up the system with red tape rather than think of smart ways to achieve outcomes.

We'll need to be innovative in other areas too, for example, there are a number of Bills in our portfolio that are taking a while to get through the parliament. And these Bills, and new ones that might come forward, all require negotiation with the crossbench. Sometimes this will mean delays or uncertainty of outcome.

So we should be helping the government by considering alternative contingencies. Are we able to implement something similar to what the government wants by regulation or administrative means? Or communication and behaviour change?

The new employment services model coming in will have substantial changes – it's not just a tweaked version of the current system. And so we'll have to think differently about how we implement it and how the people in the Department implement the model.

For example, I've been around to all the State Network offices, as you know, and I know that a lot of their time is spent on desktop-compliance activity; checking up on whether our employment providers are doing what they're supposed to do under the model.

The new model is less prescriptive and so fewer things will need to be checked up like that, and so for the State Network this will really free up people to do more of what I've been saying we need to do, which is stakeholder engagement, fostering innovation and collaboration among providers and using data and data-analytics to manage performance.

At the same time, they'll need to be attuned to whether people are using the system as it's supposed to be, in ways that are better achieved by that kind of data-analytics and stakeholder engagement than by very technical and prescriptive compliance work.

So, I give those as just a few examples of how innovation is not just something that happens in a blue-sky policy unit, it's something all of you should be bringing every day to the work that you do. Is the way that we're doing it the most effective and the most innovative way of achieving the outcomes that we all want to achieve for the Department and for the government?

And the third quality that I want to talk about is particularly about working for government, and that is the ability to properly advise Ministers.

As you can see from the letter from Minister Abetz, I think that relations with our Ministers are sound and positive, but that's only possible if we continue to provide timely, insightful and professional advice.

I think we already do that but it's something that's very important to me, as the Secretary of the Department, is that our advice is of really high quality and that it meets the needs of Ministers, even sometimes the needs they don't realise they have. We need to put ourselves in their shoes, and see issues from the perspective of Ministers about what is going to be the particular pressure in an issue, what are the timeframes that they'll need to meet – whether that's having something ready by Question Time, or having something to respond to something that's going to be in the media the next day, or recognising that the way we see an issue through our lens of programme management, for instance, may not be the way that they see an issue through the lens of political sensitivity. That doesn't mean our advice is of a political nature, but it does mean we need to understand their needs and where they're coming from.

The really critical part of that is that we also mustn't and can't slant our advice in any way influenced by those sensitivities that makes it not accurate. So accurate, frank advice is absolutely critical to enable governments to govern well.

But there's no point making it accurate if it's entirely shrouded in a whole lot of language that no punter in the community will understand if the government uses it. So it's that balance between telling Ministers the full story but also making sure that it responds to the issues they're likely to face, and that the language and the messages we give the Minister are clear and capable of being understood by the public.

We need to understand what their drivers are. You should always be following what the government says publicly about its key messages, because that will help you to understand where their needs are going to be.

So for example, the new employment services system and the expanded Work for the Dole programme will start on the first of July. The government's made much of what it's hoping to achieve through these measures and so we can expect there'll be a lot of interest in performance; are these programmes performing better than those they replace? Are they making a practical difference to the lives of Australians? Are job seekers being helped to find work?

So we need to understand that the government will want to know that, and we'll need to be in a position to provide it with the facts and data that will help it make its case about the programmes its implemented.

But as I've said, we also need to make sure that we uphold the longstanding principle of providing frank and fearless advice to Ministers. Another Secretary recently said something that I think is a very useful counterpoint to that, which is that we ought not to think that frank and fearless advice is getting something off our chest, that we want to say we don't like or that we don't feel good about that – that's not at all what it means. What it means is, when we are giving advice to Ministers on a policy or a programme or some aspect of implementation, we must outline all the pros and cons. We should paint the whole picture, even parts that might be difficult. That includes explaining the challenges or risks that a policy might entail, and warning of what the consequences might be if they're going to be ones the government needs to manage.

And I know from both Ministers Abetz and Hartsuyker that that kind of full and frank advice is just what they expect from us and what we, while I am Secretary will always deliver, is full and frank advice. Because, I believe, in only that way can governments make good decisions and govern well.

There's been recent inquiries into initiatives such as pink batts that have really highlighted the importance for governments having candid advice from the Public Service, and I think it's a critical feature of our value to the nation that we fulfil that role for successive governments.

So, that's the main points that I wanted to make today, and I will wrap-up and hand over to the Deputies in a moment. But I have really appreciated the opportunity to just set out for you what my priorities from you are going to be in the coming year, and to look forward to us all demonstrating the kind of leadership that will make this a great Department.

And the three vital traits that I spoke of – engaging and understanding external viewpoints, being innovative and providing sound advice.

Let's keep building on the outstanding work that we've done so far.

Let's keep striving to create More Jobs, Great Workplaces.

And let's keep energetically serving the government and – through it – the people of Australia.

Thank you, and all the best for the year!