Irene Longman Oration

Rethinking Collaboration, Professor Helen Sullivan

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This Oration draws on two published pieces – [Collaborating in future states—Contextual instability, paradigmatic remaking, and public policy.](#) *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 2024 and [*Collaboration and Public Policy. Agency in the Pursuit of Public Purpose*](#) *(Palgrave, 2022)*

Abstract

Collaboration is embedded in the pursuit of public purpose - between and across tiers and spheres of government, with private, not for profit, and community actors, and through market and network instruments. Collaboration came of age in the late 20th century, a consequence of changed global conditions and sweeping public administration reforms that re-shaped policy and practice. Until now. The current global instability, the uneven legacy of reform and the emergence/persistence of public policy challenges suggests we need a new approach. The Irene Longman Oration is a timely opportunity to think about where we are and to draw inspiration from Irene's preparedness to challenge the status quo to consider how we can shape what comes next. The Oration begins by asking what is the 'status quo' in public

policy and administration and draws on the enduring power of ideas about governance, economics and security to provide an answer. It argues that a new approach is required built on values of sustainability, sovereignty, and justice. This challenges us to think and act differently paying attention to time, knowledge and expertise, and citizen participation in the redesign of the public service system. Collaboration is integral to the values and features of this future system, but it will take new forms and require new capabilities.

Introduction

Good afternoon, everyone. I am honoured to be invited to deliver this year's Irene Longman Oration. I would like to thank IPAA Queensland for the invitation and particularly thank Deirdre Mulkerin and Andrew Wills for the incredibly helpful conversations leading up to this event. I hope that I do their insights and wisdom justice. I would also like to thank the event's sponsors Holding Redlich for enabling us to come together to rethink collaboration in a rapidly changing world.

As I begin I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting, the Turrbal and Jagera peoples and pay my respects to elders past and present.

I have been fascinated by collaboration throughout the whole of my working life. In part this is because I came of age during a time when collaboration also came of age as public administration adapted to new political realities and embraced (with more or less enthusiasm) the potential of the market and the role of private sector partners, and the potential of civil society and the role of communities. At the time I was a young passionate public servant working in the largest local government organisation in Europe, a place described in by historian Asa Briggs as 'the best governed city in the world' though that was at

the turn of the 19/20 century!. It was an organisation that had the ego and the budget to take on national government and policy programs that were deemed to be disadvantageous to the city's more than 2 million people. Unfortunately, I also discovered that I didn't get along at all well with politicians, a limiting factor for an aspiring public sector leader. Fortunately for me my local government had developed a policy research partnership with a major university, and this provided me with a route into my now long career as an engaged public policy scholar and introduced me to the practice of collaboration.

Fast forward thirtysomething years and collaboration is now ubiquitous in public administration and public policy, a key feature in the pursuit of public purpose - between and across tiers and spheres of government, with private, not for profit, and community actors, and through market and network instruments. It is everywhere.

Despite this and despite the voluminous literature that now exists examining collaboration, two things bothered me. The first was that insufficient attention was paid to the role of actors – individuals – in the work of collaboration. My research would inevitably result in someone saying, 'of course it's all about the

people', but I couldn't see that being interrogated in the literature. The second thing that bothered me was the disconnect that existed between discussions about collaboration, its features and how it did or didn't work, and how collaboration interacted with key features of public policy systems. To be sure there was a lot of discussion of strategy, leadership, and latterly co-production, but these discussions seemed to be held at arm's length from the day-to-day business of making and enacting public policy and administration. So, I wrote a book about it exploring the interaction of public policy and administration and collaboration through ideas, rules, expertise, ethics, emotions, objects, and practices and with a focus on individuals and their capacity to act.

Having taken 12 years to write the book – events intervened – I was both delighted and relieved to see it out in the world. However in the finalisation of the book I became aware that the settlement I had been engaging with was itself under challenge. It is this that I want to explore in this Oration, giving an account of the nature of the changes taking place and arguing that these require us to rethink how we approach collaboration. I am certain that collaboration will remain a key feature of public policy and administration, but we will have to remake it.

Th Irene Longman Oration is an appropriate venue to think about these issues. As someone so unafraid of challenging the status quo I hope Irene would be pleased with the subject matter of 'rethinking collaboration', and considering how we can shape what comes next.

I begin by asking what is the 'status quo' in public policy and administration and draw on the enduring power of ideas about governance, economics, and security to provide an answer. I will argue that the settlement that has prevailed since the last quarter of the 20th C is under challenge a new approach is required. My suggestion is that this should be built on the values of sustainability, sovereignty, and justice. This in turn challenges us to think and act differently including in relation to collaboration, paying attention to time, knowledge and expertise, and citizen participation in the redesign of the public service system.

But first some ground clearing

What do I mean by collaboration?

I define public policy collaboration as, 'a more-or-less stable configuration of rules, resources and relationships generated, negotiated, and reproduced by diverse yet interdependent actors that enables them to act together in the pursuit of public purposes' . The term collaboration is useful as it encompasses a wide range of relations and activities including but not limited to, alliances, coalitions, co-governance, co-production, public-private partnerships, networks, and strategic partnerships. It focuses attention on the constancy of concerns that spur multi-actor interaction across governance spaces, and privileges practical application over academic demarcations. It also acknowledges that public policy is made, shaped, and enacted in multiple governance spaces within and beyond the nation-state.

Importantly, the term collaboration has analytical purchase in public policy as it accommodates conflicting and competing values. It may be deployed to describe co-operative relations of one form or another to achieve public policy goals, but it may also be used to describe relations between actors whose goals and actions may be self-serving, including exclusive networks, and in some cases, criminal. Acknowledging the various forms, uses and values of

collaboration is an important reminder that collaboration is a political act, underpinned by sets of power relations and operationalised to promote or reflect particular social and cultural contexts. In my mind adopting an inclusive definition of collaboration and specifying its analytical (as opposed to normative) value enables learning about the potential and limitations of public policy collaboration from a much broader empirical base while still accounting for the particularity of context.

What is the status quo in public policy and administration?

State effectiveness is assessed on three areas – governance, economic prosperity and security. Determinations of success are contingent on prevailing ideas about each. These are matters of ideology and politics.

Ideas about governance, the economy, and security are important to public policy and administration because they set the rules for what is possible and desirable. Some attain paradigmatic status, that is they become taken for granted as mental models that guide decision-making (Hall, 1993). However, ideas are not static, rather they evolve and change over time and are subject to contestation. Even paradigmatic ideas shift.

Actors - people like you - play vital roles in the promotion of these ideas and their interaction with power and politics. Economists, governance gurus and national security experts hold sway over public policy possibilities – often without us knowing it, as Keynes observed. 'Practical men (sic), who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually slaves of some defunct economist.' These actors operate in rather different ways, for example economists have developed frameworks of analysis and rules that have dominated public policy education and training so much to embody mainstream public policy analysis. In contrast national security experts have managed to sidestep these norms by creating a policy community based on exceptionalism that they argue is essential to the integrity of the work. Governance gurus have offered 'solutions' based on separating and then bringing together politics and administration through ideas such as 'responsive government' and 'holistic' or 'whole systems government'.

The public policy environment of the late 20thC represented the 'high watermark' for the popularity of collaboration. The promotion of 'open borders' for trade, ideas, and people movement, coupled with innovation in political participation in support of responsive government offered an

optimistic vision of what the future might look like, at least through Western eyes. Collaboration became *de rigeur* in public policy as a means of responding to the interdependence, diversity, and hybridity associated with this openness.

The conditions for collaboration were set by three ideas that shaped the status quo in public policy and administration – economism (expressed through New Public Management), policy securitization, and responsive government. It is important to note that these ideas do not necessarily complement each other, nor are they consistent in their application - time and context sees to that. But they nonetheless permeate our public policy and administration systems.

In the 1980s the 'New Right's' program of reforms brought *economism* into the heart of public policy making, privileging market fundamentalism, and normalising economic assessments of value (e.g. economy, efficiency, and effectiveness) as the primary basis for decision making . It encouraged the use of tools such as cost/benefit analysis, promoted performance management and enabled the growth of organisational auditing. The privileging of economic efficiency crowded out other values upon which to base public policy including solidarity or equality. The prevalence of *economism* was such that it was hard

to conceive of alternatives. And indeed globalisation predicated on economism swept all before it.

That is perhaps until the events of 9/11 and the consequent 'war on terror' which reasserted security as a shaper of public policy, articulated then as the security of nation-states against non-state-based threats including from amongst their own populations. National security demanded an array of actors and activities be securitized. The appeal of securitization to policy makers extended beyond national security (though it is heading back there now!) to embrace *inter alia* human security, energy security, resource security, food security. Securitizing a policy issue became to signify its criticality in the policy environment.

Alongside this, ideas about how to govern also evolved in the 1990s and 2000s with a specific focus on 'responsive governance' – engaging citizens and reshaping government.

Paradigmatic ideas are both abstract and concrete, distant and intimate. They can complement each other or compete for pre-eminence in influencing the mindsets and decisions of policy makers and advisers. The material impacts of

are felt by citizens in their communities and by businesses in their supply chains, as well as by politicians at the ballot box. For example, Australia's outsourcing of public employment services through the Job Network Program (1998-2009) enacted economism through marketisation and new forms of performance assessment. This directly impacted job seekers, reshaping the conditions under which employment services were provided and prompting oppositional campaigns by social advocacy groups. It also created a market for private providers, some of which became global companies as government support expanded across advanced economies.

Post 9/11 securitization impacted all of us using air travel. But it also prompted the development of 'community safety' initiatives – collaborations between public and not for profit/community organisations to focus on those at risk of radicalisation and to find ways of addressing it.

Repeated initiatives to make government more responsive to citizens also populate the terrain. These were often attached to community regeneration programs or service user initiatives. Citizens were invited to be partners with government in revitalising their neighbourhood in place-based initiatives or using their experience as service users to co-design improvements.

Challenge and change

Heading into the second quarter of the 21stC the public policy environment looks rather different. This has implications for the status quo in public policy and administration and for collaboration.

First, geopolitical tensions, unstable economic conditions, and global crises have unsettled optimistic visions of the future (and indeed the present). Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Israel – Palestine conflict and the deterioration in US - China tensions are acute examples of what appears to be a significant rupture in global politics. COVID-19 and the long tail impact of the Global Financial Crisis have played havoc with the terms of trade and domestic economic management as increasing interest rates and inflation illustrate - even here in Australia. Cost of living has returned as a dominant feature of public and political concern. Talk of tariffs and trade wars and 'sovereign capability' not to mention restricting immigration (something that higher education is currently a pawn in a political game) highlight changes in the ideas that shape public policy - specifically a rebalancing of economism and securitization towards the latter with a narrowing of focus on national security. This necessitates a reshaping of the rules of collaboration including the

creation of more bounded spheres of activity with specific countries, regions and companies that will reshape economic partnerships and impact domestic economies.

Second, the digital revolution is proving to be a significant disrupter affecting all aspects of life. The evident power of social media and the nascent transformative potential of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) offer both utopian and dystopian visions of our present and future. Social media, which held the promise of 'democratising the public square' by involving and engaging people in new ways has proved to be an equally powerful instrument for polarisation and division. Far from being an aid to responsive government, social media and digital engagement have become conduits for sowing and reinforcing disengagement with and mistrust of government. Misinformation and dis-information present public officials – elected and appointed – with serious challenges both professionally and personally. In such circumstances collaboration between citizens and government are infused with conflicts about what constitutes 'truth', and with concerns about how to regulate interactions – in real life as well as online.

Artificial Intelligence is already an actor in public service delivery, for example through chat bots etc and the use of robots in older age care and disability services. It is progressing at dizzying speed as the evolution of Chat GPT and its impact on knowledge acquisition testifies. These developments pose a range of questions from future employment patterns to how to regulate AI. One key issue for collaboration relates to the design of AI and human – non- human interactions. How do we ensure that AI is designed or co-designed with diversity of citizens and users in mind. How will different knowledges and experiences be taken account of? These are crucial questions to address if we are to avoid excluding large sections of our community from the benefits of AI.

Alongside these new challenges are pre-existing ones – enduring policy challenges such as climate change or the life chances of First Nations' people, that we continue to struggle to address and where there is an uneven legacy of previous reforms. The failure of existing ideas of governance, economics, and security to take account of diversity and difference has prompted the emergence of social and political movements that seek to challenge dominant paradigms and transform how public policy is made. These take different forms, but they share a determination to redesign public policy, its institutions, and practices so that they are more reflective of the rights and needs of all

including future generations. They pose fundamental challenges to

collaboration, including rejecting it as a vehicle for achieving positive

outcomes. I will return to this later.

Changing ideas and their potential

As indicated above paradigmatic ideas do change. This may be linked to socio-

economic disruption and key actors' loss of faith in the prevailing paradigm. I

would argue we are in such a moment. The question is then what might

replace these paradigmatic ideas and constitute a new settlement – a new

status quo? Envisaging alternatives is always risky especially with an informed

public purpose audience, but as Giroux urges, we need 'imagine otherwise to

act otherwise'. So here is my alternative.

I propose a future shaped by the ideas of sustainability, sovereignty, and

justice. Each of these ideas offers different and distinctive points of

engagement with economics and security and governance that can challenge

conventional public policy design and content. Individually they represent a

positive response to the limits of economism and securitization and responsive

government such as a rise in social exclusion, a diminution of holistic thinking

and a disregard for acting for the long term. Together they comprise a spectrum of perspectives about the future purpose and possibility of public policy that can be inclusive of marginalised voices.

Idea 1. Sustainability. Sustainability is possibly the most obvious and least contentious idea to consider. Without a healthy planet human beings will neither thrive nor ultimately survive. We are all interdependent. Collaboration across space and time is essential for sustainability and addressing climate change is the central challenge.

Economism has shaped debates about sustainability for decades as supporters and detractors use economic value arguments to endorse their claims e.g., the economic benefits of 'alternative energies' versus the 'jobs and growth' baked into fossil fuel discourses.

Discussions of sustainability are now also securitized and increasingly repositioned as matters of national security - see for example the Australian Minister for Climate Change and Energy's annual climate change statement to Parliament in 2023.

Sustainability requires an engagement with economics and security. Specific innovations e.g., Kate Raworth's (2017) 'Doughnut economics' offers an alternative approach to sustainability that departs from economism and

incorporates diversity and addressing inequality into its framework. Sustainability also offers the possibility of security for all including the most vulnerable as it requires the minimisation of harm and damage in all areas of activity.

The need to prioritise sustainability is highlighted by the fact that managing crises is likely to be a primary feature of public policy and administration in the future. Climate change will be a key generator of crisis but increasing global instability could preface natural resources and supply crises, as well as the intensification of people movement. Crisis preparedness and disaster management are necessarily collaborative activities and demand a particular approach to working across institutional, geographical, and sectoral boundaries. We have positive evidence of the efficacy of collaboration as an immediate crisis response, but future scenarios may demand a system of public policy and administration that is in a constant state of vigilance, geared toward managing more frequent and diverse crises. Here collaboration will need to be embedded as a core activity of our public policy and governance systems.

Idea 2. Sovereignty. This idea is present in several ways in public debate, each connected to ideas about economics and security as well as governance and each implicating collaboration. I have already mentioned the increasing

attention paid by nation states to 'sovereign capability' and its challenge to

global economic interdependence. I have also obliquely referenced the

'sovereign citizens' movement that has purchase in many societies. They are

relevant because of the ways in which social media has enabled and amplified

their distrust of government.

However, where I want to focus my attention is on the relationship

between First Nations peoples and ideas of sovereignty. In Australia, the

movements to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations and

the contributions their knowledges, traditions, and practices have made and

continue to make to our communities engage directly but not always

comfortably with ideas of sovereignty. These maybe expressed in actions

designed to secure traditional ownership e.g., native title, or access to and

management of economic resources e.g., land councils. The success of any

claims is contingent on collaboration between First Nations peoples, and with

governments; and as we know the latter is not regarded as 'collaboration' as

First Nations peoples are denied 'self-determination' in that relationship.

One illustration of the primacy of sovereignty is the increasing

importance of data sovereignty to policy makers that has implications for

collaboration. Data sovereignty is essential for 'sovereign capability' as it

protects knowledge essential to a country's interests and requires collaboration

between public and private sectors to take effect. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data sovereignty is identified as an important marker of self-determination as well as protection of indigenous knowledges from exploitation. This places new collaborative demands on researchers, entrepreneurs and governments who wish to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Finally, data sovereignty is one aspect of activities to mitigate the disinformation that enables the sovereign citizen movements and requires collaboration across public and private and community sectors as well as across media platforms.

Idea 3. Justice. This idea speaks to the point I raised earlier reflecting on the failure of public administration to deal fairly with specific communities and/or to include them effectively in policy design and service delivery. Economism and securitisation are represented in public policies that denote humans as 'capital' of more or less economic value and communities that present more or less of a risk to society. These representations cast a shadow over attempts at 'responsive government' with underserved or excluded communities. A frustration with existing ideas and rules that have failed whole communities and indeed nations has generated radical solutions that demand an overhaul of public (and private) institutions grounded in ideas of justice.

One representation of this is the 'abolition' movement that calls for defunding and disestablishing the criminal justice system in response to the over policing of particular communities (Black, Indigenous) and the distortion of the prison system following privatisation. Here security and economics combine to perpetuate injustice and inequality, and collaboration is a tool to support this via public private partnerships and contracting out of services.

A very different though no less radical interpretation of justice refers to the call for a more emphatic commitment to securing the wellbeing of all communities in a global context of growing inequality and increasing exclusion and seclusion of elites. This emphasises strengthening global, national, and local institutions in support of shared positive outcomes such as the Sustainable Development Goals. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is one example. Evolving conversations about reparative public policy' also fit here. Both demand new ways of thinking about economics (moving away from a 'growth' mindset) and security (prioritising poorer communities' access to key resources) and respectful of alternative approaches to responsive governing. In both interpretations (though in different ways) future collaboration pertains to identifying and building relationships and alternative institutions that are just in their practice and their outcomes.

In the final section of this Oration, I would like to focus on the things we need to do to renew collaboration for our increasingly uncertain, unstable, and unsettled world and communities – public servants included. These are proposals and actions that can be taken whether or not you agree with my analysis of how we should reimagine public administration in the context of new ideas about governance, the economy, and security.

I have argued for the continuing necessity of collaboration in the face of significant change. My conviction is based on the fact that however bounded and limited the scope for collaboration may be, the challenges we face will be collective ones demanding action by multiple actors. Whether locally, at state level, nationally or beyond the pursuit of public purpose requires engagement with interdependence, diversity of peoples, and hybridity of delivery. Each of these implicates collaboration.

However, this does not negate our responsibility to scrutinise carefully any decision to collaborate. Collaboration is expensive, particularly in human terms, and it is also very hard work for often equally slow progress. Every decision to collaborate will shrink or delimit future options and partners. Every collaborative experience is informed by the past and will leave a legacy for the

future – for good or ill. Arguably, the demands posed by collaboration and the risks they incur for the future indicate that collaboration should really be a last resort – the thing you try when you have tried everything else.

With that in mind here are four key questions that need to be considered:

1. What is collaboration for?

2. What will collaboration do?

3. What does collaboration mean?

4. What shape will collaboration take?

Question 1. What is collaboration for? This refers to the key feature of public purpose collaborations – they are political acts. Collaboration always and everywhere is deployed in the service of political goals, operates in political contexts, and is performed by political actors. A focus on the political enables an examination of how collaboration is designed in the context of prevailing power relations, with particular emphasis on the respective power of the state (local, national, supra-national) vis-à-vis non-state actors including the private and not-for-profit sectors as well as citizens and communities. It offers an opportunity to examine how old and new ideas enter political debates to inform and influence decisions about the use and form of collaboration, and

the role of expertise and ethics in facilitating the passage of ideas. It also

illustrates collaboration's use as a political practice designed to promote or

reflect particular social and cultural relations and associated values. This last is

particularly important in revealing how particular attributes, such as consensus,

are associated with collaboration and others, such as conflict, disassociated,

and these associations normalised.

Question 2. What will collaboration do? This refers to the material aspect of

collaboration – the tangible expression of their purpose. Collaborative action

includes among other things: development and implementation of joint

strategies, initiation of new policies and practices, establishment of

new/enhanced services and products, agreeing new treaties, etc. It includes

consideration of the resources for collaborative action, that is, the combination

of institutional, physical, monetary, and human resources that are assigned to

the achievement of collaborative goals. How these resources are used is

contingent on prevailing rules and ethics, forms of expertise, and established

practices.

Question 3. What does collaboration mean? This may seem like an odd

question, but it is one that allows us to examine how actors take, create, and

communicate meaning from and through collaboration. It focuses attention on the symbolic, rhetorical, and normative tools available to actors, the personal and professional resources they draw on to make sense of collaboration, and how these combine to generate collaborative practices. Exploring these questions offers the opportunity to consider alternative explanations for why actors collaborate, going beyond rational motivations for collaboration, drawing instead on attachments to values or meanings. This can provide new perspectives on why actors choose, or continue to rely on, collaboration despite an absence of evidence that it 'works'. This also enables us to examine how collaboration may impact positively or negatively actors' sense of identity as professionals, politicians, or community members and what that means for their sense of agency.

Question 4. What shape will collaboration take? Collaborations are designed and developed within a set of spatial relations. For example, neighbourhood partnerships operate in spaces proximate to 'local' communities, determined by policymakers working at national, regional, and/or international scales. Alternately public-private partnerships operate within spatial relations that may have been created for a specific purpose e.g. building a road, a hospital as well as within relations that govern partners own

sphere of action e.g. government relations, or company structures. Collaboration creates new boundaries and so acts to include and exclude and it is important to be aware of this.

I began this Oration by reference to Irene Longman – a leader who challenged the status quo and did so I imagine at least in part because of her sense of agency – the combination of capability, capacity, and intention that fuels leaders to make change. It seems appropriate then to end the Oration with a few words about agency in the pursuit of public purpose.

Reshaping collaboration so that it meets the challenges of the future is principally a question of agency. Who has it and how they use it are key artefacts of power in public policy. This places particular responsibility on leaders to engage carefully yet bravely as they pursue public purpose collaboration, building coalitions of support including with those who may have good reason to be sceptical of engagement with the bureaucracy and developing collaborative capacity within their own organisations.

Far too little attention is paid to ensuring that those involved in collaborating have the necessary mind and skill set to do so. Collaborations fail for all sorts of

reasons but the absence of individual capacity is one we can address. Crucial

here is attention to expertise, ethics and emotions. As I hope I have indicated in

this Oration expertise comes in many forms but is infrequently acknowledged.

Building capability that acknowledges a variety of kinds of knowledge (and

expertise) is curious about what it can offer and is skilled at working out how it

can be drawn upon will provide more robust foundations for collaboration,

though it may generate very robust discussions along the way.

This brings me to the question of emotion. Too often in collaboration – and

indeed in the world of work generally - we assume that emotion plays no part

in what we do and how we do it. We tell ourselves that we are rational and

neutral and disinterested. In practice emotion is everywhere, we just choose to

label it emotion when it transgresses established norms. This matters

particularly for collaboration where different cultures have different acceptable

norms and where conflict is often a necessary vehicle for arriving at the right

answer.

Working in these ways and developing these capabilities is a component of a

public service ethos that I consider essential to enabling collaboration for

public purpose. This of course demands clarity about ethical conduct in collaboration and also ethical conduct about collaboration.

Developing these mind and skill sets is for me part and parcel of the remit of the Institute for Public Administration Australia. In conversation with Andrew just today I have heard so much about what IPAA Queensland is doing and plans to do in support of the public service and I hope that my thoughts and reflections make a contribution to their future work.

Thank you.