

OPENING ADDRESS

Thursday 23 June 2011

Everyday Heroes Short Film Premiere @ WA State Library

SPEAKER: Yvonne Henderson
Equal Opportunity Commissioner

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EVERYDAY HEROES OPENING ADDRESS UNITED NATIONS PUBLIC SERVICE DAY Yvonne Henderson - Equal Opportunity Commissioner

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recently said Australia has a “robust system of democratic institutions”.

Functioning democratic institutions are often the very things that distinguish societies where individual human rights are respected and those where they are not.

Democratic institutions include more than a system of parliamentary democracy with free, fair elections and universal suffrage. They also include the institutions charged with providing the citizens of a country with the services they pay for through their taxes and with implementing the policies voted for by the people in elections.

An independent, impartial and transparent public service is such a cornerstone of a democracy that it is difficult to imagine how a democracy could function without a healthy executive.

People often have no difficulty recognising the place that maintainers of law and order have in a democracy. Few have difficulty imagining the descent into chaos without police to enforce the law supported by a system of independent courts and tribunals. But what about universal health, education and social security services? Despite the fashion of contracting out and privatising in time of economic restraint when standards are said to be falling in literacy and numeracy by school leavers the argument is always made the public system is failing. Of course there is an expectation that the public system should lead the way - it should educate all to the highest standard achievable, it should treat the most severely ill, the most traumatised by road or work accidents, it should carry out and oversee research at the highest level for new treatments, it should provide care and protection for the children of parents who cannot; it should house those most in need, it should ensure no one is without these most fundamental essentials for human survival - food, shelter and an income. In addition it should plan diverse and vibrant cities and communities, it should build or design roads, bridges, ports and other infrastructures; it should assist home buyers; it should safeguard the environment and ensure an efficient and effective public transport systems operates.

In addition to the wide range of task that public servants are called on to perform (and I have only referred to a small number), public servants are expected to be diligent, ethical and transparent in their dealings. In a modern democracy they are of course expected to be open and consultative in their dealings with the public, be true to the political direction of their Ministers whilst always remaining impartial and fair.

If they are not as diligent as they could have been, their errors could be spread across the front page of the morning newspaper; clients regularly can and do criticize them in public and most cases out of respect for privacy they are not able to respond.

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They are frequently asked to do more with less and they must swallow almost every day the widespread supposedly self evident truth that the private sector always do better what the public sector does now.

This despite public servants often having the evidence that puts the lie to this myth. So when public authorities are sold off in a wholesale manner as initiated by Prime Minister Thatcher in the UK in the 80's it must be galling indeed to watch private companies make massive profits and to allow basic infrastructure to deteriorate and decay as service to the public becomes more expensive and less reliable.

So today is the day we celebrate United Nations Public Service Day. The day we celebrate the achievements and contributions of the public service. In particular, we celebrate the qualities that public servants bring to their work - dedication, professionalism, knowledge, compassion, creativity and the highest sense of ethical behaviour - because that is what we expect of public servants.