

ASSET MANAGEMENT AS A QUEST 1984-1993

Dr Penny Burns
Chair, Talking Infrastructure Association

Chapter Eight: My Story - Moving On

Again it was time to move on and, as much as I did not want to leave the EWS, I was even more reluctant to leave the PAC, which had been so much fun, but my work there was done. The decision of where to go next, however, had been made over a year before.

As the end of the first year of my secondment to the PAC came up, the PAC Secretary had shown me a job being advertised by the public buildings department. The job specification required someone to 'remove all fluctuations in the South Australian construction industry'! I protested that public buildings did not have the ability to do this, whoever it employed. It might build a large proportion of schools and office buildings but the demand decisions were made elsewhere, and even this represented only about a third or less of state funded construction, moreover the department had little, if any, influence over local or federal construction expenditure in the state and none at all over private construction. I declared it a non-job!

These jobs were not as rare as they should be, they were mainly designed to boost the number reporting to top executives and thus make them feel more important. I was surprised that the Secretary had not recognised this for himself. But, of course, he had. He had also seen something that I had not. With a happy smile, he replied "Exactly! You can make this job anything you like!"

I won the job and as the PAC one-year secondment stretched out to close to two-and-a-half years and we saw more and more asset management issues needing attention, it was obvious what I wanted my next job to be.

Finishing with the PAC

I officially started with Public Buildings, now re-named Housing and Construction, on April 1st, an auspicious day, but there were still two more agency reports to be tabled and the whole of the final summary report had yet to be written. I split my time between the two agencies, but even so it would not have been possible without the willing co-operation of the other two researchers who not only put aside their own projects to get this finished, but who also gave up their weekends and so we tabled the last two reports. Then, with just the summary report to go, the House decided to rise early for Easter. We now had less than a week to finish! So, again, it was all hands on deck and at one stage even the Chairman rang and asked "Do you need another hand on a pencil?". He then came in about 9 that evening and wrote the section we had talked about a year before on the untying of federal government grants to the states. It is very rare for PAC chairmen to do any writing in their reports and I was grateful for his help at this critical time. The final report that would go on to have so much of an impact on asset management was actually

written in just 54 hours go to woe, including two presentations to the Committee! But, of course, its actual preparation time was almost two and a half years, not including the original work for the water authority.

That final summary report was tabled on April 15 and now there remained just one task left - to present this work to the Biennial PAC Conference in Sydney in six weeks time. If the State PAC committees and the Auditors-General, who generally all attended, saw value in our work, there was a chance that asset management could be taken up Australia wide and I was very hopeful. I was also keen to be there in Sydney, 'in at the kill', as it were, but I was no longer on the PAC staff. While they kindly offered to include me in their official party, I needed my new department to pay my costs and give me the time.

And here, we struck a bit of a problem. Well, two problems. Having had to wait for me for about 15 months, my new Director was not well inclined to support the PAC any further. Also my new position, having not been planned for interstate travel, had a travel budget of just a few hundred dollars. So, a bit of a challenge.

Getting to Melbourne and Sydney

I had received a request to address the CSIRO in Melbourne. Lex Blaikie, the head of the Building Division and Professor Frank Bromilow, of the Architecture department at the University of Melbourne and advisor to the CSIRO, had read the presentation I had made to the World Housing Congress in November and were interested to know more.

Even before the PAC took up the AM work, Lex Blaikie's division in the CSIRO had been very active in this area, through their publication *Infact*. They had been attempting to model needed maintenance but they didn't have the information access that the PAC did. They had a small selection of schools but were only able to access figures on the maintenance that had actually been carried out. There was no way of telling whether that maintenance was enough, or excessive, or indeed whether it was spent in the right areas. This frustrated them, so they were delighted with the PAC's work and were keen to speak with me.

I arranged with them to meet just before the Sydney PAC conference, so that now, with the Adelaide-Melbourne return air fare taken care of by the CSIRO, my travel budget was just enough to get me the rest of the way plus a couple of nights of cheap accommodation so that solved one of my problems. It didn't solve everything though for, while the CSIRO had written requesting my attendance in Melbourne, I still needed an excuse for Sydney, an excuse that my new Director could not refuse.

As I stared out of my new office windows at the grey April skies, I thought how much they matched the greyness of my chances. Then, and I have no idea where this inspiration came from, probably desperation, I picked up the phone and rang the Director of Public Works in Sydney and, announcing myself as Dr Penny Burns (PhDs were not so common then, and certainly not for females), I explained to the secretary that I had just finished a two and a half year study with the Public Accounts Committee looking at the cost and timing of renewing all of South Australia's infrastructure and I thought that the Director might be interested in the results. She thought so too and put me through.

An hour's conversation later, it turned out he was very interested so I said I would be in Sydney in May and would he like me to speak with his executive panel? Yes, he would and would write a letter of request to my department. Then, thinking that these guys

probably talked to each other and I didn't want to get offside with anyone, I did the same for Public Works in Melbourne, with the same results.

Looking back, I now consider it one of life's miracles, that both directors were free to take my call that afternoon and their secretaries were willing to put me through. It is yet another example of the luck that followed this project.

So pleased was I to have solved my Sydney PAC biennial conference problem that I was slow to realise that I had done it yet again - been so task focused that I had not considered the consequences. If I had thought about it at all, and honestly I hadn't thought much, I imagined my Director would be proud that his officer had been requested by the two largest public works authorities in the country. He wasn't!

Fortunately, the CEO was.

New opportunities arise

In Melbourne with the CSIRO I was introduced to Charles Johnson who was busy designing the brochure for the upcoming Canberra National Infrastructure Forum. In the heading was the phrase 'infrastructure needs'. I took issue with Charles about this, saying since we didn't know what we had, nor what we wanted, 'needs' was hardly the right word. He protested that he had spent all morning getting it in. I suggested he take all afternoon and get it out again! We had a spirited but good natured conversation, the end result of which was that the CSIRO arranged for me to be given a speaking slot at the Forum, which was to prove instrumental in what was to happen next.

The next day, on my way to meet with Victorian Public Works, I got caught in a drenching rainstorm and arrived, soaking wet and dishevelled, to be told that the CEO, with whom I had spoken, was home with a cold. I was left to introduce myself. As I looked around the room, something seemed off. I said "You don't know why I am here, do you?" and one said: "No, the boss just said to come and it would be interesting" "It will, and if someone can find me a hot coffee and a place to dry my jacket I will happily tell you". That was my not impressive, but nevertheless memorable, introduction to a group that I was to become very friendly with and work with many times in the following 20 years. The Sydney Public Works meeting was not so fraught but it also produced long lasting contacts and led to my involvement in writing the first state asset management manual.

At last it was time for our the address of our Chairman, John Klunder, to the PAC Conference that I was so looking forward to, but his Session Chairman was so taken by the fact that I had the same given name as his daughter that the idiot wasted a good 15-20 minutes talking enthusiastically about me! Initially I was amused, then embarrassed and finally distressed that John had so little time to talk about our work. He took it more calmly than me.

Fortunately, Chris Jay, the well respected senior reporter for the Australian Financial Review, was called upon to comment. This was the same Chris Jay who had spoken at the last biennial PAC conference in Adelaide just before we started our work. He had been given a full copy of John's paper. After clarifying that we were indeed quoting prices in 1985 dollars - and not guessing at future inflation - he said how tremendously impressed he was with what we had done and how important it was that everyone should know about it. With this endorsement, by the time the delegates went on the end-of-session harbour cruise, all knew who I was and many wanted to talk about asset management.

So, in just six weeks, changing the focus of my new role as Manager, Policy Development from controlling construction fluctuations to asset management was already beginning to take shape with the opportunity to influence not just South Australia but the whole of Australia. Importantly, I now had my next two questions:

- 1. How could the PAC recommendations be implemented?*
- 2. How could we capture the hearts and minds of other disciplines who needed to be involved?*