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## A man of many faces

Katharine Murphy  
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ON ELECTION night 2007, Peter Shergold and wife Carol dropped into the national tally room in Canberra's north but didn't linger. The country's most powerful public servant, the head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, wanted to be alone, undisturbed by the necessity of polite small talk, to watch the verdict. On the television, he watched the prime minister he had served through the tumult of the previous five years concede defeat after probably losing his seat.

Shergold turned off the television, packed his bag with its detailed brief for the incoming Labor government, and went to bed. At 8.30 the next morning he phoned John Howard. Howard says he was "touched by what he had to say". By 9am Shergold was at Canberra Airport boarding the plane to meet Kevin Rudd in Brisbane.

This is the strange twilight existence of career public servants — one political boss one day, an election brings a new one. Now it is Shergold leaving the public service after more than 20 years. It's an emotional time. "More emotional than I thought."

On one analysis Shergold's career is simply the remarkable and unremarkable story of a highly able public servant made good. On another, Shergold is an intriguing chameleon, starting his career right at the bleeding heart of the Hawke and Keating social policy agenda as the head of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and running the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).

By all accounts he was an activist, an enthusiast. And then he burned it all down under Howard. The alacrity with which he took to that task of policy reversal made some public service colleagues and Labor people who knew him well uneasy. The Labor senator Kim Carr thundered in disgust that Shergold was the most political public servant in Canberra, endearing him enormously to Howard and possibly cementing his career.

Canberra consultant Stephen Bartos, a former public service colleague, expresses Shergold's chameleon qualities elegantly: "He has a very theatrical personality, he'll play the part even when the script is terrible. Peter has a flair for making the nasty look reasonable."

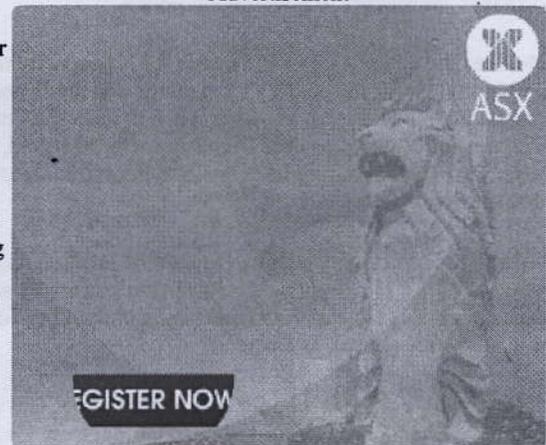
One of his political bosses, former Aboriginal affairs minister Robert Tickner says: "Peter is someone I regard as a friend. He has operated in a way traditional public servants operate — that is to serve the government of the day — but that is not a path I have chosen or could ever undertake."

Howard says he will also regard Shergold as a friend. "I think his great skill was he combined the traditional abilities of a highly successful public servant ... with a constant search for new ideas." Asked why he chose someone like Shergold to head his department, Howard replies: "I picked him because I believed he had the right skill set for the job at that time."

Shergold decided to move on from his life as a bureaucrat more than a year ago regardless of the election result. We meet this week on the executive floor of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Out one window of his office stands God, in the form of a stately sandstone cathedral in the suburb of Manuka, and the other politics, with the marble and stainless steel of the Parliament. Five phones sit on his desk. None ring. Friends joke Shergold is already on the cocktail circuit, shortly to join the black-and-white portraits of previous departmental heads. This formidable bunch stare down at you in the long corridor, looking vaguely terrifying. Shergold will smile in his official portrait, of that you feel certain. Do you want me looking pensive or happy, he asks our photographer. Happy is fine, Glen replies, and Shergold smiles away.

We discuss his professional transformation under the different governments. Was he simply implementing government policy in

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a methodical way, or did his views change over the two decades?

A bit of both is his candid answer. Hawke's positive agenda on multiculturalism, he believes, has stood the test of time and remains at the core of his values. At the Office of Multicultural Affairs, "I think I got it right," he says, although he asserts the cause was not helped by people who used the banner of multiculturalism as a justification for cultural relativism, a stance he says he never supported.

"On indigenous affairs, I think my views have changed. If I look back on my failures, not necessarily personal failures, but failures over the 20 years, it has been the inability of successive policies to actually address in a substantive way the appalling social and economic disadvantage of indigenous peoples," Shergold says.

He says even while running ATSIC it became clear that there was not enough money to do the job, and too much wasted money, which in part fuelled a growing "culture of victims". Noel Pearson, Sue Gordon and Warren Mundine became more influential in his thinking. "I did personally start to worry about the policy directions quite separately from the changes in direction of government policy," he says.

"Sometimes you do things because you are a professional public servant who will argue strongly behind closed doors but then implement the policy of the government of the day. Sometimes ... your views change over time in such a way that you have different approaches to government policy."

He likes the novelist Graham Greene for his capacity to invoke character and location, and for his skill at rendering moral ambiguity. Being the country's top public servant is not clear-cut, he says. "You have to make judgements." It was not something instinctive for Shergold, knowing when to draw the line, it was the experience of 20 years. "This is a balance of values." While Tickner and Howard profess friendship with Shergold, he eschews that kind of closeness. Political masters were not friends, he says. That said, reverting once again to his natural tendency towards serial enthusiasms, he says there was not one politician he disliked working for.

How then did he feel watching Howard on election night losing his seat given all they had been through over the previous five years. "Umm," this highly articulate person offers by way of reply before a long pause. It is hard to be certain whether he is taking a moment to suppress emotion, or embarking on a desperate internal struggle for diplomacy. "I felt sorry for the prime minister, (tiny pause), as a person."

"If you work with someone for five years closely, and on occasion intensely, it is difficult, no, it is impossible to do that unless you have established a relationship of mutual trust. Umm, (another pause), and therefore, of course, I knew the prime minister as a person. I knew his wife as a person. I felt, (another pause), sorry. But as a public servant, I was also extraordinarily impressed by the manner in which the prime minister conceded defeat and by the way in which Prime Minister Rudd accepted victory. We forget how impressive that seamlessness of democratic transfer can be and the role the public service plays in achieving it."

What did he say to Howard on the phone? "I rang prime minister Howard that morning to convey in particular how I would always remember the opportunity to work in this capacity to him. And then half an hour later I briefed Prime Minister-elect Rudd."

It was a great source of satisfaction to Shergold that Howard and then Rudd came to the department soon after the election to talk to staff. Both won ovations. That idea of seamless transition reflects Shergold positively to himself and clearly gives him closure.

Now visitors to the department are greeted by a smiling portrait of Kevin Rudd in the foyer, looking slightly cherubic. Howard has moved to the spot with other former PMs. And so, thinks Shergold, should Shergold. He won't make Howard's mistake of hanging around too long. Five years as head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet is his longest stint in any job.

Former public service colleague Stephen Bartos says there is much good in his legacy. "Peter has made the very best of the opportunities he's had," he says.

Shergold will head the new Centre for Social Impact. His former boss Robert Tickner, who now runs the Red Cross, is delighted to see him in a role helping not-for-profit organisations. Howard says he wasn't surprised by his choice of role.

Shergold is a cross-country skier. This has always struck me as a terrific metaphor for a career public servant: an activity that requires endurance over rough terrain, with none of the unpredictable exuberance of the downhill sport. But at Christmas, Shergold gave in and struck a blow for risk-taking: with daughter Amy, he took downhill lessons in Aspen. He crossed the frontier. It was time.

*Katharine Murphy is national affairs correspondent.*

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/02/08/1202234164055.html>*