

Closing remarks, Peter Cullen Trust 15th Anniversary Dinner

The Boat House, Canberra, 22 May 2024

Andrew Campbell

It is wonderful to be here on Ngunnawal Country with so many old friends and colleagues, so many leaders, so many people who knew, worked with and have been influenced by Peter Cullen, not least Vicky Cullen.

A few weeks after Peter's funeral, Ken Matthews and I wrote to the leaders of many organisations (in this town and beyond) involved in the water sector, science and education, inviting them to a dinner, to discuss how best we could honour Peter's memory in an enduring way. That dinner was fifteen years ago tonight, right here at the Boathouse. We were heartened with the level of consensus and support we received, and the seeds for the establishment of the Peter Cullen Trust were sown.

As a Friend of the Trust, a recent board member and as one of its instigators, I am very proud of what the Peter Cullen Trust has achieved. I think Peter would be chuffed.

Coincidentally, my most recent boss in the APS was the Foreign Minister, Senator Penny Wong. When we first sought Commonwealth support for the Trust, Penny Wong was the Minister for Water. At my first meeting with the Foreign Minister in my role as CEO of ACIAR (the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research) I took a conversational detour to remind the Minister of the million-dollar grant she had made in 2009 to endow the Trust. I was delighted to inform Penny Wong that we still have most of the million dollars in the bank. She was shocked – "*What, hasn't it done anything?*" – but delighted when I told her those funds had been used to catalyse much wider support in training hundreds of leaders across the water sector.

As Minister Plibersek and other speakers have already noted, Peter Cullen's example and insights are more relevant today than ever. 'Big L' and 'small l' leadership at all levels are crucial as we face intersecting and amplifying meta challenges:

- Water, energy, food and health security, all exacerbated by climate change;
- Indigenous reconciliation post-referendum;
- Profound, transformative technological change; and
- Social fragmentation and polarisation.

As we grapple with these intersecting challenges, the characteristics of Peter Cullen's leadership remain ever more cogent and relevant:

- Fiercely independent, not beholden to particular interests;
- Frank and fearless, but always respectful and courteous;
- Grounded in good science, targeted to its application context, respecting different knowledges and ways of knowing;
- Active and creative at the interfaces between science and policy; and
- Leading community debate, and building water literacy at a societal level.

Two 'Cullenisms' resonate as strongly today as they ever did:

“If you think knowledge is expensive, try ignorance!” and

“You can't drought-proof Australia. We need to learn to live with the landscape, not try to fight it all the time.”

Courageous leadership as I understand it, as well as in the common sense of being brave, not necessarily popular, and sticking to one's principles, has other important characteristics.

Courageous leadership extends the boundaries of what people perceive to be possible, and achievable. It makes space and is infectious and osmotic in encouraging (in the literal sense of the word **en-courage**) others to lead – followers, stakeholders, formal leaders, even opponents.

Peter Cullen (even or perhaps especially in the 'pensioner from Gunning' phase of his influential career) **enlarged the space** for leadership.

Peter Cullen **encouraged** Prime Ministers, Premiers, Ministers (State and Federal), and industry and community leaders at all levels to **lead**, from a sound evidence base.

As we can see from the so many outstanding emerging leaders in this room tonight, in the water sector in particular, Peter Cullen's example, his life's work and his legacy is still very real and meaningful.

Enlarging the space for leadership, encouraging and empowering leaders.

Peter's work continues through the work of the Peter Cullen Trust and the impactful careers of hundreds of Peter Cullen Fellows across the continent.

Thank you so much for coming tonight, for honouring the memory of a great Australian, and for your ongoing contributions to leadership in the water sector and beyond.