



Lil Anderson

## NAVIGATING INDIGENOUS RELATIONS ACROSS THE DITCH

Lil Anderson has been in Australia since April. Kirsten Rose catches up with her and asks her about her impressions of the Australian public service and other things Australian.



Lil Anderson (Te Rarawa, Ngāpuhi) is the Tumu Whakararae (Chief Executive) of Te Arawhiti | the Office for Māori Crown Relations. Over the past twenty-five years, Lil has worked tirelessly in the public sector, spearheading change in Māori relations, negotiating Tiriti settlements, and supporting vulnerable communities. In April 2022, Lil started a twelve-month secondment at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) in Australia, as a leadership and teaching fellow.

On the morning I caught up with Lil, she had been at her Gold Coast desk since 5.00 a.m. with her “Te Arawhiti hat on”, meeting with New Zealand ministers to discuss Māori Crown relations.

Navigating different time zones and obligations between her Te Arawhiti and ANZOG work is a wero (challenge) that she is relishing; thanks in part to coffee, but mainly to the joy of being able to watch her mokopuna grow up nearby and the chance to help local Indigenous communities and Australia’s public service.

### The Australian journey

“The secondment has provided a great opportunity personally and professionally. I was at the point of my career where I felt like I needed some perspective, particularly post-COVID. What I do is really big and it’s important and complex. This post is giving me the opportunity to contribute something to the Australian journey. I think they’re probably where we were eight years ago. The role sees me working three days a week for ANZSOG and then two days with the New Zealand government.”

A big part of her secondment has been facilitating visits and meetings – between Te Arawhiti Minister Kelvin Davis and Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations Minister Andrew Little with their Australian state and federal government counterparts, Aboriginal groups, and Māori residing in the Gold Coast.

“It took a while to make the right contacts. I already had a few here, but I now feel like I’ve got relationships across the breadth of the Australian public service, for sure. The work here has been really interesting. Prime Minister [Anthony] Albanese has brought a really sharp focus to Indigenous issues here, particularly around the Uluru Statement from the Heart. That’s given a huge impetus to government and to the public service to really lift their game in the way that they work with Indigenous issues.

“I teach and work with executive teams and other public service teams trying to understand their journey, trying to give

them some really practical help. I’m not really a forty-page strategy person (which they seem to really like here). I’m more, ‘why don’t you try this?’, ‘why don’t you try that?’, ‘we’ve had some success with this type of thing’. The hunger and the passion for that [practical] work here is really insatiable at the moment. The other part of my work here is working with the Australian Public Service Commission and other key agencies to look at how you grow capacity, which is a different issue to capability.”

### An outside perspective

“The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands public servants is quite low here, particularly in high-level executive positions. There really is a desire here to see that [change]. They have got strategies and pathways, but something is missing. Trying to help them put their finger on that has been really the most exciting piece of work that I’m doing here.

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“Change doesn’t come without challenge. Sometimes it’s easier to have an outside perspective, and I’m finding the Australians are really valuing my views and

observations. Certainly, it's not like they haven't been trying, it's just some of the measures haven't quite landed fast enough. This is a government, here in Australia, that wants things to move relatively fast. Some states are starting on the Path to Treaty, which is their Treaty settlement process equivalent. They're also looking at Voice to Parliament, which would be a constitutional voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. That's a step further than obviously we have [taken] in Aotearoa. They've also got a number of really big partnership community initiatives with Indigenous communities, which part of me wants to bring back home, in exchange for the knowledge that I'm sharing about our experience."

### Similar but different public services

There are distinct differences between the two countries – notably volume (there are 2.1 million public servants in Australia compared with New Zealand's 60,000) and the way each government works – but Lil has found refreshing similarities.

## HERE THERE ARE AROUND 250 ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES.

"Every public servant I've met is really passionate about serving their people. They are here to make a difference, much like the public service in New Zealand. There is the same real passion for what we do," she says.



"I suppose the two things I've noticed that are most different is the hierarchy and the level of political involvement. In New Zealand, we tend to be very politically neutral and that's, I think, a real credit to us as public servants. In Australia, they express really strong political views all the time, which really had me taken aback."

Australia's disparate approach to dealing with its fraught colonial and Indigenous history has

provided another layer of complexity for Lil to negotiate in her Indigenous relations work at ANZSOG.

### Different histories

"This country has 60,000 years of history with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island races here. I've tried to meet with as many Indigenous public servants and community people as I can. Compared with the greater population, they're only a small part, and they feel it's really difficult to have a voice. But I think the moves that are being made across Australia to address that are really important."

Lil reports some states are well into the journey of trying to negotiate treaties, while others are going straight to partnership agreements. Others are yet to start the process.

"Here in Queensland, for instance, there's a programme called Thriving Communities, which is all about community governance and Indigenous governance in their community across social issues. That sort of partnership approach has been really successful for them, but that started well before the addressing of historical grievances and Path to Treaty. In New Zealand, we've had a very linear approach to it. We've looked at addressing grievance first as an enabler to being able to start fresh and look at partnership as a real possibility, whereas I think Australia has been able to look at partnerships earlier and then come to the treaty elements at a later point. In my opinion, you can't really have a partnership when one of your partners is feeling aggrieved.

"It's a really different landscape to New Zealand. There's just so much complexity. First Nations language is hugely challenging. In Aotearoa, we have different dialects but our [Māori] language is the same. Here there are around 250 Aboriginal languages, and people are very protective. I had to be very careful when I took the ministers to visit Logan (Queensland), where there are a number of different mobs (tribes). We had to be mindful to greet every single group. There are public servants and academics who are really doing their best to change the narrative and to move forward, but it's a really big struggle, even within their own culture, as to which way is best."

### Implications of becoming republics

Talk of moves from a commonwealth to a republic across both countries

has prompted interesting conversations within the public sector. Lil believes any potential change would have a much greater impact in New Zealand than it would in Australia.

"One thing Māori all agree on is that the Treaty partnership is fundamental to everything. If one of those parties disappears, it changes fundamentally. Moving to a republic would change Treaty settlements, it would change the nature of governance in New Zealand, it would make sovereignty look different. Who then would be the partner to Māori in New Zealand? I'm not saying better or worse. I just think it opens up a completely different world.

"I was with a group of Aboriginal people here, and they said it wouldn't really change anything for them. They don't talk about the Crown at all. They talk about state government and federal government and local government. No one really thought, apart from the politicians, about the impact of the Queen's death and what that might mean [for Aboriginal relations]."

### New Zealand's journey

Now in the final stages of her secondment, Lil says she has gained a new perspective on the public sector.

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"I'm trying to help the community work their way around challenges. It feels like we've been there in New Zealand. I'm not saying we're out the other side because we're still going through it, but it feels like these communities are in some of the places we've already been. So, it's been really great to reflect, actually, on what an amazing journey New Zealand's had. It feels slow to me when I'm in New Zealand and I feel very impatient that the public service needs to get better and faster. But being here, I've been able to reflect, and we've made a lot of movement in five, six years."

