



As a very young public servant Dennis Richardson handed out how-to-vote cards for the ALP. Mick Tsikas/AAP

Dennis Richardson, one of Australia's most respected federal public servants, has just retired after an illustrious career. He served as head of the foreign affairs department, the defence department, and ASIO, and was Australian ambassador in Washington. He was also once chief-of-staff to then-prime minister Bob Hawke.

Richardson was never afraid to tell ministers what he believed they should hear, and any grudges they had as a result they apparently got over very quickly.

He urges bureaucrats to be forthright with their political bosses, but also to be strategic in how they go about trying to persuade. "Providing frank and fearless advice is not about getting something off your chest, it's about seeking to influence for an outcome that you think is the right one."

In this interview with The Conversation he reflects on trends in the public service, and discusses the implications of the Trump presidency and the future of China. He also recalls as a very young public servant being sent to play squash with Billy McMahon – and beating him. Not long after, he handed out how-to-vote cards for Labor in the "It's Time" election.

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Politics podcast: Dennis Richardson on telling it like it is

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