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Aboriginal numbers in PS down

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The Howard Government revealed yesterday that its term in government had seen a drop in the number of Aborigines in the Public Service.

Whereas Aborigines made up 2.5 per cent of the Public Service in June 1996, when John Howard came to power, the figure had slipped to 2.2 per cent last year, Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott said. Separate figures show the trend is likely to get worse, Aboriginal people making up 1.6 per cent of people joining the Public Service in 2000-01, but 3.1 per cent of those leaving.

The best-represented agencies, other than the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission, are Education, in which about 11 per cent of staff are indigenous, and Centrelink, with about 3.6 per cent. Those with fewer than 1 per cent include the Tax Office, Defence, Family and Community Services, and the Bureau of Statistics.

Mr Abbott said he had asked Public Service Commissioner Andrew Podger to make it his top priority to address the problem.

But he said the public sector was doing better than the private sector - where just 0.8 per cent of people in public-sector equivalent jobs were indigenous. He urged the private sector to lift its game. But he also stressed self-help. 'We are, for better or worse, the authors of our own lives. Yes, we don't come from nowhere; yes, we don't live in isolation, but in the end these are our choices to make,' he said. Lynne Tacy, who is acting in Mr Podger's job, said a mix of factors had contributed to the decline. Recruitment rates were reasonable - and improving more recently - but separation rates were an issue, she said. 'I think a key factor there is for many indigenous people coming in, it's just the different culture,' she said.

The commission was looking at better support networks. Another reason for the decline was that Aboriginal people were over-represented in the lower rungs of the service - where outsourcing and other changes had seen a 'collapsing of opportunities'. Mr Abbott was speaking at the launch of a booklet that tells the stories of 15 indigenous public servants - with the aim of encouraging departments to consider employing indigenous people. Among those featured in the booklet is G. Joseph Murphy, who heads the Canberra office of Health and Family and Community Services.

Mr Murphy, one of seven children brought up in Brisbane by their mother who worked up to three jobs, credits his mother's belief in education with his success. He won a scholarship to a private school, and after working as a labourer, truck driver, storeman packer, and health worker, he gained a degree and entered the Public Service. When he won the manager's job in 1998, he was the only Aboriginal in the office, leaving him feeling a little like 'a left-handed Calathumpian with two heads', but since then he had increased numbers.

Five Aboriginal people were now among the 50 staff. Mr Murphy said Aboriginal professionals had to learn to walk in two worlds - and public service recruitment could be improved by improving indigenous understanding of white structures, by using role models and a buddy system, and by creating an environment that gave people confidence that they could contribute. 'The real message is, hey, Australia, please create opportunities for participation in a Australia's economic and social fabric,' he said. 'And indigenous Australians, hey guys, if the opportunities are presented, grab them with both hands.'