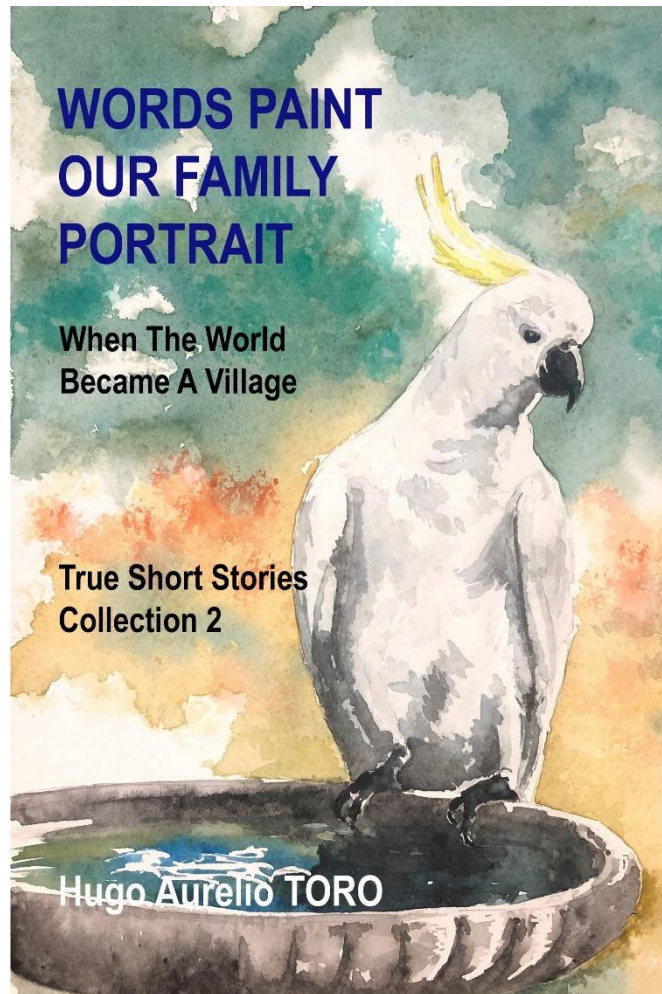


A short story from this collection.



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2.6) Retrenchment Survival

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro

FINANCIAL REVIEW

The abolition of DAS leaves a lot of questions unanswered

Ian Davis

Oct 11, 1997 – 10.00am

'DAS, as it was universally known, was the core service provider to other Federal departments and agencies. Its services included IT for smaller government agencies.

DASFLEET, Works Australia, Australian Operational Support Services, DAS Distribution, DAS Asset Services, Interiors Australia, DAS Environmental Management, the Australian Property Group, and the department's personnel management system NOMAD have all been sold this year, as have elements of the Australian Land Information Group and Australian Government Publishing Service.

The abolition of DAS and the transfer of most of its functions - domestic property, overseas property, procurement and contracting, corporate services, policy, business closures, Removals Australia, Comcar, Australian Government Publishing Service, Office of Government Information and Advertising, and Ministerial and Parliamentary Services - will further enhance Finance's considerable influence over other departments while eliminating a department which frequently challenged its authority.

The remaining DAS staff and the Community and Public Sector Union, are angry at what they say is the abolition of the department without explanation or reason.'

Extracts from news article by Ian Davis, Financial Review – 1997.

Whether you are in government or any other employment, being thrust into unemployment in mass, without explanation or reason, is sometimes a harsh reality. Higher powers decide that services need to be cut and outsourced, and suddenly your job is at risk. I am a middle manager, and I watch colleagues go into shock, while others scramble to reach a vantage point. The key is to be well informed, to make the best personal decisions in a crisis.

In September 1997, Prime Minister Howard took the decision to abolish the Department of Administrative Services. The abolition of the whole department was an unnecessary brutal assault on honest and hardworking employees based only on ideology.

Our senior managers were stunned, standing frozen on the spot. They knew more but chose to keep their employees in the dark about their options and entitlements. It quickly became an 'us and them' scenario. My role it is, to assist people through change. At times like this however, my own survival instincts are intensified.

We called in our union representative Peter, since he was an old hand at complex negotiations. He was terrific at getting management to be transparent with staff and honest about our fate.

I watched the dynamics with great interest. Peter, staff, and managers met in an open office space, and he had our managers cornered. He was asking questions about our fate and retrenchment entitlements that they wished had been kept hidden. Peter discovered that the department in fact, didn't have the funds to cover large scale redundancies, so they were hoping people would leave out of frustration.

Peter delivered information and clarity. He also secured the best possible redundancy conditions for workers.

Keeping A Cool Head

My partner Penny and I work for NOMAD (mentioned in the Financial Review). It is one of those work romances. Our computer system is sold to an external software company. They are interested in our strong client base, which consists of half of the Australian Public service and the whole of the Northern Territory Government. Fortunately, two thirds of our staff have jobs with the new business owner. The remaining workers go our own way with hugs and smiles and a promise to catch up down the track.

Penny's biggest fear in life is being homeless because she had a narrow escape previously. My biggest fear is becoming unemployable in my middle age. I need to remain competitive in the job market. We acknowledge each other's fears and seek financial advice, as you must always do. You need the best in your corner and that is a financial advisor by the name of Darryl Dixon.

'Government pensions are like gold. They are indexed. Take the whole thing as a pension,' said Daryl, as he gave his best financial advice to public servants in our situation.

Penny and I accept our redundancies and take our full pensions. It is such a relief to have a pension in times of need. The less informed of our friends (in their unfortunate naivety) took out lump sums instead. They pay off mortgages, buy cars, and waste it. Others move their superannuation into savings accounts with little or no interest.

The APS is a powerful network of good people, and they offer us contracts back in the public service. It is common knowledge that the public service is informally contracting back all the skilled people that had been retrenched. The contractor funds comes from a different bucket of money in the general ledger. No questions are asked of contractors, even if you are going back to a familiar role with a salary increase. The only thing you cannot do, is to apply for permanency within a year of retrenchment.

I'm barely a week unemployed when a friend in the APS offers me a contract. I'm to support the same system we had sold to him a year earlier. I have valuable systems knowledge, and he pays well for it. Being fresh out of the APS, I fit right in and assist his team.

Penny stays in the APS on redundancy training and then on a contract. Her employer is keen to have her stay on, but she wants a real change from government work. She gladly joins a nearby local suburban medical practice as a medical receptionist. It is a husband-and-wife

General Practitioner business. The roster is shared with two other receptionists and the part time hours suit her well.

Soon, Penny is well established as the senior receptionist at the local medical practice and is extremely motivated there. They are a close-knit team responsible for managing all aspects of the family business. The doctors are demanding but to their credit, they reward the receptionists with good award wages, fair conditions of service and secure employment. The GP business has a shopfront in a cluster of stores including the grocery store, chemist, hairdresser, and baker. A petrol station and a mechanic are also located on the same lot. Penny has landed on her feet, and her fears of homelessness are put aside.

I'm keeping positive and apply for a job with the prestigious firm Price Waterhouse. The firm originated in London in the mid-1800s. They are seeking human resources and finance staff with relevant computing experience. The role consists of implementing the SAP software. This is a German software company that aims to capture records for the whole enterprise. SAP is second only to Microsoft in earnings.

The interview process is fast and efficient. The first interview is with the team leader. It is a face-to-face conversation about my work experience and skills. The second interview consists of a short introduction phone call from the partner in charge, who just wants to get to know the short-listed candidates. The third interview is from the human resources manager, who is calling me to make the offer and complete the paperwork. I reflect that, overall, *the whole recruitment process is streets ahead of the clumsy and slow APS recruitment process.*

I land on my feet and can hear the crowd cheer. I take a moment and acknowledge the crowd in my head. Yes, silly but we must celebrate our wins even if just in our heads.

Starting A New Job

The company gives the new recruits a quick orientation: we are issued with an IBM ThinkPad laptop, are introduced to the team, and have billable hours and hot desking explained to us.

With billable hours I must be assigned to client sites to be earning for the company. A hot desk is one that is unassigned, you simply claim it when you come to the office. The company then sends us to Sydney for exceptional consultancy training and to meet company partners from Australia wide and internationally. I look around the training hall and see only well dressed, intelligent and focused young people. I'm perhaps the oldest in my new team.

Without wasting time, we are sent to the US Philadelphia Sapient College for a two-week intensive training course. Students must pass the course to be permitted to join client sites. Those who fail, must pay back the cost of the flights and the training. It is an early introduction to the private sector and the realities of profit driven companies.

In Philadelphia we form a small study group made up of consultants from various countries and of all ages. We focus and study hard. Most nights, after a good meal, we gather at one of the student apartments to go through our course notes. All training material is on our new laptops. At the end of the course, my group passes the exam with perfect marks.

Others in the course chose to go sightseeing and party. The fate of the less studious is unknown but their names drop off the list of consultants. I was tempted to party. Close by in New York, Black Sabbath is playing on their 'Reunion' tour. It is a shame that I can't take time out to see Ozzy and the band slamming out their historic heavy metal performance. Our group did venture out to explore the sights and restaurants, but not at night since it is dangerous in Phili.

On a sunny Saturday, I run up the 'Rocky Steps' at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and at the top jump around triumphantly with fists in the air. You must do silly stuff like that occasionally.

In 1998, a year after my commencement with the company, there is a merger between Price Waterhouse and Coopers & Lybrand. We now call ourselves PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). The IT branch is expanding in response to a surge in computer automation. With the merger, PwC employs over one hundred thousand consultants worldwide. The size of our business is mind blowing and I feel empowered by such a large group of professionals.

Resilience Through Art

Art has been a big part in my life and contributes to my mental health. In Philadelphia I visited the art galleries and came across an amazing artist, Maxfield Parrish (1870 to 1966). He illustrated and painted in the early 1900s. His work is precise yet surreal. He created a fantasy world with his colourful paintings.

In fact, in my 30s, I was feeling inspired to engage with likeminded people. I saw an advertisement for the Canberra Times Outdoor Art Show on the newspaper. I completed the form and was ready to display my new paintings. This was a yearly event where Canberra artists exhibited their work in an outdoor art exhibition. I looked forward to painting and framing my two-yearly entries.

At bump in, early in the morning at the park, artists lined up outside the registration tent. We saw a glimpse of each other's work while in the queue. Exceptionally talented people exhibited their works, but I was not discouraged. Through the exhibition I encouraged family and friends to support artists by visiting the outdoor show.

At bump out time, an anticipation built up that perhaps our paintings had found a buyer. I was pleased to sell a painting occasionally. Secretly, I was pleased to collect them and take them home as art studies to learn from.

In my 40s, I'm enjoying improved art skills, and producing art quickly and without any major rework. When painting, I find that my mental health is improving. That is what hobbies are for, to lift off worries and replace them with calm through a fun activity.

One year, the weather turns bad at the outdoor art show, and the paintings are damaged. It is eventually closed altogether. What a shame, I missed the art in the park, and I stop participating at that point.

On Government Contracts

In my early 40s, and over a period of four years, I'm assigned to client projects by PwC. I'm working furiously and earning well for the company. My sizeable daily rate motivates me to provide value for money for our clients. There is a hint of guilt at the high charge out rate, but I did not set it.

On my first contract, I'm assigned to an implementation job in the Queensland Government. Three departments share people to implement SAP together. We are in the Brisbane city centre and my company has set me up in a one-bedroom riverfront apartment opposite the Story Bridge. PwC pays for Penny's flights to visit me in Brisbane because we are on tight deadlines, and I will be away for months. I'm feeling spoilt and my loyalty to the company is strong.

The job is demanding, so to prepare, my morning starts with an hour of watercolour painting, my hobby, which shifts my brain to a clearer space. The Story Bridge seen from my balcony comes up nicely on watercolour paper. After breakfast, I walk to work along the busy footpaths, on the shady side of the street. Shady as in sheltered from direct sun, not shady as in seedy. Upon arriving in the office located on the river, I spend fifteen minutes cooling down and letting my shirt dry off. Brisbane is hot and humid during those long summer months. Our project team members are extremely cooperative at all levels. They are keen on new

technology, process changes, and streamlining transactions. The days pass quickly, and it helps that we are a friendly team and have a laugh.

The evenings are peaceful, and I spend them sitting in my balcony watching the Brisbane River flow past. Until late, I'm listening to the constant hum of the city sounds and watching the urban jungle descend into nightfall.

When the Brisbane job is done, I'm of course feeling a bit sad. We did a good job, and it is time to say goodbye and move on. I'm sent to Sydney for another SAP implementation job with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

At the ABC, I quickly discover that it is a tough job technically and emotionally. They are in the middle of downsizing and their management say that SAP is going to help them do this through automation. I'm on the team delivering the bad tasting medicine, and feel conflicted, since it is a known fact that when you implement a new computer system, you need more staff, not less. Any manager who tells you that they will save on staff from day one is disingenuous.

My people management skills tell me that work psychology is at play, with staff needing careful treatment. To show the ABC staff that my intentions are genuine, I make myself available to talk with them and join them during breaks at the cafeteria. Unfortunately, inexperienced PwC consultants on my team with a keenness to appear busy on site, accused me of time-wasting. They have misread the client needs since the project was more than just about the software.

When the team lead role became available, it is offered to me, but I reject it. I prefer to return to my hometown of Canberra, where there are other major projects commencing.

In 2002, PwC wins the tender with the Department of Employment and Education for a technology upgrade. A mix of SAP and change management consultants are assigned to the project, with me included. I meet great people on that project. With a strong team, we do a good job. My thoughts are confirmed that you can make friends in complex and fast-moving projects if you care about the people as well as the task. This is becoming a point of difference with my prestigious employer, an organisation which places profit ahead of people.

A year passes, and the client is satisfied with their implementation, and I help with the handover and closure of the project. Things run smoothly until the end of the financial year, when an integrated system can bring you unstuck. The accountants close all accounts on the General Ledger (as they did normally on paper). They issued new accounts but failed to add that change on the SAP system. The whole payroll crashed, salaries miss the payday, and mortgage payments are missed. My distressed client friends contact me in a panic. Fortunately, I know how to synchronise paper records with the new accounts, in SAP. The problem is rectified quickly.

Nature Is A Leveller

SAP contract work is slowing down so I start to contact friends in the APS to explore opportunities. While in between contracts, the January 2003, fires threaten our peaceful existence. We have been watching on the news the bushfires burning their way from Victoria towards Canberra. A poor decision is made to wait to see if the Molonglo River creates a natural fire break. The river unfortunately failed to be an effective fire barrier.

Penny and I are shopping in Belconnen Mall, when a message over the loudspeakers urges all shoppers to go home immediately. We do just that and from a vantage point on the way home, we watch in disbelief as a massive white smoke cloud covers the outskirts of Canberra. The fire has intensified and easily jumps the river heading towards south side homes. It isn't too long before the sun is blocked out and the city is hurled into eery darkness.

Ash falls from the sky reaching our home. Penny and I run two hoses on either side of the house wetting the gutters. We watch Elvis, the helitanker, fly over and dump water on the fire.

Four people lose their lives fighting the fire, and 488 buildings are destroyed during Canberra's worst fire in history.

My PwC friends are on the phone checking on us, thankfully we are safe.

Penny and I are feeling lucky to have survived a major fire threat to our home, and to have also survived a major government retrenchment. We transitioned well from young public servants reliant on permanent work to wiser middle aged competitive employees. Penny continues to strengthen her medical administration position, and I am looking forward to further work in government and computing.

With regards to the SAP computer system, I must state clearly that I am a fan of the product. I can see how a large private company like BHP may want to implement a whole of enterprise system. For the government however, it is the wrong solution, a bit like purchasing a double decker bus to get your two children to and from school.