TRANSCRIPTION

RORY MEDCALF: Welcome back to the *National Security Podcast*. I'm Rory Medcalf, head of the National Security College at the Australian National University. Before we begin, I'll acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and pay respects to their elders.

The National Security College is really pleased to be presenting a very special podcast discussion today looking at one of the most sensitive and important topics in Australian national security, and that is the role of intelligence, the role of our intelligence community. And we have two very special guests for this conversation. It is a pleasure to welcome to the studio Andrew Shearer, the Director General of the Office of National Intelligence, and with Andrew, to welcome Mike Burgess, the Director General of Security, the head of ASIO. And, of course, Andrew and Mike, if I can speak to you on first-name terms for this conversation, are leaders of our intelligence community along with the heads of the other intelligence agencies and play vital roles in informing decision-making of the Australian Government and indeed with Australia's partners and allies in this incredibly contested time in our national security.

But many questions often arise in the public mind as to what is intelligence, the purpose of intelligence, the role of intelligence in an age of enormous volumes of open-source information and despite some significant efforts in recent years to, I think, demystify what intelligence is and why it matters to the national interest, some confusion still remains, I think. So, the purpose of our conversation today is to shed as much light as we can on the role of intelligence in Australian security policy and in particular to think a little about the future of this craft, the future of this capability, for Australia in a contested age.

So, a few questions for our guests, and I appreciate that some of these are pretty sensitive topics that go to classified areas of work, so I don't anticipate that every question will get the answer I want, but let's start at the beginning. For both of you, and maybe we'll begin with you, Andrew, what actually is intelligence?

ANDREW SHEARER: Well, Rory, first, thanks for having us. It's great to be back at the college and really look forward to the conversation. For me, there are many, many definitions of intelligence and there are many different forms of intelligence but fundamentally intelligence is nothing more than information that can provide decision-makers with advance warning of threats to our national security or our national prosperity but also of opportunities that we might face as a nation, and actionable insights into the world and how it affects Australia's national interests.

RORY MEDCALF: That's important I guess because you haven't said automatically that all intelligence necessarily is secret.

ANDREW SHEARER: Far from it. As you alluded, the volume of open-source information that is available continues to grow exponentially. There's so much data out there that, in fact, one of our challenges, and we'll probably come to it, is how do we deal with all that data? How do we ingest it? How do we understand it, how to organise it and how to analyse it? So absolutely open-source is

critical, but there are still roles for more traditional classified covert forms of information, whether they are derived from human intelligence operations or more technical means, including signals intelligence, cyber and so forth.

RORY MEDCALF: And we'll come back to that in a moment, Andrew, but Mike, what's intelligence to you?

MIKE BURGESS: Thanks, Rory, and thank you for having me here. Great to be here with you, Andrew. Like Andrew, intelligence is information that provides insights and allows people to make informed decisions. Context does matter so the real definition depends on where you are applying that, those insights or information to make decisions. So, in the context of the security service, it's actually that information that intelligence that enables us to identify or understand, harden or disrupt threats to security.

RORY MEDCALF: We'll come in a moment to what the Australian agencies therefore do that's – your working definition of "intelligence", but I think to introduce you a little bit more in the conversation, it would be great to understand a bit more about why you're both in this game. How did you come to intelligence as a leadership point in your careers? Not every kid necessarily grows up wanting to be a spy, so to speak, and not everyone who wants to work in this space is necessarily cut out for it. So, I'm just curious to know and I might start with you, actually, Mike, how did you become DG of ASIO and how did you set about this career?

MIKE BURGESS: It's a great question and I wish I knew! Although actually, to be honest, I do know how I got here, but my journey started a long time ago, like everyone else. I had no idea that I would be head of an intelligence security agency at this stage of my life. I was an engineer, electronic engineers, I just wanted to do fun electronic geeky things, and that just evolved over time into one day I saw a job advert in the paper. That's when jobs were advertised in newspapers. It was sized about a postage stamp, and it didn't say who it was, but it was appealing from a technical point of view. It turned out to be Defence Signals Directorate. The rest is history.

RORY MEDCALF: This is back in the twentieth century, but you've moved in and out, right? You've worked in the private sector. You've worked out of Government. What's the appeal of being back in?

MIKE BURGESS: Well, the reason for moving in and out, my advice to anyone who wants career advice, actually do what you enjoy. And when you don't enjoy it, go and find something that you enjoy. That's why I moved in and out. Not because I had some clever strategy that thought that would make me a better head of an intelligence agency, although it has made me a better head of an intelligence agency because it gives you a broader perspective, but the real reason I'm here, and I'm sure it's the same for Andrew and other colleagues in our organisations and the community, it's simply to make a difference. And actually, I can't think of a more important time than where we are in the world actually to be part of a community, part of an organisation and in partnership with our friends on actually making a difference to Australia's position in the world and our safety and security.

RORY MEDCALF: Andrew, what about you? Intelligence is one part of your career, but how and why is it something that's so important to you in a leadership role?

ANDREW SHEARER: There's actually a common link here, Rory. Mike knows this better than anyone. I'm not a tech geek like him. I'm a liberal arts buff with majors in history and politics and a law degree, and I was finishing my law degree when I saw a very postage stamp–sized obscure advertisement and it was also for the Defence Signals Directorate. At that time though in Melbourne, before the move to Canberra and the transition into the Australian Signals Directorate. And it was an exciting time, but it was also a time when for intelligence you might have thought it wasn't the most promising time to be starting a career because the Berlin Wall was coming down, the Cold War was coming to an end, and we had moved into what George Herbert Walker Bush called the new world order at the time.

So, perhaps not a growth industry - or that's how it felt now - but I have to say there's plenty of demand for signals now and as you said, Rory, I've worked in different roles in policy. I've worked in a couple of Prime Ministers' offices as a national security adviser, but after working in DSD I had a stint in what was then the Office of National Assessments, a much smaller, quieter and more long term–orientated organisation, I think it's fair to say, before moving into those policy roles. So, for me, coming back to lead ONI and the really important assessment work that ONI does, and the open-source collection and coordination work we do, and our newer role in coordinating and leading the 10 agencies of the national intelligence community, feels to me like coming home in a way to a mission that I've been involved in one way or another for over 30 years now.

RORY MEDCALF: That's a really useful way to get into that conversation about change we've seen in the agencies. So, as you say, Andrew, there are 10 agencies in the National Intelligence Community and it's not that long ago, and I remember as a former analyst with the then Office of National Assessments, and I think we talked about six agencies and the Australian intelligence community earlier this century, but there's been rapid change particularly over the last five to 10 years. It would be really useful to hear from each of you about that change and in particular if you look at the intelligence community today as opposed to, let's say, five or six years ago and there was, of course, in 2017 a review by my predecessor at the National Security College, Michael L'Estrange, and by Stephen Merchant too into the Australian intelligence community. What's changed? How different is the landscape and the intelligence architecture now to what you would have known just a few years ago? Andrew?

ANDREW SHEARER: I think the short answer is it's radically different. Those reviewers were pretty farsighted, it turns out, in identifying the challenges facing our community. They recognised that geopolitical change was underway. They recognised that there was disruptive technological change which presented real opportunities for intelligence agencies like ours but also some really pretty daunting challenges, especially around human intelligence operations and, as I said, some of those issues around massive data and how to process it.

So, there was a really farsighted understanding that we needed to do our work differently, that the individual agencies were performing at a very high standard, but that we needed to bring in some of those other agencies who brought complementary capabilities and legal authorities to join what's now the National Intelligence Community, that the agencies needed to start working together in

new ways and to become a more integrated community, better coordination, better sharing of information, and better sharing of technology and capability, more efficiency. And that's very much the approach that I have tried to take since I became Director-General. I've got fantastic colleagues right across the other nine agencies and it's great to be here with one today, and Mike is just an incredibly important partner in that broader community endeavour.

RORY MEDCALF: What about the change from your perspective, Mike? And ASIO has been around a long time, so what's new?

MIKE BURGESS: Well, obviously, I'm the head of ASIO now, but I'll answer it in the context of when I came back into Government service as Australian Signals Directorate, that was as a result of the intelligence review, obviously, so I paid great attention to it and as Andrew said, it wasn't commenting on I guess the substance of each agency, but it recognised what was happening in the world and said actually you need to lift because you're already individually good but actually that's not enough. You actually need to lift in the way that Andrew described. So, that's changed. So, actually what's really changed is we have lifted. We are hard on ourselves. We know we've got more to do. We are doing things together in cloud, in vetting and other areas and we're very much on the right path in that regard. So, it has very much changed.

The other thing that's changed in the last 10 years, of course, is some of the agencies have got into new things or had new capability challenges they've had to address, but all of that is about changes in the world and the needs of what our Government has had and we're responding well to that collectively.

RORY MEDCALF: Let's talk about changes in the world at this point and about how they are affecting the work that they do. I mentioned at the outset of our conversation a statement of the obvious. It's a contested strategic environment for Australia. It's disrupted. It's not only disrupted for Australia but really for the whole world. We're looking at strategic challenges. We're obviously looking at the impact of Chinese power and the way China is using that power, coercion, military modernisation and really, I think, full spectrum competition with the United States and others. We're looking at the impact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and what that means for really not only a rules-based order but, frankly, respect for sovereignty of nations. We are looking at transnational shocks and threats and so much more. And it seems, of course, that the boundaries between what is an international risk and what is a domestic risk are fundamentally broken down, the boundaries between technology and people, between economics and security. It seems overwhelming from where I sit for the intelligence community. I just wonder if both of you – maybe starting with you again, Mike – could reflect on what means for your work? How do you respond?

MIKE BURGESS: Sure, so I'll answer that in the context of – our core business hasn't changed but, obviously, the world around us is changing and therefore we change as a response to that in line with what we're trying to achieve. So, we describe the security environment as complex, challenging and changing, as you articulated, but I'll give you the short there. I mean, great power competition – as a result of great power competition, we're seeing a change in technology driven by that great power competition. And all that comes with that. The tech sector, if I could loosely say this, and I'm not the national assessment type here, but let me chance my arm here, Andrew, the tech sector has moved east. Nothing wrong with that except for what that means in the context of

great power competition. And we're more – all of us today are more dependent on technology and when we become more dependent on technology, that represents some great opportunities with some downside risks, because of that great power competition and how things might play out. We have climate change at play. So, there are things happening.

My agency's role, though, actually hasn't changed. Our heads of security are still the same. But what has changed is part of the world change, there's been some great work globally on countering terrorism and while terrorism is still a thing, the terrorism level here in Australia has lowered as the result of some great work across the community and across the country. It's still a thing globally, it's a driver, but actually espionage and foreign interference as a result of great power competition has supplanted terrorism as our principal security concern. So, what's changed for ASIO? We've got to maintain our CT capability but actually we've got to raise our rate on countering espionage and foreign interference. And we might get to that later in this podcast. We're doing some great work in that regard.

RORY MEDCALF: What does the change mean for you, Andrew, for the Office of National Intelligence and I guess the broader intelligence effort that from an enterprise perspective ONI leads?

ANDREW SHEARER: So, Rory, when I think about the changes that are playing out today, I think about complexity and scale and velocity, and I think that is what marks this new order or disorder that we're moving into as separate from certainly what we've lived through for most of my career, all of my career. When I think about that complexity, what I'm driving at is earlier in my career, crises would come along – the Asian financial crisis, the East Timor crisis, you know, wars in the Middle East, and so forth. And they tended to be – you tended to see them coming a way off. They tended to play themselves out and eventually they would fade away and then some time in the future, you'd see the warning signs and you'd be into another one. What we face now, I would say, is a sort of cascading series of systemic crises. So, I think we are still feeling the ramifications of the global financial crisis, which is now quite a long –

RORY MEDCALF: Fourteen, fifteen years ago!

ANDREW SHEARER: Exactly. We're still living in the long tail – political, economic, social – of the COVID pandemic and it's going to be with us for many more years. It's going to continue weakening societies, feeding vulnerabilities in more fragile companies, undermining social cohesion, driving wedges within countries and between countries, and then there's the whole climate system and the energy transition, which relates back. And then technology, which Mike talked about very eloquently and its positive and negative disruptive effects and the one of the moment, of course, is artificial intelligence. The world has sort of woken up and said, "Oh, we'll talk about artificial intelligence this year." And then the overlay of geopolitics, which, as I've said before, is very much back with a vengeance.

And at ONI in our all-source assessment role for the Government, we have a really important current intelligence warning function. We work with Mike's agency, the other agencies, to provide that

constant feed of current intelligence to give Government that decision-making advantage but our unique and critical function is actually making sense of complexity. And that's not ever going to be perfect, but it's about having really smart people. It is about integrating information from open sources and from all the other classified sources. It is about contesting ideas, testing assumptions, working with our international partners, especially the Five Eyes partners but increasingly a wider group of partners to frame issues for Government and to help Government think its way through big complex policy problems. And if we're doing our job really, really well we'll be thinking about the next big complex policy problem that's coming that Government hasn't even got on its radar yet.

RORY MEDCALF: Just to clarify for listeners who still don't understand the day-to-day workings of this machine, that involves effectively giving Government that decision advantage every day on breaking issues or issues that you anticipate, but also involves some sort of longer-term anticipation or foresight. How do you juggle those, Andrew?

ANDREW SHEARER: It is incredibly difficult to juggle both, Rory, and it goes back to my point about velocity just the speed at which issues emerge and play out places a real strain on an organisation like mine that is around 300 a bit larger than that, and, as I said, I've got brilliant people – all of them, I would like to think – and they are very, very smart, but to manage that day-to-day work load and still have the bandwidth and the intellectual freedom and the courage to deal with those long-term harder more strategic issues is really important.

I'll give one example of that latter category of work and that is it's widely known before the election the now Government committed to a major assessment on the national security implications of climate change. When they came into office, the Government, the Prime Minister, tasked me with preparing that assessment and that's an absolutely huge body of work. It involves really detailed intelligence analysis, outreach to our partners, to non-government experts across Australia and globally, a lot of really tough methodological thinking and as I said at the start, a really complex set of issues to get your arms around and just organise intellectually.

So, we have to be able to do that while at the same time warning about the possibility of a terror attack, which would often come through the great work that Mike's team at ASIO do or a negative development somewhere in the South Pacific or other challenges arising in South-East Asia or indeed globally.

RORY MEDCALF: And just to draw that out a little further and I will come back to you in a moment, Mike, particularly on the question of capability advantage, so kind of a bit of forewarning there, but Andrew, the relationship between intelligence and policy is sometimes misunderstood. You talk about intelligence giving decision advantage to Government. So, how does that translate into the relationship between intelligence and the policy world?

ANDREW SHEARER: Rory, if it's working well and I believe it is working well and has been for a while now, intelligence and policy are working hand in glove. So, we bring capabilities to Government that are an essential part of the Government's statecraft toolkit. And many of these efforts will be led by DFAT in the sense of traditional diplomacy, using our network of diplomatic posts around the world, obviously, with a particular focus on the Indo–Pacific region, Defence and not only its capabilities but

its extensive network of defence engagement and cooperation, relationships and so forth. And intelligence can bring that decision-making edge to the work of those departments and especially offshore. But we can also bring additional capabilities. We are spending more and more time working with other partners. We're building capacity with our partners in the Pacific and across South-East Asia. We are coordinating much more actively with our traditional partners in that work.

Obviously, the Five Eyes sits right at the heart of all of that international cooperation and coordination, but we are also building new partnerships with countries like Japan and India, for example. And what we're doing is trying to build up their situational awareness. We're trying to build their knowledge of problems that are of concern to us in Australia because, fundamentally, the more that their intelligence services are seeing the same picture that we're seeing and the same threat environment that we're seeing, we're creating a higher base for our policymakers to reach agreement on the nature of the problem and to act in concert. And we're not going to solve any of these problems without that type of international cooperation.

RORY MEDCALF: And that [indistinct] takes into account, I guess, the view that we're good at what we do. We've traditionally been good at what we do, but we're in a strategic competition, as we've been talking about. We're in constant competition and not just with one country, I suspect. So, how do we maintain an edge? I'll come back to you there, Mike, and that's partly to do with technology, it's partly to do with people. Are we maintaining an edge? How do we know? And in particular how do we do it in a technology sense? Without revealing any secrets!

MIKE BURGESS: Well, no, I can definitely answer that question but first I would actually just quickly touch on your point about the –

RORY MEDCALF: You are welcome to reveal secrets by the way!

MIKE BURGESS: – the tactical and strategic problems and how do you do that? As Andrew said, that's the job of all of us in the community actually. It's the here and now and the future. And for my agency, obviously threats to security now have to be dealt, but we also have to make some hard decisions and say, "We're not going to touch that at this stage because I need to and I'm responsible for looking at those threats to security that are over the horizon or on the horizon coming our way." That is very much part of our job.

RORY MEDCALF: Sorry, that's a bit cryptic. What do you mean?

MIKE BURGESS: Well, if I know there's an extremist plotting to kill someone, we and the police will deal with it. But we know there's potential spies in this country, well, we're not all-seeing, all-knowing, but we'll deal with them when we find them. But sometimes we've got to make some hard decisions in terms of where we are in an investigation. I'm not going to spend any more time on that lead at this point because actually I do need to have people who are looking at the looming threats as they evolve because the world is changing around us. And we would be negligent if we just dealt with the problems we had before us. The high-priority ones I can assure you, we deal with, but leadership is about taking that gutsy decision and going you know what? No, I'm going to focus on

that looming threat because that's our job, which gives the Government a better position to handle and make informed decisions.

The capability advantage, this one you've got to be careful of. It's the job of any intelligence agency. We are successful and Andrew and I get to read some great stuff and see some benefits of the work that the community does. We do that because we have methods and techniques and tradecraft that our targets, our adversaries, think are impossible. That's the secret sauce. That's the stuff we don't talk about. But we don't rest on our laurels because sometimes we might be reading some really great stuff that's being fed to us and we think we're being clever. And that's why my people, Andrew's people, and in the other agencies we have very clever people who look to make sense of information and we don't just fall down a rabbit hole of running off because we've got some great piece in front of us that says that's outstanding. Andrew's people, my people, structured analytical techniques that test and recontest assumptions about what we're seeing and why we're seeing it, that's also part of the capability protection.

In terms of the application of technology, Andrew said earlier we are living in a data-rich world. That's brilliant. It's also a massive vulnerability. So, we are all working hard to: how do you make sense of that data to extract insights and understandings so we can do our thing to give the Government its information advantage? That's a whole new capability front, but that's not something the intelligence communities are doing on their own. There is lots of great clever stuff happening in the private sector that we can just tap into. We don't have to lead. The world is doing it.

Of course, if I flip it on its head, as you would expect me to, our capability advantages are also our potential vulnerabilities for the country because there's a lot of data. If the wrong person has hold of that, they can do things which account to our national interests and that's why the other side of the coin is: it's great to have that information advantage, but how do you stop others from having an information advantage against you, because you've been free and open, which we all want to be, and you've lost sight of – you've sold an advantage to someone who's going to hurt you at some stage.

RORY MEDCALF: Absolutely, no complacency. Andrew?

ANDREW SHEARER: I just add the thought that – Mike is absolutely right, and that technical edge is incredibly important to all of our work. But when we think about capability, ultimately, people are just at the heart of everything and when you think – when you boil our business down to its essentials, what's it about? It is about understanding human beings' actions and, you know, if we're doing well, being able to anticipate their intentions. And that's fundamentally human, and that's why the quality of our roughly 9,000 people who work across this community is so important, and I know we're going to come on and talk a bit about workforce challenges but, you know, in an environment where there's a lot of excited talk about artificial intelligence, I'd just like to reassure you and the listeners that we're very well aware of the importance of the human element, both in doing our jobs, but also the impact of that technology, putting in place the right ethical frameworks, the right – making sure that everything that's done happens within our legal frameworks as well. So, I just want to provide that reassurance.

RORY MEDCALF: Keeping you on that people thing for a moment, Andrew, we will talk workforce itself a bit later, but from an assessments point of view, whether it's ONI or elsewhere in the community, how do you maintain that very dynamic sense of contestability so that people's judgements about the material they're looking at is not always following some linear predictable path but they're constantly testing their judgements?

ANDREW SHEARER: Rory, that has given me an opportunity I was looking for actually, which is to pay tribute, really, to one of my most important mentors and predecessors as Director-General of ONA, Allan Gyngell. Allan was all about relevance to policy, and an incredible human, great leader, but fundamentally he was on about ideas and contestability and testing the quality of thought and analysis, and I think that remains right at the heart of our DNA, if you like, and we work very hard to build an environment where people can express themselves, where you can have a contest of ideas, which is about the contest of ideas, not personalities and playing the person, and where people are encouraged to be brave and to engage intellectually with issues. I think we have a whole lot of formal structures.

Mike mentioned structured analytical techniques. We find we're leading a lot of those right across Government because people are finding them a really useful way to organise a discussion and to tease out complex issues. We have built-in internal contestability. Our analysts share draft product. They meet. We spend a lot of time refining the analytical question that we're trying to answer; that brings discipline. We have red teaming. We have senior analysts who are looking critically, trying to poke holes in arguments. We have a rolling process of review of our key judgements right across our analytical products and we also come under the scrutiny of the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security, who is there looking to make sure that all of those contestability arrangements are robust.

And then, ultimately, I'd say we also have the real test, which is whether the Prime Minister, senior Cabinet Ministers, senior officials, find our work useful, and part of why they find it useful is that it informs them and if we're not doing that, then we'll get that feedback pretty quickly.

RORY MEDCALF: Mike, on contestability, how does it work in your shop?

MIKE BURGESS: It's exactly the same as in Andrew's. I'm proud of and learnt a lot and being a former SIGINT'er, no disrespect to my SIGINT colleagues listening to this, that the collection thing, that's good, it's great you've got some collection, but you've got to do something with it and actually you've got to make those assessments. And I've certainly learnt the power of actually everything Andrew has just spoken about and had some robust conversations and learnings, including myself learning from the team. That discipline is absolutely critical, including things down to, you know, making sure you understand the bias or what bias you might be presented by the data you've got because you can start to make some judgement off the data you have, but there is a bias in the fact that that data is perhaps a limited set of what's really happening. It would be easy to make the wrong judgements. And the process, as Andrew is talking about, really helps our people, Andrew's people test that and make sure we're not just being biased or sent down the wrong path in terms of judgements by the piece of paper we have before us, which is incredibly important we do that. Our work impacts people's lives. The community makes a difference to the country, but if we get it

wrong – you might see how that happens elsewhere in the world when you do get judgements wrong.

RORY MEDCALF: So, we've talked a little bit about the strategic environment, but, of course, there are changes in Australia's response too, and AUKUS is one of those landmark moments or landmark initiatives in Australian strategic and defence policy that will be with us for a long time and really could change the landscape of how we do security. So, Andrew, with AUKUS, with the nuclear submarine program, with all those critical technologies, with all of that close and classified work with our friends and allies, how does that change the landscape for the intelligence community?

ANDREW SHEARER: So, Rory, it is a profoundly important development, and it is yet another area where intelligence is working incredibly hard in concert with Defence and the wider Government team to make sure that we maximise the benefits of the partnership and that obviously involves a whole lot of opportunities around the nuclear-powered submarine program. But it also involves the new technologies that are being developed under pillar 2 of AUKUS which goes to areas like hypersonics, quantum applications, sensing robotics and so forth. Just incredible opportunities for us.

There's a role for intelligence in identifying efforts that are underway to disrupt the AUKUS initiative through disinformation and manipulation of opinion and –

RORY MEDCALF: Is this happening?

ANDREW SHEARER: This is happening. It is real. So, and there is a role for intelligence and that's the whole gamut of intelligence that we've been talking about today, including open-source intelligence, looking for misleading narratives; that's a reality as well, and a very important function for intelligence. But then there's the defensive part of the AUKUS agenda, which is obviously protecting that technology. And I'll throw to my friend Mike on that.

MIKE BURGESS: Yeah, thanks, Andrew. Thanks, Rory, for the question. To give you a perspective on AUKUS, obviously it is significant, but 74 years ago, the United States, the United Kingdom, came to Australia and told Australia, "You are penetrated with Soviet spies, and we can't trust you with our secrets." ASIO was formed. Seventy-four years later, our allies, our mates, are sharing with us some of their most sensitive technology. They trust us to protect those secrets. We know that to be true. And as Andrew said, people are already coming after those secrets and looking to interfere with this. So, for me, the security of that is absolutely important. Security is good policy around people, places, technology and information, but good policy implemented enabled by law because we also require the laws of this land to protect those things that need to be protected. And nation-states will seek to have a crack at us and pick at it and use our open system of justice against us. We in the community know we need to have the laws enable us to have the right security measures in place that actually have the deterrence and the effect to protect those secrets. Without that, we are going to be in peril.

RORY MEDCALF: I'm going to pivot to your engagement with the wider community, with industry, with the public debate, with our Federation; I'd go that far. Because the world has changed. We are now seeing intelligence leaders speaking more in public and I think, Mike, your threat assessments have been a really notable achievement and I hope it is here to stay in the Australian intelligence landscape. We've seen our friends in the United Kingdom using rapidly declassified intelligence judgements as a way to inform what's really going on with the conflict in Ukraine, and I think, in a sense, by providing that information, there's a bit of influence at work too in a very positive way, in my view.

But there are still things that a lot of influential people, decision-makers, institutions in this country probably don't know all that well about what the intelligence community thinks or does. I could be wrong on that. It would be interesting to know what engagement with industry, with the private sector, with State Governments, with civil society, actually looks like for your agencies in this new world where so much information is there in the open-source and where there's basically a narrative battle, a battle of disinformation and counter disinformation going on. Are we doing enough? I'll start with you, Mike.

MIKE BURGESS: Thanks. That's a great question. I could come at it in so many different ways. I'll just be honest here. I have a reaction. I know you're not suggesting this, Rory, but when people say, "Oh, the intelligence people don't share enough", they say that a lot in cyberspace. Oh, God, it does my head in just quietly. I'll speak for ASIO. I know Andrew will speak for what ONI does, but we do things together sometimes and we're out there outreaching to members of the community, industry, heads of industry and we're sharing a lot. Because we know there's no point having this stuff if we're just putting it in a filing cabinet for Government to read, which is great because they'll read it and we can help shape that environment. You talked about policy impact that we have, the positive impact we have. It needs to go wider than that. And I think we've done a good job. Could we do more? Yes. We know that. We'll do more. But actually, there's stuff that will stay inside the vault for very good reasons and it comes back to another element we might get to in terms of the need to protect sources and methods.

But, of course, in the end, you talked about declassification of information for effect because it needed to be used. We know that. And I think we're doing very well in that one. I'm a big believer in – for my agency, the reason I started the threat assessment is I think I have to explain to the people of Australia the threats that we face. There's no point just having a view of it. And, of course, we could just have a view and take our own action and deal with it quietly, but I think it's important not to alarm them but just to help them understand the world in which we live because security from my point of view is a shared responsibility and if people know what they face, they're part of the answer to help our country be more secure.

RORY MEDCALF: Andrew, what's your perspective?

ANDREW SHEARER: I just want to say I think the work Mike does with that annual threat assessment is really profoundly important and, obviously, there are real sensitivities about agency heads speaking publicly, starting right at the heart of everything, of course, with protection of intelligence sources and methods. But Mike's right. We don't want to cause unnecessary concern – far from it. Our job is to keep people safe, and we want people in Australia to feel that everything possible is

being done for them to be secure, frankly, so they don't have to worry about these issues in their daily lives. I think that's incredibly important. And if Mike's in public or I am or our other agency head colleagues, listeners should, I hope, understand that we're incredibly careful about what we say and when we make those interventions and we do it for a set of good reasons. And they're carefully thought about, carefully weighed and carefully measured. So, I think that's important.

One of the things that surprised me a little about taking on my current role is how much time I spend interacting with business leaders, with CEOs of some of our biggest companies, boards, industry groups, vice-chancellors and their senior leadership teams, and ultimately that's incredibly important for a couple of reasons. One is that in that more complex strategic environment I outlined at the start, the old barriers that let us think about economic policy and prosperity in one kind of silo over here and national security and all those difficult issues over there is completely broken down.

And, you know, for me in the last couple of years, the one event that's had the greatest sort of impact catalytic effect here was Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when you could make conceptual arguments, I think, to business leaders and vice-chancellors and State Premiers about geopolitics and about threats – and Mike and Rachel Noble, our ASD colleague, and I spent a lot of time talking to them about cyber threats and physical security and all the aspects of security. But that event sort of broke the sort of somewhat trance-like state that I think many of our non-government leaders were in about what was actually happening in the world and so I see our business leaders responding to that. They're more concerned about their supply chains. They're more concerned to diversify their market because they're aware that economic coercion is a reality. Australia has experienced it. Many other countries have experienced it and are still experiencing it. And we need to be providing some of that contextual information to those business leaders and bringing them into our confidence more than I think we have in the past. But also, we learn an immense amount from them about what's happening in their part of the global market, about trends, about technological development, so it's very much a two-way interaction when we have those discussions.

RORY MEDCALF: State Government, State and Territory Government, are also front-line players on a lot of national security issues in ways that perhaps they didn't mention that they would ever need to be. So, just to be clear and I'll go to you first, Mike, do you have regular contact with State Governments on these issues and how does that work?

MIKE BURGESS: Yes, certainly we do. I have officers in every State and Territory and my officers there are regularly engaging their Victorian or New South Wales Government counterparts. I will routinely see a Premier when I'm in town or see a secretary of department. Essentially, Prime Minister and Cabinet run regular meetings with equivalents to talk about these matters, because, as Andrew said, we've been out – like Andrew, I've been surprised how much of that we've had to do, but it's good that we're doing it. It's right that we're doing it.

RORY MEDCALF: Andrew.

ANDREW SHEARER: I just say like Mike, I do a lot of outreach obviously in state capitals but when I do, I always offer to go and meet the Premier or the Chief Minister and I've never had a knockback when I've made that offer. And I have found the State Premiers that I've met with take their responsibilities for security increasingly to heart and they are more aware of the complexities around engagement and economic interaction and security and they are, like the rest of us, like we are as a country, having to work harder at that balancing and understanding where the risks are and where the benefits are and what the net of that looks like for their business or their state.

RORY MEDCALF: I'll say it: we can assume therefore that when we hear State Premiers talk about security issues, sometimes they know more than they're saying. That's a nice thought to take away.

Look, I want to conclude the conversation on issues of workforce and people because we talked about that earlier. We alluded to that, but that is absolutely at the heart of what you do, clearly. The National Security College plays its own part in seeking to develop the human capability that Australia needs for a secure future and whether our students or our course participants go back into agencies or go to work in agencies in the intelligence community or in policy departments or other parts of the system, we know there's a massive amount of work to be done to ensure that Australia has the talent it needs for a secure future. I'd just be interested in some reflections from both of you on what's the challenge, what's the opportunity, what do we need? It's clearly an exciting and rather daunting career. You don't make it sound easy, either of you, but I'd love to hear some thoughts on: what should we be doing? Andrew.

ANDREW SHEARER: Rory, this is at the heart of so much of what Mike and I talk about together and with our colleagues. You know I talked earlier about the importance of our people, and I think there's nothing more fundamental than looking after the great people you have. So, as an agency and I know right across the community, retention is right front and centre for us all. And, of course, that's getting harder in an environment of skill shortages, as I said we've all got these incredible people and they're in demand, and, you know, we have to work harder to hang on to them. We also have to be more strategic about thinking about what the pipeline of people is. And we also have to – and this goes back to my earlier comments about sort of unity of effort and the National Intelligence Community being more than sum of the parts. We have to think in different ways about this, and so I've changed the way we measure retention so that if someone leaves ONI to work in ASIO or ASIS or the Defence Intelligence Organisation or any of the other agencies, it is not reported as a separation.

We need to think more in a more coordinated way about recruitment as well, and we are doing things. For example, we advertised recently as part of the Australian Government's graduate program for an intelligence stream. That's all 10 agencies involved in that effort. And we had over 1,000 applicants for that, which I think just tells you that young Australians are no different from their predecessors in their eagerness to join the community and work on behalf of Australia's security. So, to me, that's really encouraging. Here at the National Security College, the community has funded a number of scholarships for graduate students, for women who are interested in moving into the national security community, and our intelligence community in particular. But I think there's a lot more we can do to make a proposition to young Australians and, for that matter, any Australian who's thinking about a mid-career shift, to present a wider offering, which is: come and be an intelligence professional in the Australian national intelligence community. You don't have

to stay in ONI for 20 years or ASIO for 20 years. There are great opportunities right across the 10 agencies, many of them in Australia, many of them overseas.

And then finally the diversity piece is obviously incredibly important. We need to do much better in terms of attracting and retaining women. I think we are doing better but there is a lot more work to be done there. But other minority groups as well, incredibly important. And we need to – and I am going to tee up my friend here. We need to think differently about security clearances and vetting. We all know that especially with COVID and post-COVID, the incidence of mental health issues across Australia and the way we think about those issues is completely different. Things that under an older way of thinking would have been ruled out by a very inflexible system, we need to find new ways to think about that and to make sure that we are bringing as many people as we possibly can in through that vetting process. And I'd say the same about people from different cultural backgrounds and different ethnicities.

We need to work as hard as we possibly can to reconceptualise vetting in a world where the very people we most need in terms of their cultural skills and language skills are sitting right in front of us. But again, if we take too rigid or too old-fashioned approach to security vetting, we won't be able to maximise the talent pool that we can draw on.

RORY MEDCALF: So, before I go to you, Mike, and actually you may want to touch on this as well, there has been a myth in some parts of the community or a perception that if you were not born in this country, don't bother applying for a high-level security clearance to work in the –

ANDREW SHEARER: Absolutely untrue.

MIKE BURGESS: Yeah, and I'll come to that. So, with Andrew, that is untrue, but I'll come to some of the challenges around security in a sec. Firstly, as Andrew said, our people are the most important asset. We can't do anything without our people. And as an engineer, our humans are actually still the –

RORY MEDCALF: It's a big admission.

MIKE BURGESS: Well, it is a big admission and everything we do in my agency, and I know it is in the community, it is human-led, data-driven, technology-enabled and it will always be that way. We're not going to have machines that go "ping" that generate security assessments with no human in the loop. That would be disastrous. So, a human is the most important asset.

RORY MEDCALF: A ChatGPT assessment ain't happening.

MIKE BURGESS: No, but there's utility in that technology but we'll come to that another day perhaps – probably a subject of a whole new podcast. The other advantage we've got – so Andrew is right about the challenges, which every employer faces in this country. We have one thing going for us

and that is our role. Across the community people can work in our agencies and do things they can't do anywhere else in this country. No wonder we get 1,000 graduates applying because they know that. People are smart. And whilst we have to pay attention to what they want, what they want in their careers, younger people, younger generations are different, they say, "I'm not so sure about that", as Andrew said – and a sense of purpose, enjoyment in their career, but we do have to pay attention to that, and we should not take them for granted.

We have no trouble recruiting people. That example Andrew gave says we have no trouble. Retaining them – yes, we are subject to the competitive marketplace and where people may need to live and want to live, and we have to accommodate that and move with them. And we are doing that and we're doing quite well in that space now. So, there's nothing really new in that space. Of course, security clearance is something that can – you know, why would you wait six months to get a job when they'll offer you a job and you can have it tomorrow? We know that's an issue across the community. We've had ways of dealing with that. We have entry level. People can come in with a low-level clearance. We've got to do more on that space.

On the security thing we are transforming the way we do the highest clearance in the land. That's important because of the threat environment we face. But it was also important because actually we're bringing five vetting agencies working together to one standard, so we can ensure mobility between those agencies because, as Andrew said, I call it a win when people leave my organisation and go work in the community. That's not a loss to ASIO. That's a win for the community. That helps. The other thing we're doing, though, is, if I can say this – and to all the vetters out there listening to me, you do a good job, this is the system we have got. It's more like a vet-and-forget model. We want to move to continuous assessment. And that continuous assessment actually helps us take broader risks and challenge our more rigid approach to security. And part of that is application of technology. One of those trends that's happening in the world that causes problems. It also gives us great opportunity and we can turn that in a nice way to actually make sure we've got the right people with the right skills at the right time and people do want to work in our organisations.

And actually, like Andrew, the final thing I would say is it's just great people come and do five years and go outside for five years and then want to come back. We've had a higher-than-normal attrition rate like most people through COVID, but we have a higher-than-normal return rate at the moment. I think that's fantastic.

ANDREW SHEARER: I think creating more of those pathways, as Mike said, is immensely important. I think we're all working on more multi-classification workforces, so there will be more opportunities for a broader group of people to work in the national intelligence community. And if I could put in one plug, if you are listening and you're interested in a job in our community: intelligence.gov.au.

RORY MEDCALF: I'll give you one plug too, Mike.

MIKE BURGESS: They can find ASIO through that website, so I don't need to plug it.

RORY MEDCALF: There we go. That's kind of a clue to the joined-up nature of the community. I think the idea that some of the agencies going to be in a perennial war with one another for talent, or the idea that good people can't get in because of security clearances, or the idea that there's a kind of cultural homogeneity to intelligence professionals, I think you've pretty categorically dismissed those as unfounded or stories of the past.

I would add to the conversation, reinforcing that point about the sense of the mission, sense of purpose, if there's one thing I've learned from the contact that the National Security College has with the intelligence community is my own experience in ONA, which I'm sure is a culture that continues in today's ONI, is that contestable collegiality, that sense of mission and the fact that it's really an environment where there is not a lot of place for ego.

So, in that respect, I'm really grateful for the time and the candour with which you have both spoken today. I know there are things that you can't say and there are questions that I wish I could get more out with, but having said all of that, I think this has been an incredibly useful conversation. I want to thank both of you for your time and I also want to note that as well as being appreciative of the scholarships that the intelligence community provides to the National Security College or provides specifically to some extraordinary young women who are working in this space or studying in this space, I think it's great that we could use this conversation to acknowledge the contribution that the late Allan Gyngell made, to really acknowledge and really celebrate his work as well.

So, on that note, I'm going to thank you both and we'll conclude the podcast.

MIKE BURGESS: Thanks, Rory.

ANDREW SHEARER: Thank you.

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