

'A new paradigm': Australia's new top cop promises era of transparency

By [Zach Hope](#)

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Australia's new top law enforcer has pledged an era of unprecedented access to public-interest information currently shielded by layers of bureaucracy, restrictive costs and a long-standing culture of selective sharing.

In his first interview since taking the helm of the Australian Federal Police last month, Commissioner Reece Kershaw said he was in the process of a 100-day restructure of the AFP, which could also set a higher threshold for any future AFP raids on journalists such as those conducted in June on News Corp and the ABC under the watch of his predecessor, Andrew Colvin.



AFP Commissioner Reece Kershaw at the Australian Federal Police headquarters in Canberra *CREDIT: ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN*

One measure, he said, could be setting a greater onus on agencies engaging their own criminal lawyers to assess the likelihood of conviction before referring alleged disclosure crimes to the AFP, thereby potentially avoiding high-profile raids which have drawn his organisation into the spotlight.

Mr Kershaw is taking a transparency-trumps-all approach to his five-year term leading the AFP, informed by the "new paradigm" of the social media age, in which he said information voids were too often filled with rumours and incorrect detail.

He said this had led him to the view: "If it's going to get out, we might as well be the ones actually saying it".

Mr Kershaw said this included a commitment to release information previously only accessible by freedom-of-information requests, which have become increasingly entangled in delays and exorbitant costs to applicants in many Australian bureaucracies - sometimes into the thousands of dollars for even basic questions.

The new approach to information sharing marks a major shift for such a large and vital Commonwealth bureaucracy and comes during a campaign by Australia's major media companies, under the banner of the Right to Know Coalition, to lift the veil of secrecy that has descended on Australian public life.

Mr Kershaw said previous AFP regimes had not been intentionally secretive, but "maybe [officers] are being told 'let's just buffer that or let's try and dodge that'."

"My view is tell the truth because it's going to come out and the truth is the truth," he said.

"We've changed a few things up ... what I've said is if we're going to be FOled or taken to the Supreme Court or wherever it is, and we're going to hand over the material anyway, why don't we just do it without all those processes having to be taken. So we're going to give that a go."

Mr Kershaw has also promised more transparent communication with journalists and to meet with media organisations to repair relationships he conceded had been damaged in the raids.

"But actions speak louder than words," he said. "So I could talk all day but if you're not actually experiencing it, then it's pretty hollow."

The new commissioner said he was currently looking at AFP's case against journalists Annika Smethhurst, Dan Oakes and Sam Clark, who were raided after breaking stories of public importance on the back of leaked unauthorised information. "I'm doing that right now so we'll just see how that pans out," he said.

He said he was more focused on those leaking the documents than those reporting: "I'm angled in more to those people that access that information ... doing the - what you call - the disclosure than the rest of the chain."

While the commissioner's language may provide some hope to the journalists, it would give little to the whistleblowers who risked their own freedom to put information into the public domain.

Mr Kershaw said whistleblowers had other avenues to bring about reform, such as the Public Interest Disclosure Act, various ombudsmen and the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity, which he noted was about begin public hearings into allegations of wrongdoing inside Crown Casino.