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**SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
BUDGET ESTIMATES**

OCTOBER 2020

**Mr Mike Burgess, Director-General
Australian Security Intelligence Organisation**

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today.

I am joined by one of my deputies, Hazel Bennett.

I know this year has been a challenging time for **all** Australians. Despite this, ASIO has continued to perform well under difficult circumstances, and my team has shown professionalism and dedication to the mission of securing Australia and protecting our people.

Working with our law enforcement partners, ASIO's intelligence has led to multiple terrorist arrests, convictions and disruptions.

We have stepped up our investigations into espionage and foreign interference, and we continue to provide government and industry with trusted advice to help them protect themselves.

These activities reflect Australia's threat environment, which remains complex, challenging and changing.

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The global pandemic has altered some of the threats Australia faces, but it has not reduced them.

Counter-Terrorism

The terrorism threat level remains at **PROBABLE**, and I see no prospect it will be lowered in the foreseeable future.

We know groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (**ISIL**) and al-Qa'ida continue to call on their supporters to conduct terrorist attacks, in some instances with Australia specifically identified as a target.

Around 80 Australians who travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight for or support Islamic extremist groups are still in the region, and some may bring extremist ideology and enhanced battlefield capability back to Australia.

Individuals in Australia continue to be radicalised, and the online amplification of radicalisation messages is reaching **ever-younger targets**.

Multiple terrorism offenders are scheduled for release from Australian prisons over the next five years.

At the same time, **right-wing extremists** are more organised, sophisticated, ideological and active than previous years.

While we have been actively monitoring the threat for some time, we are reprioritising our activities to focus additional resources on the evolving threat. This year extreme right-wing individuals comprised between thirty and forty percent of

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our priority counter-terrorism investigative subjects.

Many of these groups and individuals have seized on COVID-19, believing it reinforces the narratives and conspiracies at the core of their ideologies. They see the pandemic as proof of the failure of globalisation, multiculturalism and democracy, and confirmation that societal collapse and a ‘race war’ are inevitable.

Foreign interference

While terrorism is a *threat to life*, espionage and foreign interference represent *threats to our way of life*.

I have said on many occasions there are more foreign spies and their proxies operating against Australian interests than there were at the height of the Cold War.

Foreign governments are seeking information about Australia’s strategic capabilities, leading-edge research and technology, and domestic and foreign policy.

ASIO recently disrupted a plot to penetrate Australia’s intelligence community, for example.

An Australian-based foreign national and a team of foreign intelligence officers were trying to recruit multiple Australian security clearance holders. The agents wanted sensitive information about our intelligence activities, particularly those directed against their home country.

While the concept of espionage is well known, ‘foreign interference’ is often

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misunderstood.

Simply praising a foreign country or publicly taking its side is not, of itself, foreign interference.

But when the advocacy is being **covertly** orchestrated by a foreign government and is **contrary** to Australia's national interest, it may well constitute foreign interference.

Almost every sector of Australian society is a potential target of foreign interference, and the threat manifests itself in different but equally unacceptable ways.

We see evidence of intelligence services deceptively cultivating politicians, at all levels of government, who will advance the interests of the foreign countries.

In coming weeks, I will write to all Commonwealth parliamentarians to warn they are attractive targets for those trying to steal our secrets and manipulate our decision-making.

And ASIO will continue to engage with the states and territories to ensure they understand the threat and what they can do about it.

Foreign interference also manifests in the monitoring, harassing and intimidating of Australia's culturally diverse communities.

We have uncovered many cases—involving multiple countries—where Australian community members and their families have been threatened for expressing views

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at odds with the foreign government's policies or values.

It is unacceptable that people in Australia are being intimidated simply for advocating for democratic reforms or criticising human rights abuses. Foreign interference in this form is nothing less than an attack on Australia's sovereignty, multicultural communities, values and freedoms.

Closing Remarks

ASIO officers work day and night to protect Australians from these kinds of threats.

They do so subject to rigorous oversight – and that is something I welcome.

The view from my office across the lake is dominated by two buildings –the High Court and this one, Parliament House.

To me, they are concrete reminders that ASIO is granted extraordinary powers, but those powers must always be exercised legally and ethically, with appropriate checks and balances.

This is something I reflect on every day.

As Director-General, I am determined to ensure ASIO does not just do what is legal, we do what is right.

Committees and processes such as this are an important part of ASIO's oversight.

Thank you and I welcome your questions.

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