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Director-General Opening Statement

Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs

Good afternoon. Thank you Chair.

Australia's threat environment remains complex, challenging and changing.

ASIO is responding as we always have – with agility and ingenuity, doing things our adversaries consider impossible.

And we've continued to do this during a pandemic that's altered both our threat and operating environments.

For example, I'm sure you can appreciate the challenges of safely, securely and secretly meeting our human sources. While I can't share details, I'm proud of the innovation my officers have devised to maintain our hold on all high-priority targets without compromising officer safety.

This clever, creative work ensured ASIO could continue its mission.

The Espionage and Foreign Interference Threat

While terrorism remains a key threat and countering threats to life will always be a priority for ASIO, based on current trends, we anticipate that espionage and foreign interference will supplant terrorism as Australia's principal security concern.

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On a daily basis, multiple countries are making multiple attempts to conduct espionage and foreign interference against Australia.

These attempts are sophisticated and wide-ranging. They are enabled and accelerated by technology. And they take place in every state and territory, targeting all levels of government, as well as industry and academia.

In addition to attempts to steal sensitive or classified information, interfere in our political institutions and intimidate diaspora communities, I remain concerned about the potential for Australia's adversaries to conduct sabotage against us.

It is entirely plausible that our adversaries would seek to pre-position malicious code on our critical infrastructure.

Such cyber-enabled activities could be used to damage critical networks and infrastructure in the future, especially in times of increased tensions.

These activities represent a threat to Australia's way of life. They can undermine our sovereignty, democratic institutions, economy and national security.

ASIO is stepping up its resources to these threats. Working with a range of partners, we have dismantled spy networks, recommended visa cancellations and conducted other forms of disruption.

At the same time, we have worked closely with government and industry to harden our environment and make it more difficult for our adversaries to operate here in Australia.

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The Threat from Terrorism

Australia's national terrorism threat level remains PROBABLE. This means that we have credible intelligence to indicate there are individuals in Australia with the intent and capability to conduct an act of terrorism.

Religiously motivated violent extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) continue to urge attacks.

At the same time, our investigations into ideologically motivated violent extremists have increased.

There has been considerable and understandable attention given to racist and nationalist violent extremism, but we are also seeing a growth in single-issue motivated groups and individuals that have the potential to embrace violence.

We saw this, for example, in recent anti-lockdown protests where some adopted violence as a tactic.

ASIO's been concerned about this for some time – it's one of the key reasons why I changed the terminology we use to describe categories of violent extremism.

The most likely attack in Australia will be that of a lone actor, someone who mobilises to violence with little or no warning.

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Our Capability

While the threats facing Australia continue to evolve, we remain well-placed to counter them.

In May 2021, the Australian Government announced a significant new investment in ASIO's sensitive capabilities. The investment of \$1.3 billion over 10 years will enhance our ability to 'connect the dots' through a human-led, data-driven, technology-enabled approach to security intelligence.

We will work with the Australian technology sector to deliver this capability. It will allow us to continue to counter the threats from sophisticated foreign adversaries and violent extremists.

The Importance of Oversight

I recognise the importance of using our capabilities and statutory powers responsibly, proportionately and with propriety.

ASIO is subject to stringent oversight, including by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security, who has powers of a Royal Commission. We welcome this because it allows us to demonstrate that we operate lawfully and with integrity.

On this note, I would like to acknowledge the sad passing of the Hon. Margaret Stone, a former IGIS, Independent Reviewer of Adverse Security Assessments and respected colleague.

Margaret held us to account and was generous to ASIO staff with both her time and advice.

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Margaret will be missed.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.