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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE
EPISODE 10

MIKE BURGESS

Director-General of Security
Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

Hosted by DAVID PEMBROKE, Founder and CEO, contentgroup
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DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service, my name is David Pembroke, thanks for joining me. As we begin today's podcast I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their Elders past, present, and future, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

Today Studio 19 is on the road once more, this time to the shores of Lake Burley Griffin and the offices of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation or ASIO as it is more commonly known.

ASIO is the national security agency responsible for the protection of Australia and its citizens from espionage, sabotage, acts of foreign interference, politically motivated violence, attacks on the Australian defence system and terrorism. My guest today is Mike Burgess, Australia's Director-General of Security, and the boss of ASIO.

Mike was born in the UK, raised in Adelaide, graduated with a Degree in Electrical Engineering from the South Australian Institute of Technology in the late '80s.

In 1995, after answering a quite curious newspaper advertisement, he joined the Australian Signals Directorate or ASD, which is the government organisation responsible for foreign signals intelligence in support of military operations, cyber warfare, and information security.

Mike worked there for 18 happy years before taking the leap into the private sector where he took on the role of Telstra's Chief Information Security Officer. After a short time working in private consulting, he re-joined ASD before being appointed to his current position in September of last year.

He joins me now, Mike Burgess, welcome to Work with Purpose.

MIKE BURGESS: Good morning, David.

DAVID PEMBROKE: How are you holding up under COVID-19 with the pressures and stresses that you have got?

MIKE BURGESS: Yeah, personally, I am holding up fine and my organisation is doing absolutely well. It's an incredible organisation that does fantastic work as you said in the intro there, our role is to protect Australians and Australia from serious security threats and our organisation continues to do its important work even during this difficult time.

DAVID PEMBROKE: What has it meant for ASIO during this time? Is Australia safer because of the pandemic or are we less safe because of the pandemic?

MIKE BURGESS: Sadly not safer, less safe, well, the threats that we worried about before COVID are still very much with us and of course we've got the big issue of dealing with COVID itself, and of course, I think Australia as a country have handled that really well. My organisation, fellow Australians like everyone else, like every other Australian they have been dealing with the anxiety and uncertainty of what COVID means to them. But again, I'm incredibly proud of this organisation because whilst dealing with that and caring for their families and loved ones, they've maintained the rage and actually we've maintained our rate of effort on making sure we're following those

serious threats that could do Australia and Australians harm, and they've done a splendid job.

DAVID PEMBROKE: It's interesting that through this discussion around Work with Purpose, we've really been looking at the government and really sort of the joined-up enterprise of government. How has it changed for ASIO, or how have you been able to work into that wider enterprise and make the contribution that you have?

MIKE BURGESS: Sure, on a couple of levels. Firstly, and foremost for ASIO partnerships are absolutely critical so there's nothing we can do that we do in isolation, we're not an island so partnerships are absolutely critical. Our partnerships with the Australian community, our partnerships with law enforcement agencies, our partnerships with private sector and being members of the national intelligence community partnership is absolutely critical. In that regard and during COVID nothing really changed, partnerships are still there and obviously working constructively with others is paramount for us to do our job. Of course, as we're all working through what it means to work in a COVID environment, there are some adjustments to be done there, but basically we didn't miss a beat and the work continued.

DAVID PEMBROKE: That seems to be quite a feature of the Australian Government response at the public service level, that joined up nature. Has there been anything that surprised you because of COVID that has put particular pressure on you?

MIKE BURGESS: Yeah, probably. And again, this is not unique to ASIO, although in the context of ASIO our purpose is clear. Generally, in times of crisis though, our national security crisis, we are very much in control, as in, we understand the nature of the threat and we know what to do about it. COVID is completely different and in this case the enemy is unseen. And actually, we're not front and centre, we're not there with law enforcement agencies dealing with a terrorist threat. It's our medical profession, our nurses and our doctors and the health industry that's actually the first responders dealing with a threat, completely different. The thing that surprised me the most was the level of anxiety in our workforce, equal to the anxiety in our country, and that's all of us just dealing with something we haven't had to deal with before, so that was a surprise.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And how did you cope with that as the leader of the organisation?

MIKE BURGESS: Well, it's just being very mindful to suspending some judgement sometimes when you hear people saying certain things because it might look like very rational people are having very irrational thoughts, but actually no, they're just dealing with a new problem. And let them have their say, let them think about that, let them talk about that, that's really constructive, really important for us in general and that's a winning recipe to help people through difficult times, just listen and understand.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And listen, one of the features of this particular podcast is that we do take questions from the future leaders of the Australian Public Service and IPAA's Future Leaders Committee. And I have one here from Amy Burgess from the Attorney General's Department. And she asks that, or mentions that, "You have spoken publicly about the threats such as foreign interference, disinformation and the like, and only as recent as February where you did the threat assessment and you came out. How has the pandemic changed how we need to think about those things, or indeed has it changed the way we need to think about those things?"

MIKE BURGESS: Sure. Firstly, I should say I've never met Amy, but given that she's namesake I wonder if she's related. I suspect not but, good question, Amy. Obviously, the underlying threats we face haven't changed, they're still here, but COVID has impacted our environment, has impacted the threat environment because it's impacted the world, it's impacted society. It will be kind of short-sighted to say there is no impact of COVID on the threat environment, of course there has been. Terrorists have to operate in a constrained world just as security agencies and law enforcement do. State governments or federal governments, intelligence services are all impacted because their workforce are impacted.

But in terms of threat terms, obviously we've seen more people at home, and as they're at home they're online and we've seen increased chatter in the online world when it comes to the spread of extremist ideology attempting to radicalise people. We've seen more of that just as we've seen more criminal behaviour online, cybercrime, which is well reported by other agencies. Espionage is the second oldest profession on the planet, perhaps the first and it hasn't gone away. More activity online of people, spies are constrained on the streets, so the problem hasn't gone away, in some cases things have got busier, especially in the online space.

DAVID PEMBROKE: I want to come to that in a minute because I think we're at a critical point I think in terms of that online discussion.

MIKE BURGESS: Sure.

DAVID PEMBROKE: ... and the movement of information, but we'll come to that in a minute. But a second question from Holly Noble, at the Department of Finance and it partly moves into your previous responsibilities at ASD. But she asks, "COVID-19 has changed the way Australians go about their daily lives with more than ever happening online. What impact has this had on protecting Australia's interests from cybersecurity threats?"

MIKE BURGESS: Sure. Again, the Internet's a wonderful thing, it's a great benefit to society and the economy that connectivity is brilliant but with that upside comes the downside. The downside is strangers can meet you online and cultivate a relationship with you and obviously spies do that, criminals do that, and their intent is to connect with you, link with you and then exploit that relationship to their benefit. In this COVID world again, with more people at home, more people online, isn't it great just quietly the internet held up quite okay, thank you very much, which is probably good. But of course with that goodness comes the downside.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But it is that acceleration piece, isn't it? That one of the great impacts COVID has been this acceleration of trends and this movement to digital, movement to more people online, more challenges to deal with.

MIKE BURGESS: Sure. More opportunities for-

DAVID PEMBROKE: Good stuff, yeah, that's right.

MIKE BURGESS: And more opportunities for downside. And once you're online, hackers, it's their intent that matters so if they connect with you what they do next is a matter of intent not really technical capability, so it's a world of opportunity for criminals and nation-states and extremists.

DAVID PEMBROKE: From your point of view, how do we deal with this? Because this is... listening to a podcast over the weekend from an institute at Oxford University... Emily Bell, from the Tow School in Columbia Journalism, that was saying that they felt and not so much in the national security sense, but their views were that the WhatsApp closed groups, the Facebook closed groups where a lot of this conversation is taking place, where there is no visibility about what's going on or an inability to be able to understand what's going on. They were saying that they believe that this is the greatest threat that we face, that there are these closed groups.

These platforms are more powerful than anyone could ever imagine, no one understood. And the impacts of these platforms that we're seeing now, just in the riots that we're seeing in the States. As we say, "For good", there's been a lot of stuff exposed and a lot of content moved around, a lot of inflammation, but there's this power that they are now have accumulated that we now have to deal with. You have to deal with and the government has to deal with. What happens to the regulation of these platforms? Is it time to challenge them and to say, "Hang on, there are things going on in your places that we really need to know a lot more about, and you can't just say, 'we're a platform we're not responsible?'"

MIKE BURGESS: Sure. That's a great question and it comes at us in many forms. It's the lawful ability for a security service or a law enforcement or police agency to get lawful access to information. Of course, look at the positive here. Yes, having private communications is actually a good thing. Having people engage in closed groups, actually the starting point in our society should be that's a good thing. The real challenge comes though when you have a lawful need, so the police are investigating something or ASIO is investigating something and they've got a warrant and they want to get access and those providers actually refuse to actually cooperate with governments. That's a problem for me because-

DAVID PEMBROKE: That's the problem for me.

MIKE BURGESS: ... as societies, especially democratic societies, we understand we operate within the rule of law. Yes, privacy is paramount, but privacy is not total because there's a balance between privacy and security, and under the rule of law when appropriate warrants are in place, law enforcement or ASIO should be able to get access to something. And to be very clear here, it's one of those interesting dilemmas of this intangible nature of the internet. As a society, whether we know it or not we've accepted the fact that the police or ASIO can get a warrant to bug someone's car or someone's house. Why should cyberspace be any different, yet every time we have these conversations with the private sector companies, they kind of push back and say, "No, we're not so sure about that?"

I mean, I could draw you to the case in the U.S. where the FBI have been long talking about access to iPhones. Of course, Apple's view is that privacy is paramount and they want to design a phone that actually no one can access and because if they give some country access, they have to give it to all countries. At one level, I accept that bit in our country under the rule of law, if we have a warrant, so we've met a legal threshold and the appropriate person has said, "Yes, you can have this access," we would expect companies to cooperate and actually ensure that there is lawful access.

Of course, in having this conversation, if there are other members of our society in the room they would say, "But you're the deep state, you want to look at everything

and you've got no oversight and you keep asking for new laws." Well, all that is just simple nonsense. We ask for laws that are proportionate to the threat we're dealing with, and actually ASIO is subject to independent oversight. First and foremost in that is the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security. That organisation and the Inspector-General has standing powers of a Royal commission.

So, she can come in and red card me and if I don't cooperate with the Inspector-General, I'm going to jail and that's the way it should be. With the appropriate oversight and the appropriate laws, I don't support private sector companies who want to fight governments to say, "No, we can't give you," or, "We can't cooperate with you." Because the other angle that we come at this from is actually when a terrorist event occurs and then someone puts that footage online, or is broadcasting that online and the companies that are facilitating the live streaming of the death of people actually find it really difficult to cooperate on actually the blocking that material or having it removed as quickly as possible. Again, in our society, I find that really hard that private sector companies do not want to cooperate with governments on dealing with such abhorrent behaviour.

DAVID PEMBROKE: But these companies are gigantic, the power that they have, the reach that they have, the lobbying that they put in behind their efforts globally... is the solution a multilateral solution or is it such that really, there's no way you're ever going to join up governments around the world and Australia has to do something perhaps takes a lead globally and says, "No, no, this is the way we're going to regulate the social platforms?"

MIKE BURGESS: Well, I think I'd argue it's a bit of both, right? There's stuff that you can do as a sovereign nation through the rule of law and there's collaboration with like-minded countries, and I think in Australia's case we've done both. The government has taken action to put in place laws, they have engaged with the companies in terms of code of conduct in agreeing how to do this and they are engaging with other countries, like-minded countries, a broad number of countries to actually say, "We think this is unacceptable and let's cooperate," and the government has led the charge on these matters.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Hey, listen, ASIO is an unusual organisation in many ways that it operates necessarily sort of in the shadows with a degree of secrecy. Can you tell us a little bit about what it's like to lead an organisation like that to ensure that there is a degree of transparency about the work that is done?

MIKE BURGESS: Sure, David. I mean, straightaway I could say I can't talk about that because it's secret. But of course, I won't because, let me explain why, and the work we do necessarily is a secretive organisation. Our heritage comes from catching spies and to catch spies you have to trust almost no one, and you have to keep it secret because it's a really hard game. Spy-counter-spy is really difficult. That's our heritage. Another thing is to have the capabilities that we have, the people we're targeting have to think what we're doing is near impossible or impossible, which means they let their guard down and they open themselves up to our line of inquiry so we can obtain information that would not be normally obtainable. That's an incredibly important tool in the toolkit, so combination of things there.

Genuinely, we don't talk about what we do. Our officers also have to be protected, their identities are protected. They put themselves on the line when they're penetrating an extremist organisation or looking to understand. The final thing

about our secrecy though is not about ASIO, it's about the individuals. ASIO is Australia's security service, so that means we're effectively investigating Australians, our fellow Australians. And we have many lines of inquiry where we have to satisfy ourselves that there's nothing to see here, which means we're investigating Australians.

We keep that private to protect the innocent because in many of these cases when we are doing lines of inquiry, it amounts to nothing. And that person and those people involved actually need to be protected because they are good Australians doing nothing wrong, that's why secrecy is very important. Of course, there's secrecy on what we're doing for the general public, but all of that, the Inspector-General knows everything we're doing so we don't have secret investigations that even the Inspector-General can't see because her office will see everything that this organisation does.

DAVID PEMBROKE: This podcast is called Work with Purpose. And I think there is no greater purpose than the one that you've just outlined in terms of keeping Australians safe, the Prime Minister says it every time, number one priority really is to keep Australians safe. One of the things I've been interested to read and to see and to watch is, during the pandemic this discovery of purpose and people thinking much more about how can they serve, how can they make a greater contribution? And people are actually considering much more work in the public service where they can apply their skills. What's it like to work for ASIO? If I applied, what's life like here?

MIKE BURGESS: Sure. ASIO is an organisation where you have a very clear purpose. Our purpose is very clear and it's a noble cause. You're protecting Australians and Australia from serious security threats so you're very much inside that activity. And that value, that thing that says, "Your work makes a difference," actually is very empowering. And actually the motivation, the engagement level of ASIO staff is really high and it's because we have clever men and women, people of this country who are engaged in that purpose and it's really motivating.

Another thing about working in this organisation is you can have many careers inside the one organisation. If you talk about purpose overall, and then different ways you can help serve that purpose, there are many opportunities in our organisation and more broadly across the national intelligence community and that is really motivating. We have a low attrition rate, so when we keep people they're sticky to this organisation and that's because of the work that we do. This is work that you can do nowhere else.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And what sort of skills are you looking for and what sort of attitudes are looking for from people who apply?

MIKE BURGESS: It's a broad range of skills here. Just a starting point, clever, curious people, but they come from all walks of life. A security or intelligence officer's field, obviously people who are engaging, charismatic, deeply analytical, language skills, international politics, domestic politics, just the whole range of things through to great technical officers, surveillance officers who know how to follow people unseen, undetected, just a whole range of skills. So literally-

DAVID PEMBROKE: How hard is it to get a job here?

MIKE BURGESS: It's really hard because we take the best of the best, but that shouldn't stop people-

DAVID PEMBROKE: So I shouldn't apply?

MIKE BURGESS: Well, no, we actually welcome anyone applying and it's a non-

DAVID PEMBROKE: A different type, I imagined it's looking for... you're looking for a mix like a team.

MIKE BURGESS: That's right.

DAVID PEMBROKE: You're looking for all different shapes and sizes.

MIKE BURGESS: That's right. The security service is important, we represent the full spectrum of the country we serve and so we have a broad church intake, obviously a finite resource but we're always on the lookout for new people with clever brains who want to protect their country because it's a great starting point.

DAVID PEMBROKE: And say, a recruitment process. How do I get to come? There's an interesting story, I think, where you applied to quite a sort of unusual curious ad that was, you rang and you said hello and then someone else said hello.

MIKE BURGESS: And for ASD I know that would be different today. For ASIO it may not be that different and that's simply because of course we are protecting, obviously when we put people through so they can find our jobs online, they're advertised online, we take registrations of interest online. People should just keep an eye out for that. Obviously, as they're going through the process they can't tell their friends they're applying for jobs at ASIO and it's all very mystique, but that's part of the charm and actually part of the selection process and it does work a treat. We have no problem attracting people to work for this organisation. And if any of your listeners, whether they're starting out or actually been in the career for 20, 25 years, please if you're interested you should let us know.

DAVID PEMBROKE: How long does it take from picking up the phone or sending the email to actually getting through if everything's okay, how long would it take me?

MIKE BURGESS: Part of that is the selection process and then there's the security clearance. It could take anywhere between half a year and a year to walk through-

DAVID PEMBROKE: Oh, wow. Okay.

MIKE BURGESS: ... the door. Security process is the big part of that. And as you understand every officer that works in ASIO is deeply vetted and that's incredibly important. If you go back to our heritage of, we are a spy catcher and obviously in our past, in our history, matter of public record, when spy catchers organisations are penetrated by a foreign intelligence service, that's a bad day for everyone.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yeah. Well, Mike, thank you so much for your time today and for being on Work with Purpose to share your story of ASIO, and thank you for your service and thank you to ASIO for everything you're doing in keeping us safe.

MIKE BURGESS: Thank you, David. My pleasure.

DAVID PEMBROKE: To the audience, thank you for tuning in once again and for your ongoing support. Thanks also to our friends and colleagues at IPAA and the Australian Public Service Commission for their support in putting this programme together. Work with

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This episode ends three weeks of discussion around our nation's security. We've had the pleasure of hearing from Defence, the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Border Force, and now ASIO. Next week, we go straight to the heart of the health response to the COVID-19 crisis and we'll be joined by Professor Brendan Murphy, Australia's Chief Medical Officer, and Caroline Edwards, the Acting Secretary of the Department of Health. And that interview will air on Monday the 15th of June.

Ladies and gentlemen, the hits keep coming. Thanks again so much for the quite overwhelming response to this podcast, it has been great to see that there is such an interest in the important work that is done by the Australian Public Service and the growth in audience every week is just fantastic. Thanks again for your time, we'll be back at the same time next week but for the moment, it's bye for now.

SPEAKER 3:

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