

TRANSCRIPT – INTERVIEW #3

ASPI Interview with the Director-General ASIS Paul Symon

8 October 2020

Graeme Dobell (GD): Paul Symon, welcome to ASPI.

Paul Symon (PS): Thanks, Graeme.

GD: Paul, an Australian overseas is kidnapped. Overseas terrorist groups decide that they are going to target Australians. What does ASIS do?

PS: Sadly, we have a bit of experience with this. There's a number of things we do, very quickly. Firstly, you said an Australian is kidnapped, so the first thing that I need to do is gain a Ministerial Authorisation to potentially collect intelligence against that individual for their own safety and security. Because they're an Australian there are extra layers of privacy protections that surround Australians so I actually need to go to the [Foreign] Minister and the Attorney-General and obtain the authority to collect against those individuals, as I build up the picture. So there are special protections for Australians, and we can do that very quickly, but that is a requirement under the [Intelligence Services] Act for me to get that authorisation. The second thing I'd be doing would be reaching out to liaison partners, so counterpart organisations in the region, in the country where the person's been kidnapped. This is one of the reasons we have intelligence diplomacy, why we have liaison relationships, in moments like this that come out of the blue, that we can continue a conversation or build on a conversation that we've already built up over many years. And clearly those counterpart intelligence organisations, will often have a much better and deeper, richer understanding of the dynamic at play when an Australian citizen is kidnapped overseas. I would then really look to pre-position people forward to the location to continue with that liaison arrangement, and use all of the mechanisms, not only that we have, but that the whole Australian Intelligence Community would be directed toward – antennas would be directed towards – every effort would be made to know and understand what has happened to the individual. And of course, we work in parallel with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), they would in a whole-of-government sense, they would lead the Australian Government effort. They would put together the interagency taskforces that would try and help the individual that's been kidnapped. This is the overt and the covert working in parallel. We would be very much guided by DFAT, but we would also be aiming to inform DFAT to know and understand what's going on.

GD: And how do you apply that same philosophy towards terrorists targeting Australians overseas?

PS: Really quite a similar dynamic in many ways. If there are terrorist groups targeting Australia, ASIO has the prime lead on that, but it's a team game. Our footprint overseas, our relationships overseas are brought to bear to assist ASIO, to assist the Federal Police (AFP).

GD: Now the Australian Defence Force is deploying overseas. Again, what does ASIS do?

PS: Well again, we're very well practiced in this. The tentacles between ASIS and Defence are many and varied. Let's take, as the lead proposition to your question, that Defence is about to plan and conduct operations overseas. We are embedded in [the] planning headquarters with liaison officers, so we're brought in very early into the piece in the planning of their operations. When I say there are many tentacles, I mean we have deep relationships with the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), in certain areas that they concentrate on that we have a relationship with them; with Special Forces; with the Defence Force's human intelligence capability. So there's an array of elements of the Defence Force which ASIS has a very strong working relationship.

GD: This idea of having relationships or intelligence diplomacy with overseas intelligence services – how do you balance your purpose against maintaining that relationship?

PS: That's a good question. We have to calibrate our liaison relationships. Our start point becomes the human rights record, for example, of some of our counterpart agencies. I've talked in the past about legality and propriety of what we do – it underpins the way in which we will build a relationship with a counterpart organisation. Clearly if there have been instances in the past of breaches of human rights, or other extrajudicial activities, then we would engage in the relationship very carefully and very warily. And you'd say at the very low end of the spectrum if it was in Australia's interest to have some sort of relationship with that liaison partner. Clearly at the other end of the spectrum, Five-Eyes countries that we have worked with over decades, [we] have a very trusting relationship, share knowledge, capabilities. And so, there's a spectrum and it is genuinely calibrated really in Australia's national interest, but I would say obviously with our deepest and richest partners, it's been calibrated over many decades, borne of similar values.

GD: So that's history and culture as well.

PS: Absolutely. That's right. So it's not one size fits all. It has to be calibrated very carefully. I can't open a new liaison relationship without the permission of the [Foreign] Minister. And again these are provisions in the Act that are not well-known – obviously they need to be well-known by us – but [the provisions] speak to the richness of the law and how well protections have been put in place since [Justice] Hope. Just to make sure that we are managing these relationships carefully and in our interest.

GD: How do you recruit foreigners to spy for Australia, to spy for ASIS?

PS: Well, in some instances, only a minority, people will walk-in. People will actually – and history is replete with spies both good and bad who have literally been a walk-in and wanted to have that relationship. Obviously we have procedures and very careful gates that we step through in that type of instance, but that's a possibility. I think the majority really, we use, in the first instance, significant data sets looking at profiles, thinking about the intelligence questions that we're trying to answer, who might assist us and might be interested in assisting us answer those questions. Where do they sit in the program? Where do they sit in the government? So a lot of background work goes into thinking about, if you like from a targeting perspective, who are the individuals that we might be interested in. And then we go through a careful process of cultivation, potentially recruitment and validation which I've talked about before. So, it's probably not that dissimilar to your journalistic pedigree and how you choose your network and the relationships that you build, it's not dissimilar in some ways.

GD: I suppose what I'd say to that is that while journalists and spies might be tracking across the same terrain, I've often said that what matters to journalists is what they can make public, whereas what matters to spies is what they can keep secret. That's the difference and the dynamic, isn't it? Even if they are tracking through the same country.

PS: No, no – that's very true. But at its very heart, your contacts are relying on your skills and your tradecraft, in some cases to project their voice if that's what they want, or in some cases to protect their voice. In our case it's not to project a voice, but if you like, the sanctity of the relationship, the trust, the care that we put into securing that relationship and making sure that their personal safety and security is uppermost in our mind. It's a very key component of what we do.

GD: How do you recruit Australians to be your officers? What qualities are you looking for in Australia's officers?

PS: We used to have a banner for ASIS which was $IQ + EQ = ASIS$. It's not a bad banner. There are some parts of the intelligence organisation where you can accommodate a higher IQ [intelligence quotient] and a lower EQ [emotional intelligence quotient]. In ASIS, it has got to be pretty balanced so ultimately they're the qualities that we're after. Someone, individuals who are intelligent but also have a very good emotional quotient and can read a situation, can read relationships. I need people with a really good antenna, because at the end of the day a lot of judgments are pushed down to the individual – they've got to make some very fine judgments. So, in the broad that what I would say. Clearly we've talked about a person who has a serious ego or is narcissistic becomes a problem for me, because we, as we've described, enjoy our successes internally. We don't celebrate externally. So our individuals need to be balanced, IQ/EQ, balanced in their own personal comfort with their ego and those sorts of things. But I would make the point, there is no such thing as a typical officer. The moment we look typical, is the moment I've failed in ensuring the diversity of our profile. No one should be able to look at an individual and say 'that person has to be an ASIS person', because in fact we work very hard to make sure that we don't look like a 'typical' spy.

GD: So a typical spy has to be very typical.

PS: Yes.

GD: How do they deal with you? How do your people, these people with high emotional intelligence, high intelligence, how do they work you when they're working you in the office?

PS: Well, I found that very interesting when I came here and I quite enjoyed it in the sense that you do, in the early days when you join the organisation, feel like you're being HUMINT-ed. They're sizing you up; they want to know whether you're trustworthy. They want to know what type of person you are. And so, it certainly does feel like as they have learned skills around cultivation and recruitment, persuasion, you can feel very loved in the organisation, when you join it, by a lot of officers as they build a relationship and getting to understand you. So it's quite fun to watch. The other aspect is, our people are trained in and need good memories because they can have a conversation for a long period of time, and they need to record in writing everything that was said, accurately, it is clearly the most important aspect of what they do. And not only what was said, but

what they've observed. You would've observed, I'm wearing a different shirt to what I wore last time, so why is that? Have I changed since our last interview? Did I spill coffee? Was I sweating under the lights in the last interview? I've noticed you're wearing a different tie. So, their ability to not only recall conversations, but have an antenna that tells the complete picture which helps as we pass an agent, let's say, from one officer to another which might happen if we've got an agent that we might have for decades, they'll have a number of case officers who look after them. So, this understanding becomes really important as people read into what is going to become a relationship to them.

GD: What are the selling points when you're recruiting? How do you get people to commit to this super-secret organisation?

PS: It's one of the challenges and one reason why I think conversations like this are important because, for me, having some conversation with the general public and especially young people who are wondering what they might do with their future, they need to have some understanding that we exist and what we do. No media is a problem, because we're just simply not known. So for me there's a sweet spot here, which is I would rather not be in the public light, I prefer that we have a modest to low media profile, but as I say no profile is a problem.

GD: You're asking people to go overseas and break the rules, but you want them to do that as they very strictly follow the rules, a whole set of rules – a whole set of rules that you're imposing on them. Describe the tensions and the dissonance in that approach.

PS: Training is everything. So, we do train people to abide by rules and tradecraft that have been acquired over many, many decades. So, issues that I've been discussing about the accuracy of conversations and write-ups and what we seek to get from relationships with agents overseas. There are rules, processes and procedures that we take very seriously and our younger intelligence officers learn in the breach by their elders if they are being casual with procedures and tradecraft that we've acquired over many years. There's quite a strong internal discipline to the way we do the work that we do. And of course, what's happening overseas from our officers' point of view, they are applying that tradecraft. The agents that they are dealing with, they are breaking the laws of their country, that is true. There is no tension in the eyes of our officers as to what is being asked of in that relationship – there's a lot of work goes into making sure that both sides are comfortable and that there's an understanding. We would never ask an agent to do something that is improper or illegal in the sense of undertaking violent activities or anything like that. We are acquiring intelligence. So, I don't see that there is a contradiction or a problem there. We do have mechanisms though, and it's certainly borne out more in the counter-terrorism space where we've sought to penetrate terrorist groups, or recruit individuals who are part of terrorist organisations. It is true that we have in the last ten years or so strengthened ethics. We have an ethics counsellor inside the organisation. We have a number of avenues that if an officer at any point in time feels the sort of tension that you're describing and want to opt out, they can. If they, in most cases, don't want to opt out but they actually just want to sit down and have a conversation and just want to be clear in their own mind about that relationship between ethics, morals and what they're being asked to do with an agent. So, we've embedded that in the organisation and it works very well.

GD: That really leads naturally to the last question of this interview, which is that ASIS will be 70 years old in 2022. What has it grown into? What has it evolved into over those 70 years?

PS: My read of the history is that for many decades we were a family, we were a small family unit in many ways. There was a kinship, there was a size that went with the organisation, [and] there was a budget that went with the organisation that meant it had all of the hallmarks of just being a big family. A small family and then a big family. But it really changed significantly once [Justice] Hope brought us into, if you like, brought the intelligence community more into the public spotlight and a deeper understanding by the Australian public of intelligence, the use of intelligence, the purpose and function of organisations. And then of course, really since the late nineties and the extent to which Australia's interests through the region and further afield has played out in the last twenty years of my lifetime has meant that really ASIS has stepped from being a big family to being a mid-sized corporation quite frankly. And we're not a big corporation; we're a mid-sized corporation. We like to ensure that we have very flat structures and we don't admire bureaucracy; we don't admire processes for process's sake. We do the minimum necessary to do our job efficiently and effectively, knowing that processes and bureaucracy support rather than hinder good organisations. So, that's how we've changed and the path forward, given, I think, the successes we've achieved, looks very promising to me.

GD: Paul Symon, thank you.

PS: Thanks, Graeme.