

## The ASIO Astrologers: Terror Threats and Radicalisation Down Under

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*Bureaucrats tasked with protecting national security are often inclined to encourage insecurity. It's all part of the job prescription. The imperative is understandable if chillingly amoral: increased budgets are demanded to counter threats, however spectral; justifications for existing budgets needlessly bloated are always sought. In the Cold War, an old favourite was the teeth-chattering concern that the other side might just steal a march on the other in terms of nuclear missiles. Legendary "missile gaps" were concocted to frighten lawmakers.*

In any logical sense, such distinctions were always superfluous, even idiotic: one can only destroy the planet once, and claiming to have the capacity to do so a hundred times over eliminates the relevance of having any such advantage to begin with. The threat, to that end, becomes purely psychic, a matter of ego and accountancy.

The director general of ASIO, Australia's domestic intelligence service, is very much of the belief that drumming up threats is indispensable. To that end,

**Mike Burgess** is proving to be one of the most garrulous chiefs of what is otherwise a secretive profession. Rather than working under the radar and plotting in the shadows, he has become a regular commentator on the gloomy state of the world, and, more relevantly, certain people who live in it.

On August 5, Burgess appeared alongside Australian **Prime Minister Anthony Albanese** and **Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus** at a [press conference](#). It signalled something of a change in arrangements, given the administrative reshuffle of taking ASIO out of the hands of Home Affairs and placing them under the direction of the Attorney-General.



ASIO's New Central Office building in the Parliamentary Triangle, Canberra (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)

Such a change did nothing to temper the Burgess world view, one framed darkly and foreboding of the next threat. "Australia's security environment is degrading – it is more volatile and more unpredictable." (When was it not degrading or volatile?) He goes on to say that espionage and foreign interference had previously been "principal security

concerns". No longer. "While the threats to our way of life remain elevated, we are seeing an increase in extremism."

Terms are lustfully used to signify danger. "More Australians are being radicalised and radicalised more quickly." Australians, in greater numbers, were "embracing a more diverse range of extreme ideologies" and content "to use violence to advance their cause."

Peering into the lexical mangle, and one can detect certain tendencies on the part of the intelligence security establishment. Burgess frowns on the way politics and political objectives have become issues of protest. While paying lip service to the importance of political differences, debates and the role of protest, always a prelude to authoritarian disapproval, he laments "spikes in political polarisation and intolerance, uncivil debate and unpeaceful protests."

The spy chief wishes to expand the nexus between politics and terrorism. All "violent" acts or threats fall within this assessment, be it "violent protest, riot or an attack on a politician or our democratic institutions." Such events as the COVID pandemic and the October 7 attacks on Israel and its military response, had seen individuals embrace "anti-authority ideologies, conspiracy theories and diverse grievances. Some are combining multiple beliefs to create new hybrid ideologies." The prospect of war in southern Lebanon also posed further risks.

Who, then, are these individuals? Those of the "lone actor" persuasion, prone to using such crude weapons as knives, guns or improvised explosives. Or minors transfixed by ideology. (An old ASIO favourite is to see teenagers, gorged on internet scrolling, as posing a terrorist threat, including those as young as 14.

Having deluged the press corps with such grim warnings, though giving little by way of actual evidence, Burgess moved on to play with an old favourite of the security establishment: the National Terrorism Threat Level. Such levels are rarely tangible but serve as catalysts of needless fear and warning. With oracular force, he proposed an adjustment. "After careful consideration and consultation, ASIO is raising the National Terrorism Threat Level from 'Possible' to 'Probable'. Our decision reflects the degrading security environment."

To the clear of mind, these are meaningless utterances. But for Burgess and the desk filing wonks, they constitute a world of pulsating realities. "A threat level of 'Probable' means we assess there is a greater than 50 per cent chance of an onshore attack or planning in the next twelve months." This did not mean that ASIO had *actual* intelligence of an ongoing plan to attack, or even "an expectation of imminent attack." But relevant "subject matter experts" at the National Threat Assessment Centre had been busy using "analytical techniques to test, retest and contest their assumptions." The soothsayers, it would seem, are busy.

Such addresses as those given by Burgess generate their own sinister code. That code promises further surveillance and control, a call for increased monitoring and cocooning of the Australian body politic and broader society from a wicked world. While ASIO is tub-thumping about the dangers of increased radicalisation, the absurdly named office of the e-Safety Commissioner wages war against the offending defilements of the Internet. With these officials in charge, the world will be made safe for censorship and docile thought.

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Featured image: Mike Burgess ([Source](#))

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