

Good afternoon everybody and I am delighted to welcome you to the very final event of Civil Service Live Online. And we have a very special guest, we've saved the best till last. Shortly I'm going to hand you over to Alex Younger who is the Head of MI6, and he is going to talk about challenges and threats throughout the COVID-19 situation. He will talk for a while and then he'll leave plenty of time for questions, so do feed your questions in via Slido. So without any further ado, I will pass you over to Alex Younger.

Thank you very much and it's worrying to hear that I'm last on, but I will strive to make it interesting. And I've done Civil Service Live a couple of times, once in Edinburgh and once in Glasgow, and I've always been asked to talk about worthy issues like leadership in the National Security community. And then all the questions have been about spying and gadgets and stuff. So I think I'm going to keep this one focused on the day job, if you don't mind. And my plan is to leave quite a lot of time for questions. Because I think, I mean, frankly, I'd like to hear from all of you. I want to start by saying thank you, as a Civil Service leader, but also as a citizen for what you in the Civil Service have done in the, during the crisis that we're all living through. And I think it's been, I think it's been remarkable and by no means preordained, either. I think, as SIS officers we, particularly when we work overseas, we are, we've got some experience of a situation where the threats that we work against are also things that we in our families are exposed to in our personal lives, and it's very undermining, and it's distracting. And it's difficult, frankly. And now we as a nation at large have been through that and as a Civil Service. And I think it's truly inspirational, the way that you have all risen above all of the concerns that we have as people, to do what you're paid for and work in the interests of the public. So as I say, please take thanks from me as a kind of representative sample. I'll tell you a bit about my background and my career. I've been in MI6 for nearly 30 years, the last six of which has been as Chief, and in fact, I'm coming to the end of my time as Chief shortly. I've been a spy, for want of a better word, throughout that entire period. I joined at an interesting time kind of between the end of the Cold War and before 9/11. At that time I was posted in Europe in Vienna. And it was kind of a good opportunity to learn the, learn the ropes, because it was kind of geopolitically not that much was going on, really. But it was a fascinating time. I, after that, and in fact, after 9/11, spent quite a lot of time in the Middle East, again as a Head of Station, which was an intense and difficult time, but where I learnt, it's fair to say, a huge amount. I was then Head of Station in Afghanistan, which was probably the privilege of my life when you consider the capabilities that we have there and our capacity to make a difference, which is what we all join MI6 to do. And frankly, just the incredibly interesting nature of the place, and of course, of the people. And after that I came back and moved into the leadership, I was our Director for Counter Terrorism and then our Director for Operations, and then I took the job that I have now. When I got back from Afghanistan, I went on a course, and I had, until that time, very much thought of myself as a spy, as an operational officer, I didn't have aspirations, particularly, towards leadership. I didn't think of myself as part of the broader Civil Service team. I went to the course, the HPDS, the high potential development scheme, and I met a set of colleagues. And it was frankly a wake up call, and when I looked at the quality of the work going on in the Civil Service, and the quality of the people, and the depth of responsibility that they all had, it made me thoughtful because I had always thought that those were things that marked out my organisation. And I discovered then that, in fact, there are things that we have in common with the broader Civil Service. And I made friends and links that I have to this day. And it made me think much more about how we work across the systems and as part of a team. And it

also made me think about being a leader, which was not something I had really thought about before. So I suppose my message there is kind of make sure you get out, I should have got out more, I think I would have been, have found being Chief easier had I done more jobs across a broader waterfront of the Civil Service. A bit about us. So we are MI6 externally, and we're normally known as SIS, the Secret Intelligence Service, within the government. We are the foreign intelligence service. We are responsible therefore for working overseas. And what we do is we work covertly to protect this country from threats and to advance the national interest. That's our mission.

Broadly, we do that through the provision of intelligence, so finding stuff out that is not findable out in any other way, in support of the government's strategic objectives. But we also use covert action, so we act secretly to change the behaviour of people overseas to the advantage of our country. It means we can do that in lots of different ways. Our act, our Founding Act is silent on the methods we should use, we can use and in practice as long as they're consistent with our laws and our values, as a country, we will we will go there. But we, essentially our founding capabilities, what is called human intelligence, so creating relationships of trust with people overseas, who are prepared to work with us and give us the intelligence information we, you, our government needs. So that defines the character of my organisation, it's extremely human focused, we think about people a lot and we're those sorts of people ourselves, and also we're very overseas focused. So if you came to Vauxhall Cross where I am now, you'd ostensibly be in our headquarters, but I very much think of the beating heart of my organisation as being, as being abroad. We, I think, are one of the best intelligence services in the world. We've got a storied history, of course, the problem of being a spy is it's your failures that are known publicly not your successes. But we do have a very strong reputation, with our friends and foes alike, particularly in the area of human intelligence. And that's kind of a happy thing, and it makes me feel good. But there is a catch, which is that certainly, as of the last 10 years, there's been a sort of Darwinian wind blowing through our business, caused essentially by digitalisation, to some extent globalisation, essentially digitalisation, which has fundamentally changed the rules of the way that we do our business, and means, I think, that there will be a few services that get this that will remain world beating and a lot that don't and won't. And I'm utterly determined that we are in the former category. So we're going through, and have ever since I've been Chief, going through a period of digital transformation, which I just want to describe in a bit of detail because I think it's not dissimilar to the sort of experience that many of you will be having. And I think we found that there are three things that really matter here. The first is partnership. Despite all the sort of brilliance of sort of places like Bletchley Park and our ability to come up with incredible creative solutions inside the secret community, the reality is that we just can't go as fast as our opponents unless we engage in modern partnerships with people in academia and the private sector, who have got that amazing tech thinking at their disposal. And we're now constituted to do that and in fact, we also, through the National Security Investment Fund, can make investments in private sector to get technology through to our mission. And in fact, I think that as we do that, we will, we have an opportunity to create in the UK a new tech sector dealing with national security, the sort of thing that exists in Israel, which very much contributes to the government's broader ambitions in science and tech. So the partnership is key. The next thing is hierarchy. So I worry that, basically, government departments' top down hierarchies are really not good at technical innovation. They imply that the people at the top of the organisation know more than the people at the bottom of the organisation. And I've found out the hard way that that simply is not the case. And it's vital to try and mitigate the effects of hierarchy if you're to innovate, and to get and to move faster than our opponents.

And I have thought really hard about this because even in MI6, which is, in some ways, an unconventional place, we're still a government department, and we still have someone at the top and you know, a chain of authority and we need that to manage the risk that we run. But it's very, very important for me, that that doesn't inadvertently squeeze the innovation out of the machine. And I've thought hard about how to do that.

And finally diversity and inclusion. And this is obviously highly topical. It's something that should happen and needs to happen as a function, of course, of fairness and legitimacy. But for us also, it's the way in which we're going to galvanise, we galvanise ourselves, we garner the creativity that we must have. And of course, we avoid groupthink, which is the intelligence officer's kind of worst enemy. And I should say, we may want to talk about this more, that in the current crisis, the outrage caused by the killing of George Floyd, I think we have the opportunity to move further and faster, end the environment where I think the national security community is one of the more forbidding environments for people from ethnic, minority ethnic communities to contemplate working in and where we have to communicate all the more assiduously to attract people to our ranks. And that's a big focus at the moment. I'd like to end by talking a bit about the mission and how it's been changed by COVID because it has. But perhaps before I do so I'll say one thing about how we've been changed by COVID. And that's to observe that we, I have sought to put data at the heart of everything that we do, whilst MI6 at the end of the day is fundamentally about the creation of human relationships, the way in which we do it, the environment in which we do it, the way we prevent ourselves from getting caught, the way in which we select the right opportunities - all those things are significantly transformed by our capacity to use data, apply advanced analytics including AI to data, and it's made us significantly more capable. What we haven't done quite so often is apply data to ourselves in the form of business intelligence, to actually work out who we've got and where and what skills they have and where they can go. And COVID has absolutely forced us to get much, much, much better at that. And now our capacity to work out what we want to do most and who we've got to do it and how we put the two together, is immeasurably different. So in that respect, and really beneficially, COVID has transformed us, and have no appetite to go back to how we were before. As regards the mission, there's three areas which are, feel very different. None of them are new. Essentially, what's happened to us, and probably to you as well, is 2030 has arrived in 2020. We knew this stuff was coming. It's just got here far quicker than we would have thought. Specifically the world has gone online. Secondly, there's a premium on resilience and economic security. That is a completely different magnitude to what we had before. And thirdly, geopolitical rivalry, of course, has deepened. And all of these fundamentally affect the way that we do our work and what we, what we spend our time on. The online aspect, as I say, we knew was coming, but in moving online, the world presents, that presents opportunities to us, it also presents threats to us. And we've had to move really, very quickly to ensure that the opportunities are bigger than the threats. And we've used it to galvanise a set of things that we intended to do over a 10 year period and more or less do them in three months. On resilience, of course, that's always been at the heart of our mission. So in looking to help preserve the resilience of our country against the likes of terrorists, or hostile state actors intent on undermining our democracy, while serious organised criminals, or paedophiles, or cyber actors, all of these things, all of these threats were, are areas that we have always worked on or worked on recently. And we'll have to intensify our efforts. So they conventional resilience mission is still there. But on top, I think, given the fragility that this country will experience as it comes out of this crisis, on top of that, we've got the fact that, I think, the fundamental key to our security is our economic

strength and our economic security. And that is an area where we're going to have to be far more closely involved. And there's lots I could say about that. But I'd shout out foreign direct investment where, as the Prime Minister has made clear, we're not going to go to some crazy North Korean situation where we make everything ourself, but we are going to have to make much more careful choices about how we invite foreign direct investment into our country. And we will have a big role to play I think in that, in discerning the motives and beneficial ownership and the risks inherent in them. And, sort of closely related, supply chains where it's pretty clear our economy was optimised for efficiency and now needs to be optimised for resilience, and I can see a strong need for us to diversify our supply chain and our approach. And we need to be the people that work out the risks of supply chains being politicised by geopolitical events. And that brings us to the third area, which is just this deepening geopolitical rivalry where we're going to have some difficult choices to make where, where a lot has been written and a lot has been said. This is the area I'm least able to talk about in an open call like this, but it is the area that we were set up to deal with. The service was established in 1909 in the run up to the First World War, to look at German rearmament. Now, I actually don't do clash of civilisations. I don't think it's inevitable that these tensions will will lead to some kind of military conflict, but also, but clearly that is a risk and it's extremely important for us to be to help the government make difficult decisions. One area where we will be very active and we always have been, and I think it's a USP that we have is, to ensure that, if you like, like minded countries use their strongest card, which is the fact that they're like minded. We, as Western nations united by particular values, can create alliances that can in turn constrain the activities of authoritarian states. And I think through alliances like the Five Eyes and more broadly, we are in a position to use our intelligence relationships to underpin coalitions of the willing in a way that I think will be very powerful. I'd like to end by talking about our sort of killer app, our USP, and that isn't, you know, a poison pen or invisible writing, our most important attribute is the values of our country. And I strongly reject the idea that all intelligence services are the same, or that somehow mine represents the Department for Moral Shortcuts within the UK. On the contrary, we demand extremely high levels of moral literacy as befit the difficult ethical dimensions of what we do. We regard the values of our country as our strongest weapon in that they allow us to, they distinguish us. And I thought, and of course, as a service, we have a specific set of values that guide our activity where officers are often in quite isolated circumstances, asked to make difficult decisions. And in summary, we aspire to have the courage to speak the truth to power I think an intelligence service is useless without that. We aspire to have the respect to understand that we do not know everything and that we have plenty to learn not just from our friends, but from our enemies.

The integrity to obey the law, and understand that the moral consequences of our actions as individuals stay with us as individuals. And finally, creativity, we are never going to get ahead of our opponents through scale. And most of my adversary organisations are at least 10 times larger than us. We seek to succeed through being cleverer than the opposition, thinking our way around the problem. And that, I hope, is what we do. So thank you, and thank you for listening to me. And that's a, sort of, a skate across some aspects of my world in the time of COVID but I'd be really keen to hear any questions you might have.

Thank you, Alex, that was absolutely fascinating. You have answered some of the questions that have come along, so I will try and pick the ones that you're talk didn't touch on. I'm going to start with one that has been a theme throughout both days. So we've had lots of questions on the impartiality of the

Civil Service and lots of specific references to the political appointment of a new National Security Adviser. And somebody's asked a question that with Mark's departure, will the Fusion Doctrine still be the guiding force or ambition for the cross government national security strategy?

Well, I don't know the answer to that formally, but if it isn't, it would be the wrong answer, because what, the thing that's different about the 30 years in which I've been in national security, is that before we could sort of do stuff on our own in MI6, now nothing is possible without partnership. Our opponents are masters at hybrid warfare, which is about partnership. And if we can't respond in kind, then we've lost one of our most powerful advantages. So I'm a fan of fusion. And I, and I know, certainly when it comes to the spending round, that if we put in bids, and they haven't got several badges at the top of the piece of paper, the government will look at them as scams. So I think the time for sort of, you know, stovepiped heroic individual efforts is very much past us. On the issue of politicisation of the NSA, and clearly I've spoken to David, and it's the first thing we spoke about. And he was very clear that the rationale behind this is that, given that communication is now half of security, is that as a political opponent when he's in a position to communicate our security policy and priorities in a way that an official can't, but he said it before I said it. That did not extend to the politicisation of security advice to government, which would, of course, be a disaster. There have been issues with that in the past, and it's not a place we intend to go to.

Okay, thank you. So then a big strategy question. I'm going to go to what everybody wants to know, which is around recruitment. So I've got three similar recruitment questions. So first of all: how do you get into MI6? Is it true you get headhunted rather than apply? And are there any jobs outside London? Can you cover those three?

Yeah, I can. So how you get into MI6, I'm afraid it's a rather prosaic answer: you apply online, so. You're not tapped on the shoulder? Well, I was tapped on the shoulder. And so that's the second answer is, we do go out to people. And that relates principally now to our diversity agenda. So I can't emphasise enough the determination that I have to get people who would never have thought of joining MI6 to think of joining MI6. And I want that to happen because I want the best of talent across our country in this service, regardless of background or ethnicity. And that is, I think we can only do that by communicating actively with people who just might have ruled themselves out. And I think that's my biggest message is don't rule yourself out. And by the way, one of the biggest areas we recruit from is the wider Civil Service. If you think you can do it, then you probably can and you should get in touch. And I've really enjoyed it, for what it's worth.

And someone's added a supplementary one. I mean, this might be from personal experience, but it says, younger people live their lives online, and they post quite a lot online - does this have implications for recruitment? I think someone's furiously trying to delete all of their historic posts. Do you background check their social and digital footprints? I guess that is the question.

Yeah, would I have got in social media had existed when I was a university? That is questionable. But anyway, let's move on. No, that is, I think there's, sort of, there's an idea about our vetting process, that it's some kind of, you know, there's a moral test or that somehow, you know, we're checking up on people in that way. We're not. We're, it is, it doesn't involve moral judgments. It's a way of ensuring that

people don't have security vulnerabilities that might be exploited by our adversaries. And the key, and it's democratic, everybody does it. I do it. We all do it. And we all are in a position therefore to trust each other as a result. So it is oddly, it sounds divisive, but it's something that brings us together. From a diversity perspective, I worry about it. I think that we've got to be super careful that that experience of being vetted doesn't have cultural assumptions in it, that work against our broader diversity agenda. And I can, and I think that's a standing risk, and we spend a great deal of time making sure, and I spend a great deal of time asking for reassurance on that point. But clearly it needs to happen. Our business model is to, to work with people who are at danger, including of their, of losing their lives, and put deep levels of trust in us, and we need to know that we are capable of holding on to the information that we are, we're given so I don't apologise for it. But we seek to make it as non intrusive as we can and emphasise that it's something that we all do. And when it comes to stuff online and all of that, clearly we're just we're just practical. It's just, as I say, we're not we're not sitting around making judgements about people. And we seek to make sure that that our decisions are, you know, in that respect, completely neutral. So don't worry about it. And as I say, don't rule yourself out.

Okay. There's lots of positive comments on this. People are saying that they found your chat fascinating. That's not a question. It's just some encouraging encouragement. You talked a bit about the pandemic making you put data at the heart of how you work. There's quite a lot of questions on any of the different ways of working that COVID has brought about, but two specifics. One, do spies work at home during a pandemic? And two, how is it affecting your wellbeing and how are you helping your workforce through a difficult period as well?

Well on the working at home thing, I mean, we, clearly we work all over the world, and we work in all sorts of ways in different guises. So it's kind of important for us to be able to adapt, I think. But clearly we need access to government technology and you know, that's something we've had to adapt. But that's basically been okay. The resilience thing's been interesting. I think in some ways, we are naturally a very resilient organisation because of what we do. And therefore, there is a very strong culture in MI6 of mutual support. And, which sort of goes against some of the stuff you see in fiction about, you know, ruthless self interested people in my profession. I have to say that my experience is very much the opposite of that, because what we do, that comes with its stresses and specifically because of the secrecy involved, we have a culture within the service that is, I think, highly mutually supportive. And that, of course, gives us additional strength in circumstances like this. That said, there has been a cultural change alongside the broader, broader way in which the UK has changed. But I would say if I were to be honest with you, the service I joined was of a stiff upper lip variety probably. And it probably wasn't the sort of place where you would naturally talk about your mental state or the extent to which you are undergoing stress. And I'm glad to say that that's completely different now. And I think we have, not least because of the sort of difficulties that are associated with the counter terrorism mission, I think we now have developed a much more sophisticated approach to mental health, a set of really good capabilities for helping with it but as I say, most importantly, a culture where it's normalised and a recognition that neurodiversity in particular is a core advantage and capability that we can bring. So it's allowed us to keep a whole, a much more diverse set of people and approaches in the conversation and in the workforce.

Thanks. I'm going to try and squeeze two more questions in. One's on artificial intelligence and one's on Brexit. We'll start with AI. There's been two questions on it but basically, do you think you use it enough to keep up and compete with competitive hostile states? And then the other question is, do you think it's useful to predict behaviour or do you still need humans to do that?

So, well the two issues are linked, so do we use it? Yes. Am I fascinated by the implications, good and bad, of it? Yes. Do we use it enough? No. So I'm keenly interested in developing this capability, well, really as three intelligence services. Can it, would it predict for the way people are going to behave in the future? I think the answer is probably yes. And that carries with it implications both positive and negative. But it kind of reinforces what I've just said, that I want us to be astride this capability. The most important enabler, though, isn't technology. It's law and culture. So in contrast to countries like China who have unbridled access to their citizens' data without asking them, which will give them enormous power and advantage when it comes to training neural networks, for instance, we're in a different place, we must have public confidence for our possession of these really powerful capabilities. So a thing I'm very focused on at the moment, as is the government, is making sure that we've had the conversation with the public and we've got the law and the legal permissions to allow us to use this in an appropriate way that, as I've said before, fits with what this country would expect us to do.

And then finally, on Brexit, will this create problems or barriers with coordinating security and intelligence with European Member States once we leave, well we have left, once we transition?

Yeah, I think the broad answer to that is no. So national security has never been a competence of the European Union. Our links to European states on this are bilateral or in other groups. And of course, one thing we have sought to do, given the inevitable friction and turbulence that accompany the Brexit process, is to be really, really clear with our European partners that our security relationship is unconditional, that it's two way, that we rely on them as much as they rely on us. And the imperative to make sure that nothing that happens next gets in the way of this excellent cooperation that we have, which if anything has improved since the since the referendum.

Great. I'm gonna ask one final silly question which someone's submitted, but everybody wants to know the answer. Who do you think would be the next 007 or who would make a good one? We'll finish on that one, I promise.

I think I'll go Idris Elba. I think he said no, but...

Thank you very much. We've been inundated with positive feedback about how great this session is. But also quite a lot of comments saying that they would like that tap on the shoulder. So I think you've inspired a lot of new recruits. So I would just like to thank you for your time, it's been a brilliant session, and I think you will have very positive feedback in the evaluation which we will share with you. So thank you, Alex. And thank you to the audience for all your great questions. Bye. Bye.