

A job beyond ordinary: A conversation with Rebecca Kitteridge



Rebecca Kitteridge

Rebecca Kitteridge, Director-General of the Security Intelligence Service talks with Public Sector's ROSE NORTHCOTT about career choices, transforming the NZSIS into a more open and sustainable organisation, and the fascinating work of our human intelligence agency.

Why did you switch from law to the public sector?

After completing a BA and LLB I started work as a family lawyer. I then moved into broader areas of litigation and then into commercial law with Chapman Tripp. While the latter was more forward-looking work with clients, you are still constrained by what the law is and I was increasingly thinking about what the law should be. I became interested in public policy and institutions and decided to move into the public sector.

Those nine years weren't wasted. The focus on things such as customer value, responsiveness and excellence has been useful throughout my career and given me an understanding of the private sector.

How has your public sector career progressed?

I started as the Legal and Constitutional Advisor in the Cabinet Office. It was early in 1997 and the first Government under MMP had just been elected. It was a momentous first term, with a change of Prime Minister and the collapse of the coalition government. Plus the whole public sector was adjusting to an MMP environment. It was a fascinating time to be in that role.

After five years I moved to the legal division at MFAT, working on constitutional issues in the Pacific and managing work on international treaty making. I was about to become a 'proper' diplomat when the Deputy Secretary Cabinet role came up and I couldn't resist. After that I became Secretary of the Cabinet.

Moving away from a law focus was deliberate on my part. A Leadership in Practice course at the Leadership Development Centre was transformational; I realised that my true love and an area where my strengths aligned was organisational development. The Cabinet Office was a great place to hone those skills because it is small, semi-autonomous with a direct reporting line to the Prime Minister, but also quite a complicated little place involving operational, regulatory and

policy elements.

What attracted you to the NZSIS?

During my time as Cabinet Secretary, I was asked to undertake a compliance review of the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB). It was a very important seven months for me. The GCSB was in a state of real distress and I felt my role was to properly flush out the issues in a way that was going to make it a stronger organisation and help it move into a different future.

It was tricky to manage as the environment was very political, but we got through. The GCSB staff were gratifyingly supportive and the review led in the end to a strengthening of the whole intelligence community.

I'd already been thinking of a role with the NZSIS, which is why I was interested in doing the GCSB review. I thought I would enjoy the work at NZSIS and could add value. New Zealand is an inclusive society, tolerant and accepting of diverse communities. All of that is what the NZSIS stands for. We are here to keep the country safe, a country we all want to live in.

What's the main role of the NZSIS?

While the GCSB works mainly in the electronic sphere, we are the human intelligence agency - we deal with people.

An important function is domestic security in areas like counter-espionage, counter-terrorism and national security threats to New Zealand. While our focus is primarily domestic, we do have international obligations to guard against New Zealand research institutions being used to advance the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction through dual technologies. We also have a small foreign intelligence function.

A big part of our work is providing protective security services across the New Zealand government, including security clearances services. The protective security requirements help departments to assess themselves, looking at the physical security of buildings, technology security systems, and security in relation to their people. This is not "one size fits all". We ask them to look at the type of organisation they are and if they have their settings right in those three areas.

It's important to understand our functions relate to the collection of intelligence and the communication of intelligence to those who need to know. We are not a law enforcement agency. If we investigate a person who, for

example, we think is about to undertake criminal activity, we will talk to the police. We have very good connections across the public sector, including with police, border security, defence and the GCSB.

Who watches the watchers?

We work to national intelligence priorities set by Government and are subject to robust oversight and scrutiny from the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament and the Inspector-General. We are also subject to oversight by the Privacy Commissioner, the Auditor General and the Ombudsman. We are a public service department and I am accountable for my performance to the State Services Commissioner, who is my employer.

What are the main security threats to New Zealand?

There are three areas. Firstly, in the geopolitical sense, what we might have assumed to be a permanent international order is under pressure. That creates issues for New Zealand as a small player. There are challenges to western liberal democracy for which multilateralism has worked very well for decades, to our electoral system, and to human rights. There are big players who don't subscribe to an international, rules-based system that has worked very well for New Zealand.

Secondly, spheres of influence. There's a lot of jockeying for position by state and non-state players and it is unclear how that is going to play out over time.

Thirdly, the threat of technology and complex disruptors such as in the cyber realm. Changing technologies such as bulk data, drones and artificial intelligence are also challenging, as well as providing opportunities.

The public feedback I get is that people understand the trade-off between privacy and security. They know privacy is always balanced against the community's right to security.

How do you identify future threats?

A lot of effort goes into thinking strategically about future threats, by the NZSIS and other New Zealand government organisations, and also by international intelligence agencies that we interact with on a regular basis.

Future threats include the areas I have mentioned, with complex disruptors really important. Space is an interesting area, with new technology making it cheaper to participate in space.

What are your key achievements at the NZSIS?

I have put a lot of effort into putting NZSIS on a more sustainable footing. When I started in 2014, there were similar organisational issues as at the GCSB. As had been the case with GCSB, I got a clear message that NZSIS staff were keen for change.

We did a lot of diagnosis about what the organisation needed to do to get to where it needed to be. Thousands of hours of analysis work was put into a budget bid so the government was satisfied we knew enough about our business and what our customers needed to invest that money to grow to where we needed to be.

We also put a heap of effort into successfully strengthening our legal compliance processes and systems. I could see

our legislation was hopelessly inadequate for a modern intelligence agency. The new Intelligence and Security Act is a huge improvement, with much more explicit guidance and policy statements about how we are to do our work.

While the organisation today is very different from when I started, I am very appreciative of what my predecessors achieved. They all faced their own challenges and took the organisation forward.

How does the NZSIS interact with the public?

We interact a lot with the public. That is partly through community liaison officers who talk to various community groups in a declared way to keep the lines of communication open. We ask the public for help with operational issues, such as access to a property. Ninety five percent of people that we talk to are happy to help us.

I make myself available to the media and talk to community and other groups. I'm keen to make it clear that we serve all sectors of New Zealand. And of course, our protective security people engage with organisations in the public and private sectors all the time.

It helps New Zealanders to support agencies like ours if they understand what we do. There is now much more information available on our website. The public feedback I get is that people understand the trade-off between privacy and security. They know privacy is always balanced against the community's right to security. I can't talk in detail about our capabilities or sources, because then they would be compromised and we would not be effective. People understand that.

What's the NZSIS like as a workplace?

It's very cool and beyond ordinary. Every day I'm impressed by the work people do and how smart they are. There are constraints of course - you can't go home and talk about the job or have a mobile 'phone in the building and the blinds are always pulled down. But it is a fantastic place to work.

We have just over 300 staff and share some of our services such as HR and finance with the GCSB.

What sort of people do you want to recruit?

Because we do so many different activities, we are looking for diverse skills and people. We want all ages and qualifications, different ethnic backgrounds and perspectives. We want our workforce to represent the community we serve. It's a diverse workforce and I love that. There's no one mind-set about the work we do and that's really healthy.

