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Force for Change

As Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, Andrew Colvin APM OAM goes to work every day to create a safer country for all Australians.

Images courtesy of Australian Federal Police

When Andrew Colvin joined the police 25 years ago, he never imagined one day he would be leading the entire organisation. As a constable fresh out of college, his main concern was doing a good job and serving the community. Now Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, these values have steered him through many past roles in international policing, and continue to define his leadership style.

“I joined the police in 1990 and I think, like everybody else who joins the police, you never have aspirations beyond wanting to do a great job and enjoying the challenge,” Andrew says.

“Like many people, I joined because I was interested and attracted to the operational nature of policing, and that it was different each and every day. In the past 25 years, I’ve been fortunate to have been given a very broad array of opportunities. The

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main focus of my career has been around international policing, but with a heavy emphasis on national crime issues like terrorism, money laundering, and organised crime.”

Andrew says his leadership style has been and continues to be influenced by both the people who have surrounded him in the force and the different environments he has worked in. He believes leadership is largely about being flexible and adaptable to changing environments and situations. “I’ve been fortunate, and I have had many opportunities to learn about leadership from others throughout my career. You learn the positive and the negative, and you take that away from each of them. But I think, more than anything, my leadership style is really based on the environment that I find myself in.

“Leadership is very contextual. What works for one person may not work for another, and what works in one environment may not work in a different environment. I am focused on continual

improvement, consensus building, and making sure that there is integrity and transparency in what we do as an organisation. I also try to ensure that AFP members can have trust and confidence that what I say is what I will do. Leaders need to be accountable for their actions.”

Andrew’s role is especially difficult given the changing nature of policing. The AFP’s role and expectations are quite different to when Andrew started as an officer over two decades ago. “I think there are many challenges in modern policing. The obvious one that lots of people talk about is the rapid advancement and uptake of technology in Australia, which far outstretches the ability for police to keep up.

“Crimes are being committed either wholly online, or certainly enabled by the online environment, and the pace of change has been incredible. Crime is now online—and organised crime, terrorism, drug smuggling, >



and organised fraud operate like any other sophisticated business model. Criminals are no longer working on the old style of criminal hierarchy where somebody was in charge and everybody was to do what they say. It is opportunistic; it is interconnected and it is global.”

The other major change is the increase in expectations of police and the increased transparency required. This presents challenges, but Andrew says he believes it’s better for the community. “The other thing I think is changing rapidly is the nature of public expectation and the role of the media cycle, which is much faster and more challenging than it used to be.

“The accountability and transparency of law enforcement agencies is far greater than it was in the past. There is very little that police do these days that is not completely transparent to the public, or that is not open to detailed scrutiny. For me, the legitimacy of our role comes from the public, and to get that legitimacy we need to be open, transparent, and accountable at all times. This requires us to change the way we think about our role, the manner in which we engage with the public, and the partnerships we have with the media as well as the private sector. We are establishing relationships with people and organisations that we probably never had in the past. That’s one of the big changes to the role of a police commissioner.”

Although he has only been in the role for just over a year, Andrew was Deputy Commissioner for four years before being appointed, and says that he is still learning the ropes. In the past 12 months, there have been a number of highlights. “I am still learning in many ways. I’m still going through that period where I am doing things for the first time as Commissioner, and every time I do an activity as Commissioner I think it’s a highlight. The first graduation ceremony where I was swearing in new recruits in the AFP was a definite highlight.



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“The first opportunity for me to go overseas and represent Australia’s interest and the AFP as a Commissioner was a highlight. There are many achievements in the past 12 months that I am proud of. One of the first things I did as Commissioner was embark on a fairly ambitious project to do a far-reaching staff survey. We wanted to honestly and openly understand from the organisation what our people thought worked, and what they thought didn’t work.

“Likewise, I wanted to ensure that the AFP executive team, and particularly myself, was held accountable for the outcomes and the way we respond to the feedback we received. As Commissioner, I’m not afraid to tackle organisational and cultural change, and there are aspects of policing organisations that we need to improve upon, but simply embarking upon a staff survey so early into my term as Commissioner was a highlight.”

It’s not only feedback from staff that Andrew is seeking; he wants to have conversations with all the stakeholders that the AFP works with to ensure good relationships for the future. “We are now six months into a project seeking feedback from our stakeholders, both government and non-government, about everything the AFP does—and, more importantly, what they believe we should do,” Andrew explains. “The AFP is a very complex organisation, and few in the public fully understand the breadth of our policing responsibilities—both nationally and internationally. Through engaging our stakeholders and partners, I hope to create a road map for the AFP’s future by enhancing these relationships.

“Relationships always come down to trust and integrity, so whether it’s my relationship with government, the AFP’s relationship with the community, or the relationship with our overseas partners, it’s about trust. And if our

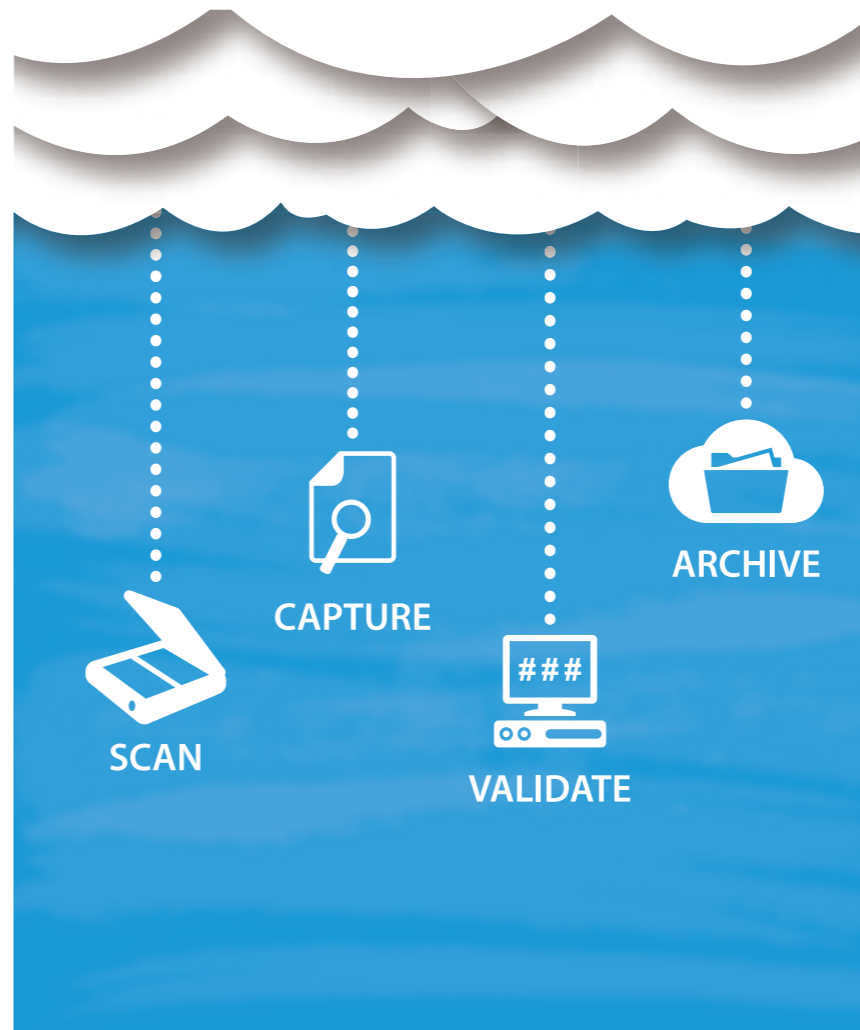
partners feel that they can trust the AFP, then I am three quarters of the way to having productive relationships. For me, a little bit of empathy goes a long way to understanding what your partner wants to achieve in a relationship, not just what you want to achieve—and building rapport, building trust, and establishing integrity are always fundamental.”

For the future, Andrew says he wants to continue ensuring the AFP evolves to meet the challenges it is faced with. “I think we need to continue to focus on the fact that modern policing is complex, and also very dynamic. And that’s not unlike any of your readers in the private sector who have to deal with complexity and rapid changes to their environment.

“It would be quite simple for me to continue on a path of evolution in policing and deal with changes as they come up. That approach has served the AFP well in the past, but the problem we have now is



that those changes are so much quicker. An evolutionary police path is no longer going to keep pace with this change—the gap is widening. In the AFP, we’ve got great people doing great work and delivering great outcomes for the community. What I have to do as police commissioner is make sure I can steer the organisation in a way that, long after I leave and long after my senior executive leaves, the AFP continues to be an organisation that provides quality outcomes for the community, and one which the community can be proud of.” •



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