

Dennis Richardson talks about the Trump leak

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Former Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs, ASIO chief and Australian Ambassador to Washington, Dennis Richardson, weighs in on the Trump leak.

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: I was joined a short time ago for a rare interview by one of Australia's most connected and experienced public servants. Dennis Richardson retired last week after stints of chief of ASIO, Australia's ambassador to Washington, and the head of the Foreign Affairs and Defence departments. Dennis Richardson good to have you with us.

DENNIS RICHARDSON, FORMER DEFENCE SECRETARY: Thanks Leigh.

LEIGH SALES: You have a reputation for being a very frank man, so let me start with a very frank question. Is Donald Trump a competent United States President?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: Look, the key thing about Donald Trump is the following. One, he's a democratically elected leader of the United States. Secondly, the US has a robust democracy. A range of investigations are going on at the moment and they will take their course over the next 12 months - two years.

LEIGH SALES: But in the meantime, we have to deal with Donald Trump as United States President. Is he an alliance partner that we can trust and rely on?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: I think we can certainly trust and rely on the United States, regardless of the personality who happens to be President at any one time. That's been the case since 1951 and I see no reason why it would change and when you look at some of the people President Trump has appointed, we have... we have great cause to be confident.

LEIGH SALES: People often come on the show and say, you know, the alliance is bigger than the personalities involved, like you just said, but surely there must be some limits to that?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: I don't, I think it's absolutely essential that you never allow an alliance to become hostage to one person or to one administration. That's been the case on both sides of the Pacific.

LEIGH SALES: The White House is dealing with a couple of crises this week. One is that the President shared classified information with top Russian intelligence officials and, two is that he asked the FBI Director, whom he has since sacked, to drop an investigation into the Trump administration's ties to Russia.

LEIGH SALES: How can Australia have any faith or trust in a President who's facing such allegations?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: Well, first of all, they're allegations. They're yet to be proved. Secondly - there are investigations going on both by the FBI and by... and by congressional committees. And, Leigh, you have lived in the states, you know this, both the FBI and the Congress can be expected to take forward their investigations thoroughly and without favour.

LEIGH SALES: Would you, you used to be the head of ASIO, would you anticipate that if you shared classified information with the President, that it would be then passed on to countries like Russia?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: Well, it would depend what the information was and what the circumstances of it passing on were.

LEIGH SALES: The White House has defended Donald Trump sharing this intelligence by saying that intelligence sources and methods were not disclosed. In your view, does that make a difference?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: It can. Leigh, let me give you a case about 25 years ago when I was in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, some intelligence came in which indicated that a democratically-elected leader was going to face a coup the following weekend. The Australian Government wanted to alert the democratically-elected government of that intelligence. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing with the intelligence, with the intelligence agency at the time. In the end, there was, we found a way to pass it across. The bottom line for the government of the day was that if you can't action such intelligence, then it's not worth having.

LEIGH SALES: You pointing that out reminds me just how long your career in public service has been and now you are freed from the shackles of that. So let me ask you another very frank question which is, in your 50 years when you look back over your public service, how do you rate the quality of political leadership that Australia has had over the past decade or so?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: Look, I'm not going to get involved in that Leigh, the point I would make is that, as you know, Prime Ministers and ministers work very, very hard. Every Prime Minister I have worked for has had the interest of the country at heart. Yes, they have to compromise on political grounds and other grounds, they want to get re-elected but they all have the interest of the country at heart.

LEIGH SALES: And do you think that the public service in Australia has remained as frank and fearless throughout your tenure as it always has been or has it become less so?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: Well, if it's, if it's become less so, it isn't because of Prime Ministers and ministers. If it's become less so, then that's a failing of the public service.

LEIGH SALES: On another matter, in your farewell speech at the National Press Club last week, you said that China is very active in intelligence activities directed against Australia. What sort of activities?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: I mentioned cyber quite specifically. I said it went beyond cyber. I specifically mentioned the Australian Chinese community. I also said, Leigh, that - that was simply the world in which we lived and that was no reason to engage in knee-jerk anti-China decision-making.

LEIGH SALES: But when you talk about activities inside communities, what do you mean? Surveillance or spying or...

DENNIS RICHARDSON: Clearly, clearly, Chinese authorities don't like their students overseas expressing views that are contrary to their own government.

LEIGH SALES: The former US ambassador to Australia, John Berry, said last September that the US was concerned about the extent of Chinese money going to Australian political campaigns. What do you think of that practice?

DENNIS RICHARDSON: Look, money goes to Australian political parties from a variety of quarters. I think that's something that all political parties need to watch, where their funding comes from. And I think by and large as a result of the events over the last 12 months, I think they probably exercise a fair degree of care now.

LEIGH SALES: Dennis Richardson, it's been great to have you on the program. Thank you very much.

DENNIS RICHARDSON: Thanks very much, Leigh.