

US Customs chief praises Australian expertise

The strategic alliance existing between Australian Customs and Customs in the United States was further strengthened with the recent visit to Australia of the US Commissioner of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, Robert Bonner. It was the first official visit by a US Customs Commissioner to Australia.

During the visit, Commissioner Bonner held talks with Australian Customs Chief Executive Officer Lionel

Woodward and other senior management as well as touring Customs facilities in both Melbourne and Sydney. The discussions centred on issues of mutual interest such as border security and counter terrorism measures, intelligence sharing, emerging technologies and international passenger and cargo matters.

Commissioner Bonner is in charge of a workforce of over 40,000 federal employees within the newly created Bureau of Customs and Border Protection. It became the official single border agency of the US Department of Homeland Security on 1 March, combining employees from the Customs Service, the Border Patrol, the Department of Agriculture and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The Bureau's priority mission is to prevent terrorists and terrorist weapons from entering the US. The mission calls for improved security at America's borders and all ports of entry.

In an interview with the Australian media, Commissioner Bonner spoke about his Bureau's mission and how his visit to Australia would assist with achieving that mission.

"Australian Customs is one of the finest, most well run Customs organisations in the world," he said.

"Apart from the very strong and long lasting relationship between our two countries, we also have a very strong relationship between our two Customs administrations. Part of being here is to underscore and reinforce that relationship. I think we have had some very important discussions which are



Australian Customs CEO Lionel Woodward (left) and US Commissioner of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection Robert Bonner.

going to lead to an even stronger mutual effort against the terrorist threat including improvements with respect to the movement of cargo.

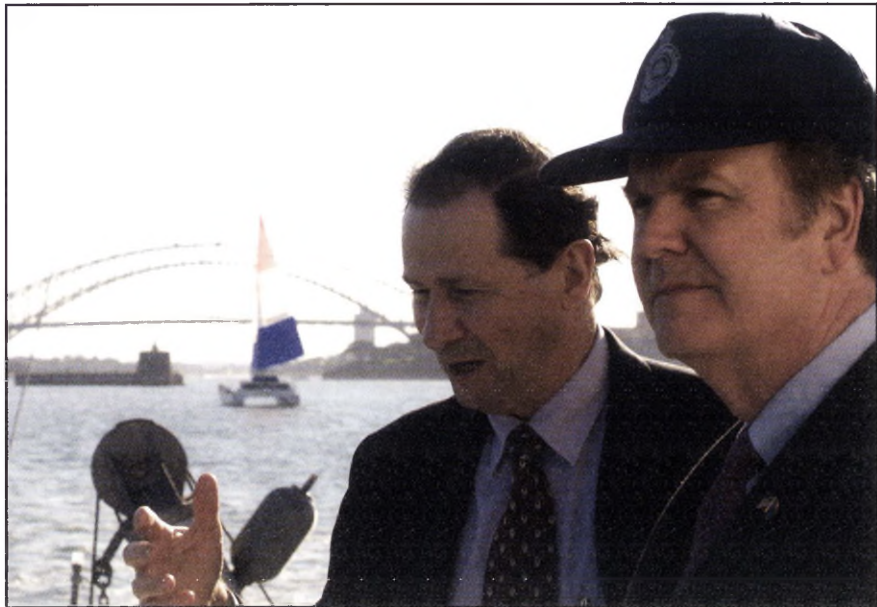
"Certainly one of the greatest concerns when you are talking about an international terrorist threat to us is the potential for terrorist and terrorist weapons, and that includes weapons of mass destruction, to be brought into the United States for the purposes of staging a terrorist attack. The big threat is the introduction of potential terrorist weapons by means of cargo containers moving to the United States. Six million cargo containers arrive in US seaports annually.

"But we also have a concern with our land borders with Canada and Mexico as a potential entry point for terrorists and potentially terrorist weapons. So we can't look at just our seaports or even our international airports in terms of arriving people. We also have to look at our land borders. When you are dealing with a 4000-plus mile border in the case of Canada or a 2000-plus mile border in the case of Mexico, we know from experience that it is all too easy to be able to enter the United States through either of those countries.

"Having said that, certainly from everyone I've talked to, there are serious concerns over the potential for terrorist organisations to conceal weapons of mass destruction in cargo containers. So it's very important we focus attention on improving security of the movement of container cargo to the United States.

"Ultimately we want to improve the entire security system for the movement of container cargo worldwide so we can protect what is the principal system of global trade. What we are trying to do, and what we have done to some degree already, is to add security to that system so we are protecting not just the United States against potential terrorist attack using cargo containers but literally protecting the principal system of global trade which is containerised shipping.

"One of the primary ways we are doing that is through the implementation



of the container security initiative - CSI for short. That is to develop information and target high-risk containers before they are loaded on vessels bound for the United States. We now have agreements to participate in CSI from 13 countries representing 18 of the top 20 ports in the world in terms of the volume of cargo containers to the United States. CSI is essentially targeting high-risk containers at these CSI ports and then using sophisticated detection technology like the type that Australian Customs has, which are large x-ray and scanning machines, to rapidly screen those cargo containers to ensure that they are not a threat.

"The first thing you need is as much information as you can reasonably get about the container in advance. We are gathering the information electronically as part of what sometimes is called the 24-hour rule - advance manifest information. This information must be provided to US Customs and Border Protection 24 hours in advance of the container being loaded on board the vessel destined for the US.

"There are other factors in what we call our automated cargo system beyond that which gives us what we believe is a good indication of the cargo containers that pose a potential risk or a terrorist threat. We use over 100 targeting rules. Some of them are risk factors that you would logically think of and some of

them aren't that give us, we believe, a high degree of competence that the containers that are identified are potentially risky. The key to it is to have information and to have it in an automated way so you can rapidly make judgements as to those cargo shipments that pose a potential risk or a terrorist threat.

"In terms of port security, one of the more impressive systems I have seen is the CCTV (closed circuit television) monitoring of the ports of Australia by Australian Customs. It seems to me an impressive coverage in terms of the security of the physical facilities themselves and is beyond anything we have in the United States. We are also looking at the issue of port security. But ultimately the security of United States seaports is to guard them from external threat. We are very concerned with the threat of problems brought to seaports rather than the seaport itself. Nevertheless seaport security is important at the seaport itself because of potential internal conspiracy issues, smuggling issues and pilferage from the cargo containers that arrive.

"There are a whole host of traditional measures that United States Customs utilises - everything from preventing contraband from entering the country and we also have responsibility for apprehending people attempting to enter the United States illegally. There are

traditional trade measures, the facilitation of trade and regulating trade and collecting revenues from duties. We still collect about \$US24 billion annually, although this is a small fragment of our entire federal budget.

“But a lot of what we are doing in terms of improving security against the terrorist threat actually has had and is consistent with many of these other measures. For example, we have seen seizures of illegal drugs like cocaine increase by about 70 per cent, I believe, as a result of our increased effort against the terrorist threat. The reality is that it has actually made us, if anything, better at some of our traditional measures like intercepting illegal drugs and other kinds of contraband - such as weapons. Rather than robbing Peter to pay Paul, we think it may have actually improved a lot of what we are doing.

“Both US and Australian Customs are developing essentially a new and integrated computer database system for import and export data. While in Australia it is known as CMR (Cargo Management Re-engineering), we call it ACE which stands for Automated Commercial Environment. It has been extraordinarily useful to discuss the lessons learned in terms of doing this because Australian Customs is up to a year and a half ahead of where we are in the implementation of our ACE system.

“As I mentioned earlier, one of the important features of port security, aside from access issues, is making sure that you have some sort of physical surveillance capability at the ports. It is not that we don't have CCTV technology similar to that utilised by Australian Customs. We are using some things like that at our land borders.

“But we certainly have nothing that compares with a security system for our seaports that is centrally monitored by US Customs. Actually we have nothing at this point with respect to individual ports such as Los Angeles. That doesn't mean there is no security at these ports. It just means we do not have the capabilities through technology that

have been employed here by Australian Customs.

“That's why I made the comment that Australian Customs is certainly in the forefront of Customs administrations. So, yes, we have some things that we can and are learning from Australian Customs in terms of technology and the use of technology. We have even discussed comparing notes on the potential future of improved technology for, let's say, the detection of everything from illegal drugs, weapons, potential terrorist weapons and weapons of mass destruction and the like. We are both thinking of possibilities of things that will give us additional detection capabilities short of physically opening up and stripping a container.

“Australian Customs CEO Lionel Woodward agreed that we have many issues of mutual interest and that our approaches to them differed so we can learn from each other. Meetings between the senior management teams responsible for introducing the cargo management systems will follow in the near future.”