

CSC Evaluation and Monitoring Programme

Strengthening Democratic Resilience and Security

Matthew Hefler



Across the world, governments are increasingly confronted with complex security environments defined not only by military considerations, but by political volatility, rapid technological change, and the growing influence of information in shaping public life. Contemporary security challenges often unfold in ways that blur the line between domestic and international spheres, creating pressures on decision makers to act swiftly while navigating incomplete, conflicting, or ambiguous information. In this context, the ability of states to interpret events accurately and respond proportionately has become both more important, and more difficult than ever.

Intelligence institutions play a central role in helping governments make sense of diplomatic developments, strategic risks, and evolving threats. Their assessments rarely offer certainty; instead, they provide informed judgements that must be weighed alongside political, economic, and societal considerations. This uncertainty heightens the need for transparency, accountability, and critical engagement, issues that resonate strongly across the Commonwealth's diverse political systems. The Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic Plan 2025–2030 reflects this priority, emphasising democratic resilience, foresight, and analytical capacity as essential components of effective governance.

It is within this wider landscape that Matthew Hefler's work is situated. Awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2015 to complete a PhD in War Studies at King's College London (KCL), Matthew has developed a research profile that bridges intelligence analysis, diplomatic history, and contemporary

security practice. As Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Statecraft and Strategic Communication at the Stockholm School of Economics and Project Lead of the AJI Intelligence and Security Programme at the Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy, he engages with questions central to how states understand threats, manage information, and navigate complex geopolitical environments. His interests span the historical use of intelligence, the evolution of diplomatic decision making, and the ways governments interpret and communicate assessments of global security challenges. These themes carry broad relevance across the Commonwealth, where approaches to security, governance, and international engagement vary widely in tone, priority, and historical experience.



Matthew appearing on CBC News Network with Tim Cook and Andrew Nichols following HM Queen Elizabeth II - Victory in Europe Day 75th Anniversary.



Matthew Hefler was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship in 2015 to complete a PhD in War Studies at King's College London, where his work was shortlisted for the Michael Dockrill Prize in International History by the British International History Group (BIHG). His doctoral research explored espionage and clandestine diplomacy in Allied relations during the Second World War. Following the completion of his PhD, Matthew returned to Canada and began lecturing in the Department of History, Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where over 2019-2021 he taught undergraduate courses on 20th-century European history and international humanitarian law. He went on to serve as Press Secretary to the Premier of Nova Scotia where he had leadership role in communicating of government policies, including supporting efforts to increase visibility for the Mi'kmaq and Gaelic languages. In 2022, Matthew was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship at the Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy. In 2024 he was promoted to Senior Research Fellow and as Project Lead helped found the Ax:son Johnson Institute Intelligence and Security Programme, where he manages a large slate of research, outreach, and teaching initiatives examining intelligence and ongoing global conflicts.



Touring the Tower of London with Goodenough College whilst studying at King's College London.

Academic Foundations and the Commonwealth Scholarship

Matthew's academic journey began in Nova Scotia, Canada, where an early interest in history and international affairs developed into a focus on intelligence and diplomacy. Guided by Professor John Ferris at the University of Calgary—a leading intelligence scholar—he gained the analytical and archival skills to examine the role of intelligence in diplomacy and policy making.

'It was working under John, and with other mentors ... that pushed my training towards the role of secret services, and intelligence itself, as a product, in domestic policy and in relations between states.'

His Commonwealth Scholarship enabled him to pursue a transformative PhD in War Studies at King's College London. It provided access to leading academic environments, global networks, and the resources for archival research in the UK, France, and the United States. His expertise both in the English and French languages and earlier research experience strengthened his insights into wartime diplomacy and intelligence liaison.

'The Commonwealth Scholarship gave me the resources and the support I needed to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity... and to advance on an academic, professional and personal journey.'

The Department of War Studies at KCL offered a multidisciplinary, internationally diverse environment that encouraged collaboration and innovation. Matthew credits this setting with refining his research and helping him build a global academic network.

Matthew's reflections highlight how disadvantage can affect academic journeys in varied ways. Although his experience in Nova Scotia differs from contexts where educational or socioeconomic challenges are more acute, he recognises that barriers to opportunity — whether socioeconomic, geographic, or institutional — appear in every region and take varied forms.

'The Commonwealth Scholarship — when I speak about it being a life changing opportunity for me — that happened in a variety of ways. One of them was in plucking people out of circumstances where you would never have been exposed to these worlds, and dropping you into a place where, after quite a bit of learning and growing, you had the chance to learn how to navigate the broader academic and public spheres, from scholarly publishing to contributing to wider conversations through various outlets, including the media.'

His work with the Ramphal Institute during his PhD, supporting small and developing Commonwealth states, strengthened this awareness by showing how equity in education and policy must be understood globally.



Lecturing on Churchill and de Gaulle at the Swedish Defence University - Försvarshögskolan.

Matthew identifies his Commonwealth Scholarship as a turning point in his life, noting that the Scholarship's most significant impact on him as an individual was gaining the ability to contribute to global conversations.

'It didn't just afford me the necessary skills to become an historian working on these important issues, it helped actually make me a person with the skills and competencies and confidence to pursue these subjects and to have a voice in shaping them.

Whether or not one has been able to actually turn their training into a position in the hyper competitive world of international academia, as I have been fortunate enough to do, my experience as a Commonwealth Scholar in the UK helped give me the skills and the determination to contribute to a global conversation around statecraft, diplomacy and international security – and so drive change in some of the most important questions of our time.'

The Ramphal Institute is a Commonwealth policy organisation that supports member states, particularly smaller or resource constrained governments, in international policy settings. During his PhD, Matthew contributed to this mission by providing policy and communications support to developing Commonwealth states seeking stronger representation in climate and development forums. Through this work, he helped amplify the perspectives of countries that often face structural barriers in global decision making.

Matthew's experience demonstrates how scholarships can be genuinely transformative, opening doors for individuals facing different types of challenges. He recognises that his own circumstances differ from those of many others, and stresses the importance of academic environments that listen to and empower people from all backgrounds to share their experiences. For him, inclusive scholarship programmes must respond to this diversity of circumstances, fostering respectful, mutually supportive partnerships and a shared commitment to expanding opportunity across the Commonwealth.

Building Research Expertise and International Networks

Matthew's development as a researcher was profoundly shaped by the opportunities offered through the Commonwealth Scholarship. He describes the award not simply as funding, but as an experience that expanded his capabilities and confidence. Immersed in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, he joined a world class intellectual community that exposed him to multidisciplinary debates, visiting scholars, and peers from across the globe.

'This was a four year, globetrotting, life altering opportunity... you emerge not just with a qualification, but with the confidence and determination of what it meant to be an author, a researcher, a writer.'

A central part of Matthew's growth came from the networks he built during the Scholarship. Living at Goodenough College and engaging with academics at King's and other institutions in London allowed him to form an international professional community early in his career. These relationships offered intellectual support, collaboration opportunities, and exposure to diverse methodological approaches — advantages he notes many early career researchers struggle to access.

'These practical benefits of being a Commonwealth Scholar place one in a position to conduct world-class research in an exhilarating and innovative environment. It both trained you and gave you the opportunity to begin constructing an unparalleled global academic and professional network that you would be able to benefit from for many years to come.'

Matthew also took deliberate steps to establish himself as a credible researcher. He pursued archival work across several countries, developed the linguistic and analytical skills needed for transnational intelligence research, and aimed to produce scholarship that would stand up to scrutiny.

His doctoral work was shortlisted for the Michael Dockrill Prize in International History, and he has since advanced it into his first monograph, *Churchill and de Gaulle: Secret Intelligence and the Failure of Franco British Relations*, a forensic study of wartime statecraft and alliance politics. Alongside his academic writing, Matthew built a strong public facing profile. He contributed analysis to outlets such as *Engelsberg Ideas* and *The Conversation Canada*, and provided commentary for CBC News and CBC Radio on intelligence cooperation and international affairs.

Matthew speaks at numerous high-profile academic conferences each year and has served as a Member of the Board for the Society for Intelligence History. He also had the chance to offer insight to the new 20-part WWII documentary for History Channel narrated by Tom Hanks. These engagements helped him refine the ability to communicate complex historical and security issues to wider audiences — an increasingly important skill for researchers seeking to demonstrate impact beyond academia.

‘In that way, again, one places oneself in a position not just to engage in the conversation, but also to establish your own brand as someone who can contribute to these larger issues.’

Matthew’s experience shows how early career researchers can build a strong foundation: by joining vibrant intellectual communities, pursuing ambitious and original research, cultivating international networks, and engaging confidently with public discourse. His trajectory demonstrates that research excellence involves not only producing scholarship, but also developing the professional identity, communication skills, and collaborative instincts needed to shape wider conversations.



Lecturing as Course Co-Director of Applied History 767: World Order and Present Challenges, flagship course of the Centre for Statecraft and Strategic Communication.

Teaching Foundations and Early Academic Practice

One of the most immediate outcomes of Matthew’s Commonwealth Scholarship was his transition into university teaching. The award gave him not only the academic qualifications for post secondary instruction but also the confidence, disciplinary grounding, and pedagogical preparation to begin teaching almost immediately after completing his PhD.

‘Being given the opportunity to take the studies that I did as a Commonwealth Scholar... allowed me to gain the necessary skills and qualifications to teach at the university level.’

Within weeks of submitting his PhD, Matthew began lecturing at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax, where he taught a large-enrolment, introductory survey of twentieth-century Europe and an upper-division seminar on war crimes and international humanitarian law. Over two years, he delivered nearly sixty lectures, designed curricula, and led seminar discussions. This intensive ‘baptism by fire’ accelerated his development as an educator and helped him translate his research into clear, structured learning experiences.

The pedagogical skills Matthew drew on during this period were shaped strongly by his time in London. The interdisciplinary ethos of the Department of War Studies exposed him to diverse teaching approaches and academic cultures, while Commonwealth Scholarship activities and the community at Goodenough College reinforced his commitment to inclusive, globally informed teaching. These experiences modelled the academic citizenship and mentorship he later brought into his own classrooms.

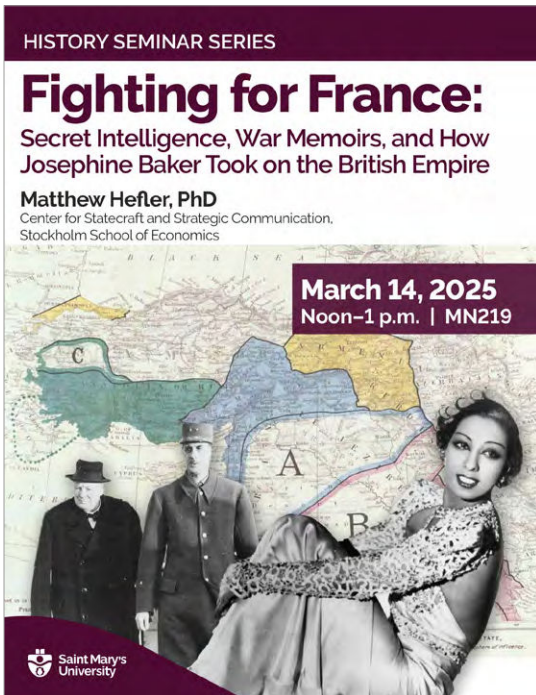
‘As a Commonwealth Scholar I was given that trust and that responsibility immediately... and that helped develop very strong pedagogical skills that I’ve brought ever since.’

Matthew’s experience illustrates how scholarship programmes can equip emerging academics with the confidence and practical skills needed for demanding teaching roles early in their careers. The combination of rigorous doctoral training, exposure to diverse academic cultures, and the trust placed in him as a young scholar gave him a strong pedagogical foundation. His early teaching demonstrates how research expertise, supported by inclusive scholarly environments, can translate into meaningful classroom leadership and sustained professional growth.

Community-Level Impact and Public Service

After leaving academia, Matthew moved into public service as Press Secretary to the Premier of Nova Scotia, a transition shaped by the research, writing, and analytical skills he developed through his Commonwealth Scholarship. He describes the shift as an unexpected but exciting opportunity that emerged from community involvement, professional networks, and the credibility gained through his doctoral work.

'It came about through the skills that I had developed as a Commonwealth Scholar, that made me an attractive candidate to bring into a competitive position like this.'



A Poster Presentation given by Matthew at Saint Mary's University, March 2025.

In this role, Matthew led strategic communication, policy messaging, and media engagement across the province. The work demanded rapid writing, clear translation of complex policy issues, and confident public representation — skills he had honed during his PhD through intensive research and writing, and through exposure to diverse academic environments in London.

He supported initiatives focused on equity, inclusion, and community wellbeing, helping communicate policies such as \$10 a day childcare, the creation of an Office for Mental Health and Addictions, and the establishment of the African Nova Scotian Justice Institute. He also promoted efforts to increase the visibility of Mi'kmaw and Gaelic languages, including bilingual signage and support for cultural institutions — work he describes as a privilege to help share publicly.

'I was in the enviable position of getting to crow about these efforts and try to impress upon the province just how much it mattered to us.'



Matthew working as Press Secretary to the Premier of Nova Scotia.

This phase of Matthew's career demonstrates how research driven training can translate into meaningful public engagement. The analytical discipline, communication skills, and global awareness developed through the Commonwealth Scholarship enabled him to contribute to policy conversations beyond academia and support initiatives grounded in inclusion, cultural recognition, and social justice. His experience demonstrates how scholarships can open doors to opportunities that might otherwise remain out of reach, providing access to academic communities, professional networks, and the confidence to contribute meaningfully to public life.

Building Strong Institutions in the Age of Disinformation

Matthew's research and public engagement align closely with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. His work shows how democratic governance, institutional accountability, and international cooperation depend on a clear understanding of intelligence services and their role in modern security ecosystems. When asked about the Commonwealth's 2025 – 2030 priorities for promoting peace and stability, he highlights the importance of setting ambitious agendas that drive regional stability.

'We talk about these being big goals, but the Commonwealth should be setting big goals as an organisation.'



The launch of Matthew's collected essays, *Intelligence in Contemporary Conflict*, at King's College London.

Across his scholarship, Matthew emphasises the dual character of intelligence institutions: essential guardians of national security and, simultaneously, actors requiring rigorous democratic oversight. His analysis challenges simplistic narratives that cast intelligence agencies solely as instruments of state overreach. Instead, he argues for a more nuanced public understanding, one that recognises both their protective function and the need for transparency, ethical governance, and accountability.

A central theme in Matthew's work is the evolving threat landscape shaped by disinformation, foreign interference, and the weaponisation of open societies. He highlights how malign actors exploit social media to polarise democratic societies and erode trust in institutions.

'Democracies face sustained and systematic efforts by adversaries to warp the discourse in our societies... to make that discourse more extreme and to polarise our societies against one another. Intelligence and secret services have a key role in countering mis- and disinformation and a range of hostile threats, from international crime, transnational repression of diaspora groups, and attacks on critical infrastructure.'

His insights underscore the importance of strengthening institutional resilience and public awareness in an era of increasingly sophisticated information warfare.

Beyond domestic governance, Matthew's research explores the often overlooked diplomatic role of intelligence services. He argues that intelligence cooperation can act as a stabilising force in periods of geopolitical strain, maintaining channels of communication even when political relationships falter. These alliances help sustain international security architectures and reinforce long standing partnerships.

In his current role as Project Lead of the AJI Intelligence and Security Programme, Matthew supports the Commonwealth's strategic priorities for 2025–2030 through convening interdisciplinary forums, contributing to public discourse, and advancing research on intelligence, diplomacy, and democratic resilience. His work reinforces commitments to human rights, rule of law, and good governance, while also expanding understanding of the hidden infrastructures that underpin global security. He advances these commitments by shaping research, education and dialogue on how intelligence and security institutions intersect with diplomacy, democratic processes and the rule of law.

Through managing a multidisciplinary programme that brings together historians, political scientists, security scholars and practitioners, he helps illuminate how intelligence activities, such as espionage, covert action and strategic communication, influence state behaviour, alliance building and international decision making. By convening forums like the Programme's monthly Digital Seminar, he creates spaces where experts and the public can engage critically with the structures that underpin global security, promoting transparency, informed debate and a deeper understanding of the norms and safeguards that protect democratic societies. His work strengthens governance by improving awareness of how secret services operate within legal and ethical frameworks, and by supporting policy-relevant research that encourages accountable, rights-respecting approaches to security.

Looking ahead: Plans for the future

Matthew's current path reflects a sustained commitment to shaping discourse on international security, intelligence policy, and democratic governance. After roles in public service and academia, he was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship at the Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy, a transatlantic initiative spanning Stockholm, Cambridge, London, and Washington, D.C. This opportunity, as he emphasises, was deeply shaped by his Commonwealth Scholarship:

'The opportunities I was afforded as a Commonwealth Scholar have gone a long way to helping me stay in this field that I value so much.'

As Senior Research Fellow and Programme Lead, Matthew now convenes high level seminars and produces policy relevant research on global security challenges, including the war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, and rising tensions in the Indo Pacific. His work brings together intelligence practitioners, government officials, academics, and business leaders, creating rare spaces for informed dialogue on the threats facing allied democracies. These impact focused initiatives also support his own scholarly development, including his forthcoming monograph on intelligence history and diplomacy.

Matthew's future vision is grounded in the belief that rigorous scholarship must also serve the public good. His leadership of the Ax:son Johnson Institute's Intelligence and Security Programme expands this mission further, driving new research seminars and publications that illuminate the evolving security landscape. His scholarship has helped him maintain his deep connections to the UK. This year Matthew was named Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge 2026-27 and a Co-Convenor of the Cambridge Intelligence Seminar, founded by the doyen of intelligence history, Professor Christopher Andrew. He supports the Canada-UK council, including presenting on their Youth Leadership Forum.

'I hope that I am contributing to a conversation that will engage our larger societies to help make us all safer, more resilient, and more inclusive.'

His work exemplifies how Commonwealth Scholars can evolve into thought leaders who bridge academic research with policy innovation by strengthening institutions, informing public understanding, and shaping the strategic debates that define global security today.

Find out more about Matthew Hefler's work:

www.linkedin.com/in/mattheffler

Learn about Matthew's role at the Ax:son Johnson Institute for Statecraft and Diplomacy:

www.hhs.se/en/research/centers/center-for-statecraft-and-strategic-communication/aji-intelligence-and-security-programme/

axsonjohnsoninstitute.org/dr-matt-hefler/

Read Matthew's published work:

tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02684527.2018.1444433

engelsbergideas.com/essays/the-suez-canal-purchase-and-the-making-of-modern-britain/

See Matthew's edited volume, *Intelligence in Contemporary Conflict*:

www.hhs.se/en/about-us/news/cssc/2024/new-book-on-intelligence-research/

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