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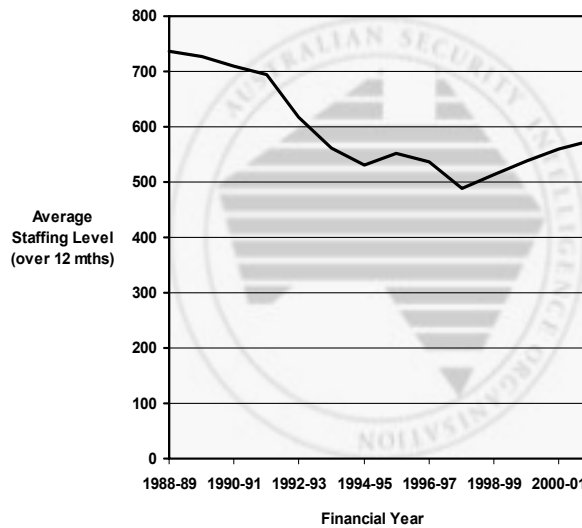
Dollars and Sense: Trends in ASIO Resourcing

Australia's domestic security agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), is responsible for collecting and analysing intelligence of relevance to Australia's national security, and advising Government accordingly. As specified in the *ASIO Act 1979*, ASIO's investigations are restricted to only those activities involving espionage, sabotage, politically motivated violence, the promotion of communal violence, foreign interference, or attacks on Australia's defence system.

ASIO is prevented from investigating any matter that does not fall under one of the above categories, and as yet, does not possess any powers of arrest or law enforcement. Criminal matters with no relevance to security are handled by the police or other agencies, as appropriate.

Ever since the 11 September 2001 attacks and the Bali bombings in October 2002, there has been much discussion about the resourcing of ASIO. Claims that ASIO is significantly under-staffed and under-funded and that Australia's security is being put at risk as a result, has led to calls for ASIO to be given a major increase in funding. Although ASIO's 2003–04 budget remains relatively small, it says it has received all the funding it has sought.²

Figure 1. Average Staffing Levels in ASIO between 1988–89 and 2001–02.



ASIO Staffing

ASIO has traditionally been a comparatively small organisation and, as Table 1 shows, it remains smaller than most of its major overseas counterparts. Of course, the role and function of each agency and Australia's relatively small population need to be considered when making such comparisons.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the current Average Staffing Level (ASL) of 575 is well below the ASL of 736 some fifteen years ago in 1988–89, at the end of the Cold War. However, ASIO's ASL is at its highest level in ten years and has been steadily increasing from a low of 488 in 1997–98.

ASIO's primary means of

recruitment is through graduate entry into its Generalist Intelligence Officer (GIO) traineeship, intakes for which it conducts twice a year. For the

year 2001–02, ASIO accepted 28 GIO trainees, nearly double the number recruited the previous year and one of the biggest intakes in recent years.

There is no shortage of interest in ASIO's traineeships, with many hundreds of applications received each round, a fact attributed to the current heightened public

interest in security matters. However, while attracting staff appears to be easy, retaining them is another matter.

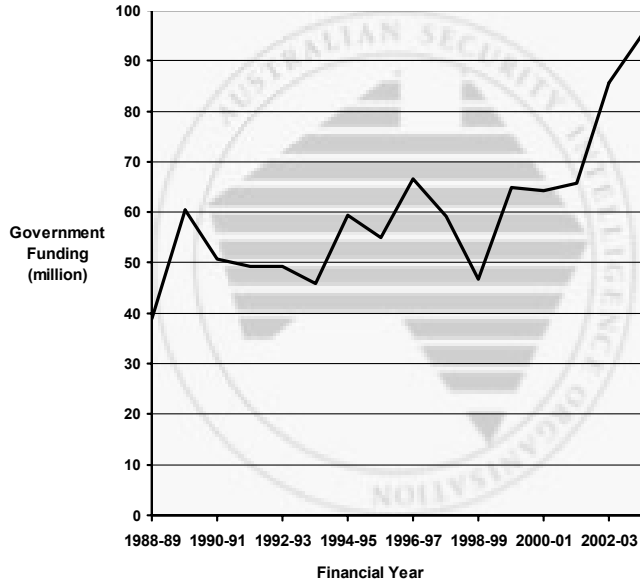
ASIO's separation rate currently runs at about 10.4 per cent,³ which, although better than the high of 17.3 per cent in 1988–89,⁴ is still higher than the current Public Service-wide rate of about eight per cent,⁵ and remains of concern to the Organisation.⁶ Consistently high numbers of separations from ASIO over the last five years⁷ (many of which were retirements and resignations) of 66 officers in 1996–97, 70 in 1997–98, 35 in 1998–99, 60 in 1999–2000 and 67 officers in 2000–01, recently prompted ASIO to commission a staff survey to find out why people were leaving.

The survey indicated that although over 80 per cent of staff thought ASIO was a good place to work, 'the major reasons for current staff contemplating leaving ASIO were better promotion opportunities, increased remuneration, greater job satisfaction, better training and development opportunities, and greater rewards and recognition.'⁸

Table 1; Comparative Staffing of Domestic Security Agencies (* latest data available).

Nation	Pop. (million)	Agency	Year*	Staff	Ratio Staff : Pop.
UK	59.8	SS/MI5	2003	1900	1 : 31 474
US	280.6	FBI	2003	27 800 ¹	1 : 10 094
Can.	31.9	CSIS	2002	2097	1 : 15 212
NZ	3.9	NZSIS	2002	140	1 : 27 857
Germ.	83.3	BfV	2003	2100	1 : 39 667
Aust.	19.5	ASIO	2002	575	1 : 33 913

Figure 2. ASIO funding 1988–89 to 2003–04.



Reasons to remain at ASIO included 'job satisfaction, management support, a good work and family balance, and commitment to the national interest.'

Responding to claims of understaffing, ASIO Director-General, Dennis Richardson, recently stated that ASIO was growing at a 'fairly rapid rate' but that there is a 'sensible limit to ASIO's absorptive capacity and ASIO needs to grow carefully'.⁹ In other words, ASIO, like any organisation, simply could not absorb a doubling of staff overnight.

Besides, with such a high turnover of staff, the real issue might in fact not be that ASIO needs more people, but rather, ways of keeping them in the first place. If the staffing situation at ASIO is in any way putting Australia at risk, it is more likely to be through the ongoing loss of training, experience and corporate memory.

ASIO Funding

Although unthinkable in the current climate, ASIO suffered a series of budget cuts and job losses during the early 1990s as part of the downsizing and restructuring of the agency following the end of the Cold War.

Table 2. Comparative Funding of Domestic Security Agencies. (* latest data available)

Nation	Agency	Year*	Budget (A\$ million)
UK	SS/MI5	2003–04	\$2751 ¹⁰
US	FBI	2003–04	\$7024 ¹¹
Canada	CSIS	2002–03	\$282
NZ	NZSIS	2002–03	\$14.6
Germany	BfV	2000	\$205
Aust.	ASIO	2003–04	\$95.2

As Figure 2 indicates, ASIO's funding fluctuated in the range of approximately \$40 million to \$60 million until the Olympics in 2000 and the attacks of 11 September 2001, events which both saw a big leap in funding. It has continued to rise since and the 2003–04 Federal Budget heralds another increase to a total of \$95.2 million. Table 2 shows how this compares to ASIO's overseas counterparts.

While ASIO's funding is still comparatively small, the Director-General does not believe ASIO has been left wanting: 'Since 11 September, ASIO has received all the additional funds it has sought'.¹² Perhaps then if ASIO receives all the funding it requires to carry out its functions effectively, it cannot really be considered to be under-funded.

On the other hand, it could be argued that this statement may simply reflect the possibility that ASIO has never asked for any more funding than experience suggests it is likely to receive. What, perhaps, the Director-General does not say is what extra capability ASIO might be able to develop and benefit from, if it were to receive even more funding.

Therefore, the real issue might not be what ASIO does with its \$95.2 million, but rather what it is not doing for lack of resources.

Perhaps then, the focus of any discussion about ASIO's resourcing should be to ask what it is that ASIO cannot do, but should, and to examine what the consequences might be of any

sacrifices ASIO has to make to operate within its current budget.

1. This represents the entire staff of the FBI, comprising 11 400 Special Agents and 16 400 other staff. As the FBI also fulfils a law enforcement function, the precise number of staff strictly working in a domestic security capacity is difficult to determine.
2. 'Report Claims ASIO "Desperately Understaffed"', 30 April 2003, at http://www.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,4057,6360628%5E2,00.html (15 May 2003).
3. ASIO, 'Report to Parliament 2001–2002', p.7 and p.51. This figure does not distinguish between those staff leaving for another Public Service agency and those leaving the Public Service environment altogether.
4. ASIO, 'Report to Parliament 1990–91', p.75.
5. This figure represents those staff leaving the APS altogether, and was derived from the Australian Public Service Commission's (APSC) 'State of the Service Report 2001–2002' at <http://www.apsc.gov.au/stateoftheservice/SOS2002.pdf> and confirmed verbally with the APSC (May 2003).
6. ASIO, 'Report to Parliament 2001–2002', op. cit., p.51.
7. Figures obtained from respective ASIO Reports to Parliament.
8. ASIO, 'Report to Parliament 2001–2002', op. cit., p.51.
9. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 May 2003, p. 6.
10. This represents the total funding for all three of the UK's intelligence agencies.
11. This represents the additional funding requested by the FBI for 2003–04.
12. 'Report Claims ASIO "Desperately Understaffed"', op. cit.

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