The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

A watching brief

The nature, scope and appropriateness of ASIO's public reporting activities

Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

September 2000

Commonwealth of Australia 1999
ISBN

Contents

Foreword v
Membership of the Committee vi
Terms of reference vii
List of abbreviations viii

List of recommendations ix

THE REPORT

1 Introduction 1

Background 1
Conduct of the inquiry 2
Scope of the inquiry 2
The report 3
Launch of ASIO's internet site 3

2 ASIO and its accountability 5

Role of ASIO 5
ASIO's accountability mechanisms 6

3 ASIO's current public reporting 11

Public knowledge of ASIO 11
ASIO's reporting 13
Annual report 13
Internet site 22
Other publications 25

Other public activities by ASIO 27
Reporting on ASIO by other agencies 28
Comparison with overseas intelligence agencies 29
Conclusion 29

4 Archived ASIO files 31

Legislative framework for access to files 32
Interest in ASIO files 33
Exemptions from ASIO files 33
Problems in accessing ASIO files 35
Conclusion 36

Appendix A 37

Appendix B 39

Foreword

It is vital that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), Australia's domestic intelligence service, is subject to appropriate accountability mechanisms and is required to report, in a general nature, to the Australian public on its activities.

Over the past 12 months our Committee has become aware of some feeling within the Australian community that ASIO should report more comprehensively and candidly on its activities.

In this inquiry, we looked at ASIO's current methods of providing information to the public – through its annual report, internet site, and other publications. We have also looked at information provided about ASIO by other government agencies, and have compared ASIO's public reporting with that of international intelligence agencies.

In general terms, we have found that ASIO's public reporting activities have improved substantially over the last decade.

We believe that ASIO's public reporting activities, combined with its other accountability mechanisms, ensure that the community can keep a 'watching brief' over the organisation. The community now has access to sufficient information to make informed judgements about the propriety, legality and effectiveness which which the organisation operates.

This is not to say that ASIO should be complacent about its public reporting – like all government organisations, it must strive to improve the way that it communicates with the public. We have made a number of recommendations aiming to improve ASIO's current public reporting activities, and to ensure that the organisation continues to look at how to improve the nature and scope of its reporting into the future.

DAVID JULL MP

Presiding Member

Membership of the Committee

Presiding Member	Hon. David Jull MP	
Members	Senator Paul Calvert	Mr Stewart McArthur MP
	Mr John Forrest MP	Hon. Senator Robert Ray
	Senator Sandy Macdonald (from 11/5/00)	Hon. Leo McLeay MP
	Senator Ron Boswell (to 11/5/00)	

Committee Secretariat

Secretary	Grant Harrison
Inquiry Secretary	Bronwen Jaggers
Administrative Officer	Lisa Kaida

Terms of reference

To review the nature, scope and appropriateness of the way in which ASIO reports to the Australian public on its activities.

List of abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
APPC	Australian Privacy Charter Council
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
ASIS	Australian Secret Intelligence Service
CSIS	Canadian Security Intelligence Service
DIO	Defence Intelligence Organisation
DSD	Defence Signals Directorate
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
IGIS	Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security
MI5	United Kingdom Security Service
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NSC	National Security Committee of Cabinet
NZSIS	New Zealand Security Intelligence Service
OH&S	Occupational Health and Safety
ONA	Office of National Assessments

List of recommendations

Chapter 3: ASIO's current public reporting

Recommendation 1

ASIO should ensure that an overview of key points of interest from its work over the last 12 months is available on its internet site.

Recommendation 2

Before July 2001, ASIO should conduct a review of its internet site, taking into regard its effectiveness as a primary communication tool, considering arguments for adding further information about the organisation, and making additions and improvements to the site as appropriate.

Recommendation 3

ASIO should produce paper versions of all information available on its internet site, for distribution (on request) to people who do not have access to the internet.

Recommendation 4

ASIO should produce 'ASIO Now' or a similar publication in a number of community languages. These versions should be made available in hard copy and on ASIO's internet site.

Chapter 4: Archived ASIO files

Recommendation 5

ASIO should provide to the National Archives of Australia a list of its files over 30 years old, excluding the names of files which may contain sensitive information as defined by the Archives Act 1983.