

Inquiry into Funding for public research into foreign policy issues
Written questions on notice for Mr Peter Jennings

Written QoNs from Senator Kitching

- Given the bulk of ASPI's funding comes from Defence, what measures do you take to ensure the independence, and perception of independence, of your research?

Answer

ASPI was designed to be separate from the Defence Department. The institute is a Commonwealth-owned company, reporting to a Council appointed by the Government and which includes a Council member nominated by the Leader of the Opposition. ASPI's charter requires the Institute to offer 'contestability of policy advice.' In practice this means the Institute regularly publishes material that offers perspectives quite different from current Defence policy settings.

In the financial year 2019-20, Department of Defence core funding amounted to 35% of ASPI's total funding. Every financial year ASPI agrees with Defence a series of topics of mutual interest which are to guide a proportion of ASPI's research output. For example, topics in 2020-21 included Southeast Asia, Hybrid Warfare, Implementing the 2020 Strategic Update, and Cyber Security. Defence plays no role in determining how ASPI undertakes this work, nor to my knowledge has the Department ever sought to shape the content and conclusions of our research. Depending on the topic ASPI may provide drafts of research papers to subject matter experts in Defence, other parts of the Public Service, academia and elsewhere. We do this to check facts and to ensure our work is informed by the best thinking available, but all research judgements remain those of our authors. I'm not aware of any instances where attempts have been made to compromise the Institute's independence from Defence or indeed from any other ASPI sponsor.

The best demonstration of the independence of ASPI's work is that body of work itself, which now has a twenty-year track record of hundreds of long-form research publications and many thousands of items published in the *ASPI Strategist* and elsewhere. This amounts to a substantial record of the independent thinking of our researchers. While our critics may from time to time question the Institute's capacity to make independent judgement, we are not aware of that criticism ever being made about specific pieces of research. That points to a demonstrated capacity for maintaining independent judgement.

Critical to ASPI's success is the simple but powerful design of the Institute's governance structure, which makes delivering contestable policy advice the central mission of the Institute. This creates a strong foundation enabling ASPI's independence. It's the job of the ASPI team to live up to that expectation in our daily work.

- Do you take any measures to avoid politicisation of your work?

Answer

ASPI's charter requires the Institute to be 'non-partisan' on political matters. In practice the focus of the institute is on policy, not politics. Policy matters may take on a political dimension particularly if there are differences of view between political parties on policy issues. ASPI's

approach is to focus on policy and leave politics to the politicians. We ensure that our written product takes this approach.

ASPI is keen to engage with any politician that is interested in our work. This can be through the Parliamentary Committee system or indeed simply by meeting with interested individuals. We see this as an important part of our role to offer contestability of policy advice. Occasionally an ASPI representative may find themselves at an event where politicians may also be speaking. Our approach is to focus on the policy matters at hand, about which reasonable people may have different views.

The position of a nominee of the Leader of the Opposition on the ASPI Council is an important expression of the intent that the Institute remains non-partisan. ASPI also works hard to ensure that Government and Opposition figures can speak at our Conferences and other events. Our December 2020 publication, *After Covid-19 Volume 3: Voices from federal parliament* included contributions on emerging policy issues from 49 Members of Parliament, with representation from the major parties and cross-bench MPs.ⁱ We see this non-partisan engagement as a way to strengthen our own thinking on policy issues and to inform the thinking of Parliamentarians.

- Your submission speaks in favour of a foreign policy ASPI. Do you think it would be best for this to be totally separate from ASPI, or could ASPI be expanded to take a holistic approach to foreign policy, that encompasses diplomacy, defence, strategic studies and perhaps even trade?

Answer

There would be major value for Australia in establishing a Foreign Policy Institute with a business model like the ASPI model. Such an institute could only benefit DFAT, which desperately needs an injection of new and informed policy thinking. A Foreign Policy Institute would be a valuable source of advice to Parliament, help to deepen a wider policy debate and hopefully encourage more bright minds into the business.

The most important thing would be to establish the Institute with a structure and purpose that cements its independence and with sufficient size to establish critical mass.

ASPI could certainly be expanded to take on this role. We have a twenty-year track record of performing comparable functions in Defence and strategic policy and, it must be said, a sizable part of our output is relevant to Australian foreign policy as well. ASPI has an established international reputation which could help a Foreign Policy Institute start running from day one. The Institute has also shown that it can expand to address emerging policy issues. In 2013 ASPI established the International Cyber Policy Centre, which has since developed international standing for its research on cyber and the interconnection between critical technology, government and international security. ASPI also has a demonstrated back-of-house management system for publications, events, an on-line presence, budget and people management capabilities, a corporate structure and relations with Government, Parliament and the Public Service that would not need to be re-invented or duplicated.

ASPI would be more than happy to be considered to take on this role. That said, a separate, standalone Foreign Policy Institute is also worth seriously contemplating. An ASPI and a 'FPI' would generate a sense of creative competition, putting two useful voices into policy debates that will only become more important to Australia's future interests. Whether or not it is part of ASPI, the Committee should consider recommending the creation of a substantial Foreign Policy Institute. This will enhance Australia's foreign policy capabilities at a time when that is desperately needed in the national interest.

Peter Jennings

25 July 2021

ⁱ Genevieve Feely and Peter Jennings (Editors), *After Covid-19 Volume 3: Voices from federal parliament*, December 2020. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/after-covid-19-volume-3-voices-federal-parliament>.