

A watching brief

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

Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation



Terms of reference

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



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



List of recommendations

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.

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*.