

Improving Security Within Government

- News Release by the Attorney-General, The Hon. Daryl Williams AM QC MP

More stringent vetting of staff and strengthened security procedures will be undertaken to prevent leaks and espionage from Commonwealth departments and intelligence and security agencies, under measures adopted in principle by the Government.

The measures were recommended by the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security, Mr Bill Blick, with the aim of further improving security in departments that handle highly classified material and Australia's six intelligence and security agencies - the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), Australian Imagery Organisation (AIO) and Office of National Assessment(ONA).

The Inspector-General was commissioned by the Prime Minister to undertake a review of security procedures following the 1999 arrest of a former DIO officer, Jean-Philippe Wispelaere, on charges of attempting to sell highly classified material. While the Government is confident that Australia's intelligence community generally operates with the utmost professionalism, a more recent case involving the alleged removal of classified documents from DIO has reinforced the need for improved security arrangements.

The Inspector-General's report is comprehensive and makes more than 50 recommendations which are designed to:

- Give greater priority to, and heighten awareness of, security arrangements on a public service-wide basis.
- Enhance security coordination arrangements between government agencies.
- Ensure greater priority is given to effective security arrangements within Australian intelligence and security agencies and departments that handle highly sensitive national security information.
- Improve personnel security practices.
- Improve physical security arrangements in intelligence and security agencies and relevant departments.
- Enhance computer security.
- People who are employed in security or intelligence work must meet very high standards of security and accept a more detailed inquiry into their personal affairs than is required for employment in other areas.

For this reason, the Inspector-General recommended that staff of intelligence agencies be subject to psychological testing, financial checks and random bag searches where they do not already occur. ASIO has agreed to undertake an internal and voluntary trial of polygraph tests (electronic lie detector) to evaluate the potential of the tests as a personnel security tool.

Because of the sensitive nature of many of the measures, the Government will not provide further details on the recommendations. This is in keeping with the practice of successive Governments not to comment on intelligence and security matters.

The Government is committed to protecting Australia's national security and is confident that these measures will improve the security of the more sensitive information held by Government agencies.

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