

Foreword

by Kim Beazley

There is one thing in the life of a Minister appointed to a portfolio with a national security mandate that academic analysis can not quantify. That is the sense of handling the keys of the kingdom that comes with the first intelligence assessment that crosses his/her desk replete with codeword notations on sentences and paragraphs. Each codeword represents a source of home-grown or foreign intelligence. That sense of admittance to the cognoscenti, if not the illuminati, deepens as more cryptic reports, consisting mainly of an ultra sensitive piece of raw intelligence, start to arrive. They are valued even more highly when, unlike the general theses argued in the more lengthy assessments, they don't turn up in newspapers or academic journals.

Before the Minister has received such material he/she will have been briefed in considerable detail on the structure and operations of the relevant intelligence agencies. If the person is an Australian Defence Minister, briefings will include the arrangements which sit at the heart of Australia's alliances, most particularly the capacities and operations of the joint facilities operated with the United States.

All this can be immensely seductive. It looks extremely valuable and it is. There is some comfort in seeing capabilities and quantities of data that go beyond the capacities of public analysts to provide. It is easy to slide into that dismissal of contrary points of view in the public national security debate: 'I understand your point of view, and respect your arguments, but if you knew what we knew, you would have a different view. If I told you how I know your assessment is flawed, I would compromise sources. You will just have to trust me.'

When I was Defence Minister in the 1980s, a major shift occurred in the underlying rationale for Australia's alliance with the United States that has held ever since. From World War II through the Vietnam War, debate in Australia revolved around the reliability of alliance commitments when traded against a portion of national sovereignty. By the 1980s this was seen as valueless hypothesizing. If we were not sure in what circumstances the United States would come to our aid, neither

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could a potential enemy be sure in its calculations. The possibility that Australia might be supported by the United States would be a very big hurdle for a would-be enemy to jump. That imponderable was seen as just as valuable as certainty in any American commitment.

More quantifiable was the value of the intelligence and enabling capabilities for our military that the alliance brought. We placed a very high value indeed on these attributes as Australia could not afford the collection capacities of our ally. Particularly if we engaged with our ally or if we asserted our need or right to know about materials of interest to us, the intelligence flow was massive and formed a substantial database for our assessment agencies. Good enough, for example, for those agencies to be confident that they saw the material on which their equivalents in the US and UK provided their assessments to their governments on issues such as the capabilities and intentions of Saddam Hussain's government in Iraq and broader implications for the struggle with militant Islamic fundamentalism.

One thing a Minister will never receive in a properly calibrated piece of assessment is an unqualified statement on the next steps likely to be taken by a problematic actor or the possible outcomes of the course of action the Minister's government might intend. When the CIA Director, George Tenet, in the run up to the Iraq war stated his assessment on Saddam Hussain's weapons of mass destruction as a 'slam dunk', the expression was more a reflection of the political pressure he was under than an assessment any of his officers would ever have produced. More to the point, the politicians hearing that advice were not listening to the assessment, rather they were approving the noises of a man joining the team for a game they intended to play anyway.

Let's be clear: every political leader with national security responsibilities understands that intelligence is an imperfect science. Such politicians also understand that when they embark on any foreign expedition or initiative, intelligence is transformed by them from the 'imperfect' to the 'imperative'. When the consequences of their political actions become fraught, the 'intelligence imperative' is transformed again to the 'intelligence failure'.

It happens every time. The consequence is that a series of political judgements which push a nation into an unwise commitment are blamed on faulty intelligence, which produces upheavals in the intelligence community while the political leadership of the time slides

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for at least a while. President George W Bush, in the end, suggested as his Deputy Secretary for Defense, Paul Wolfowitz did some time earlier, that without intelligence on Saddam Hussain's weapons of mass destruction, the United States would not have invaded Iraq. This reflection, however, was not based on a view that policy direction was wrong. Rather, it was based on their view that Congress and the American people would not have supported the policy in the absence of that intelligence assessment on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

This is not to argue that intelligence failures should be excused and that shake-ups in the community should not occur. Rather, it is a plea in mitigation. The struggles in which we are now engaged require a self-confident intelligence community as well as a wise political leadership handling their material. This cannot be achieved whilst politicians seek scape-goats for their own failures and intelligence officers are drawn into the web of a political campaign.

Though lost in the welter of inquiries in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, the judgement of the Australian Parliament's Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS, and DSD on the performance of Australian agencies on the rationale for the Iraq War is instructive. The committee was bipartisan and though its judgements were muted, they reflect well on the Liberal members in their implied criticisms of their leaders.

In reality, the Australian Government went to war because it was already engaged in the Persian Gulf and because the United States went to war. The pressure for an intelligence 'slam dunk' was not quite so great in Australia. In possession of the same information as their siblings in the US and UK, the two Australian assessment agencies, the Defence Intelligence Organisation and the Office of National Assessments, provided conclusions that were anything but slam dunk.

The Joint Committee findings are worth quoting here: "therefore, the case made by the government was that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction in large quantities and posed a grave and unacceptable threat to the region and the world, particularly as there was a danger that Iraq's WMD might be passed to terrorist organisations." "This," said the committee, "is not the picture that emerges from an

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examination of the all the assessments provided to the committee by Australia's two analytical agencies."¹

One can't help feeling this caution by our agencies was not a reflection of the relative genius of the Australian intelligence community but rather where their siblings would have ended up if they had not been under intense political pressure.

Politicians handling intelligence need two attributes. One is, behind closed doors, diligent attention to the quality of the product. I recollect ordering a reappraisal of collection on one target when I felt that over the years the quality of our collection against that target had dropped off. That concern never emerged in public. Unpressured reassessment by the agencies saw ungraded collection result.

The second attribute should be a public stance of political self-denial. Whenever a policy action is advocated, based in part on intelligence assessment, the inexact character of such assessments should be acknowledged. If things go wrong, public scape-goating of the intelligence community should be resisted.

Hopefully this will be among the many valuable lessons learned from the comprehensive analysis of our intelligence environment in this book.

1 The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD, *Intelligence on Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction*, December 2003, Canberra. Para 5.16 and 5.17, page 93.