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Closer ties that weaken the system
The Sydney Morning Herald
24 February 2004

IN HIS 1977 blueprint for the establishment of the Office of National Assessments, Justice Robert Hope quoted approvingly the words of the great American commentator Walter Lippmann: "The only institutional safeguard (for impartial and objective analysis) is to separate as absolutely as it is possible to do so the staff which executes from the staff which investigates. The two should be parallel but quite distinct bodies intrinsically uninterested in each other's personal success."

An institutional blurring of that vital distinction seems to me to have been a far more important element in shaping intelligence reports on Iraq than any overt instructions from politicians. It has been the missing element in the noisy debate about the shortcomings of Australian intelligence during the Iraq war.

The job of intelligence assessment organisations such as the ONA is to stand slightly outside the system; to confront the innate human tendency of policymakers and policy advisers to see the world's problems in terms of the policies they have already devised for dealing with them.

But over the past several years, in small but significant ways, intelligence officials have been brought into a closer structural relationship with the Government and the policy process. The dangerous impact of this development has been to give senior members of the intelligence community "ownership" of policy in a way they have not had in the past.

The machinery of government is hardly a barbecue-stopper of a subject, but like all machinery the government's has a direct effect on how things work. When the Howard Government came to office, it changed the way Australian foreign policy is made by establishing a National Security Committee of cabinet (NSC) involving the key national security and economic ministers. Most Australian governments have referred sensitive defence and intelligence matters to some sort of small committee of cabinet, so in that sense the Howard changes were not new. But among the Howard reforms was the decision to invite senior officials rather than just ministers to participate in the committee's deliberations in a way that was unprecedented in this area of government.

The senior public service mandarins the secretaries of the departments of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Foreign Affairs and Trade, Defence are all regularly present at NSC meetings. So, too, are the senior intelligence staff: the director-general of the Office of National Assessments, Australia's main analytical intelligence agency, and the director-general of ASIO, as well as the Chief of the Defence Force. Others are co-opted when needed.

The reform has been popular with officials: it's a seductive feeling for public servants to be invited into the inner chambers of political power. But the result is very different from the traditional Westminster system under which the only insight most officials had into the deliberations of ministers was a written minute, a few lines long, setting out the decisions. The engagement of public servants in the NSC intensifies their identification with policy because they are present at its forging. In subtle but real ways the experience shapes their outlook on the world.

If handled properly, interaction of this sort can strengthen policy and make its co-ordination more effective. Officials are more responsive to the thinking of ministers and more conscious of the broader context in which government policy is made.

For their part, ministers have the opportunity to ask detailed questions of officials and to hear arguments about the issues in front of them put more powerfully than in any written submission.

But the dangers, too, are real: officials can start thinking and acting like politicians, pre-emptively shaping advice to take account of political considerations.

For the policy departments, the pluses and minuses of direct involvement in the NSC balance out about evenly. It depends a great deal on the good sense of both politicians and officials. But for the intelligence community, and particularly the analytical agencies, it raises real concerns because they need to keep a much greater distance from the policymaking business if they are to do their job properly.

The closer embrace of intelligence officials to the policy bosom has been taking place in other ways as well. The Australian Government has been using senior intelligence staff more directly than ever before for diplomatic and policy purposes. For example the head of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service was brought in to run the East Timor policy taskforce in the Prime Minister's Department.

Similarly, on several occasions the resolution of the Sandline mercenary affair in PNG, the response to the Bali bombings intelligence officials have been used for diplomatic or quasi-diplomatic purposes. Back-channel diplomacy involving intelligence officials is not new. It was used effectively through the period of confrontation with Indonesia, but this has been a more mainstream effort. The director-general of ONA, for example, was the Australian official who accompanied John Howard in his discussion with George Bush at his Crawford ranch.

Each individual involved in those tasks has been an outstanding public servant and very conscious of propriety. But the impact inevitably has been to blur further the sharp distinction that should exist between the people who are making policy and the people who are trying to interpret the environment in which it is made.

I am not arguing for the creation of a cadre of "pure" intelligence professionals without experience of the policy world. Secret intelligence agencies that feel called to higher purposes than the grubby world of policy are dangerous to democratic communities. There is no point in intelligence analysts producing brilliant assessments on matters of marginal relevance to the government. But the border between responsiveness to policy priorities and responsiveness to policy itself is sharp and important. When it is crossed, both intelligence and the policy that flows from it are weakened.

It is impossible for outsiders to point to specific instances where intelligence advice has been changed as a result of the closer involvement of intelligence officials in the culture of the policymakers. Indeed, the insiders themselves might be unaware of what sort of impact it is making. But the fact that the dangers might be subtle and slow makes them no less real.

The first step towards a healthier intelligence system for Australia is for the Government to close the door to the general policy deliberations of ministers politely but firmly in the faces of the intelligence agencies.