

Office of National Assessments



What ONA does

ONA provides assessments on international matters of political, strategic and economic significance to the Prime Minister, members of the National Security Committee of Cabinet and key senior policy makers in the government. ONA bases its assessments on information from a range of sources, both inside and outside government.

While ONA reports directly to the Prime Minister and sits within the Prime Minister's portfolio, responsibility for the preparation of assessments and day-to-day management issues falls to the Director-General of ONA. The Director-General of ONA is an independent statutory officer who is not subject to external direction on the contents of ONA assessments.

In addition to setting out ONA's assessment function, the *Office of National Assessments Act 1977* (ONA Act) charges ONA with responsibility for coordinating and reviewing Australia's foreign intelligence activities and issues of common interest among Australia's foreign intelligence agencies. ONA is also responsible for evaluating the effectiveness of Australia's foreign intelligence effort and the adequacy of its resourcing.

ONA's role is now complemented by the role of the National Security Adviser who is responsible for enhancing whole-of-government coordination among the national security and intelligence agencies.

Further information about ONA can be found at <http://www.ona.gov.au>.

New Director

On 14 April 2009 the Prime Minister announced the prospective appointment of Mr Allan Gyngell AO as the Director-General of ONA, with effect from 13 July 2009.

Mr Gyngell will take over from Mr Peter Varghese, whom the Prime Minister has announced will take up a senior diplomatic appointment following the completion of his five year term as DGONA. In the course of speaking with many ONA staff in the last four years I found that there was considerable respect for Mr Varghese.

I look forward to engaging with Mr Gyngell when he commences his appointment.

Implementation of recommendations

Following my inquiry of ONA's statutory independence in 2007 I made one recommendation concerning the minimum set of documents including drafts, which ONA should retain for each assessment product it produces.

I was disappointed to find that this recommendation seems to have been implemented in part only. I will return to the matter in the context of the next inquiry into ONA's statutory independence.

Privacy guidelines

In December 2005 ONA adopted a set of privacy guidelines that outline standards for the handling, use, and further dissemination of information about Australian persons. The guidelines apply to references to personal information about Australian persons in any external communications – including reports, briefings, emails and advice – emanating from ONA.

The ONA privacy guidelines mirror the DIO privacy guidelines and are essentially identical to the privacy rules which are applicable to ASIS, DSD and DIGO.⁵⁹

During 2008-09 I conducted four inspections of ONA's use of the privacy guidelines. While there were no concerns of a substantial nature, there was some room for improvement. The Director-General took appropriate remedial steps.

I will continue to conduct inspections relating to ONA's use of the privacy guidelines at quarterly intervals. In particular, I will be looking for indications of sustained and improving standards as a positive indicator of a well established culture of compliance.

Training

ONA's privacy guidelines were instituted some three and one half years ago. In that time ONA has incorporated training on conformance with those guidelines into its induction course. It also revises and re-releases its procedures document

concerning the privacy guidelines annually. In this way, the requirements for conformance with the privacy guidelines are brought to the attention of staff members on at least an annual basis.

I have continued to place emphasis on raising awareness about my office and also encouraging greater interaction between my office and ONA.

Throughout 2008-09 I presented to the AIC common induction and senior officers courses, to which ONA staff are regularly allocated places.

Information about the role and functions of my office is also accessible on ONA's internal web pages.

Complaints and inquiries

On 23 February 2009 I advised the Prime Minister and the Director-General of ONA of my intention to conduct an own motion inquiry into the statutory independence of ONA (as provided for under section 8(3)(c) of the IGIS Act).

I conducted the first inquiry of this sort in 2007. The outcomes of that inquiry were generally positive. Nonetheless I believed that it was timely to return to looking at ONA's performance against the relevant requirements.

In returning to this matter in 2009, and as mentioned above, I am aware that the recommendation I made following my inquiry in 2007, that ONA retain in a retrievable form, a copy of a specified minimum set of documents for each assessment, seems to have been implemented in part only.

A number of high priority demands subsequently placed on my office caused me to suspend this inquiry for several months. I expect to reinvigorate and conclude the inquiry in the next reporting period.

I received no complaints about ONA which required inquiry action during this reporting period. One matter was handled administratively.

59 A copy of the ONA privacy guidelines can be found at Annex 7 of the IGIS Annual Report 2005-2006.