

Securing public servants for private ends

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Worried about being killed by a terrorist? Or sent a suspicious white powder in an envelope? You can now seek advice - for a price - from a growing band of high-ranking ex-intelligence, police and defence officials willing to put their expertise at your disposal.

The ranks include a former head of the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS) Rex Stevenson; a former head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) David Sadlier; a former commissioner of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) Mick Palmer; and a former director of the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) Bill Crews.

There has always been some movement to the private sector from officials in sensitive government positions. But the terrorist atrocity in the United States on September 11, 2001, has greatly expanded the demand from the security consulting industry for people with a background in law enforcement or, better still, in one of the nation's highly secretive intelligence agencies.

The switch inevitably entails that use will be made of specialised expertise acquired on the public payroll. But the transition also places an onus on ex-officials not to misuse any classified information for commercial gain.

Fortunately, there are no known examples of this occurring. But one serving official close to the intelligence services says privately: "As more people make the switch, there must be a danger in future that someone will cross the line, especially when dealing with a foreign client."

There is a separate issue of just how much value an ex-government official can deliver to the private sector. Alan Behm had oversight of much of the nation's counter-terrorist activities while in the Attorney-General's and Defence departments. He says: "My background doesn't mean I have much to offer a big corporation in areas such as risk assessment - the problems are different." Although now a consultant himself, Behm says he does not offer his services to companies in the burgeoning security business.

However, the rapid growth for the industry suggests there are plenty of customers satisfied with the advice on offer from former officials. Some, such as Signet International, are content to remain as boutique operators, despite being praised by booming competitors such as Intelligent Risks.

Signet is run from Canberra by a former deputy commissioner of the AFP, Jim Allen, and by Rex Stevenson, who retired as head of ASIS in 1998. As well as some government work, Allen says Signet does "risk stuff for corporates". Despite the inclusion of the word "international" in the company title, however, he says it does not have any overseas clients.

In contrast, the principal of Intelligent Risks, Neil Fergus, says his company derives about 80 per cent of its revenue from offshore. Fergus was a senior ASIO official who worked with the head of security for the Sydney 2000 Olympics, the then NSW deputy police commissioner, Paul McKinnon. Fergus established Intelligent Risks in April 2001 with McKinnon as a consultant. Staff include David Nolan, who was director of "positive vetting" for high-level security checks in the Defence Department. The law prevents other staff from being named as former members of ASIO, although clients presumably can have a good guess.

The company now has 12 full-time staff and offices in Brazil, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Fergus says Intelligent Risks also does a lot of "fly in, fly out" work in the Middle East as well as some consulting for the Athens 2004 Olympics. The company's services include preparing detailed accommodation, transport and exit plans for executives sending staff to risky parts of the globe.

Intelligent Outcomes is another company experiencing strong growth. Its Canberra-based managing director, Mike Dunn, describes the company as providing risk management and intelligence services. Dunn, who is a former director of military intelligence, says he started the company five years ago and it now has 14 full-time staff plus several part-time consultants. The latter includes David Sadlier, who is a former ambassador to China as well as an ex-head of ASIO.

According to Dunn, the big impetus for growth has come from concern about terrorism, but the company also assesses risks posed by fraud, disgruntled employees and industrial espionage. Although the task might seem to fall within the normal responsibilities of government agencies such as ASIO, Intelligent Outcomes does threat assessments for Department of Foreign Affairs staff and facilities in Australia.

Another growth area stems from US requirements (after September 11, 2001) for improved port security in countries wanting to export to America.

Dunn says the "almost exponential" growth in the industry following September 11 has created some problems of quality control among lesser known new entrants.

Like Fergus, he fears the industry is attracting people who "hang out their shingle without the necessary background or qualifications to do the work".

However, the Melbourne-based Global Village Survival group has no shortage of staff and associates with impressive CVs in pursuing its stated goal of protecting companies from non-commercial threats. Apart from Mick Palmer who retired as head of the AFP in March last year, they include the former Victoria Police Commissioner Neil Comrie, the former Victorian Fire Brigade chief Alan Richards, as well as Bill Crews who previously directed DIO.

The company, which was started last September by a former army brigadier, David Noble, also boasts the services of a chemical, biological and radiological threats expert, Alan Mellier.

No company official was available to speak to the media for a week, so it is not possible to report what success has been achieved in preventing a chemical, biological or radiological attack on any clients of Global Village Survival.