

# ASPI trades Iraq War criminal for new-age techno-spook

By Richard Bardon

After ten years as Australia's semi-official warmonger-in-chief, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) Executive Director Peter Jennings will step down at the end of this month. But ASPI's sponsors in the Defence Department, United States and allied governments, and the "Western" military-industrial complex may rest assured that their agenda is safe in the hands of Jennings' replacement Justin Bassi, whose career path and Liberal Party connections are so similar to his predecessor's that he might as well be the same man, updated for the digital age.

ASPI was established by the Liberal government of John Howard in 2001, and commenced operations in March 2002. It bills itself as an "independent, non-partisan think tank", whose "core" funding comes via an annual grant from the Defence Department. But it also accepts large sums from the governments of the USA, Britain, Japan, Taiwan, and other Anglo-American "allies", as well as from the US- and Europe-headquartered multinational armaments manufacturers which between them supply the vast majority of war materiel to the Western world, and therefore have a vested interest in stoking global tensions. When the *Australian* newspaper reported 19 December 2021 that Bassi had been anointed as Jennings' successor, it declared that "ASPI went from strength to strength under Mr Jennings over the past decade, becoming a leading global voice on the threat posed by Xi Jinping's China." As the *Australian Alert Service* and others have documented, however, what ASPI actually did was produce a steady stream of anti-China propaganda thinly disguised as impartial "research"—often commissioned directly by its state and corporate sponsors. Much of this research has been so blatantly biased or outright fraudulent<sup>1</sup> that even had Jennings' nominal term of office not expired, a change of leadership would have been necessary for ASPI to retain sufficient credibility to continue serving its masters' purposes.

Jennings took the reins at ASPI in May 2012, replacing its inaugural executive director Hugh White (now professor emeritus of strategic studies at the Australian National University), having previously been its "director of projects" in 2003-06. His resumé includes several senior roles in the Defence Department, notably Deputy Director of the Defence Imagery and Geospatial Organisation (now Australian Geospatial-Intelligence Organisation) in 2002; head of the Strategic Policy Branch in 1998-99; co-director of the East Timor Policy Unit, responsible for developing Australia's policy regarding the international peacekeeping operation in Timor-Leste (which wrecked Australia's relationship with Indonesia), in 1999; and Deputy Secretary for Strategy in 2009-12. He was also defence policy advisor to the Liberal Party opposition in 1990-93, chief of staff to Liberal Defence Minister Ian McLachlan MP in 1996-98, and senior strategic policy advisor to PM John Howard in 2002-03.

## Unrepentant war criminal

In the latter capacity, Jennings was intimately involved in ensuring Australia's involvement in the illegal US- and UK-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. John Howard, US President George W. Bush and British PM Tony Blair justified the invasion using what were later admitted to be "sexed up"—that is, deliberately falsified—British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) reports on the alleged threat posed by Iraqi "weapons of mass

destruction" they knew did not exist. In an article headlined "The Iraq war decision ten years on", published

14 April 2013 on ASPI's website, Jennings defended his own and Howard's actions by declaring that Australia simply had to go to war, because it "didn't have a realistic option to cut itself away from alliance loyalty to the US in 2003. Had we done so, the alliance relationship would have been in profound crisis. That realisation informed much of the national security community's approach to the decision to deploy Australian forces." (Emphasis added.) Jennings also downplayed then-Labor leader Simon Crean's principled opposition to the war as being based on a mere technicality, and his later claims of vindication hypocritical, because a speech Crean gave in Parliament at the time "[made] it clear that the Opposition accepted the view that Iraq was concealing WMD and indeed would have supported the commitment of Australian forces had a further UNSC [United Nations Security Council] resolution authorising the conflict been passed. This was a position structured around a preference for UN procedure, not opposition to war." (Emphasis added.) Not mentioned is that under the international law established by the UN Charter, which became Australian law the moment it was ratified by Parliament in November 1945, the "UN procedure" Jennings so airily dismissed is the only thing aside from an imminent threat (which, again, they knew did not exist) that could have made the invasion in which he was personally complicit anything other than a blatant war crime.

Since his impending departure was announced last year, Jennings has been lionised left, right and centre as a veritable sage whose "contributions and leadership have deepened strategic policy discussions in this country", as Defence Minister Peter Dutton said in a 29 March press release formally announcing Bassi's appointment. To the extent that this last is true, it is only because the mainstream media, riddled with intelligence mouthpieces and US fellow-travellers, has been entirely uncritical of the manifold failures of intelligence that have made ASPI a laughingstock in much of the outside world. Had Australia an actually free and objective press, Jennings' personal credibility would have died four years into his tenure, after his repeated insistence that the Australian Bureau of Statistics website had melted down on census night, 9 August 2016, because of an attack by "hackers" from China.<sup>2</sup> "We've had quite a sophisticated attempt to take down the ABS and maybe also to steal information", Jennings told ABC's 7.30 program the next evening, insisting that a foreign state must be involved and that "really, it comes down to Russia and China, and ... I think China has more of a motive at the moment." Jennings kept up this mantra for weeks, even after an investigation by federal intelligence agency the Australian Signals Directorate had determined that the census was in fact knocked out by a combination of technical faults and a series of relatively small "denial of service" attacks originating from the USA and Singapore, and there had been no "hacking" attempt at all.



Outgoing ASPI head Peter Jennings. Photo: YouTube

1. "ASPI: forced labour hypocrites and academic fraudsters", AAS, 14 Oct. 2020.

2. "2016 census fail: A case study in China-bashing", AAS, 9 Nov. 2016.

ASPI's vaunted International Cyber Policy Centre (ICPC), established in August 2013, has also been the object of much international derision for a string of alarmist reports which, among other things, misrepresented ordinary Chinese diplomatic and cultural outreach and talent-recruitment programs as global "political interference" and industrial espionage operations;<sup>3</sup> claimed to have identified some 300 "detention centres" in satellite images of China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, many of which could be easily identified from Google Maps and other open sources as schools, municipal buildings, factories and shopping centres;<sup>4</sup> and spun an intricate fantasy of a China-wide Uyghur slave labour program out of a handful of mistranslated government documents and anonymous "eyewitness" accounts—most of whose allegations concerned conduct that would not have breached any human rights law even if proven.<sup>5</sup>

### Mr CIA cufflinks

Small wonder then that the Morrison government would replace Jennings with a younger, more technically savvy version of himself—not to make ASPI's cyber intelligence (to use the term loosely) "research" more accurate, since that would defeat its purpose, but presumably to at least try to make it more plausible. As noted above, Bassi's Liberal Party and "deep state" pedigree are remarkably similar to his predecessor's. Little information about his education and early career are publicly available, and as of this writing, ASPI has not published a biography of its incoming leader; but his *curriculum vitae* since the Liberals returned to government in 2013 puts him squarely in the middle of the Anglo-American "Five Eyes" intelligence establishment-directed drive for a new Cold War with China,<sup>6</sup> of which ASPI has been the main public face in Australia.

Bassi comes to ASPI from the office of Foreign Minister Sen. Marise Payne, to whom he has been chief of staff since 2019. Reporting on his appointment to that role, the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 24 June 2019 described him as "the closest thing to a *bona fide* Antipodean 007 ... fresh from assignment in the Office of National Intelligence" (ONI), Australia's peak intelligence agency which reports directly to the Prime Minister. Dutton's 29 March press release stated that he had "served as a senior officer" there for an unspecified period, during which according to the above-cited *Australian* article he had "[led] the agency's cyber and critical technologies section". Before that, the *SMH* reported, in 2015-18 Bassi was national security advisor to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull—whose 2016 *Defence White Paper* for the first time officially described China as threat to the so-called rules-based global order—and was "previously a cyber security expert in the Attorney-General's Department under current British High Commissioner George Brandis ... [where he] was one of the key architects for the controversial data retention legislation the government introduced at the time". Fittingly given how much inspiration (and funding) ASPI draws from the US State Department, Bassi caused something of a stir by appearing in the Senate on 26 March 2015 during the final debate on that legislation, the *Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Amendment (Data Retention) Act*, wearing a pair of US



Justin Bassi, second from right, meeting a delegation as National Security Advisor to PM Malcolm Turnbull in 2017. (Curiously, photos of Bassi, who has been likened to 007, are hard to come by. This is from the Twitter account of Stefan Romaniw, the man on the left, an Australian who also happened to be the global Chairman of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists-B. The B stands for Bandera, or Stepan Bandera, Ukraine's notorious WWII Nazi collaborator. As head of ASPI, Bassi will be involved in the propaganda war about Ukraine, including whitewashing the heavy Nazi involvement in Ukraine's forces.) Photo: Twitter

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) cufflinks, which according to various media reports he had long been notorious for wearing to work at the Attorney-General's Department. Where and how he came by them has not been reported.

When his pending appointment to ASPI became public knowledge, Bassi was singled out for high praise from a veritable Who's Who of "China hawks" at home and abroad. Former US President Donald Trump's Deputy National Security Advisor Matthew Pottinger—reputed principal author of the 2018 *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* which outlines US plans to "contain" China militarily and economically so as to "maintain US primacy" in Asia<sup>7</sup>—told *The Australian* that Bassi was "the ideal person" to lead ASPI. "Australia and the rest of the free world have no idea of the debt we all owe Justin Bassi", Pottinger said. "He was an indispensable behind-the-scenes figure steering Australia's strategic realignment [against China] these last several years." Bassi had been "instrumental in putting foreign influence and interference on the national security agenda, and developing the 2016 Cyber Security Strategy", the *Australian* added, and was also "a key adviser to Mr Turnbull on the decision to ban Huawei and other Chinese telcos from Australia's 5G network, and was a major player in developing legislation on foreign interference, counter-terrorism, cyber intrusions and border security"—all of whose passage into law ASPI eased by propagandising the public in their favour. Another propaganda agent involved in the same campaign, aggressively anti-China former Fairfax Media foreign correspondent turned Turnbull "espionage" advisor John Garnaut,<sup>8</sup> called Bassi "the most capable national security professional of his generation". The late Sen. Kimberley Kitching, who was a member of the US-loyalist, fanatically anti-China "Wolverines" bipartisan parliamentary clique, also lauded Bassi's work while at Payne's office, where it is suggested he played a major part in getting the so-called Magnitsky sanctions she had championed incorporated into Australia's autonomous sanctions regime; as well as in the *Foreign Relations Act 2020*, which lets the Commonwealth veto state and local governments' education, trade and other partnerships with foreign counterparts. Both of those laws also principally target China. As head of ASPI, Bassi will now be in charge of cooking up pretexts to justify their application.

3. "A tale of two think tanks: Canberra escalates McCarthyism, de-funds diplomacy", AAS, 17 June 2020; "Canberra unveils next phase of New Cold War vs China", AAS, 2 Sept. 2020.

4. "ASPI doubles down on Xinjiang 'detention centre' fakery", AAS, 30 Sept. 2020.

5. "Independent legal analyst shreds ASPI's Uyghur 'forced labour' claims", AAS, 12 Jan. 2022.

6. "The China narrative, part five: All roads lead to ASIO", AAS, 23 Sept. 2020.

7. "The Nazi roots of the 'Indo-Pacific strategy'", AAS, 20 Jan. 2021.

8. "The China narrative part three: Espionage and interference", AAS, 9 Sept. 2020.