

# MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS AT SIG

By Rod Cowan\*



**N**OT ONLY WERE THE CROWDS MISSING from this year's Security in Government (SIG) conference, but more than a few keynote speakers were no-shows, too.

Kicking off the event, the Federal Attorney-General, Robert McClelland, opened with something of a history lesson. Not only was the week before the seventh anniversary of 9/11, said McClelland, but the first day of the conference coincided with what was "until 11 September 2001, the worst terrorist attack in the history of New York." On September 16 1920, a horse-drawn carriage with 45 kilos of dynamite exploded, killing more than 30 people, causing widespread fear and panic. The Washington Post of the day declared the event an "act of war," which, McClelland said, was a phrase "familiar to every one of us." His point being, national security threats were not new.

"What we in Government must do is to re-examine the assumptions we make about the nature of the threat and what this means for Australia's response," said McClelland. He then went on to talk about Australia's "first ever National Security Statement" (but more on that later). Aside from that, there were no announcements. No news. In fact, there was little fodder for a security savvy crowd.

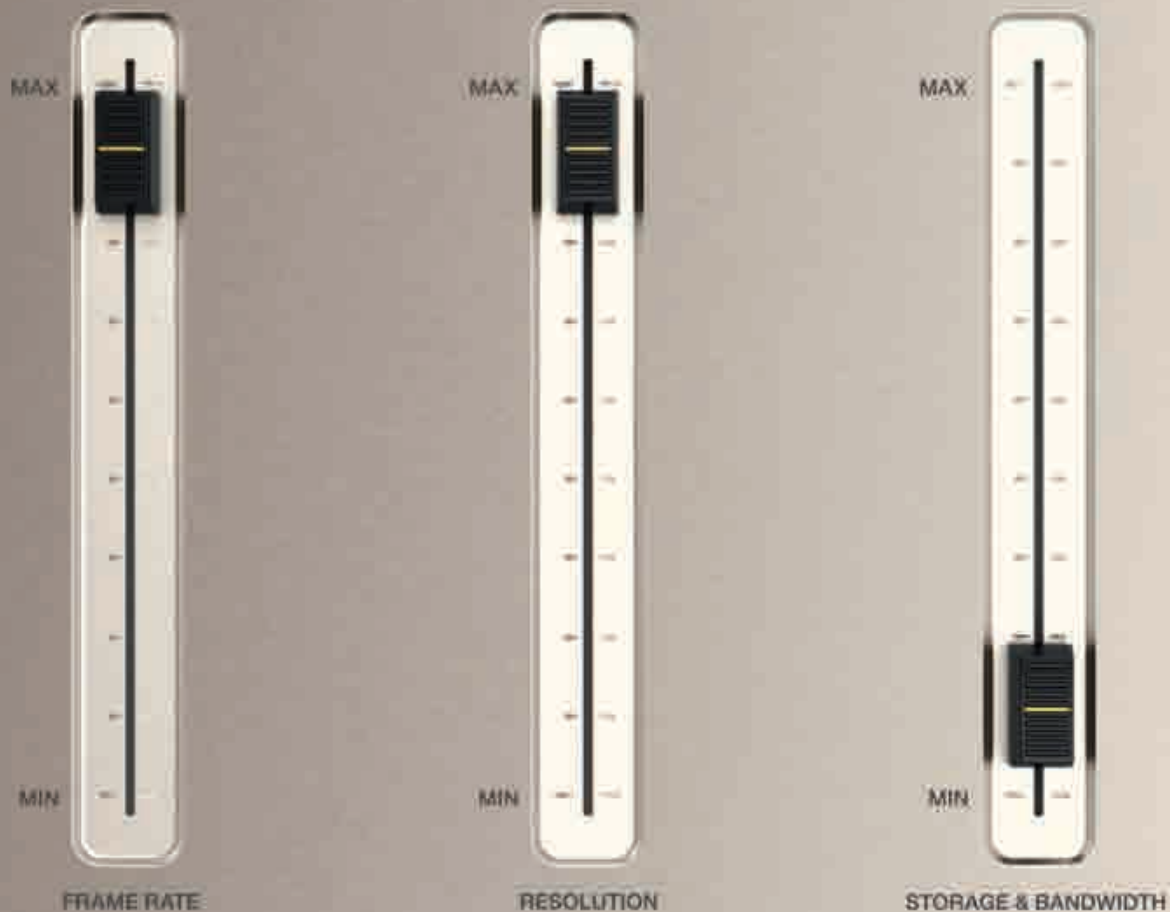
Major General Maurie McNam, Director, Defence Intelligence

Organisation, and Paul O'Sullivan, Director-General of Security, ASIO were both last minute cancellations. Stand-ins appeared to read off speeches prepared for the missing parties, giving away little more than could you would find on their respective organisation's websites. Also missing was Duncan Lewis, Deputy Secretary, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, which was a pity, since he was due to talk about the National Security Statement. Instead, The Australian journalist, Greg Sheridan was drafted in at the last minute. "Quite funny," as one person put it, with others agreeing, "but I don't think I agree with everything he said." Foreshadowing, perhaps, what could be the response to the National Security Statement itself.

Day two of the conference did well in covering e-security. Pitched at the right level, and still being of interest to the more knowledgeable in the audience was no easy task, but an important one nonetheless. As Bob Debus, Minister for Home Affairs, pointed out: "The Internet is now the target for traditional crimes, such as fraud, identity theft and child exploitation. And, it's not just individuals: one of the largest threats to our security is sophisticated frauds and attacks against business, government and critical infrastructure,

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In fairness, the event was not devoid of good speakers. For example, Dr Carl Ungerer's outline of Australia's international drivers – the big four being ideology and identity, nationalism, continuing US primacy, and global demographics – is well worth looking at and can be downloaded from the SIG 2008 website. In short, globalisation is in trouble, says Ungerer.

“For Australia's national security interests, the four international drivers... suggest that conflict in the international system is not going away anytime soon,” said Ungerer. “Preserving Australia's freedom of action and ability to pursue national objectives without external coercion is likely to become more not less of a policy challenge.”

Another worthy speaker was Professor of Strategic Studies, ANU, Hugh White's speech (also on the SIG Website) on global threats and international security, spanning the globe and the next 40 years with sobering insights.

Equally daunting, and equally well put, was Dr Keith Suter's dinner address on delivering climate security. According to Suter, things look bad, but there will be job opportunities, such as biomechanics, and completely new careers, such as carbon forensic accounting. Although an admirable address, it might have been better confined to the conference, rather than a dinner speech. The again, maybe it was too serious a forum for a footy player with inspirational and entertaining advice.

It wasn't in the past.

Therein lies the rub: are the organisers aiming too high and too broad, with too much emphasis on counter terrorism and global issues?

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Somewhere along the way SIG morphed into a showcase, something of a rallying point, and a growing exhibition, run this year by an events company, Sydney-based ICMS.

The danger of relying on drawcard names, apart from the fact they may have to be called off for operational reasons, is that nothing is really learnt.

When it began SIG – organised by Attorney-General staff – was a gathering of Agency Security Advisors, joined by some consultants, managers, and practitioners, with an emphasis on the practical and open discussion.

To be sure, the organisers know something needs to change for SIG to remain a meaningful exercise.

A spokesperson for ICMS said there was some discussion about changes for next year, including its timing and “maybe broadening its appeal” and becoming “more commercial!”

A better plan might be to “re-examine the assumptions” and have a Security in Government conference.

After all, no one would want to see a Rudd Government be like this year's SIG brochure – big on promise and no one there to deliver.

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