

Analysis Politics Federal Home Truths

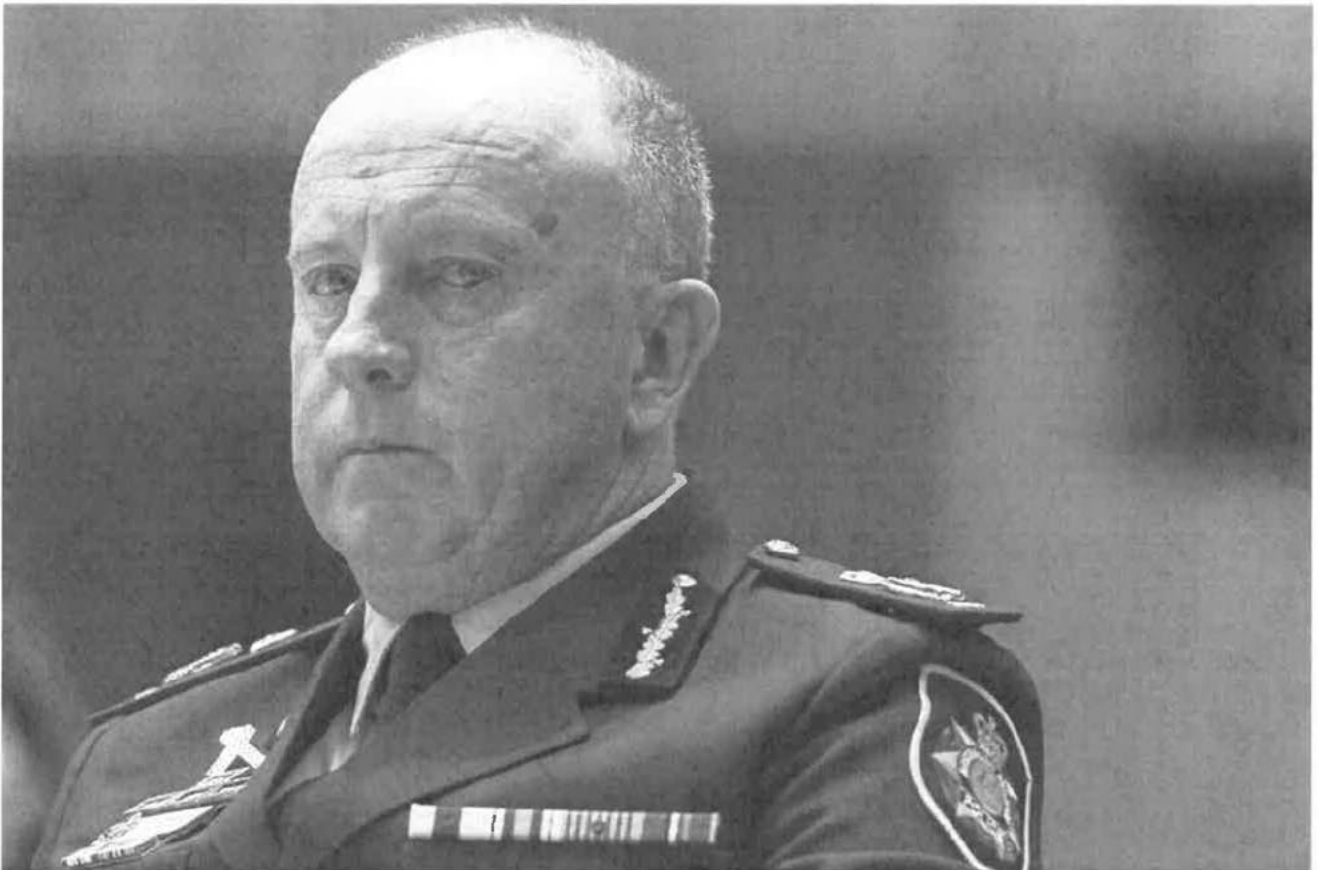
The police came to set the record straight, but we all ended up confused

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Even those following the Home Affairs contract corruption issue closely might have been befuddled by Friday's events in Senate estimates.

The Australian Federal Police apparently came to set the record straight, but mainly managed to raise more questions, few of which its senior officers could answer.



Australian Federal Police Deputy Commissioner Neil Gaughan during Friday's hearing. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

This is what we know: For five years from 2015, the AFP was pursuing Sydney businessman Mozammil Bhojani and his company for making under-the-table payments to senior officials on Nauru. These bought him preferential access to lucrative shipments of Nauru's phosphate in 2015 and 2017. He made millions.

Phone taps confirmed that Bhojani made the payments, and he pleaded guilty in 2020 and quit as a director of his company, Radiance International. The company itself kept operating. But the entire time the Australian Federal Police were pursuing him for the phosphate crimes, Bhojani was doing lucrative business with a separate part of the Home Affairs department – offshore processing.

He had three different hotels providing accommodation to asylum seekers and refugees: Anibare Lodge, the Budapest Hotel and Anabar Pond. The Anibare Lodge contract was signed in 2014, (remember, the AFP bribery investigation started in 2015), then Budapest Hotel was signed by Home Affairs in 2016 and Anabar Pond in August 2018.



Anabar Pond Hotel in Nauru was one of the facilities run by Radiance International.

Bhojani also had a hand in the food supply contracts to Nauru through another company, AW Exports. In 2016, staff of lead contractor Broadspectrum expressed concern that AW Exports was bribing a Nauruan MP in return for permission to supply bottled water – which would mean the corruption was not just in phosphate, but in offshore processing. This has never been subject to an investigation or prosecution.

We now know, thanks to AFP Deputy Commissioner Neil Gaughan, that in July 2018 – just a month before Bhojani signed the third accommodation contract – police warned Peter Dutton, then the home affairs minister, that an arrest of an unnamed person was imminent in a foreign bribery case. Police were worried it might affect the forthcoming Pacific Island Forum meeting on Nauru.

However, Gaughan admitted on Friday that the AFP did not identify Bhojani in that briefing with Dutton – and that the force had got it wrong when it answered a recent question on notice in parliament by saying it had. That incorrect earlier answer was subsequently reported by this masthead and others.

In any event, Dutton did not have long to wait for the name: Bhojani was arrested a couple of months later, in September 2018, and the AFP issued a media release about it. This event would normally trigger a briefing to Dutton, Gaughan said. But had *that* briefing taken place? He took the question on notice.

If Dutton didn't know that Bhojani was being investigated, Home Affairs certainly did. Dutton has said in interviews the "secretary of the department" would have been told, and Gaughan also confirmed the bureaucrats were aware.

So why did the department keep signing contracts with a suspected crook? And when exactly did Home Affairs learn he was suspected of bribery offences? After saying the first question was one for the department, Gaughan took the second on notice.

On the police side, Gaughan could confirm the AFP knew that Radiance was a contractor to the offshore processing system. Asked if it had passed any police concerns to Home Affairs about that fact, he took the question on notice.

And when did the police find out about the Home Affairs link? Gaughan took that on notice too.

It's worth remembering that, from 2017, the AFP was part of Home Affairs – a portfolio formed partly so that information and intelligence could be shared more seamlessly.

Why is all this important? Because not only have these contracts meant potentially millions of Australian taxpayer dollars has been wasted, but Home Affairs rewarded the corrupt in a tiny nation whose people can ill afford it.

Dutton, current Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil and the department also all refused to elaborate on Friday.

So now we wait for the AFP's answers to the questions on notice. Let's hope this time, Gaughan gets them right.

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