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DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

**Opening Statement
Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee
Senate Estimates**

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The Department and the Portfolio of Home Affairs has in its modern configuration been in existence for over three years, having been re-established in December 2017. The establishment phase which was directed by the Government has been completed, and not before time as the nation contends with parallel and concurrent strategic challenges, including (but not limited to) a global pandemic; extreme weather events; cyber-attacks; ideologically- and religiously-motivated violent extremism; risks to supply chains, telecommunications and critical infrastructure; espionage and foreign interference; deliberate disinformation campaigns; and misinformation which races around the world before truth has even tied the laces of its runners.

The establishment of the modern department was never about operational and tactical coordination, for instance in relation to counter-terrorism operations, where ASIO and the AFP possess a deep reservoir of professional skill and expertise. It was always about long-term strategy and planning, and strategic coordination across a range of issues which see an intersection of security, economic and/or social policy interests, and where there is no clear departmental lead. In the era of the 'grey zone' between peace and war, of state competition which is below the threshold of confrontation and conflict, and where some non-state actors are increasingly taking on state-like features and capacities, democracies can chose either to have such a department in place or be forced into creating such a department by force of circumstance.

These challenges have demanded versatility in response – such as we have seen in the establishment a year ago (March 2020) of the National Coordination Mechanism (as an adjunct

of the Department's emergency management function) to assist with the non-health response to COVID-19. These challenges have also demanded innovation in organisational design – such as we have seen in the grouping together for the first time in July 2020 of the following functions in the interests of Australia's social cohesion: citizenship, multicultural engagement, countering foreign interference and countering violent extremism and terrorism, all of which reside within a single group in the Department.

To support the Government's plan for Australia to become a world-leading digital economy over the next decade, Home Affairs is working with Government agencies, businesses and the community to further enhance **cyber security** measures and protect critical infrastructure. The Department is responsible for:

- The Surveillance Legislation Amendment (Identify and Disrupt) Bill 2020, which is now before the Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security that is focussed on the security risks which arise from the increasingly pervasive use of anonymising technologies;
- The Security Legislation Amendment (Critical Infrastructure) Bill 2020, also before the Joint Committee, includes reforms to protect critical infrastructure and enable Government assistance to industry in the context of the most serious likely cyber-attacks on national systems;
- The modernisation of the Surveillance Devices Act, Telecommunications (Interception and Access) Act and those parts of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Act governing the use of computer access and surveillance device powers as recommended by the Richardson Review – the *Comprehensive Review of the Legal Framework of the National Intelligence Community*.

Digital identities constitute an essential component of trust in online transactions. Home Affairs is working with the Digital Transformation Agency and other partner agencies to support the government's digital identity program. This program will make available trusted digital identities for use in accessing government services online. As one element of this work, the Department is working with states and territories to complete the rollout of the Face Verification Service—subject to the passage of the Identity-matching Services Bill 2019. The Bill has also been referred to the Joint Committee.

Immigration will be an important element of economic recovery, with its capacity to stimulate economic growth, create jobs and attract investment. Attracting people with the skills and talent Australia needs is a priority. The **Global Business and Talent Attraction Taskforce** (the Taskforce) is supporting the Government's JobMaker blueprint for the post-COVID economic recovery. The Taskforce targets and attracts exceptionally talented individuals and international business entities with the potential to make large-scale positive impacts on the national economy and to create jobs. To ensure Australia is competitive in attracting individuals and businesses, the Taskforce is facilitating rapid and seamless integration into the Australian economy through tailored assistance programs and streamlined visa pathways.

The Department is also focused on continuing to ensure that the integrity of our immigration programme is maintained and where necessary enhanced. Since 2015-16, with changes in how the Department applies intelligence discovery and analytical tools to the immigration programme, the rate of refusal of visa applications has increased from 2.5% in 2015-16 of all applications decided to 4.5% in 2019-20, which is a very significant increase in the refusal rate – which indicates that we are doing so much better in terms of detecting and dealing with risk and fraud in the immigration programme. Had we maintained our earlier, less effective, performance, then the number of additional visas which would have granted in high risk or fraudulent cases would have been over 145,000 in 2019-20 alone.

For more details on achievements in Immigration and Citizenship services, I refer the Committee to the latest edition of the publication *The Administration of the Immigration and Citizenship Programs* which is now available on the Department's website.

The Department, through Emergency Management Australia, has been actively involved in the emergency response to natural disasters throughout the 2020-21 high-risk weather season, including the bushfires in Western Australia, and floods in South Australia and Queensland. The Australian Government responded in November 2020 to the recommendations of the **Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements**, supporting or supporting in principle all of the relevant recommendations. The Department of Home Affairs will lead the enhancements to EMA to increase our capacity to respond to the likely increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters. Home Affairs is also working in partnership with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in the design and establishment of a new **national resilience, relief and recovery function**, and we are working with that Department to establish a new end-

to-end operating model for the national disaster management and recovery continuum, as recommended by the Royal Commission.

The Department is working with other agencies to counter disinformation, provide factual information about COVID-19, and to promote Australian values. We have worked closely with the Department of Health to provide the public with factual information about COVID-19 and the vaccine roll-out. This information is translated into 63 languages, published on our website and provided to Australian communities through our Community Liaison Officer network. The Department is also focused on strengthening social cohesion by promoting Australia's inclusive national identity, citizenship and Australian values. Before Australia Day 2021, we launched a new website and a number of social media channels promoting and celebrating Australian values. The channels host content and information in English and in the top three languages other than English spoken in Australia - Chinese, Arabic, and Vietnamese.

In parallel, we are engaging across government, business and internationally to prepare for international travel to resume at scale. The resumption of international travel needs to be effectively managed through a comprehensive biosecure border framework. International collaboration on standards will strengthen governments' ability to implement biosecure borders. We are working with international partners to design ways to collect and validate a traveller's health and vaccine status. The aim would be to capture a person's recent travel history along with their visa and contact information. This information will support effective contact tracing, quarantine management and individual health risk evaluations. Home Affairs is also working closely with other agencies including Services Australia to develop specifications and standards for personal digital vaccination certificates and a biosecure border framework.

In the end the Government will take advice on this matter – including especially from public health experts including the Commonwealth Chief Medical Officer and his colleagues on the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee. The role of Home Affairs is to support the Government's consideration of this matter with expert advice on border management and relevant data exchange issues.

Finally, I take this opportunity to welcome the **Office of the Special Investigator (OSI)** to the Home Affairs Portfolio as a new executive agency. Headed by Mr Chris Moraitis, the Office of the Special Investigator was established on 4 January 2021. The OSI is an independent agency which receives corporate and enabling services from the Department.

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