

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs, defence
and trade 2020-21

QUESTION ON NOTICE / Verbal

**001 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
defence and trade – 2 September 2020**

Senator Tim Ayres

Question

AYRES: On the 28th of August the Prime Minister said that the government has been working on legislation, I think he said, for many months. Has Department been working on the legislation for many months?

NEWNHAM: The Department's been working on the legislation for approximately 2 months. I could check the exact timing on that and come back. That's the approximate timing we've been working on it, from the beginning of the process.

AYRES: From the beginning of the process, so you'd be able to come back to us about how long that work has been going on for?

NEWNHAM: It was approximately late June, early July, but I'll come back with an exact date.

Answer

The Department first participated in a legislative drafting discussion on 2 July 2020.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Verbal

**002 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Senator Tim Ayres

Question

AYRES: Thanks Mr Newnham. Has the Department ever advised a state or local government not to pursue a third party agreement or a memorandum with a foreign country?

ADAMSON: I'd have to take on notice whether we have ever because that's a very sort of broad question. We do, either through our state offices or DFAT here in Canberra, provide advice when our advice is sought, about MOUs, and that - over the years that has certainly happened. I can't recall an instance where we have been in a position, where we have provided strict advice about instructing or advising a government not to enter into, but as you know we have provided advice in a particular instance springs to mind about the inadvisability of moving ahead. But it hasn't been our role thus far to adjudicate specifically over these things, and that, of course, is a reason for the introduction of this legislation, to ensure that there is a uniform approach consistent with Australia's foreign relations interests, our national interests.

Answer

Refer to the answer to Question on Notice 004.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Verbal

**003 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Mr Patrick Gorman, MP

Question

GORMAN: What measures – just to jump to increasing the capacity for Australians to return home, what measures is the Department aware of to increase the quarantine capacity in Australia, including in remote and regional areas, and at Christmas Island, so that more Australians can return home?

WEBSTER: Thank you, that would be a matter for other portfolios.

GORMAN: I'm asking what the Department is aware of -

FAWCETT: You can take that on notice, if you don't have information on hand and we'll go to Senator McMahon.

Answer

On 21 August, the Prime Minister announced that he had tasked the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Defence to bring forward measures to better support Australians who are still overseas. Australia's domestic quarantine capacity is primarily a matter for the relevant State and Territory jurisdictions.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Written

**004 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Question:

State government agreements

1. Has the Department ever advised a state or local government not to pursue a third-party agreement with a foreign country? Has the Department ever advised a state or local government not to sign up to any aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?
2. Can the Department provide a list of all briefings the Department has provided to state and local governments since 1 January 2018?
3. Given that Trade Minister Birmingham said on 4 November 2018 that the government was 'positive for Australian engagement in BRI', can the Department explain why the Prime Minister, when asked about the Victorian Government's BRI MOU, said on 24 May 2020 that 'we didn't support that decision at the time'? Was it DFAT's policy to not support the Victorian Government's 2018 MOU with China on the BRI? Was this policy communicated to the Victorian Government? If so, when?
4. Is it the Department's view that the 2015 leasing of the Port of Darwin for 99 years to a Chinese company is against Australia's national interest?
5. Did the Department provide any advice on the lease of the Port of Darwin to the Northern Territory Government at the time? If so, when?
6. Is the Department considering any options to reassert Australian ownership of the Port of Darwin as a strategic asset?

Answer

1. DFAT regularly engages with state and territory governments on a range of matters, including updates relating to foreign and trade policy issues. To provide comprehensive information about engagement in respect of individual arrangements would require extensive examination of DFAT's historical files. We are not in a position to undertake such a search given time and resource constraints.

The Commonwealth does not currently have any mechanism by which it could direct a state, territory or local government to not enter into an arrangement with a foreign country and for that direction to be enforced.

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In relation to the BRI, DFAT has advised state and territory governments that have raised the BRI that the Federal Government's position is to engage China on investment in third countries in practical ways, rather than entering into agreements or frameworks that could have broader policy implications. DFAT has also advised that the Australian Government has not signed onto or endorsed the BRI, but rather is committed to strengthening Australia's economic relations with China through our bilateral Free Trade Agreement and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Consistent with the Commonwealth Government's position on the BRI, DFAT's advice has been to consider the national interest, including the range of trade, security and strategic implications associated with the BRI, noting that matters relating to foreign and strategic policy are the remit of the Commonwealth Government.

2. The Department, including via its network of seven state and territory offices and more than 100 overseas missions, regularly briefs state, territory and local governments and their overseas representatives on a range of matters. To attempt to provide all of the information requested would entail a significant and unreasonable diversion of resources.
3. The full quote from Minister Birmingham reads: "I haven't discussed the content of it with Victoria but we have been, and are, positive for Australian engagement in BRI, where those projects are sustainable projects that provide clear benefits for the recipients".

DFAT had concerns about the Victorian Government's plans in 2018 for an MOU, and advised Victoria that it should act consistently with the Commonwealth Government's policy position on the BRI: that is, that we support practical cooperation on individual projects that met appropriate standards but we had chosen not to enter into a written agreement on the BRI.

DFAT communicated the Commonwealth Government's policy position on the BRI to Victoria in February, May and June 2018.

4. Matters of national interest are for the Government to determine. The Minister for Defence, Senator the Hon Linda Reynolds CSC, said on 9 September 2020 that "...we currently do not have any defence security concerns in relation to the commercial Port of Darwin."
5. The Department did not provide advice on the lease of the Port of Darwin to the Northern Territory Government. In the normal course of work, DFAT was asked (by Treasury) to contribute to a preliminary Foreign Investment Review Board assessment of Landbridge's application to acquire the Port of Darwin. We advised the Treasury of our views. We cannot share those views; DFAT's assessments are confidential in accordance with the Foreign Acquisitions and Takeovers Act 1975.

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6. Any consideration of options to reassert Australian ownership of the Port of Darwin as a strategic asset would be one for Government.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Written

**005 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Question

Stranded Australians

How many requests to DFAT for emergency financial assistance have been rejected by the department?

On current circumstances, how long does the Department anticipate it will take for the 23,000 Australians seeking to return home to be able to do so?

Does the department expect that number to increase or decrease in coming months?

Answer

As at 7 September 2020, the Department had received 253 applications for financial assistance following the Foreign Minister's announcement of the establishment of the Hardship Program on 2 September. As at 7 September, none of these applications had been rejected for funding.

Given ongoing changes to the COVID-19 situation in Australia and overseas, we will not speculate on how long it might take all Australians wishing to return to Australia to do so.

The Department expects that the number of Australians registering an interest in returning will continue to increase.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Written

**006 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Question

Travel

Was any overseas travel cancelled for any portfolio minister as a result of the Coronavirus Pandemic?

What were the destination and nature of each of these trips?

What was the cost of each of these cancellations (including but not limited to hotel, hospitality, airfares and costs for the travel of officials and staff)?

Answer

Senator the Hon Marise Payne's planned visit to Papua New Guinea and Palau from 16 to 19 March 2020 was cancelled, owing to the coronavirus pandemic. The visit was an opportunity to reinforce Australia's commitment to the Pacific Step-up and profile Australia's expanded diplomatic network in the Pacific through the opening of Australia's embassy in Palau. Cancellation costs for this visit were approximately AUD1,600.

Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham's planned visit to the US and Canada in March 2020 was cancelled, owing to the coronavirus pandemic. Senator Birmingham intended to meet US counterparts, engage business groups and attend an Ottawa Group meeting. No cancellation costs were incurred.

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**007 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Question

Overseas Staff

1. How many DFAT staff posted overseas have returned to Australia due to the Coronavirus Pandemic?
2. What was the cost to DFAT of this travel?
3. Has DFAT increased reliance on locally engaged staff in 2020. If so please provide financial impacts and details on the number of additional staff at each post?

Answer

1. Almost 300 departmental staff and 800 dependants departed posts, or were already absent from post and were unable to return, due to COVID-19. Since mid-May, staff and dependants are progressively returning to posts following an assessment of the risks in each location and appropriate mitigations.
2. The cost of airfares for travel to Australia by these staff and dependents was \$1.39 million.
3. No. The department's locally engaged staff workforce has decreased in 2020. At 1 July 2019, the department's locally engaged full-time equivalent staff level was 2257.86. At 1 July 2020, the department's locally engaged full-time equivalent staff level was 2202.58. All staff across our network contributed to DFAT's support for the Government's response to COVID-19. In addition to staff working at posts, operations overseas were supported by surge 'tiger teams' in Canberra and short-term deployments.

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**008 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Question

ICT

What additional ICT equipment has DFAT provided each portfolio minister since the beginning of the Pandemic?

Answer

DFAT provided the following ICT equipment to the Office of Senator the Hon Marise Payne:

- 1 x laptop
- 1 x laptop docking station
- 2 x monitor
- 1 x printer
- 1 x 4G modem
- 1 x switch
- 2 x Wi-Fi extender

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**009 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Question

Social Media

Has DFAT issued any guidance for social media to Heads of Mission or overseas posts since the beginning of the pandemic? Can you please provide a copy of any guidance?

Answer

Since the beginning of the pandemic, staff in Canberra have supported Heads of Mission and posts to increase their use of social media through mentoring, providing content and tips on best practice.

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**010 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Question

SmartTraveller

1. In 2019 DFAT closed SmartTraveller registrations. Is DFAT planning on a replacement service?
2. Has DFAT relied on any legacy data or registrations from SmartTraveller in managing the response to the Coronavirus Pandemic?

Answer

1. DFAT replaced the pre-travel ("just in case") registration system with a new subscription service and a "just in time" registration system in November 2019. Australians can subscribe to receive updates to travel advice via email and/or SMS, and register with the Department in a crisis. This registration system was used to help organise assisted departures for Australians from Wuhan in early February. In addition, we have developed a COVID-19 specific system, which was rolled out in April 2020 to capture data on numbers of Australians seeking to return to Australia. The Consular Emergency Centre continues to be the 24/7 contact point for any Australian in trouble overseas.
2. No.

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**011 – Inquiry into the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Australia's foreign affairs,
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Question

Staffing profile

Has DFAT increased the number of Consular Operations staff in Canberra in 2020? If so by how much?

What was the full time equivalent staffing of the following groups/sections of DFAT at 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2020

- Global Cooperation, Development and Partnerships Group
- Trade, Investment and Business Engagement Group
- Office of the Pacific
- International Security, Humanitarian and Consular Group
- Service Delivery Group

Answer

Yes. DFAT reallocated staff to its Consular and Crisis Management Division and established two temporary branches to address the significant consular and crisis management workload associated with the COVID-19 response. DFAT also activated its Crisis Centre and Emergency Call Unit.

Consular and Crisis Management Division's FTE is generally around 79 staff. To respond to COVID-19, staff numbers more than doubled. Approximately 98 additional staff from other areas of the department provided support to the division at different times.

In addition, the Crisis Centre was activated for 40 consecutive days (1 Feb-12 March), including 12 days of 24 hour capacity (1-11, 19 Feb), staffed by 119 Crisis Cadre members drawn from across the department.

The Emergency Call Unit (ECU), which provides surge capacity for the 24/7 Consular Emergency Centre, was activated three times in response to the COVID crisis for a total of 95 days. Approximately 240 ECU operators undertook shifts in the ECU, including from the department's state and passport offices.

Overseas, the department has 165 Australian Public Service (APS) staff with consular responsibilities, supported by a further 214 locally engaged staff. However, given the scale of the COVID-19 consular response, many more APS and locally engaged staff, including our Ambassadors and High Commissioners, have supported consular efforts in addition to their normal roles.

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The table below provides FTE allocations for DFAT Groups on 30 June 2019 and 30 June 2020:

<u>Group</u>	<u>30 June 2019 FTE</u>	<u>30 June 2020 FTE</u>
Global Cooperation, Development and Partnerships Group	343	336.3
Trade, Investment and Business Engagement Group	288	264.5
Office of the Pacific	150.5	169.5
International Security, Humanitarian and Consular Group	352	343
Service Delivery Group	621.5	630.7

Actual FTE numbers vary throughout the year with staff movements and short-term redeployments to departmental priorities.