

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee

QoN Number: 1

Subject: Likelihood of Foreign Interference in the upcoming referendum

Asked by: James Paterson

Question:

Senator Paterson – Can you give me your assessment or the likelihood of foreign interference in relation to the upcoming referendum.

Mr Coles – the question you have asked is ultimately, I'm sorry chair we're just getting some significant feedback have you still got me.....Ultimately the question you have asked is a matter for intelligence agencies but what I can say is that the electoral integrity assurance taskforce has received security advice from ASIO relating to the referendum.

Senator Paterson – Yes, ASIO as I understand wasn't available to appear today which is unfortunate, could you speak to that advice, of course you can't reveal classified material in an open forum like this but, in the best identified way that you can, can you say is it a risk, how serious is the risk, how serious are you taking it?

Mr Coles – No I can't Senator, I'm sorry, for further detail I would have to take those further questions you have asked on notice.

Answer:

ASIO is always considering the foreign interference threat to Australia's political systems and process in line with its legislated role and this of course extends to the proposed referendum.

If ASIO identifies foreign interference targeting the proposed referendum, it would work quickly with its partners to address the threat. In accordance with long standing practice that is necessary to protect its methods and capabilities, ASIO does not talk about operational matters publicly.

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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee

04 May 2023

QoN Number: 2

Subject: Ability to identify foreign interference.

Asked by: James Paterson

Question:

Senator PATERSON: How confident are you of your ability to identify an equivalent operation if it were focused on Australia and operating on these platforms?

Mr Coles: That would be a question better put to intelligence agencies.

Senator PATERSON: To who? I'm sorry, I just missed that last word.

Mr Coles: To ASIO or other relevant intelligence agencies.

Senator PATERSON: Yes. As I've observed, ASIO is not here at the moment and you are and, as you say, you've been briefed by them on this. What ability would the Australian government have to identify an operation like this directed towards us?

Mr Coles: Beyond the fact that we have the governance structure in place, as I've already mentioned, I would need to take on notice the question on the further details you have asked for and flag that that would be most appropriately addressed by ASIO or one of the other intel agencies.

Answer:

- Home Affairs is a member of the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce (the Taskforce). The Taskforce is responsible for assessing, understanding and mitigating threats to electoral integrity, including foreign interference, and, if required, providing relevant advice and information to the Electoral Commissioner.
- Taskforce agencies operate within their existing remit and resources to support the operation of the Taskforce. Individual agencies would be best placed to speak on their remit and contribution.
- It would be inappropriate to comment publicly on operational capabilities.

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PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee

04 May 2023

QoN Number: 3

Subject: Foreign interference identification

Asked by: James Paterson

Question:

Senator PATERSON: If you can answer this today, I'd be grateful, but if you can't, I'll accept an answer on notice. Does the identification of these kinds of networks require the participation and active support and assistance of these platforms? If so, are you confident that you have the level of cooperation you need to identify these?

Mr Coles: I'll have to take that on notice as well.

Answer:

- Social media companies play an important role alongside government to detect and prevent influence operations on their platforms.
- Social media companies have implemented various policies to govern how their platforms are used to combat information operations.
- The Australian Government has committed to releasing an Exposure Draft Bill in the first half of 2023 to provide the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) with new powers to combat dis- and misinformation and increase transparency on digital platforms. Under the proposed legislation, the ACMA would be able to compel the digital platforms to provide information about the actions they are taking to address dis- and misinformation. The Government intends to introduce the Bill into Parliament, after public consultation, later in 2023.
- On 22 February 2021, Digital Industry Group Inc. launched the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation, a voluntary industry code that commits signatories to reducing the risk of online dis- and misinformation in Australia. The code has eight signatories—Adobe, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Redbubble, TikTok and Twitter. The code was updated on 22 December 2022.

- In preparation for the referendum, the AEC and relevant Taskforce members have engaged with representatives from Meta, Google, Snap, TikTok, Twitter, Microsoft, Tencent and Reddit, to ensure referral processes are in place to allow platforms to take action against content that breaches relevant legislation or platform terms of service.