

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Inquiry into Australian Antarctic Division Funding

QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

Inquiry into Australian Antarctic Division Funding

Hearing Date: 29 January 2024

Topic: AAD Meeting discussions

Senator Peter Whish-Wilson

Question

CHAIR: When you have those biannual meetings, you get the various Australian government Antarctic interests together. Have internal issues within, for example, the Australian Antarctic Division been subject to discussion at those meetings, or are you dealing more with external developments where you're briefing them and providing them with advice?

Mr Schofield: I am not in a position to let you know whether internal workings of AAD have been discussed. That's just because I don't actually know the answer to that. I can take that on notice and get back to you on that point.

Answer

The Australian Antarctic Division has provided updates to stakeholders, including through a standing agenda item for meetings of the Deputy Secretary Strategic Panel on Antarctic Affairs, on internal issues such as the findings and implementation of recommendations from the Nash Review and the Russell Review.

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Hearing Date: 29 January 2024

Topic: International perceptions

Senator Jonathon Duniam

Question

Senator DUNIAM: Thank you, Mr Schofield, for those remarks and answers to the chair's questions. I go back to the points you were making around Australia continuing to be a leader in the Antarctic science space and all of the other functions it has. I accept the points you make there. One of the answers you provided to Senator Whish-Wilson was that no other treaty partner or member has made a point to the Commonwealth of Australia about any concerns around perceived or other reductions in funding or support for Antarctic science. That's correct, isn't it?

Mr Schofield: As far as I'm aware, that's correct.

Senator DUNIAM: Can you check, on notice, that that is correct?

Mr Schofield: We can certainly check that.

Answer

No treaty partner has raised such concerns with Australia's Senior Antarctic Official.

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Hearing Date: 29 January 2024

Topic: International activity in Antarctica

Senator Jonathon Duniam

Question

Senator DUNIAM: DFAT is the outward facing entity. On behalf of the Australian government it is interacting with foreign nations and their governments, getting an understanding of what is happening. You just said yourself then that, in preparation for CAMLR meetings, that's a great way to understand what other nations are actually doing. Can you give me any analysis of what other nations are doing in Antarctica, on the back of what you've just said.

Mr Schofield: If you would like a more detailed response, we'd be happy to take that on notice and come back to you with some points as far as that goes. One thing I would say is that, late last year, the Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs attended a polar summit in France. That was an opportunity to engage with other countries in relation to not only the Antarctic but also the Arctic, given it was a polar summit, and to discuss some of the issues they were focused on. It won't be any surprise to you that climate change is a key issue being considered at the moment. You will have noticed that, in our submission, we have made reference to what's known as the Helsinki Declaration on Climate Change and the Antarctic. That was an important outcome of the most recent Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting.

Senator DUNIAM: I appreciate that, and I would appreciate any detail you can provide on notice because that level of information is important when making a claim that Australia remains a leader in the Antarctic space.

Answer

Parties to the Antarctic Treaty submit annual reports and other information on their activities which are published on the website of the Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty:
<https://www.ats.aq/devAS/InformationExchange/LatestReports?lang=e>

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Inquiry into Australian Antarctic Division Funding

Hearing Date: 29 January 2024

Topic: Chinese activity in Antarctica

Senator Jonathon Duniam

Question

Senator DUNIAM: In addition to the question I placed on notice earlier, on details around specific activities: particularly with regard to those two countries, I'd be interested in what information we have. It would be helpful for us because a lot of the respected individuals we've been able to interact with as part of this process have pointed in particular to their activities; I think you alluded to it yourself. I agree with the point you make around the need to uphold the rules based order and the key principles, themes and aims of the Antarctic Treaty system; I think that's an admirable pursuit. But there are those who don't necessarily seek to play by the same rules. Did either the Prime Minister or the foreign minister raise with the People's Republic of China and their representatives any concerns around Antarctic activity in their visits or meetings with those officials?

Mr Schofield: Thank you for that question. I'd have to take that on notice. I'm not aware of whether or not that issue was discussed.

Answer

The Australian Government engages with all States Parties to maintain and strengthen the Antarctic Treaty system, particularly its rules and norms of freedom of scientific investigation, international cooperation, environmental protection and non-militarisation.

The Foreign Minister has emphasised the obligation of all States to adhere to international law and norms in her meetings with Chinese counterparts.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade does not provide details of the Prime Minister's discussions with foreign leaders.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

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Hearing Date: 29 January 2024

Topic: Defence strategic review

Senator Jonathon Duniam

Question

Senator DUNIAM: Given our strategic interests in Antarctica and some of the issues that have been referred to by other witnesses and by the chair around competing interests and geopolitical tensions, as they may be described, it's been put to me that the word 'Antarctic' or the substance is not referred to in any way in the Defence strategic review. Is that the case?

Mr Schofield: That is a very good question, and I would need to check that. I wouldn't like to mislead you. It's not something that I personally have focused on, but we can certainly check that.

Senator DUNIAM: Okay. I gather I'm going to have to put those questions on notice, and so I will. Following on from that, could I ask what input DFAT provided, as the lead coordinator with regard to Antarctic policy on a whole-of-government level, relating to Antarctic matters for the Defence strategic review; if none, why none was deemed appropriate to provide; and, if it was provided, why it then wasn't included in the review? Please take those questions on notice.

Mr Schofield: I am very happy to do that. Thank you

Answer

Questions on the Defence Strategic Review should be directed to the Department of Defence.

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Inquiry into Australian Antarctic Division Funding

Hearing Date: 29 January 2024

Topic: Feasibility study of Davis Research Station runway

Senator Catryna Bilyk

Question

Senator BILYK: When AAD spent nearly \$20 million—in fact, they spent more than that, but they spent nearly \$20 million on a feasibility study for a runway near Davis Research Station—would DFAT have had any role there?

Mr Schofield: I would have to check, but my understanding would be that, as part of normal government process, the study would have been consulted across government and DFAT would have been one of the agencies consulted.

Senator BILYK: Could you provide on notice, if you were consulted, the extent to which you were consulted and what advice you gave to the AAD in regard to that?

Mr Schofield: We can certainly take that on notice.

Answer

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was consulted as part of the normal processes of Government.

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QUESTION ON NOTICE / Spoken

Inquiry into Australian Antarctic Division Funding

Hearing Date: 29 January 2024

Topic: Budgetary constraints of AAD

Senator Peter Whish-Wilson

Question

CHAIR: Were you aware of anyone not being able to attend because of budgetary constraints within the AAD or elsewhere?

Mr Schofield: I'd have to check what the-

CHAIR: You didn't hear that some experts were unable to attend because of budgetary constraints?

Mr Schofield: As I said, I was not responsible for Antarctic matters in May last year, so I'd really need to check that. I'd not like to speculate on the detail.

CHAIR: Please take that on notice. Could I also ask you to take on notice a question I asked earlier. As I said, we've had evidence from Professor Rothwell and others that the issues that this inquiry has been looking at are being watched closely by our international partners in the Antarctic. Do DFAT have a view on that, and have you prepared any advice to government?

Answer

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is not aware of anyone from the Department being unable to attend because of budgetary constraints. Any questions on the Australian Antarctic Division's delegation composition should be referred to the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.