

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Written question received 29 September 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000675

Prioritisation of stranded Australians over other potential entrants to Australia:

Written

Senator: Kristina Keneally

Question:

Is your agency aware of any Australian Government policy, process or procedure that is in place to ensure that stranded Australians will be prioritised over other potential entrants to Australia?

- a. If yes:
 - i. Can you name those policies, processes or procedures?
 - ii. When did these policies, processes or procedures come into effect?
- b. If no:
 - i. Are any policies, processes or procedures being prepared to ensure that stranded?

Answer:

There is a clear expectation from the Australian Government that returning Australian citizens and permanent residents take priority with respect to the limited quarantine space for international arrivals. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is responsible for facilitating the return of Australians from overseas. DFAT also administers the Special Overseas Hardship Fund to assist individuals meeting the criteria for financial support.

The Department of Health is part of an interdepartmental taskforce established by DFAT to facilitate the repatriation of all Australians. The aim is to offer all Australians registered with DFAT as at 18 September 2020 the opportunity to return to Australia.

Australians considered to be vulnerable due to their individual circumstances while overseas during the COVID-19 pandemic are being prioritised for earliest repatriation via facilitated flights.

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

29 September 2020

PDR Number: IQ20-000687

Decision to appoint AHPPC as a subcommittee of the National Cabinet

Spoken

Hansard Page number: 23

Senator: Rex Patrick

Question:

Senator PATRICK: Can you point the committee to the actual decision? You have disclosed that there has been a decision of cabinet that the AHPPC is a subcommittee of cabinet. Can you provide that decision—noting that it has been disclosed—to the committee. I guess it must have been sent in writing to the AHPPC.

Dr Murphy: I can ask the cabinet secretary or PM&C to provide you that letter to that effect.

Senator PATRICK: I am actually asking you as Health. I don't care if you seek advice. You would be in possession of that decision, because it would have been communicated to you through the normal processes.

Dr Murphy: But that is a national cabinet decision, and I am not at liberty to disclose the deliberations of national cabinet.

Senator PATRICK: No, I am not asking you to. I want to be very clear: I am not asking you to disclose the deliberations of cabinet. You have yourself disclosed, or at least said to this committee, that a decision of cabinet has been made. Decisions of cabinet that have been disclosed do not attract cabinet-in-confidence. You must have a direction that was given to you, either as the chair of the AHPPC or as a Secretary of the Department of Health.

Dr Murphy: Correct.

Senator PATRICK: I'm asking you to provide a copy. Of course, you can seek advice from the cabinet office as to whether or not they still wish to maintain confidentiality.

Dr Murphy: That was a verbal direction to me, as I attended national cabinet. The national cabinet decided that AHPPC would become a subcommittee, and I was instructed at that time that all its deliberations and materials would be subject to cabinet confidentiality and only released at the approval of national cabinet. I think the easiest thing would be to request the cabinet secretary to formally write and convey that the national cabinet has decided that the AHPPC is a subcommittee of national cabinet and subject to those cabinet-in-confidence provisions. I am happy to take that on notice and provide some written proof of that decision of national cabinet.

Answer:

- At the time the National Cabinet was established, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) and National Coordination Mechanism (NCM) were identified as the National Cabinet's primary advisory bodies.
- Deliberations or discussions of the AHPPC and NCM on matters to be considered by the National Cabinet or on matters tasked by National Cabinet are confidential.
- It is well accepted that deliberations of the Cabinet should be able to be conducted to preserve the confidentiality of deliberations.