

Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee

ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES – 2 MARCH 2017 ANSWER TO QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Human Services

Topic: Information release – media article 26 January 2017

Question reference number: 17 (HS 17)

Senator: Watt

Type of question: Hansard pages 34-35

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 21 April 2017

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator WATT: There was a person who I think had received youth allowance and had been pursued by part of the Centrelink fail—that is the unkind way of looking at it. Then information was clearly provided to *The Australian* to rebut what this person had claimed. It was deeply personal information about money that they owed and their personal circumstances. I think there is another one in there as well. Did that information get provided to that journalist by the department or the minister's office?

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Senator WATT: So people ring up a journalist and say: 'You know what? I have rorted Centrelink and I would like you to put this on page 1 of *The Australian* newspaper.'

Ms Campbell: There was an article recently where someone was criticising us for recovering money from them, even though they accepted that they had not paid it all back—well, they had paid some of it back—and how unfair it was of us to come looking for that money. They acknowledged that they had not paid it back, so, yes, sometimes individuals do.

a) Senator WATT: Righto. I have just about wrapped up for now, but there was nothing from the department to Mr Benson about this incident. I think we are going to need to take on notice what contact the minister or his office had, what information he provided to this journalist, any statements, any verbal discussions and the exact timing of when that occurred.

Ms Campbell: We will take that on notice.

b) Senator WATT: Did the department provide advice to the minister or his office before that information was passed on to a journalist?

Ms Campbell: We have taken on notice what information was passed on. We need, as part of that process, to determine what advice was provided. Because we do not know, we cannot say what we did or did not provide advice on.

Senator WATT: You can find out, though, what advice was provided by the department to the minister's office about this case.

Ms Campbell: We can take that on notice. There are many cases, I think, in this article.

Senator WATT: There are not a lot that end up on page 1 of *The Australian*.

Answer:

- a) and b) It has been routine practice for Ministers of the Department (including in the period 2008–2013) to release anonymised case studies to the media, including in media releases about compliance matters. Material for public release is routinely prepared by the Department to support such releases.

This occurred on 25 January 2017 when the Minister's office provided information to *The Australian* which resulted in the publication of the article by Simon Benson on 26 January 2017.