

Principal Member's Opening Address
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearing

20 October 2014

Opening statement

The tribunals last appeared before the committee in May and I thought it might be opportune to update you on some matters that have occurred since then.

Caseload statistics

I am extremely pleased to say that the tribunals made a record of just over 24 700 decisions last financial year – over 21 000 in the MRT and 3 500 in the RRT. This was an increase of nearly 30 per cent on the previous year.

MRT decisions were highest in the student, skilled and partner refusal case categories, while for the RRT decisions were highest for applicants from China, India and Sri Lanka.

The tribunals therefore started this financial year in a very good position and have continued to perform well. Over 6 000 decisions have been made so far this year and we expect to make over 21 000. This is less than last year because we will be concentrating on the more complex caseloads.

Equally pleasing has been the steady decline in the tribunals combined active caseload, falling to ^{about 15500} ~~below 16 000~~ this month. This means that we remain on track to meet our overall objective which is to reduce the active caseload over the next three years to an ongoing level of about half of annual lodgements in most categories. Achieving and maintaining that level of cases on hand will result in a significant improvement in average processing times by 2017.

What these numbers mean for our applicants is that they are getting a consistently high level of service and speedier finalisation of their cases.

The dedicated staff and members of the tribunals have achieved this by adopting a range of new work practices like expanding the hearing list format in the MRT caseload, continued use of member specialisation, and changes to decision writing. An online lodgement facility, launched in January 2014, is already the most preferred mode of lodgement for new applications.

Further innovations and efficiencies are being pursued in 2014–15, with initiatives including extending the use of hearing lists to new parts of the caseload, greater electronic communication with applicants, and increasing the functionality of the online lodgement facility, and updating our case management system.

Legislative changes

To enhance its operations, the tribunals also support new powers that are proposed in the Migration Amendment (Protection and Other Measures) Bill 2014. These powers would amend the Migration Act to include the dismissal of applications for review in circumstances where the applicant fails to appear; and the ability to give oral statements of reasons without the need for a written statement except where requested. We consider that these and other proposed changes will assist us in achieving our statutory objectives of providing fair, just, economical, informal and quick merit reviews.

Budget announcement on amalgamation

I am sure you will be aware that the Government announced in the last Federal Budget that the MRT-RRT will be amalgamated with the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, the Social Security Appeals Tribunal and the Classification Review Board. The amalgamation is planned to take effect on 1 July 2015.

Planning for the amalgamation is progressing well with the amalgamated tribunal expected to be in a position to commence operations by that date. The

focus of planning to this point has been on human resources, finance , property, Information Technology and on the drafting of legislation. Not everything will be able to be integrated by 1 July but it is hoped that the bulk of corporate activities will be able to be consolidated.

My colleagues and I are happy to elaborate on any matters that I have just highlighted, or answer any other questions the committee may have.