



Tabled Document

By: DIAC - Mr Andrew Metcalfe

Date: 19/10/10

Australian Government

Department of Immig

Opening statement to Legal and Constitutional Committee

**Supplementary Budget Estimates hearing
Parliament House, Canberra**

19 October 2010

Andrew Metcalfe

Secretary, Department of Immigration and Citizenship

Madam Chair, Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to deliver an opening statement.

I would like to welcome Senator Carr, representing our minister for Estimates.

I suspect that
Some of today's discussion questions from the Committee will no doubt focus on the major issue of irregular maritime arrivals and immigration detention. These matters are a large part of our work and represent a complex and, sometimes difficult, area of public policy. The department is focussed on managing this challenge in a strategic, lawful, proper, decent, humane and accountable manner. I will expand on some of our approaches in further detail shortly. However, it is important to recognise this work is just part of the many diverse programs, policies and services the department manages on a daily basis.

So, while these are supplementary budget hearings, I would like to say a few words about the 2009-10 program year, which was a big year for the department.

We again delivered the migration and humanitarian programs on time and very close to targets. I expect that announcements on precise figures will be made soon.

We were also busy across a range of other programs, including the conferral of citizenship on almost 120 000 people over the course of the year, location of 14 169 unlawful non-citizens, granting in excess of four million permanent and temporary visas, and facilitating 28.8 million people across the border.

We continue to be strongly engaged on matters relating to social cohesion. In 2009–10, community engagement projects received strong interest with 104 grants provided to organisations through the *Diverse Australia Program* and the *National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security* community grants.

The department's policy work and engagement with the community on multicultural affairs issues will also feed into the Government's response to the Australian Multicultural Advisory Councils' recent advice, *The People of Australia*.

Madam Chair, Senators, at the last hearing, I promised to keep you updated on the progress of the department's transformation to stronger migration, visa and citizenship services. I'm pleased to report that our concept of Global Managers is now a mature structure and working well. Appointing managers responsible for specific products, services and service channels globally has led to significantly improved consistency, quality and efficiency of these services. I am pleased our clients and stakeholders are already experiencing the benefits of this approach.

A key aspect of our transformation of our service delivery model is improving the management of our four main service channels – that is, service centres, service delivery partners, online and face-to-face services. Significant progress is being made in addressing key operational issues and implementing longer-term strategies to improve our service in these areas.

The department has also now moved further toward our final end-state organisational architecture, with three groups focused respectively on policy and program management (led by Mr Hughes), business services (led by Mr Correll) and client services (led by Ms Hand). I have also recently announced that I will be establishing a fourth deputy secretary-led group in the department responsible for management of our immigration detention facilities and services.

While the department continues to manage this diverse range of responsibilities and progress our ambitious transformation agenda, the areas that receive most public attention are, of course, boat arrivals and immigration detention.

The committee would be aware of the Minister's announcement yesterday about additional detention accommodation and ~~community detention~~ ^{residence determination} options—I will cover this announcement in more detail when we come to Outcome 4.

As I have noted, the department is very focused on properly managing this often difficult and invariably complex aspect of public policy on behalf of the Australian government and wider community. Our approach is part of an overall policy setting that seeks not to encourage people to risk their lives to come to Australia, and which seeks to find appropriate ways to deal with this issue whilst meeting our international obligations.

As part of this global context, the department contributes to a whole-of-government strategy to stabilise displaced populations, and disrupt people smuggling operations, as well as building the capability of our international partners to do the same.

The increase in boat arrivals has naturally placed an increased workload on immigration detention facilities, on our service providers and, indeed, on the department. A large number of our staff are involved in various aspects of this work. I am pleased that the feedback I get from external scrutiny bodies, and indeed from our own internal processes and other checks, is an overwhelmingly strong attitude of staff who are deeply engaged about performing their jobs in a professional and ethical manner.

We are increasing the pool of staff available to undertake processing and case management through secondments from other agencies, as well as through external recruitment. We have a dedicated taskforce in place to manage our recruitment needs, including backfilling positions in other parts of the department's business. This process will allow us to quickly engage staff with the appropriate skills who can be trained in these specialised areas.

At the same time, we are very focussed on ensuring all of our other responsibilities are effectively discharged, and indeed, we aim to constantly improve our performance. In fact, since the department's last appearance before this committee, and despite the increased boat arrivals, we have maintained the improved performance we reported in our many other areas of operations.

Madam Chair, the department takes very seriously its duty of care and responsibility for people in detention and to provide them with proper amenity within the detention facilities available to us. While these individuals are detained pursuant to legislation enacted by this parliament, the policy of detention is for administrative purposes. Detention is not designed to be punitive; it certainly should not be equated to correctional custody.

Due to a range of factors, many people are spending longer times in immigration detention. With large numbers in detention for longer periods, experience shows there will be some who demonstrate their concern at decisions about their immigration status through attempts of self-harm, voluntary starvation, absconding or protesting. The department is making strong efforts to support our clients through these challenging circumstances, as well as our staff, who work so hard to provide appropriate facilities to people in detention.

Sadly, and very rarely, we experience situations such as the tragic death of an Afghan man on 22 August, following his medical evacuation to the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Perth, and of a Fijian man at Villawood immigration detention centre on 20 September. It is of course not appropriate for me to comment in detail on the circumstances of either death because they are the subject of ongoing investigations and, possibly, coronial inquests. The department and its staff are greatly saddened at these two tragic deaths of people in immigration detention. On behalf of the department, I extend my sympathy to the families and affected communities. This has also been a difficult time for our staff, Serco staff and staff of other service providers at the centre.

Madam Chair, in closing, I would like to draw attention to the fact that Deputy Secretary Peter Hughes has announced his intention to retire at the commencement of 2011. Mr Hughes joined the public service on 22 January 1973 as an administrative trainee. He spent a number of years working with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet before joining the Department of Immigration in July 1979. Mr Hughes' first role in the department was to assist in the development and implementation of refugee policy. Since then, he has undertaken a variety of work including a brief secondment to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 1981, a number of overseas postings, and a range of senior positions in the department.

Mr Hughes has represented Australia's interest at home and abroad with utmost dedication, professionalism and to a high standard during his more than 37 years of public service. Mr Hughes' contribution was deservedly recognised in 2005 when he was awarded a Public Service Medal in the Australia Day Honours list for outstanding public service through the development of policies and programs to increase citizenship, multicultural harmony and the settlement of refugees.

Mr Hughes has appeared before, and assisted, this committee on many occasions, and so, before this committee, I would like to note Mr Hughes' service to the Australian Government and the department, our clients, and the wider Australian community. I thank him for his long and dedicated service, and wish him and his family all the very best for the future.

I would also like to put on the record my sincere appreciation to all our officers in the department for their dedication, hard work and ongoing commitment to our positive values.

Thank you.