



Australian Government

Department of Home Affairs

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**Opening Statement
Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee
Estimates Hearing
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This morning I should like to add the Department's voice to the global expressions of shock and grief at the horrific slaughter of Muslims at prayer, which took place a week ago in Christchurch, New Zealand. The Department has since been working ceaselessly with our colleagues in ASIO, the AFP and other agencies to assist our New Zealand comrades with the investigation into this unspeakable act, and with other elements of the New Zealand Government's response.

During this Harmony Week, the Department has rededicated itself to standing resolutely against the extremist ideology of 'white supremacy' and its adherents, to whom I say: you are on our radar and you will not be able to incite the racial strife that you seek. The scrutiny and pressure that you are under will only intensify. For the information of the Committee I should like to table the Department's Harmony Day message which was issued yesterday to all staff.

In order to assist public discussion about immigration, this morning the Department will publish an information paper titled *The Administration of the Immigration Program*. Should it be the wish of the Committee I can table that paper for the information of Committee members.

Under Australia's non-discriminatory visa system, applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis, regardless of the applicant's nationality, gender or religion. The Department makes decisions about who comes to Australia on the basis of what they can contribute, not where they come from. Applications are considered against the individual's risk profile, but not their country of origin. This was not always the case.

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in our business. The Electronic Travel Authority introduced in 1996 allowed people from 33 different nationalities—considered at the time to be ‘low risk’—to enter Australia. It collected very little information about the traveller.

Since then, the Department has deployed new technologies and techniques to improve visa decision making grants and travel facilitation. Such systems range from electronic and online visa applications through to automated passenger SmartGates at Australia’s international airports. As at 28 February 2019, 95 per cent of all visa applications were lodged electronically.

In 2017-18 the Department granted 8.7 million temporary visas. We expect to receive over 9.7 million visa applications in 2018-19. In addition, demand for Australian citizenship has continued to grow with citizenship applications increasing by 177 per cent between 2010-11 and 2017-18.

As volumes escalate, the source countries of travellers coming to Australia continues to evolve. In 2007-08, around 51 per cent of visitor grants came from the UK, Japan, the US, South Korea and Germany. Today, these countries represent 36 per cent of visitors to Australia. There has been a significant increase in visitors from China, India and Indonesia.

Over the past five years, the Department has moved away from broad and coarse nationality-based risk profiles to more nuanced, targeted risk assessments of individual visa applications. It undertakes significantly more rigorous security checks as compared to the checks that were done when I became Secretary in October 2014. Since then the Department has completely overhauled and modernised its national security capabilities by applying the latest technology, analytical tools and intelligence techniques to support decision-making.

As a result of enhanced scrutiny of applications, visa refusal rates have increased. There was a 46 per cent increase in visa refusals for the permanent migration program in 2017-18 compared to the previous year. These factors—combined with inconsistent application quality and increasing complexity of the caseload—contributed to the lower migration program outcome last financial year. We anticipate a similar number of finalisations this year, an outcome which will be similarly driven by enhanced scrutiny and vetting.