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Opening Statement
Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide an opening statement.

NEW ZEALAND TERROR ATTACK

Many of us in the Australian Border Force work side-by-side with our New Zealand counterparts every day, at our Australian Border Operations Centre here in Canberra and through engagement on every day passenger and cargo movements and enforcement operations.

In the midst of the shock and sadness we all felt in the aftermath of the tragic terrorist attack in Christchurch, a small number of ABF officers were deployed to New Zealand to work with them and support any requests from them. The Australian Border Force enjoys a very special relationship with colleagues in New Zealand Customs and New Zealand Immigration and if anything these events have further strengthened those relationships.

Our thoughts and condolences remain with those who died and suffered as a result of events in Christchurch on that dreadful day.

FIREARMS

The events in Christchurch have, understandably, brought the issue of firearms restrictions into focus. Australia has a strong legislative framework in place surrounding firearms and the ABF manages the legitimate import and export of firearms across our border, including through engagement with importers and traders. We also conduct enforcement operations to detect and seize undeclared firearms at the border. Together with the Department of Home Affairs, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, AFP and State and Territory Police, we all play an important part in our system of managing firearms. We also work closely with our international partners.

In the last financial year we made more than 2,000 detections of undeclared firearms and we have highly skilled officers who are supported by intelligence and trace detection capabilities including detector dogs and x-ray technology.

To combat the increasingly sophisticated methods of concealment employed by organised crime groups, we spent more than four million dollars in recent years to upgrade our x-ray screening capabilities.

ABF BUDGET

I would like to take this opportunity to address some of the ill-informed commentary surrounding the Australian Border Force budget and our ability to protect Australia's border, particularly in the maritime domain.

Providing coverage of the nearly 53 million square kilometres of Australia's search and rescue zone and 10 million square kilometre Exclusive Economic Zone requires a multi-layered, multi-agency deterrence, surveillance, disruption and response capability.

Maritime Border Command (MBC), the multi-agency taskforce that sits within the ABF, utilises a range of monitoring methods and a blend of different assets to achieve this effect, including ABF and Australian Defence Force vessels and crew, satellites, radar, surveillance flights and helicopter patrols. This is overlaid with a dedicated intelligence capability within MBC. We base our aerial and maritime posture on deliberate plans that are developed within MBC, which in turn are based on the current threat picture, intelligence, maritime domain awareness and inputs from a range of agencies. We do not rely solely on one type of vessel or a single agency to manage our vast maritime domain.

In recent months, the ABF has been accused of ceasing so-called "active patrolling" and of failing to meet targets due to budget cuts and crewing issues.

The cost of doing business in protecting our maritime domain has increased significantly in recent years, due in large part to higher maintenance, fuel and staffing costs. These factors help inform our budget considerations and we continually review our operations across the entirety of the ABF to ensure we are achieving the best possible balance between our resource levels, management of border threats and risks and our service levels; while achieving the best possible value for money.

Against that backdrop let me be very clear:

- The number of ABF patrol days spent at sea have increased every year, for the last three financial years - from around 2400 in 2014/15 to almost 2700 in 2017/18.
- Over the same period the number of ABF Marine Crew increased every year and by the end of this financial year it will have increased yet again.

- This year we asked for, and received, an additional \$58.6 million estimates variation to maintain our maritime capability. An additional 19 marine crew have already been deployed, 24 are currently undergoing training, and 20 are due to commence training in April and May. By the end of 2019, we expect to have brought on an additional 95 crew.
- There has been no reduction in patrols or vessels at sea; the term “active” patrolling has been ceased within MBC as it misrepresents the way we plan our operations and blend capabilities to deliver an operational effect at sea. We continue to integrate satellite imagery, surveillance data and intelligence to predict and detect threats, rather than relying on vessels patrolling vast expanses of ocean in the hope they stumble upon something through serendipity. For context, a single flight by our surveillance aircraft can survey an area equivalent in size to the State of Victoria.

Our vessels do have a surveillance capability but are primarily deployed as response assets – once we identify a threat through our sophisticated monitoring and surveillance capability, they are tasked to respond. So to maintain an effective response time we of course keep them at sea and positioned accordingly.

The budget authority for the ABF is held by the Secretary as are several key inputs to ABF operations such as intelligence capability. I work very closely with the Secretary and we jointly ensure that 1) the ABF is adequately funded, 2) we operate efficiently and effectively and, 3) once agreed, ABF resource levels are aligned with my operational decision-making.

OPERATIONAL SUCCESS

Finally, I would like to briefly highlight aspects of the ABF’s operational success, in line with our three operational priorities; Border Protection, our Customs/Trade enforcement role and the Migration System.

Each year we continue to clear record numbers of travellers and cargo and collect billions of dollars in revenue to contribute to our prosperity as a nation. We also make a significant contribution to our national security by simultaneously identifying people and goods that could harm our economy, country or people.

In the financial year to date, ABF officers have made over 25,200 detections of illicit drugs and precursors, weighing more than 12,000 kilos through the international mail, passenger and air and sea cargo streams. We have also detected more than 140 travellers with objectionable media at Australian airports, inclusive of child exploitation material and extremist propaganda.

We continue to prevent, detect, deter and disrupt those individuals and businesses who deliberately or negligently defraud the Commonwealth of border revenue. For example, in the financial year to date we have intercepted more than 394 tonnes of illicit tobacco at the border. The ABF-led Illicit Tobacco Taskforce that has also detected over 142 tonnes of undeclared tobacco with a duty evasion amount of over \$161 million.

My officers are also focussed on maintaining the integrity of our migration system and safeguarding vulnerable people from people smuggling, human trafficking, foreign worker exploitation and organised visa and migration fraud. Through our work with Taskforce Cadena, Operation Battenrun and Operation Sovereign Borders to name a few, we are making a real difference.

I would note though that we have very limited investigative and enforcement powers under the Migration Act, which limits our ability to disrupt systemic or criminal threats that are exploiting our visa program and we are often required to rely on our often stretched law enforcement partners for their operational support.

We look to the future optimistically and I say that because I know of no workforce who are more committed to their mission than the men and women of the ABF. Through the “Realising Our Full Potential” strategy, I am focussed on providing our people with enhanced leadership, training and operational tradecraft, to further cement our position as a world-leader and contemporary border law enforcement organisation.

Thank you.