



**MICHAEL PEZZULLO AO**  
**SECRETARY**  
**DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**  
**Opening Statement**  
**Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee**

**Monday, 22 May 2023**

---

With the coming to office of a new government a year ago, the Department embarked upon a programme of realigning its functions and structures so as to be better placed to deliver on new and/or revised policy and delivery priorities. This programme of change was undertaken deliberately, in consultation with staff, and in stages, so as to lessen the risk of unnecessary disruption. As at 1 May 2023, this process was substantially finalised, with a number of minor changes still to come into effect, which will occur on 1 June 2023.

As a result of these changes, immigration, citizenship and multicultural affairs functions have once again been brought together, under the leadership of Associate Secretary Stephanie Foster. All immigration operations have been brought together under the leadership of Group Manager Immigration Operations, Michael Willard. Cyber and critical infrastructure security functions have been brought together under the leadership of Deputy Secretary Hamish Hansford. The Government recently decided to assign the Commonwealth's own IT cybersecurity governance function to the Department, and Mr Hansford's group has assumed that responsibility. In order to better integrate national security and resilience functions, I have established a group which bears that title, and am in the process of finalising a recruitment process for the Deputy Secretary who will lead that group. Its responsibilities will span: counter-terrorism, countering violent extremism, countering espionage and foreign interference, national resilience (in relation to climate, geoeconomic and geopolitical risks) and strengthening democracy.

I refer the committee to the recently published 11th edition of *The Administration of the Immigration and Citizenship Programs* report. As at 31 March 2023, there were around 575,000 on-hand visa applications, as compared with approximately 960,000 as at 30 June 2022.

The integrity of the visa system has been significantly strengthened in recent years. The Government has made it clear that it places a high priority on further strengthening the integrity of the visa system, especially as it relates to detecting and dealing with fraudulent or non-genuine applications which might be actually or potentially associated with migrant worker exploitation, and other forms of migrant exploitation.

I wish to advise the Committee that the average visa refusal rate for the six-year period from 2001-02 to 2006-07 was 1.8 per cent. The average visa refusal rate for the six-year period from 2014-15 to 2019-20 was 3.2 per cent, an increase of 1.4 percentage points. This improvement was a function of our deeply expert immigration and intelligence staff becoming even better trained and supported to detect and deal with fraudulent and non-genuine visa applications, as well as applications which do not meet the relevant and applicable visa criteria. This has included the building, since 2014-15, of better risk-profiling and threat-identification engines and tools.

Extrapolating for the whole financial year 2022-23, were the weaker visa integrity performance of 2001-02 to 2006-07 to be applicable today, then an estimated 120,000 visas would have been granted this year in circumstances where the grantees would not actually be entitled to a visa grant, for reasons of fraud or non-eligibility otherwise, as compared to the Department maintaining at least the stronger performance of more recent years (2014-15 to 2019-20). That said, our ministers have made it clear that they wish to see even better results, especially in relation to thwarting migrant worker exploitation.

Finally, with the advent of the National Anti-Corruption Commission on 1 July 2023, I am giving further thought to how our integrity and anti-corruption settings might be normalised and brought into line with broader Australian Public Service norms, without of course doing so in a manner which might inadvertently increase materially the risk of fraud, corruption and criminal infiltration. I hope to be in a position to further advise the Committee on relevant developments when we next meet.