



Australian Government
Department of Home Affairs



Department of Home Affairs Submission to the Inquiry into the Administration of the Referendum into an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice

**Senate Finance and Public Administration References
Committee**

27 April 2023

1. The Department of Home Affairs (the Department) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee about the administration of the referendum on an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice.
2. The Department's submission is primarily focussed on the part of the Inquiry's terms of reference on the potential for foreign actors to seek to influence the outcome or public debate on the referendum question and related misinformation and disinformation issues (terms of reference (a) and (b)).
3. Foreign interference and espionage is the principal security concern facing Australia. Social media platforms provide unique opportunities for foreign actors to amplify information operations at low cost and with anonymity. Social media is a channel for foreign actors to obtain: personal information, spread disinformation, undermine democratic processes and institutions, silence dissent, and limit free speech.
4. Three broad types of mis- and disinformation likely to be associated with the Voice referendum relate to:
 - a. Referendum process: false narratives that undermine confidence in voting infrastructure or confuse voters about referendum processes, e.g. concerns imported from the US about electronic voting machines, or that votes only matter in certain states/territories.
 - b. Referendum question and constitutional amendment: false narratives that incorrectly identify the terms of the question that will be put to voters and/or the amendment proposed to the Australian Constitution.
 - c. Referendum implications: false narratives misrepresenting implications of a Voice, e.g. misstating implications of constitutional change, or otherwise inciting racism and seeking to undermine social cohesion.
5. Home Affairs' role in supporting the Voice referendum is principally focused on the integrity of the referendum process through participation in the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce (EIAT).
6. The EIAT provides consolidated and coordinated information and advice to the Australian Electoral Commissioner on matters that may compromise the real or perceived integrity of federal and state and territory electoral events.
7. Each agency within the EIAT has capabilities and expertise relevant to the assessment and remediation of threats to the integrity of Australia's electoral systems and processes. These threats may be realised through various vectors, including a cyber or physical security incident, foreign interference and/or the spread of mis- and disinformation.
8. The EIAT is responsible for assessing and understanding the vulnerability of Australia's federal electoral environment, and developing strategies and processes to ensure cohesive and effective management and response should any threats be realised. The EIAT provides a platform for information sharing and is a valuable resource for centralising and exchanging information in the lead-up to, and during, an election period or electoral event.
9. In preparation for the 2022 federal election, the National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator and relevant EIAT members engaged with Australian representatives from Meta, Google, Snap, Tencent, TikTok, Twitter, Microsoft and Reddit. The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) established a framework with Meta, Twitter, Google, Microsoft and TikTok for operational arrangements allowing the AEC and the EIAT to refer harmful electoral content to online platforms for consideration and removal, where content was in breach of relevant legislation or the platform's own policies.
10. In the lead-up to the proposed referendum, the Department and the EIAT will continue to engage with social media platforms to ensure that platforms take action against content that breaches their terms of service. The AEC and EIAT will refer mis- and disinformation to major online platforms for review that violate the Australian electoral law.
11. As part of the EIAT structure, the Department and the Office of National Intelligence co-chair the Electoral Integrity Intelligence Forum (EIIF). The EIIF reports to the EIAT Board and coordinates across the National Intelligence Community to provide intelligence support to electoral integrity efforts.

12. The Department's Community Liaison Officer (CLO) network supports the communication of official information to multicultural communities, and provides a mechanism for community members to share information about their priorities, concerns, and the impact of government policies and programs on their communities. This provides an avenue for feedback to Government on any challenges relating to the threat of mis- and disinformation within these communities. The Australian Electoral Commissioner and the Deputy Electoral Commissioner briefed the Australian Multicultural Council about referendum planning and the AEC's strategy for engaging with linguistically diverse communities at the Council's most recent meeting on 7 March 2023.
13. The CLO network engages with a wide range of cultural, religious and community stakeholders around Australia. The CLO Network consists of 45 staff from 5 regional community engagement teams, each overseen by a Regional Director. The Department is in the process of recruiting additional officers with dual language skills in Arabic, Mandarin and Cantonese. Between 1 March 2020 and 28 February 2023, the Department's CLO Network undertook more than 29,800 engagements with community stakeholders.