

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: JobKeeper scheme variation

Senator: Gallagher

Question reference number: 0064

Type of question: Hansard, pages 2-3, 4 June 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: Thursday 18 June 2020

Number of pages: 2

Question:

CHAIR: ... I just have a couple of questions around your state of knowledge around the error on the JobKeeper scheme. When did you become aware that the JobKeeper program was going to support only 3½ million workers and cost \$60 billion less than previously advised to the Australian public?

...

CHAIR: Will the Prime Minister, the Treasurer and the finance minister be making statements in the parliament to correct the record for, I guess, the incorrect information that's been provided to the parliament since 30 March?

Mr Gaetjens: I wouldn't characterise it as incorrect information. What has happened, I think, in the way we look at these things from a budget issue, is called an estimates variation, because, basically, the process was designed at a time—Dr Kennedy has been through this—at the height of the pandemic in Australia. Statements were made by the Treasury and the ATO about the process issue. That gave rise to the information in the forms that in actual fact related to the amount of money expected to be received, rather than the number of employees. I think, given the re-estimation, if you like, of the number of employees, once that information became available the reconciliation was then able to be made between dollars handed out and employees identified on tax office forms. In our budget process, it would be regarded as an estimates variation.

CHAIR: It's a pretty big estimates variation. I don't think you answered my question about whether there is going to be any statement to correct the record. I think all of those ministers I mentioned, including the Prime Minister, have frequently used the figure of \$310 billion total support, 16.4 per cent of GDP, and a \$130 billion program supporting six million workers. It's clearly not that anymore, and that's accepted, but there were two months of evidence and three parliamentary sittings where that's the information that the parliament has been provided by the government. Is there no need to correct the record? Do you not see any need to correct the record formally?

Mr Gaetjens: I think the record has been corrected.

CHAIR: Not in the parliament, it hasn't.

Mr Gaetjens: I can't say what happens in the parliament; I'm not a member of it.

CHAIR: But you're the head of the Public Service. Presumably you would advise the Prime Minister if there was a need to correct the record. The Ministerial Standards go to this issue around making sure any error or misconception is corrected at the earliest opportunity. Presumably that would include the parliament.

Mr Gaetjens: Well, I think it was corrected very soon after it was found out.

CHAIR: So there won't be any correction of the record? Is that what you're advising?

Mr Gaetjens: I can't answer that. It's not me who would be making a correction in the parliament. I can ask the Prime Minister, the Treasurer and others.

CHAIR: Will you take it on notice?

Mr Gaetjens: I can take it on notice.

Answer: As outlined by the Treasurer, the Hon Josh Frydenberg MP, and the Minister for Finance, Senator the Hon Mathias Cormann, in their joint media release on 3 June 2020, the Government will provide an economic and fiscal update on 23 July 2020.

This update reported the estimated cost of the JobKeeper program.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Members of Parliament who travelled on Mr Neville Power's aircraft on 9 April 2020 and 3 May 2020

Senator: Watt

Question reference number: 0075

Type of question: Hansard, page 20, 4 June 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 18 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: ... You gave us evidence about when you've ferried ministers back to Perth on your jet. I think you said that you had done that just before the Easter break. I've just had a look at the declarations of the ministers involved, and it does look like Mr Morton travelled back with you just before Easter, I think on about 9 April—Easter being 10, 11, 12 April this year. But Senator Cormann and Mr Porter's declarations say that they flew with you on 3 May. So there were a couple of different trips, were there?

Mr Power: Yes, there were, with different people on those different trips. That group that was called out were the only ones that have been on the aircraft, but there were a couple of different trips. Whatever those dates were will be the correct dates. I don't recall them exactly and who was on each flight.

Senator WATT: Okay. So Mr Morton was the only member of parliament who travelled with you on 9 April, and Senator Cormann and Mr Porter were the only members of parliament who travelled with you on, I think it was, 3 May?

Mr Power: I don't recall the details of that. I might need to take that on notice and come back to you to confirm that.

Answer:

Refer to the response to Question on Notice 118.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Nature of the services being utilised by Resolve Strategic

Senator: Watt

Question reference number: 0080

Type of question: Hansard, page 23, 4 June 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 18 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: ... Mr Reed's company website says that he offers focus groups, telephone surveys, and campaign design and tracking. Is the commission using any of those services?

Mr Thompson: I'd have to come back to you on notice in relation to that. When you say 'the commission', the commission and commissioners have not been given access to this research; as I said, it's a part of whole-of-government activity. But our communications people, including those who are supporting the commission, have drawn on the insights provided by this market research for some of the activities that we do—for example, the design of the My Business COVIDSafe Plan website and product, which Mr Power referred to before and which has received over 20,000 downloads. That was informed by some of the insights that were gained through that market research.

Answer:

Resolve Strategic was contracted to conduct market research with the community and business to inform whole of government communications on social and community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic — particularly during the period of social restrictions.

This research included tracking surveys and qualitative research to guide the development of targeted communications aligned with business and community information needs as the pandemic progressed.

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Provision of research contacted by Resolve Strategic to the Prime Minister's Office

Senator: Watt

Question reference number: 0082

Type of question: Hansard, page 23, 4 June 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 18 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: Are the results provided to the Prime Minister or his office, either directly or indirectly?

Mr Thompson: Again, I'd want to confirm that on notice for you, Senator.

Answer:

The results were shared with key government departments to inform targeted and effective whole-of-government communications and were provided to the Prime Minister's Office.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Protocols to ensure publically funded research is not shared with any political party

Senator: Watt

Question reference number: 0083

Type of question: Hansard, page 23, 4 June 2020

Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 18 June 2020

Number of pages: 1

Question:

Senator WATT: ... What steps have been taken to ensure that any research being conducted by Mr Reid's company and paid for by the public is not being shared with the Liberal Party, given Mr Reid's longstanding connection to the Liberal Party and their polling companies?

Mr Thompson: I would have thought there were pretty well-worn protocols around that, including in Prime Minister and Cabinet and the wider communications effort. That would be my only response.

Senator WATT: So there are protocols in place to ensure that no-one within the department or the Prime Minister's office shares that publicly funded research with any political party?

Mr Thompson: I'd have to take the specifics of that on notice, Senator.

Answer:

Resolve Strategic entered into a Commonwealth Contract for Services with the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in which the supplier agreed not to disclose, other than to the Customer (the Department) any confidential information relating to the contract or goods and/or services without prior written consent by the Customer. No such consent has been requested or provided.

Departmental staff adhere to legislative requirements and the information security guidelines in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Security Framework to protect official information.