

Foreign Interference through Social Media
Senate Select Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

IQ21-000060

Division/Agency: Branch News & Media Industry

Topic: Function and purpose of taskforce

Proof Hansard Page: 32 (30 July 2021)

Senator Jenny McAllister asked:

CHAIR: What is your understanding of how the task force operates—its function and purpose?

Ms Sullivan: I'm happy to come back to you on this;

[...]

CHAIR: What do you understand to be the function of the task force? Have you received any documentation about its role and responsibilities?

Ms Sullivan: I have been provided handover notes. I would like to take that on notice if I could.

Answer:

The Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce (the Taskforce) provides information and advice to the Electoral Commissioner on matters that may compromise the real or perceived integrity of a federal election.

Taskforce members operate within the remit and authority of their respective agencies.

The Department has received a copy of the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce's Terms of Reference.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications

IQ21-000061

Division/Agency: Branch News & Media Industry

Topic: Terms of Reference

Proof Hansard Page: 32 (30 July 2021)

Senator Jenny McAllister asked:

CHAIR: Has the department been provided with a copy of the terms of reference for the task force?

Ms Sullivan: I would need to take that on notice and consult with the previous person who had responsibility.

Answer:

Yes, the Department has received a copy of the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce's Terms of Reference.

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ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
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IQ21-000063

Division/Agency: Branch News & Media Industry

Topic: Electoral integrity

Proof Hansard Page: 32-33 (30 July 2021)

Senator Jenny McAllister asked:

CHAIR: Okay. Of course, the AEC has been enforcing electoral law for many decades now and doing a very good job, so the formation of the task force implies that there are some other questions beyond the functions of the AEC that need to be tackled in the context of an election. I'm trying to understand what you think those additional questions that are beyond the conventional mandate of the AEC are.

Ms Sullivan: I don't think I'm in a position to comment on that.

CHAIR: I appreciate your earlier response about newly acquired responsibilities. Why are you not in a position to comment on it today?

Ms Sullivan: I apologise—

CHAIR: For clarity, ordinarily it's not open to a witness to not answer questions, so are you taking the question on notice?

Ms Sullivan: I'm happy to, yes, and I apologise.

Answer:

Members of the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce provide guidance and expertise on threats to Australian democracy through malicious cyber activity, physical means, electoral fraud, foreign interference and disinformation.

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IQ21-000064

Division/Agency: Branch News & Media Industry

Topic: Role of the AEC

Proof Hansard Page: 33 (30 July 2021)

Senator Jenny McAllister asked:

CHAIR: What is the role of the AEC within the task force?

Ms Sullivan: They're a co-chair of the task force.

CHAIR: Do they perform any distinct functions?

Ms Sullivan: I would have to take that on notice.

Answer:

As the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce (the Taskforce) Chair and Taskforce Board Co-Chair, the AEC provides information and advice to member agencies on the provisions contained in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, particularly as they relate to electoral integrity.

The AEC also provides a conduit for information between the Board and the Taskforce.

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IQ21-000065

Division/Agency: Branch News & Media Industry

Topic: Decision making

Proof Hansard Page: 33 (30 July 2021)

Senator Jenny McAllister asked:

CHAIR: Is it your understanding that it is the function of the task force to make decisions, or is it merely an information coordination role?

Ms Sullivan: My understanding is that it would be around information coordination. I would have thought decision-making would sit with the relevant agencies, under their legislative powers.

CHAIR: Could you take this on notice. Do the terms of reference for the task force spell that out?

Ms Sullivan: I'll definitely take that on notice.

Answer:

The Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce (the Taskforce) 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.

Taskforce members operate within the remit and authority of their agency. For example, the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications has as an advisory role that focuses on our ongoing relationship with digital platform companies, the media sector and relevant portfolio responsibilities.

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In the case of the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications, we have ongoing relationships with media organisations and platforms that could be drawn on to supplement the AEC's relationships and expertise during an election period to resolve issues quickly.

The Terms of Reference is a classified document.

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IQ21-000066

Division/Agency: Branch News & Media Industry
Topic: Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce involvement
Proof Hansard Page: 38 (30 July 2021)

Senator Jenny McAllister asked:

CHAIR: Obviously, disinformation is a key focus for those parts of government that are responsible for countering foreign interference. Was the Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce engaged in developing or reviewing the voluntary code?

Ms Sullivan: We'd need to direct that to the ACMA, who was responsible for working with DIGI on the code. I'm happy to take that on notice and come back to you with an answer from the ACMA.

Answer:

In its capacity of overseeing the development of the Australian Code of Practice on Disinformation and Misinformation (the Code), the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) engaged with the Counter Foreign Interference Coordination Centre within the Department of Home Affairs (not specifically the Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce). The ACMA is unable to comment on whether DIGI had any engagement with the Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce during its development of the Code.