

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence And Trade

Inquiry into certain aspects of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Annual
Report 2019-20 – Human rights of Australian citizens and some Diaspora
communities

13 September 2021

QoN Number: 02

Subject: Home Affairs Role in Foreign Interference

Asked by: Chris Hayes

Question:

Mr HAYES: Would that go to investigating members of the Chinese diplomatic corps and their involvement in those matters at those universities, particularly at the University of Queensland?

Mr Hallinan: Australia's approach to—

Mr Coles: In relation to operational questions, it's just not appropriate—or even possible, in fact—for the department to answer those questions. Those are matters for operational agencies which are members of the task force that we have given evidence on. But, as you'll appreciate, they're sensitive matters and that's sensitive work, so those are questions best put to those agencies.

Mr HAYES: I'm struggling a little to see what your agency's responsibility is in this regard and what it has done other than simply trying to advise people with concerns to go to talk to their state or territory police forces.

Mr Coles: What we're saying is—I'll just go back a step. There has been discussion about what the criminal threshold is, and, as we have discussed, there are offences in place. But, importantly, we're saying that if people are aware of interference of any kind we're encouraging them to report that through the National Security Hotline. The remit of the task force that we've mentioned is broader than just criminal offences. ASIO's remit is broader than that, and there's clearly a limit to the detail that I'm able to discuss here. But that body has a remit that is [inaudible] criminal offences. There are other approaches open to those agencies to address information that they receive about foreign interference when it arises, but they can only act and they can only do their work if they have that information. That's why it's critical for people to report.

Mr HAYES: In that case, I will ask you, if you could, to review the evidence of today's hearing and see where your responsibility lies, in terms of investigating or acting on the concerns that have been raised today.

Mr Coles: I think you may have asked me to take something on notice. I didn't hear

what it was. It was around where the responsibility for the Department of Home Affairs lies on investigations; is that right?

Mr HAYES: What I'm asking you to do is review the evidence that has been presented today to this hearing and see where your responsibility lies in respect of your area of countering foreign interference.

Mr Coles: Certainly.

Answer:

The Government has taken significant steps to strengthen Australia's capacity to address foreign interference including the establishment of the Counter Foreign Interference Coordination Centre (CFICC) within the Department of Home Affairs in 2018, and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) led Counter Foreign Interference Task Force (CFITF) in 2020.

The role of the CFICC is to coordinate whole-of-government policy and social cohesion responses to foreign interference. The CFICC also works with the broader community to help build awareness and resilience to foreign interference.

The CFITF is an operational taskforce led by a senior ASIO officer, with representatives from ASIO, Australian Federal Police (AFP), Australian Transactions Report and Analysis Centre (AUSTRAC), Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) and Australian Geospatial Intelligence Organisation (AGIO), with support provided by the Office of National Intelligence (ONI). The Taskforce brings together these law enforcement and intelligence agencies to disrupt acts of foreign interference in Australia and mitigate the harm of foreign interference.

The investigation and disruption of espionage and foreign interference activity targeting Australia is the responsibility of the CFITF. The CFITF investigates espionage and foreign interference offences established by the *National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018*.