

**HOME AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS**

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY SPOKEN QUESTION ON NOTICE

Select Committee on COVID-19

30 July 2021

QoN Number: CV19-464

Subject: Incoming Minister brief - re-opening of borders

Asked by: Kristina Keneally

Question:

Senator KENEALLY: I would like to ask about a different part of the incoming minister brief and that relates to your advice to the Minister for Home Affairs that Border Force and your department are 'working closely with other relevant agencies for a notional 1 November 2021 reopening of the international border'. Where did that date come from, Mr Pezzullo?

Mr Pezzullo: Again, it is a fragment of a larger text, so I will look at the text and recall.

Senator KENEALLY: To my knowledge, this is the first time I have ever seen a notional 1 November 2021 date nominated by the government. I am trying to understand how it came to be in the incoming minister brief. Do you know which agency came up with 1 November 2021 as the reopening date?

Mr Pezzullo: Subject to undertaking that textual exegesis of the document you have in front of you, just to remind myself of the context of that fragment, I can say assuredly to you it would have been our internal planning guidance in relation to the deployment of a digital passenger declaration capability, which at that point—I am trying to recall dates—we had been authorised to engage in a procurement, not at that point yet authorised to go to funding. That happened subsequently. We were planning on a rollout of a digital capability, which in late March, early April, had the international standard or some workable standard been available, which is now looking less likely to have—this is pre-Delta variant of course—digital assurance of vaccinated status. The commissioner and I were planning on limited phased entry—were the government to direct this, of course—of travellers based on a vaccine assurance. We are still working to that capability. Since that document was written, the government has decided to proceed with a digital passenger declaration. We have gone to the market. We are in the final stages of doing a selection and we are planning for a significant upgrade of our Australian traveller declaration through a mobile app that will be deployed through October-November and then the DPP itself.

Senator KENEALLY: This is all outlined in the brief as well. I am trying to understand: is 1 November the target date for the reopening of the international border?

Mr Pezzullo: Departments and agencies, in the case of the commissioner and I, are

focused on the international border. Obviously other departments and agencies do their planning for other reasons. Our job is to be prepared, primed and ready to go should governments at any time make decisions on a rolling basis that has regard to the epidemiology and all the other factors at play. Having been directed—when was it, 1 February last year, 31st January—to close the border, which is a relatively brute force operation, we simply almost put the barrier down and landed all of the planes, whereas reopening is like a very delicate intricate Swiss watch. We are just building the components.

Senator KENEALLY: Sure. The incoming brief says that you are working with other relevant agencies for a notional 1 November 2021 reopening of the international border. Can you just tell me: is that the target date or is it no longer the notional reopening date?

Mr Pezzullo: Sorry, the audio just glitched for a moment. What was the latter part of your question, please?

Senator KENEALLY: The incoming minister brief says you are working closely with other relevant agencies for a notional 1 November 2021 reopening of the international border. Has that date now changed since you did the incoming minister brief?

Mr Pezzullo: It has been rolling at various points, subject to what we all would understand to be the changing nature of the virus, yes.

CHAIR: So it is not?

Senator KENEALLY: What is the target date now?

Mr Pezzullo: I'll take on notice the amount that I am in a position to disclose to this committee about our ongoing planning efforts. There are a couple of components I can brief. The digital passenger declaration capability has been approved by government. It is a very important component.

Senator KENEALLY: It is incredibly important, but I have a limited amount of time and I am trying to understand why the date has changed, if it indeed has changed. This was a date released in the incoming minister brief released as part of an FOI. Can you not tell the Senate COVID committee to oversight the government's response to COVID what the new target date is for the reopening of the international borders?

Mr Pezzullo: All I can refer you to is—and this is of course has occurred since the time of that publication—the decisions taken by the national cabinet in relation to the four-phase or step approach. That document is available publicly. If you go to the second, third and fourth phases—I think they are numbered by letters B, C and D—there are different components that step you out to a reopened border very gradually in a stepped way. As the Prime Minister has made clear and this has achieved the endorsement of the national cabinet and, I believe, based on what the PM has been saying publicly, he intends to have a further discussion on this at national cabinet today. Rather than setting specific timing milestones for phases B, C and D, they are conditions related. They relate to the rollout of the vaccine, the behaviour of the virus and so on and so forth. The job that the commissioner and I have reporting to Minister Andrews is to be ready, once those triggers or those phases or those thresholds are met, to say to government, 'Yes, we are ready in those various elements that sit within those phases to do A, B and C as set out in that national plan.'

Senator KENEALLY: Alright.

Mr Pezzullo: It is based on a condition, rather than a date. But the commissioner and I have to notionally, in terms of our staff, assume, all the things being equal, that we

have to be ready to go on date X or date Y or date Z.

CHAIR: That is what Senator Keneally is after. What is that date?

Mr Pezzullo: It is X, Y and Z.

CHAIR: No—

Mr Pezzullo: If I can specify it any further, I will take that on notice.

CHAIR: The Senate can ask you whatever questions it likes.

Mr Pezzullo: Yes, it can. Of course.

CHAIR: It's clear you have a date and you know what that date is. It's also clear that you're not providing that to the committee. Are you going to take that question on notice?

Mr Pezzullo: Yes.

CHAIR: And refer it to the minister, presumably, because you must be—

Mr Pezzullo: Well, all questions on notice that bear on government policy are always referable to ministers.

CHAIR: But you're not answering a question. You have made the decision here not to answer a question.

Mr Pezzullo: I am saying that I'm taking it on notice.

Senator LAMBIE: Sorry, Chair. I am just wondering: what is the reasoning, at your status, that you are not answering that question? You are getting paid more than enough. I just find it really disrespectful that you are not answering that question to a senator, let alone to the people of Australia. At least give us a goddamn answer and decent answer as to why you won't give us that date.

Mr Pezzullo: I am assuming, Senator, that you would expect me to conform to the directions of elected officials. In this case, I work to the Prime Minister and the minister. The Prime Minister has set up a national cabinet. The national cabinet has decided to take a conditions approach rather than date-specific approach to the national plan to transition out of COVID. That document is available to this committee and to everyone else. If you look at the phases, we are currently in phase A. Through phases B, C and D there are elements about reopening the border. I have no directions or instructions from the Australian government, nor a consensus from the national governments of Australia, as to when those triggers will be realised in date terms.

CHAIR: But that's not the question that you are refusing to answer, which Senator Keneally has asked you, which is this 1 November date which you have. What is the date that you are now working to for planning purposes in relation to an international border? That is the question that we are asking you.

Mr Pezzullo: I understand the question. The reason why I need to take it on notice is that in March, when that document that Senator Keneally has raised was developed, that preceded the articulation of the four phases and the national plan.

CHAIR: Okay. So then you don't have a date, which should be an easy question to answer.

Mr Pezzullo: I don't want to be as blunt as that, Senator, simply because the national plan segments the reopening of the border into components.

CHAIR: I understand that. I understand that. We are not asking about the phased plan. We are asking about this date that you clearly have, that you are not prepared to share with the committee. For internal planning purposes you are working with other agencies on a date for the reopening of the international border. It was 1 November. What is it now?

Mr Pezzullo: What has changed is that national plan, which actually stages out the reopening of the border into phases that were not articulated in those terms.

CHAIR: Your earlier evidence said that for internal planning purposes you have to work to a certain point.

Mr Pezzullo: Correct. That's right.

CHAIR: Which would indicate that you have a date. We are getting frustrated with the unwillingness to provide simple information that it is clear that witnesses have. You have responsibilities to the parliament as well as to executive government, and that's what we are trying to enforce here. I just can't see why it's a state secret.

Mr Pezzullo: I am well aware of the responsibilities that I have to this parliament. What I've said is I'll take it on notice to articulate to this committee as best I can, if I can, the likely directions that I will get from the government as to when those stages will roll out. Point 1. Our planning is predicated on the much more specific guides that with now have from national cabinet, whereas in March it was a general idea of, 'At some point the border will reopen.' Now it is very particularised. If I can say, hopefully very tactfully, Chair, it's not a question of saying, 'Yes, that's the plan, but what's your internal guidance?' The guidance now has to be calibrated to the plan because that has been agreed by all of our elected leaders.

CHAIR: I feel like I'm in a The Hollowmen episode, Mr Pezzullo. Seriously, I think that, if someone goes back and reads your evidence word for word it could be picked up and put in a script for a TV comedy.

Mr Pezzullo: I'm not sure whether to take that as a compliment or a criticism.

CHAIR: Well, yes.

Mr Pezzullo: But it's a Friday afternoon. I'll take the more generous view that perhaps it was a compliment.

CHAIR: Okay. Well, you have managed to take us up to 1:30 with that rather extraordinary explanation of why you don't have a date for something that we think you do have a date for.

Mr Pezzullo: Well, I might have dates. How's that?

CHAIR: Hey?

Mr Pezzullo: I might now have to have to have dates.

CHAIR: Well, I think you've got dates, not that you might have them. I think you've got them.

Mr Pezzullo: Well, because the national plan is now segmented into phases, perhaps it's a question not of one date, which is what you asked me about, but of dates. I'll take it on notice.

CHAIR: Okay.

Mr Pezzullo: I'll be as forthcoming to this committee as I can possibly be. I give you that assurance.

CHAIR: When you talk to the people who are working for you in relation to preparing this, do you say, 'Could you please prepare for phase 3'? Is that the instruction?

Mr Pezzullo: It could be phase 2, subelement this, or phase 3, subelement that, or phase 4, subelement that.

CHAIR: Okay. I feel like there is a date there and we may get to the bottom of it one day.

Mr Pezzullo: Well, there might be dates.

Answer:

At the time of writing the 'Managing the return of Australians' Incoming Ministers Brief, the date of 1 November 2021 was a notional date for operational planning purposes for the reopening of the border. Since that time, National Cabinet has agreed the National Plan to Transition Australia's National COVID-19 Response, which provides a graduated pathway to transition Australia's COVID-19 response from its current pre-vaccination settings focused on continued suppression of community transmission, to post-vaccination settings focused on prevention of serious illness and fatalities, whereby the public health management of COVID-19 is consistent with other infectious diseases.

The National Plan sets out four phases to effectuate this transition. Each phase will be triggered by the achievement of vaccination thresholds of both the nation, and the individual state or territory expressed as a percentage of the eligible population, based on the scientific and economic modelling conducted for the COVID-19 Risk Analysis and Response Taskforce.

Reopening of the border will be a gradual, step by step process, underpinned by the latest health advice, the global impacts of COVID-19, and domestic capacity to manage international arrivals.