

Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Budget Estimates 26 May-6 June 2014

Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio

Department/Agency: Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Outcome/Program: 1.1 Prime Minister and Cabinet

Topic: Trilateral Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement - claim by former ambassador to China

Senator: Senator Sam Dastyari

Question reference number: 56

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Date set by the committee for the return of answer: 11 July 2014

Number of pages: 2

Question:

Senator DASTYARI: There is one more question, which I am happy to put on notice. Senator Abetz, can you answer a claim by Stephen Fitzgerald, who is a former Australia to China, who wrote:

“The final wording agreed in Bali was reportedly different from the draft prepared by DFAT, bearing the stamp particularly of the two drafting officials from Tony Abbott’s Australia and Shinjo Abe’s Japan ... The Australian official was Abbott’s Senior Advisor on National Security, Andrew Shearer, allegedly in Bali to ride herd on the neophyte Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and an advocate of ... diplomacy ...”

That is the quote, effectively. Would you take on notice whether or not the claim that the text of the document was changed by Andrew Shearer—the claim made by former ambassador to China Stephen Fitzgerald—is true or not.

Senator Abetz: Is the assertion that the changes were good, bad or indifferent or that there was punctuation that needed correcting or spelling that needed to be corrected? What is the issue here, so we can provide an answer?

Senator DASTYARI: The assertion is that the position being advocated by DFAT was different from that of the Prime Minister’s office and the Prime Minister’s office overrode them.

Senator Abetz: At the end of the day—it is something that, thank goodness, I do not often have to remind people of—in a democracy the public service can advise, but it is the government and ministers who actually decide. We as ministers and the government and the parliament have to make decisions. Sure, we are advised by the public service, and they are good professionals, but it might stand to reason that the democratically elected officials might want to nuance a document or make a change to

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reflect the attitude of the democratically elected government, as opposed to a view that may be held in a bureaucracy. I do not see any issue there.

Senator DASTYARI: I am not disputing that. My question is whether that is something that occurred in this instance. Would you take it on notice.

Senator Abetz: I will do. Can I say that if it did it would not surprise me at all. My department very kindly provides me draft speeches and draft media releases, and it is very rarely that they go back unamended. It is not because they do not necessarily do a good job; I just like to express myself differently or want to put emphasis on something else or greater emphasis on an issue. There is nothing much to be had here, but I am more than happy to take it on notice.

Answer:

Refer to PM55.