

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS  
ATTORNEY-GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

**Group 3**

**Question No. 6**

**Senator Xenophon asked the following question at the hearing on 24 February 2014:**

Senator XENOPHON: .... Would you say that Australia's access policies for diplomatic cables are more liberal than, say, the British archives or the US archives?

Mr Wilkins: What standard have you got in mind?

Senator Brandis: That is a pretty broad question.

Senator XENOPHON: Yes it is. I will give an example to the Attorney. For instance, the US Department of State has a prime motive on their own initiative program of declassifying diplomatic cables. Do we have that standard or benchmark?

Mr Fricker: As I explained earlier, of the several million access requests that we get, the overwhelming majority of which are resolved well within the 90-day period, 43,000 applications are received, 40,000 of which are opened within the 90-day period.

Senator XENOPHON: The question was: does the National Archives have a similar practice to the US Department of State's proprio motu—I am afraid my Latin is a bit rusty—on their own initiative program?

Senator Brandis: It is proprio motu.

Senator XENOPHON: I am very grateful to you, Senator. I last did Latin about 40 years ago and I conveniently forgot it. That is the question. You may wish to take it on notice.

Mr Fricker: We will take that on notice.

**The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:**

The Archives does not have a standard or benchmark for the release of diplomatic cables. Diplomatic cables, like other Commonwealth records, are available for access under the Archives Act 1983. The Act provides a 90 day period to respond to applications for access. The Archives assesses records for public access on request.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) publish foreign and trade policy historical material and provide selected access to departmental records. <http://www.dfat.gov.au/historical/> agencies to further reduce any backlog accumulating.