

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

Group: 3

Program: Other Agency

Question No. BE15/054

Senator Collins asked the following question at the hearing on 27 and 28 May 2015:

Senator JACINTA COLLINS: What I am also interested in is how the Australian government adjusts its own behaviour in response to a heightened risk of terror? We have talked about ASIO—sorry, we have talked about the comms, we have talked about the security of certain facilities, government employees and other safety measures—

Mr Moraitis: All those measures, yes.

Senator JACINTA COLLINS: But I am also interested in whether ASIO or other agencies conduct risk assessments with agencies and how that might occur?

Mr Lewis: I can speak from ASIO's point of view. This is not a universal answer, because there are people operating beyond where we do—

Senator JACINTA COLLINS: That is why I sought to say 'agencies' rather than—

Mr Lewis: Yes. Certainly, when an agency asks for support in terms of advice on what they might or might not do we are in a position to provide that advice. Also, if we become aware of a particular threat to an agency—if there were something quite specific—then obviously we would go to that agency head, advise them and suggest some remedial action.

I want to stress, however, that throughout the Commonwealth it is the accepted practice that agency and departmental heads, and organisational heads, are responsible in the first instance for the security of their organisation. We are here to assist and support where we can, and we will certainly be proactive where we discover things that need to be advised to those heads.

Senator JACINTA COLLINS: Did you provide advice—well, I think you did, but we will get into the nature of it—to government and to ministers about how they should adjust their behaviour in response to the increased threat? I recall media reports about how to travel, changing regular routes—that sort of thing. Did that come from ASIO or am I on the wrong track here?

Mr Lewis: I think you will probably find that most of that came from the AFP, I expect.

Ms K Jones: The departments, in cooperation with the AFP and the Department of Finance, provided briefings to MPs and senators. I participated in some of those briefings myself, where we talked about security arrangements here at Parliament House, in electoral offices—

Senator JACINTA COLLINS: I think I remember some of that, yes.

Ms K Jones: We conducted fairly extensive briefings throughout the period following—I would need to check the exact dates—but it was following the increase in the public alert level.

Senator JACINTA COLLINS: What I am interested in at the moment is not so much members and senators, but ministers and government agencies.

Ms K Jones: I would need to take it on notice, in terms of the breadth, but there were certainly discussions broadly with ministerial offices in terms of security implications of the increase in the public alert level. I would need to take it on notice for the details of those.

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

ASIO provides security advice in a number of ways. Following the increase to the terrorism public alert level, advice pertaining to the threat environment as it impacted on specific individuals and entities was provided, as was advice on protective security measures.

Threat advice

The terrorist threat has evolved significantly and the factors that led to the increase to the terrorism public alert level saw ASIO review, not only the broader threat, but the threat to specific individuals and entities.

ASIO produces a classified biannual assessment that articulates the general terrorism threat level. It contains a number of annexes that articulate the terrorism threat level (including for key Australian high-office holders, government agencies, significant buildings, foreign interests and critical infrastructure). ASIO also produces a version of this document for the Business Liaison Unit (BLU) website.

ASIO is strongly engaged with law enforcement counterparts, including the protection arm of the AFP. Any information indicating a specific credible threat against any Minister or agency is shared expeditiously as a matter of course.

Protective security advice

ASIO provided 171 Australian Government agencies (70 corporate and 101 non-corporate Commonwealth entities) with protective security advice for heightened threat environments on 12 September 2014. This advice, contained in a protective security circular, includes encouraging agencies to:

- Adopt a risk managed approach to implementing protective security measures in a heightened threat environment.
- Ensure staff are aware of the security environment, security procedures and their reporting requirements.
- Review and test security procedures and emergency plans to ensure effectiveness.
- Ensure Emergency Services contacts are up to date.
- Ensure any access restrictions are enforced.
- Test security infrastructure to ensure it is operational.

In respect to the physical security response from agencies and ministerial offices following the increase in public alert level, this is a matter for the individual agencies or offices, or their respective security advisor.

The Attorney-General's Department (AGD) participated in a briefing to Members and Senators on 1 October 2014. This briefing followed briefings to Ministerial staff on 23, 24 and 25 September 2014.

A joint letter was provided to all Members and Senators by Minister Keenan and Senator Ronaldson on 3 October 2014 relating to security measures in electorate offices. The letter offered security health checks of offices that had security concerns. To date, AGD has conducted 45 of these checks.

AGD developed a fact sheet "Your minister's protective security" in October 2014. The fact sheet, which was provided to all Ministers offices, focused on the responsibilities of each Minister's office to provide programmes for assessment and also to provide points of contact for security related matters.