

CHAPTER 2

IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP

PORTFOLIO

Introduction

2.1 This chapter summarises areas of interest and concern raised during the committee's consideration of the additional estimates for the Immigration and Citizenship portfolio for the 2008-09 financial year.

Department of Immigration and Citizenship

2.2 The committee sought information on current staffing levels, and changes in the Department's staffing profile due to redundancy. The Secretary informed the committee that the financial 'health check' about which the committee heard at its 2008 Additional Estimates hearing, had been completed. The committee was told that 149 staff had accepted voluntary redundancy, all of whom worked in the national office.¹

Temporary workers

2.3 The committee continued its long standing interest in the subclass 457 visa program and skilled migration more generally. The committee was particularly interested in how the Government would tailor the skilled visa intake to the rapidly changing economic environment. The Minister submitted that:

...there is ongoing engagement between my department and DEEWR on employment issues. We work very closely with them on a range of matters. We take advice from them on things like skill vacancies. So they provide advice about employment markets et cetera and we respond in our immigration role. But, as I made clear yesterday when asked about this, we are in a situation where the economic circumstances have changed quite dramatically. The immigration program in the skills area is largely run to meet the skills needs of the economy and I have been keen to change the focus of the program to a demand driven economy—that we actually bring in the people whom we need to fill the skill shortages that exist in the Australian economy...I see the overall [intake] being lower. Clearly the priority is on creating jobs and job opportunities for Australians, but, nevertheless, there will still be skills that we are looking to bring into the country. Long term, we will continue to have to bring migrants in to meet various labour and skills shortages.²

1 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, p. 54.

2 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, p. 19.

2.4 The Minister also told the committee that the migration program size was part of the budget process:

First of all, to be clear, the decision about the 2009-10 migration program size and composition is a decision for cabinet, as part of the budget process, as has been the tradition for many years in Australia. That decision has not been taken as yet.³

2.5 The committee also raised the case of Dr Moeller, whose visa application, together with those of his family, was rejected by the Department on the basis of the costs to the health system for his disabled son. The Minister informed the committee that he had asked the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Migration to examine the current terms of the 'health waiver', under which the Department had no choice but to decline Dr Moeller's application.⁴

2.6 The committee was also informed that the trial of guest workers from the Pacific was underway, with 50 Tongan workers due to arrive and work in Australia between February and August 2009.⁵

Refugees

2.7 The committee took evidence on the circumstances surrounding the decision by two temporary protection visa holders residing in Australia to travel to Indonesia, and the forewarning to them of the implications of their decision on their right of return. The committee also discussed the abolition of Temporary Protection Visas and the incidence of 'safe haven' visas in the previous reporting period.⁶

Citizenship Test

2.8 As with previous hearings the committee questioned officers on the citizenship test (the test). Further to the evidence taken at the last Additional Estimates hearing, the committee heard that a review of the test had been undertaken at a cost of \$221 131.⁷

2.9 In response to questions asked by committee members about the outcome of the review, the Minister told the committee that:

... the committee recommended, and we endorsed, that the test remain in English.⁸

3 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, p. 20.

4 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, pp 23–25.

5 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, p. 31.

6 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, p. 45.

7 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, p. 86.

8 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, p. 83.

2.10 Officers subsequently outlined other outcomes of the review in relation to the citizenship test:

The review committee recommended, and the government accepted, that the resource book for becoming an Australian citizen could consist of two components. The first is testable and the second is information that might be of use and of interest to people becoming or wishing to become citizens. The review committee formed the opinion that the words of the pledge of commitment that new citizens are required to make—in fact, it is the final step in becoming a citizen—and that the ideas encapsulated in the wording of the pledge should form the basis of knowledge that people have in regard to responsibilities and privileges and in regard to Australia’s democracy and democratic beliefs, et cetera, and the fact that we require people to uphold law, and that we have a rule of law. Those concepts will form the basis of the testable section of the resource book and will become the basis for questions in future tests.⁹

Senator Trish Crossin

Committee Chair

9 *Committee Hansard*, 24 February 2009, p.85.

