

CHAPTER 1

IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP

PORTFOLIO

Introduction

1.1 This chapter summarises areas of interest and concern raised during the committee's consideration of the Additional Estimates of the Immigration and Citizenship portfolio for the 2006-07 financial year.

Department of Immigration and Citizenship

1.2 On 31 January 2007 the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) was renamed the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). The Honourable Kevin Andrews MP was appointed Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, and the Honourable Teresa Gambaro MP was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship. The committee notes the considerable contribution of Senator the Honourable Amanda Vanstone and the Honourable Andrew Robb MP to the portfolio.

1.3 In relation to the changes to the portfolio, committee members sought details on the division of responsibilities between the new Minister and Parliamentary Secretary. Officers provided the committee with a brief overview, stating that the Minister would be responsible for most immigration and citizenship issues while the Parliamentary Secretary would have responsibility for multicultural affairs, language and settlement services. Officers also told the committee the specifics had not been finalised and agreed to provide the committee with the final arrangements on notice.¹

1.4 The committee questioned DIAC on its financial position; in particular the DIAC's overspend. Officers told the committee that the Department's overspend for the 2006-07 period would be between \$50 million to \$60 million, a significant increase on the original estimated overspend of \$14 million. Officers told the committee that the increase was as a result of a range of projects relating to the Palmer inquiry together with increases in activity across the department.²

1.5 As with previous estimates rounds, Senators questioned officers on a range of issues surrounding the temporary business (long stay) visas (subclass 457 visas). The committee heard that in the first six months of 2006-07, the number of primary applicants granted a 457 visa, excluding independent executives, was 21,464. Officers

¹ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, p. 4.

² *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, pp 4-9.

told the committee that this represented an increase of 17 per cent when compared to the first six months of 2005-06.³

1.6 The committee was concerned about compliance with requirements such as minimum salary levels which apply to 457 visas. DIAC advised that 300 employer sponsors are currently under investigation for non-compliance with their sponsorship obligations and 20 have been sanctioned for breaches in the last seven months. DIAC also outlined additional resources being directed at monitoring and compliance activities.⁴

1.7 Senators examined the decision to change the composition of Australia's refugee intake for 2006-07, in particular the decision to decrease the proportion of refugees from Africa from 55% to 50% of the total refugee intake. Officers cited a number of factors influencing the decision, including advice from United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Refugee Council of Australia. Officers also told the committee that the total allocated intake of refugees for the 2006-07 period is 6,000, a 50 percent increase from three years ago.⁵

1.8 Committee members sought information on inactive detention centres, in particular the cost of maintaining the centres and future plans for use of the centres. The committee heard that Port Hedland is the only remaining inactive detention centre, costing \$60,000 a month to maintain as a contingency facility. Officers also told the committee that the Woomera and Singleton centres are in the process of being returned to the Department of Defence.⁶

1.9 The committee questioned officers at length on the proposed citizenship test for new migrants. Officers provided the committee with an outline of the proposed computer based test:

There will be 25-30 multiple choice questions drawn from a bank of about 200 or more questions. They will be randomly generated through the software so that you could have two people sitting in a room doing the test and they may not get exactly the same questions.⁷

1.10 Officers told the committee that the proposed test is still under development and numerous aspects had yet to be finalised.⁸

³ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, p. 26.

⁴ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, pp 36-40.

⁵ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, pp 53-56.

⁶ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, pp 62-64.

⁷ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, p. 93.

⁸ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, p. 93.

Migration Review Tribunal and Refugee Review Tribunal

1.11 Committee members sought information from the Migration Review Tribunal (MRT) and the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) on current workloads in comparison to previous years. Officers told the committee that the workload of the RRT had reduced significantly and as a result, resources had been transferred to the MRT.⁹ The committee also questioned officers on staffing levels at the MRT and RRT, with officers telling the committee that due to declining workloads, 73 of the 96 members are now classified as part-time.¹⁰

⁹ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, pp. 111-113.

¹⁰ *Committee Hansard*, 12 February 2007, p.112.

