From: Quinn, Meghan MS
To: Perkins, Celia MS
Cc: Patterson, Cath MS; Reid, John Mr 7; SEG DEPSEC SEG Office
Subject: Re: Celia"s proposed approach: Public hearing - Management of Defence estate assets - Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Date: Tuesday, 25 August 2026 8:18:44 PM
Attachments: image001.png
image002.jpg

Hi

Very happy to support you using such words. I have forwarded you the draft sec paper that came in today. You can use as a cross check for the language.

I have talked to s47F and s47F about the sec paper and my intent to strengthen our management of committees to be consistent with our legal obligations. So shouldn't be a surprise.

MQ

s22

On 25 Aug 2026, at 6:00 pm, Perkins, Celia MS s47E(d) @defence.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Meghan,

As I mentioned last week, we will be appearing again before this Senate Inquiry on Friday 4 September.

s22

You may recall after the last hearing we had some unpleasant social media posts and reactions. And the Senate order to produce documents etc. I anticipate the session will focus on Defence be evasive etc.

I intend to go with an opening statement that outlines in detail how we manage the estate and the alignment of investment to the NDS priorities.

I also want to test with you this idea:

I'd like to add an explicit statement that the Defence witnesses appearing do not consent to our evidence being reproduced in edited format on social media platforms.

We'd need to settle a form of words that is defensible. My core arguments in support would be

- <!--[if !supportLists]--> <!--[endif]-->My obligations under the Work Health and Safety Act to maintain a safe workplace. Social media posts using footage from previous hearings – in edited and embellished formats had generated significant vile, personal commentary that was distressing for staff and invited on-line bullying.
- <!--[if !supportLists]--> <!--[endif]-->As senior leaders in Defence– we actively discourage security clearance holders from a social media presence that identifies us and our roles – and these post, designed to invite outraged responses - increase the personal risk from malign online actors, including cyber and foreign intelligence threats.

Let me know how you'd feel about that – we'd need to do some work and clear with ODPM.

With thanks

Celia

Celia Perkins
Deputy Secretary – Security and Estate

Security and Estate Group | Department of Defence
s47E(d) Russell Offices | PO Box 7904 | CANBERRA ACT 2610
P: s47E(d) | M: s22
E: s47E(d @defence.gov.au
<image001.png>
<image002.jpg>

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From: Perkins, Celia MS
To: Reid, John Mr 7; Patterson, Cath MS
Subject: Opening statement Seeking your views [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Date: Wednesday, 2 September 2026 4:55:00 PM
Attachments: Opening Statement Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs DEPSEC SE.docx
image001.png
image003.jpg

OFFICIAL

Cath, John,

I intend to make an opening statement when I appear before the Estate Audit senate inquiry this Friday - and to specifically call out the social media posting matter.

Meghan is fully supportive, as is AMINDEF. I discussed today in a meeting with AMINDEF and staff from DPMO and his office.

I'll pass the opening statement to them tomorrow.

I've drafted the following (full statement attached) - drawing from the Secretary's board submission – but would welcome your reactions.

Thanks

Celia

Chair, in closing, I would note for the record that the Defence witnesses appearing before the Committee today are pleased to take your questions but do not consent to the reposting to social media sites the recording of these proceedings containing evidence given by Defence witnesses, or the reproduction of the likenesses of Defence witnesses for purposes outside the framework of the Parliament and the transparent, public proceedings of this committee.

Thank you

Celia Perkins
Deputy Secretary – Security and Estate

Security and Estate Group | Department of Defence
s47E(d) , Russell Offices | PO Box 7904 | CANBERRA ACT 2610
P: s47E(d) | **M:** s22
E: s47E(d) @defence.gov.au

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Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade public hearing for the Inquiry into the management of Defence estate assets 4 September 2026

Celia Perkins
Deputy Secretary Security and Estate
Department of Defence

Opening Statement

Thank you Chair for the opportunity to appear before this hearing of the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into the management of Defence estate assets.

The Defence Estate

The Defence estate is the Australian Government's largest landholding at over 3.8m hectares. It includes 70 major bases, 100-plus training ranges, over 1,000 owned and leased properties, and 30,000 built assets.

The Defence Estate is older than Federation, older than the Australian Defence Force. Our oldest site, Anglesea Barracks in Hobart, dates to 1811. The Defence Estate is a critical combat enabler for the Australian Defence force and treated as a capability domain.

Defence Strategic Estate Priorities

Defence plans for future estate requirements through the hierarchy of strategic planning activities that start with strategic guidance from the Government of the day.

The National Defence Strategy provides detailed directions on the requirements of the current and planned future estate.

It directs that Defence's domestic force posture requires:

- a resilient network of northern bases and infrastructure to enable the projection of combat power into our northern approaches; and
- a resilient network of southern bases and infrastructure to enable force generation, sustainment, health networks and logistics in order to support combat operations and force projection from northern Australia.

The National Defence Strategy is driving a significant shift in estate and infrastructure investment to uplift the Defence estate to increase readiness, preparedness, including across our northern bases. The investment decisions for the Estate – in line with the NDS are agreed by the Government in the Integrated Investment Program and include:

- $13-16 billion investment planned for Northern bases and training areas over the next decade.

- Priority infrastructure investment to support Submarine Rotational Force -West at HMAS Stirling; and
- Priority infrastructure for the Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance enterprise.

Estate Investment

Defence invests in new and upgraded facilities and infrastructure through three investment subprograms:

- The Enterprise Estate Investment Program
- The Estate Works Program and
- The Estate and Land Upkeep program

In 2026-27 Defence will invest $6.2 billion across these programs.

Defence has made significant progress to accelerate the delivery of facilities and infrastructure to support the National Defence Strategy. To provide the Committee with just a few examples:

- We recently completed a $1.6 billion program of works at RAAF Base Tindal.
- We are delivering a $747 million upgrade training areas in the Northern Territory (Bradshaw, Kangaroo Flats, Mount Bundey and Robertson Barracks CTA).
- We are on track to deliver the $2.3 billion priority infrastructure program at HMAS Stirling to support the Submarine Rotational Force -West Initial Operating Support milestone by end 2027.
- In December 2025 we delivered a $25 million facility at Port Wakefield in South Australia to assembly Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System missiles, the second facility in the world to produce these missiles outside Lockheed Martin's facility in Camden, Arkansas.
- We are delivering a $518 million program of work at RAAF Townsville to support new Apache helicopters,
- We have commenced a $662 million upgrade at RAAF Base Learmonth for completion in mid-2028.
- We are completing a $376 million investment at Edinburgh Defence Precinct to support the first phase of Army's Long Range Fires Capability.
- And the Riverina Redevelopment Program is delivering major upgrades across Defence's key training establishments, including $395 million at the Albury-Wodonga Military Area, $590 million at RAAF Base Wagga, and $889 million at Blamey Barracks, Kapooka.

Sustaining the Estate: Base Services

Defence's operations across the estate are sustained through a portfolio of national contracts that deliver services to support Defence living, working and training environments.

These services include accommodation, catering, transport, facilities maintenance, environmental and land management, firefighting, training area management, and customer service delivery. We maintain joint use agreements at 7 airfields and sustain 21 Defence-operated airfields.

We deliver 9.3 million meals annually across 150 Defence messes; more than 222,000 maintenance work orders are lodged per month; and around 1000 Estate Works Program projects are endorsed for delivery annually.

Each year we coordinate approximately 40,000 activities on training area, manage over 3000 requests for ADF ceremonial support to the community, and produce over 275,000 Defence Common Access Cards.

Defence Estate Audit progress

Chair, Defence is undertaking the most significant transformation of the estate in decades. We are delivering the investment directed by the National Defence Strategy to support the planned future ADF capabilities and the strategy of denial.

Estate reform, through the implementation of the recommendations of the Defence Estate Audit, is a key pillar of the Government's directions to ensure the estate is fit for purpose, resilient and capable of supporting Defence's mission now and into the future. And that the estate investment and sustainment budget is directed to the delivery of ADF capability.

Since Defence's last appearance before this Committee on 1 July 2026, we have continued to make good progress implementing the Government's response to the Defence Estate Audit.

Defence has hosted members of this committee for additional site visits to Fort Queenscliff, Launceston and Devonport.

Four sites have been sold by Defence. Ten additional sites are now vacated and ready for transfer to the Department of Finance for divestment. Personnel have transitioned from Carlton Training Depot to Mount Waverley Depot and cadets from Carlton Training Depot and Geelong Australian Air Force Cadets have moved to new facilities.

Ministers and Defence senior leaders have completed 26 community information sessions across the country, with more than 2,300 attendees. We have completed 59 formal consultations with more than 10,000 affected employees and cadets.

Defence is finalising a History and Heritage Plan in consultation with peak state and territory heritage bodies. Most recently, the Assistant Minister for Defence led roundtable discussions in both Melbourne and Sydney with key stakeholders and elected representatives.

I would note the announcement on 4 August by the Deputy Prime Minister to expand and enhance Public Access significant Defence heritage sites. The first event under this program ‘Beats at the Barracks’ will be held at Victoria Barracks Sydney on 12 September and we will shortly announce enhanced access at Victoria Barracks Melbourne and Fort Queenscliff.

Conclusion

Chair, in closing, I would note for the record that the Defence witnesses appearing before the Committee today are pleased to take your questions. But they do not consent to the reposting of their evidence to social media sites or the reproduction of their likenesses for purposes outside the framework of the Parliament and the transparent, public proceedings of this committee.

Thank you

From: Reid, John Mr 7
To: Patterson, Cath MS
Cc: Perkins, Celia MS
Subject: Re: Opening statement Seeking your views [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Date: Wednesday, 2 September 2026 9:19:24 PM

Thanks Celia,
I agree with Cath; this is a good statement and makes the point clearly and respectfully.
I've offered some suggestions below, but they are just for clarity (and maybe to narrow the scope of the concerns) so please take them with a grain of salt.

Cheers,
JR

John Reid
Deputy Secretary, Governance
Department of Defence
s47E(d) , Russell Offices, ACT 2600
ph s47E(d) | m s22 | e s47E(d) @defence.gov.au

On 2 Sep 2026, at 6:28 pm, Patterson, Cath MS s47E(d) @defence.gov.au> wrote:

OFFICIAL

Hi Celia
Those words look fine – polite and clear and safe given in the Sec Board submission
C
IMPORTANT: This email remains the property of the Department of Defence. Unauthorised communication and dealing with the information in the email may be a serious criminal offence. If you have received this email in error, you are requested to contact the sender and delete the email immediately.

From: Perkins, Celia MS s47E(d) @defence.gov.au>
Sent: Wednesday, 2 September 2026 4:56 PM
To: Reid, John Mr s47E(d) @defence.gov.au>; Patterson, Cath MS s47E(d) @defence.gov.au>
Subject: Opening statement Seeking your views [SEC=OFFICIAL]

OFFICIAL

Cath, John,

I intend to make an opening statement when I appear before the Estate

Audit senate inquiry this Friday - and to specifically call out the social media posting matter.

Meghan is fully supportive, as is AMINDEF. I discussed today in a meeting with AMINDEF and staff from DPMO and his office.

I'll pass the opening statement to them tomorrow.

I've drafted the following (full statement attached) - drawing from the Secretary's board submission – but would welcome your reactions.

Thanks

Celia

Chair, in closing, I would note for the record that the Defence witnesses appearing before the Committee today are pleased to take your questions. But they do not consent to the reposting of their evidence to social media sites ~~the recording of these proceedings containing evidence given by Defence witnesses~~, or the reproduction of their likenesses ~~of Defence witnesses~~ for purposes outside the framework of the Parliament and the transparent, public proceedings of this committee.

Thank you

Celia Perkins
Deputy Secretary – Security and Estate

Security and Estate Group | Department of Defence
s47E(d) Russell Offices | PO Box 7904 | CANBERRA ACT 2610
P: s47E(d) | **M:** s22
E: s47E(d) @defence.gov.au
<image001.png>
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Reasons

1. My obligations under the Work Health and Safety Act 2011. I must ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the physical and psychological health and safety of workers and other people affected by the work.

   Social media posts made using footage from a previous hearing – in edited and embellished formats were misleading, they attributed to witness thoughts that were not true, and used footage in edited format and out of the context of the broader engagement in the hearing.

   The posts generated significant highly inappropriate and highly personal commentary that was distressing for staff and invited ridicule, hostility and abuse directed at individual officials.

   I note resolutions of the Senate in relation to the broadcasting of Senate and Committee proceedings note that 'broadcasts of proceedings of a committee, including excerpts of committee proceedings, shall be for the purpose only of making fair and accurate reports of those proceedings'.

2. These posts also rise significant security concerns. We actively discourage security clearance holders from a social media presence that identifies roles – and these post increase the personal risk from malign online actors, including cyber and foreign intelligence threats. The Commonwealth Protective Security Policy Framework specifically notes that Australian Government personnel are particularly vulnerable to approaches by malicious/foreign actors if identified on social media as an Australian Government employee with access to security classified information.

From: Perkins, Celia MS
To: s47F
Cc: Bazzacco, Mark Dr; West, Peter MR 2
Subject: Senate Inquiry into Management of the Defence Estate Opening Statement [SEC=OFFICIAL]
Date: Thursday, 3 September 2026 12:42:00 PM
Attachments: Opening Statement Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs DEPSEC SE.docx
image001.png
image003.jpg

OFFICIAL

All,
I'm appearing Friday morning before the Senate Inquiry into Management of the Defence Estate. It's a long hearing (2.5 hours) with only Defence witnesses.

I intend to start with an opening statement – attached above for your information.

All the best

Celia

Celia Perkins
Deputy Secretary – Security and Estate

Security and Estate Group | Department of Defence
s47E(d) Russell Offices | PO Box 7904 | CANBERRA ACT 2610
P: s47E(d) | **M:** s22
E: s47E(d) @defence.gov.au

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Secretaries Board

OFFICIAL

Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Parliamentary Standards Inquiry into the Operation and Effectiveness of Behaviour Codes and Standards in Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Parliamentary Standards on the operation and effectiveness of Behaviour Codes and Standards in Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces.

Established under section 64 of the *Public Service Act 1999*, the Secretaries Board is the Australian Public Service's (APS) most senior leadership forum. Comprising all departmental Secretaries, the Australian Public Service Commissioner and the Chief Executive Officer of the National Indigenous Australians Agency, the Board is responsible for the stewardship of the APS.

This submission focuses on the experience of APS employees, members of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), agency heads and statutory office holders (collectively 'Official Witnesses'), appearing before parliamentary committees, particularly Senate Estimates hearings. It addresses the interaction between parliamentarians' obligations under the Behaviour Standards for Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces (Behaviour Standards) and the Behaviour Code for Australian Parliamentarians (Behaviour Code), and the obligations and protections for public sector employees under the Government Guidelines for Official Witnesses before Parliamentary Committees and Related Matters (Official Witness Guidelines). This submission also considers the increasing use of select extracts from committee proceedings on social media and the impact this can have on Official Witnesses.

The importance of respectful engagement between the Parliament and officials

Responsible government requires a productive and respectful relationship between the Parliament and executive government. It is foundational to the principles of our government that the Parliament (typically in the form of committees[1]) may inquire into matters of public interest and the administration of government policy and programmes, including by the public sector.[2] Such

[1] The existence of parliamentary committees is recognised in s 49 of the Constitution.
[2] Section 1.3.1 of the Official Witness Guidelines

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committee inquiries operate on the principle that questions are to be asked and answered through the chair and in an orderly manner.[3]

The interactions between the Parliament and Official Witnesses are most evident during Senate Estimates proceedings. Committees may use the Senate Estimates proceedings to ask for explanations from ministers, or Official Witnesses, relating to items of proposed expenditure.[4] These proceedings are the major opportunity for the Senate to assess the performance of public sector agencies, the ADF and APS and their administration of government policy and programs.[5] Public servants are also regularly called to appear before other inquiries undertaken by Parliamentary committees, including inquiries into bills being considered by the Parliament.

Official Witnesses take their responsibilities to the Parliament seriously and acknowledge and respect the importance of the role of committees in supporting transparency and accountability. Official Witnesses who appear before Senate Estimates hearings, and committees generally, must be open and responsive when providing evidence, and respectful of the committees and their role.[6] The Official Witness Guidelines make clear that there should be the freest possible flow of information between the public sector and the Parliament.[7]

The Secretaries Board considers that public confidence in both the Parliament and Official Witnesses is best served when committee proceedings are conducted in a manner that is rigorous, robust and respectful.

Relevance of the Parliamentary Behaviour Standards and Behaviour Code

In 2024, the Parliament adopted the Behaviour Standards and the Behaviour Code. These frameworks establish clear expectations regarding conduct within Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces and apply to parliamentarians in the course of their duties, both inside and outside the Parliament.

The Behaviour Standards require all persons in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces to:

- act respectfully, professionally and with integrity;
- encourage and value diverse perspectives;
- recognise and not abuse power, influence or authority; and
- uphold laws that support safe and respectful workplaces.

The Board considers that the standards should be understood as applying not only to conduct occurring within committee rooms but also to conduct associated with parliamentary proceedings, including the public communication and dissemination of committee interactions.

The Behaviour Code further provides that parliamentarians must treat all persons with whom they come into contact in the course of their parliamentary duties with dignity, courtesy, fairness and respect. It also recognises the leadership role of parliamentarians in fostering healthy, safe, respectful

[3] *House of Representatives Practice*, Seventh Edition, p689
[4] Senate Standing Order 26(5)
[5] *Odgers Senate Practice*, Fourteenth Edition, p478
[6] Section 4.1 of the Official Witness Guidelines
[7] Section 1.3.3 of the Official Witness Guidelines

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and inclusive environments. Importantly, the Behaviour Code applies to conduct undertaken by electronic communication as well as conduct occurring in person.

In the view of the Secretaries Board, these standards are directly relevant to interactions between parliamentarians and Official Witnesses appearing before parliamentary committees.

In addition, agency heads and other senior public officials have a legal duty to ensure the health and safety of workers in accordance with the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* and associated regulations (as do parliamentarians[8]). This includes ensuring their psychological health through the management, so far as is reasonably practicable, of psychosocial risks arising from psychosocial hazards. Behaviour that is inconsistent with the Behaviour Standards and the Behaviour Code may, depending on the circumstances, also constitute a psychosocial hazard and present a risk to the psychological health of public servants thus engaging agencies' duties under work health and safety legislation.

The experience of Official Witnesses before parliamentary committees

By their nature, committee hearings involve questioning. Such questioning is a legitimate and important aspect of parliamentary scrutiny. While public servants expect to be subject to searching examination, where this involves conduct that demeans, intimidates, humiliates or personally targets Official Witnesses, it is inconsistent with the expectations established by the Behaviour Standards and the Behaviour Code and workplace laws set by the Australian Parliament.

In the view of the Secretaries Board, there have been instances, most notably in Senate Estimates proceedings, in which the conduct of committee hearings has not been appropriately respectful nor fair to official witnesses. For example, the Board is aware of examples where individual public servants have been accused of engaging in criminal conduct, of being racist, of gross violations of human rights and of engaging in acts deliberately intended to harm others. Officials have been accused of being "weak" for implementing government policies. It is routine for public servants to be accused of 'hiding' things or 'covering up' for the government.

Occasionally, Committee members to interrupt public servants as they are trying to respond to questions, to paraphrase responses in a way that is inaccurate or misleading or to question the competence or integrity of public servants at the table.

The Board notes an emerging pattern of behaviour where Committee members direct what might be termed 'political' attacks at public servants. This may indicate a lack of understanding of the respective roles of public servants and ministers. Official Witnesses can and should be prepared to explain government policy and its implementation. However, it is ultimately ministers who are responsible for determining government policy and answerable for those decisions. It is not the role of an Official Witness before a committee to give opinions on matters of policy.[9] Such attacks are particularly problematic during Committee inquiries where, unlike Senate Estimates, there is no minister present.

There are limited options available to public servants who find themselves subject to abusive or otherwise inappropriate behaviour from a Committee member. Officials who have been adversely referred to in a committee hearing or in the chamber may (in consultation with their departmental secretary or agency head) make a submission to the President of the Senate or to the Speaker of the

[8] See ss28 and 247 of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011*

[9] Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 of the Official Witness Guidelines and the Senate resolutions referred to therein

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House of Representatives requesting that a response be published.[10] However, the need for a public servant to be apolitical, and to be seen to be apolitical, significantly limits a public servant's right of reply if their evidence is used for a political attack by a committee member. Recognising this power imbalance, the primary protection should come from the Committee itself, most notably the chair.

We note that, since 2023, several committee chairs have read out the following statement (or similar) at the start of each session:

> *I remind all senators that, as we continue our work implementing the* Set the Standard report, *as chair I will ensure that proceedings are conducted in an orderly, respectful and courteous way.*

This reminder does seem to have some impact on behaviour. However, a reminder at the beginning of a hearing is no substitute for appropriate handling of incidents if, and when, they occur.

Emerging concerns regarding social media use of committee proceedings

The Secretaries Board is concerned about the use of excerpts from parliamentary committee proceedings, including Senate Estimates hearings, on social media platforms.

Parliamentarians, political offices and third parties can readily extract short segments of committee broadcasts and distribute them to large audiences via social media. While committee proceedings are public, and transparency is a fundamental feature of parliamentary accountability, concerns arise where excerpts:

- present an incomplete or misleading representation of exchanges;
- remove questions or answers from their broader context;
- portray public servants as personally responsible for government policy decisions;
- invite ridicule, hostility or abuse directed at individual officials; or
- generate significant online harassment and abuse directed toward witnesses and their families.

The posting of videos raises an additional matter of concern. Comments on the videos of officials shared to social media often have comments added by other social media users that are highly offensive and sometimes defamatory. In the examples outlined above, comments about the officials have attacked their physical appearance, likened them to Nazis and paedophiles, and referred to the officials as (among other things): 'despicable', 'filth', 'political puppet', 'bigot', 'pig', 'KKK member', 'sleazy', 'incompetent retard', 'parasite', 'stupid', 'shill', 'demonic', 'putrid mutt', 'criminal', 'fraud', 'clown', 'scumbag', 'lying corrupt grub', etc.

Official Witnesses appear before committees as representatives of Commonwealth entities, and not as political actors. Official Witnesses have not consented to subsequent uses of their likeness and evidence for another, often political, purpose outside the framework of the Parliament.

We are aware of some positive examples where parliamentarians have disabled or moderated comments once they became aware that public servants were being subject to abuse. We are grateful for the action taken in those instances. The Behaviour Standards indicate that parliamentarians are expected to recognise and not abuse their power, influence or authority. In that context,

[10] Section 5.7 of the Official Witness Guidelines

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parliamentarians could take into account that professional obligations to remain apolitical[11] mean a public servant will be restricted from correcting misrepresentations (intended or incidental) that may arise from the use of their evidence if that response could be characterised as political.

The asymmetry of power in such a use of committee evidence can leave Official Witnesses (individually and collectively) exposed to reputational harm and personal abuse despite having acted properly and professionally in the performance of their duties.

Section 10 of the *Parliamentary Privileges Act 1987* provides some protection for 'a fair and accurate report of proceedings at a meeting of a House or a committee'. Aa public servant may be able to seek a legal remedy, including against a parliamentarian. However, this would be a very significant step for a public servant to take such that, in reality, there may be no practical protection available even in circumstances where, for example, the public servant has been defamed.

While this submission is primarily concerned with the protection of public servants appearing before committees, we note that some of the examples above are misleading and risk undermining political debate more generally. In other words, they harm not only public servants, but Australian democracy and our institutions of government.

Effect on officials

The Secretaries Board is concerned that the behaviour of some committee members during committee hearings and online is exposing public servants to harm and it may be incumbent on Secretaries to impose more substantial mitigations against the risks of inappropriate conduct.

While most agency heads and senior public servants are used to robust and willing discussions, we are concerned about the cumulative impact of some of these behaviours. Secretaries are aware of senior officers who have requested that they be excused from attending Committee hearings.

The Secretaries Board is concerned that the consequences of inappropriate conduct are often assessed only in relation to the individual witness. In practice, committee proceedings are highly visible and often become the subject of discussion within agencies and across professional networks. When officials are publicly criticised, mocked, or portrayed as personally responsible for policy decisions, the resulting effect can be significantly broader than the experience of the witness alone. Such conduct may contribute to a perception that appearing before parliamentary committees carries an unreasonable personal or reputational risk, potentially discouraging capable public servants undertaking public-facing responsibilities.

The Secretaries Board is conscious that the impacts described in this submission may not be experienced uniformly across the workforce. Employees from underrepresented groups may experience these behaviours differently, particularly where they affect perceptions of inclusion, cultural safety and belonging. This may be particularly relevant for First Nations employees when policies, programs or issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the subject of committee scrutiny, and where First Nations officials are appearing before committees in their professional capacity. We are aware of one instance, for example, in which members of an Aboriginal Corporation were referred to as 'corporatised blacks' by a Committee member during a hearing.

[11] S10(5) of the *Public Service Act 1999* mandates that it is an APS value that the APS is apolitical.

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Where employees observe officials being subjected to conduct that is demeaning, intimidating, humiliating or personally targeted in the context of these discussions, it may negatively affect perceptions of cultural safety and belonging, with implications for the attraction, retention and development of First Nations talent across the public sector.

Protecting Official Witnesses While Preserving Parliamentary Accountability and Transparency

The Secretaries Board does not propose any lessening of parliamentary scrutiny or accountability. Parliamentarians must remain free to question officials robustly, challenge evidence and draw public attention to matters of concern. Equally, the Secretaries Board recognises the obligation for Official Witnesses to be open and responsive when providing evidence. However, there is scope to strengthen protections for witnesses and ensure duty of care considerations are met while preserving these fundamental democratic functions.

The Board submits that the following measures warrant consideration:

1. Explicitly adopt the Behaviour Standards and the Behaviour Code for the examination of witnesses before committees

Under the Standing Orders[12] the examination of witnesses is to be conducted in accordance with procedures adopted by the Parliament for that purpose. For the avoidance of doubt, the Secretaries Board submits that all parliamentary committees should expressly adopt the Behaviour Standards and the Behaviour Code for the examination of witnesses before committees.

2. Education for committee members on the role of public servants

We are concerned that some parliamentarians may not have a clear understanding of the role of public servants, including vis-à-vis ministers. The evidence provided by Official Witnesses is foundational to parliamentary scrutiny and responsible government and it is essential that parliamentary committees continue to be a safe environment for officials to appear to provide evidence. We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee on ways in which this can be explained more clearly, particularly for newer members of the Parliament.

3. Explicit Guidance on Treatment of Witnesses

The Behaviour Code and/or associated guidance materials could expressly recognise witnesses appearing before parliamentary committees as persons entitled to respectful treatment. This guidance could note that robust questioning does not include behaviour that is demeaning, intimidating, humiliating or personally abusive. As a core principle, this guidance could expressly recognise that Official Witnesses appear as agency representatives and not as advocates for government policy.

4. Guidance on Social Media Use of Committee Proceedings

The Parliament may wish to develop guidance addressing the appropriate use of parliamentary committee broadcasts.

The preference of the Secretaries Board is that video evidence from Official Witnesses not be extracted by parliamentarians or political actors and shared on social media. As noted above, these officials appear in their official capacity and not as advocates for government policy. Recognising the

[12] Senate Standing Order 182, House of Representatives Standing Order 255(d)

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evidence provided to a committee is on the public record, these officials have not consented to a subsequent use of their image, or its use by parliamentarians and their political parties for party-political purposes. In our view, the use of officials' likenesses and their evidence in this way has the potential to be harmful both to the individual and the public sector as a whole. We ask the committee to consider options to prevent the potentially harmful use of committee evidence on social media.

If the Parliament were not inclined to prevent the use of this evidence on social media, guidance could be developed to encourage parliamentarians to:

- present excerpts in a manner that accurately reflects the substance of proceedings;
- share information in a manner that respects the purpose of the committee and the capacity in which an official presents evidence;
- avoid misleading editing practices;
- refrain from content that targets individual officials for ridicule or harassment; and
- consider appropriate contextual material where excerpts are published.

One option is to mandate that contextual information must be provided with extracts of officials' evidence. For example, where clips of committee proceedings are made available on social media, links could be provided to the full hearing or transcript. At a minimum, if extracts of Official Witness evidence are to be posted on social media, they should be made with comments disabled, similar to the arrangements that are in place for some news services posting on social media. This would minimise the possibility of defamatory and/or harmful statements being made about Official Witnesses.

5. Strengthened Chair Responsibilities

Committee chairs could be encouraged, through procedural guidance and training, to intervene where questioning becomes unnecessarily personal or where witness wellbeing may be adversely affected. This would reinforce the important role chairs already perform in maintaining order and fairness during proceedings. As a last resort, chairs should be encouraged to temporarily refuse the call to Committee members who engage in behaviour that is inconsistent with the Behaviour Standards and the Behaviour Code.

The committee may also wish to consider if there is value in giving the chairs powers to remove committee members who have acted inappropriately. Of course, this should only be used where other approaches have failed.

6. Enhanced Reporting and Support Pathways

Witnesses should have clear information regarding available support arrangements if they experience abuse, harassment or threats arising from committee appearances. This may include wellbeing support, security advice and referral pathways where conduct potentially engages existing parliamentary behaviour frameworks. The committee may wish to examine the services provided by the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission and whether they appropriately cover participants in committee hearings.

7. Periodic Review of Witness Experience

The Parliament may wish to establish a mechanism for periodically reviewing the experience of witnesses appearing before committees, including public servants, ADF officials, statutory office holders and private citizens. Such reviews could identify emerging risks and inform future

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improvements to committee practice and behavioural expectations. One option may be the periodic review of the conduct of committee hearings, and the use of committee evidence, by the privileges committees.

Conclusion

The Secretaries Board strongly supports the objectives of parliamentary accountability, transparency and rigorous scrutiny. Official Witnesses appear before parliamentary committees under significant professional obligations, including the obligation to provide accurate factual information and assist ministers to meet their accountability responsibilities.

The recently adopted Behaviour Standards and Behaviour Code provide an important foundation for respectful engagement within parliamentary settings. The Secretaries Board considers that these principles should inform not only conduct within Committee hearings themselves but also behaviour associated with those proceedings, including the dissemination of committee content through social media channels. By strengthening expectations regarding the treatment of witnesses, improving guidance on social media use, and enhancing support arrangements for those who participate in parliamentary processes, Parliament can further reinforce a culture of accountability, integrity, safety and mutual respect while maintaining the robust scrutiny that is central to Australia's system of government.