



Australian Government
Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs

Address to
Migration Review Tribunal-Refugee Review Tribunal
Members' Conference
The Grace Hotel, Sydney

'Cultural change at DIMA post-Palmer and Comrie: The Department's
current approach to decision-making and its implications for the
Tribunals'

Mr Andrew Metcalfe
Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
1 December 2006

Introduction

It's a pleasure to return this year and have the opportunity to brief members on the department's approach to decision-making and its implications for the Tribunals.

Today, I will:

- start with an update on the department's reform and improvement programme,
- move on to the work we have underway to external stakeholders,
- consider some current operational issues, and
- then look briefly to the future.

Update on the department's reform and improvement programme

I spoke to you about the department's reform and improvement programme last year, and so today I will update you on the main developments since then.

We have undertaken nearly 17 months of comprehensive work, covering almost every aspect of the department's activity, but especially cultural change and systems change — both to support excellence in client service.

At the same time as we have been developing the reform and improvement programme, we have also continued the usual work of the department. As you will be aware, our 'bread and butter' workload of issuing visas has increased in this time.

people our business |

6 Chan Street Belconnen ACT 2617

PO Box 25 BELCONNEN ACT 2616 • Telephone (02) 6264 1111 • Facsimile (02) 6264 4466 • Website:
www.immi.gov.au

Since I last spoke the Government has supported its direction to implement the findings of the Palmer and Comrie Reports, with nearly \$780 million in additional and redirected funding to be spent over five years.

We are using this money to drive well over 100 initiatives designed to make the department an open and accountable organisation delivering excellent client service.

I launched the DIMA Plan for 2006-07 in July, and this brought together the key elements of our new direction in a consistent and integrated framework, which we are using for business planning throughout the organisation.

We are also embedding the three strategic themes in every aspect of our work, which I am sure you will be aware of under our motto — **people** our business:

- ❖ being an open and accountable organisation
- ❖ having fair and reasonable dealings with clients, and
- ❖ having well-trained and supported staff.

We have also done much work to establish our values.

As a large and dispersed organisation, it's essential that wherever our staff are located or whatever job they do, they have a consistent set of appropriate values to apply in their work.

We have defined our own DIMA values — in addition to those we work by as public servants — as teamwork, service excellence, respect for each other and the people we serve, openness, and commitment to delivering government policy in a fair and reasonable way.

The DIMA Plan also defines appropriate leadership behaviours, our core business processes and our strategic priorities which I shall discuss now.

Our first priority is to implement the *Systems for People* improvements.

You might wonder why client service isn't top of the list, but the fact is that getting *Systems for People* up and running will do a great deal to improve our client service.

Nearly \$500 million has been allocated to this project and I am very pleased with the progress so far under Deputy Secretary Bob Correll's capable leadership — but I note the extraordinarily ambitious work programme and timetable we have set ourselves

Working with our partner IBM, an enormous amount of work is now underway with the first major delivery of systems to occur in April next year.

In October, we launched the first release which gave staff a single view of a client's identity. This will do much to improve efficiency and for example, reduce confusion where clients are entered with slightly different details in our different legacy systems.

Future releases will deliver:

- globally consistent business processes and rules
- proper record keeping
- in-built support for decision-making
- on-line help and training, and
- operational reports.

And so to client service in its own right.

It was clear from the Palmer and Comrie reports in 2005 that we had to make major improvements in client service, not just in the areas where there had been serious mistakes, but across all our client programmes.

The Minister launched the Client Service Improvement Programme in June, which we have now rolled out to all offices.

Our DIMA National initiative identified 28 projects that were designed to drive a client-focussed change in culture across the department. These are largely complete and are now ongoing or managed as mainstream projects.

We have established a client survey framework that will be used to guide decisions about intended client surveys over the coming years,

We centralised the processing and analysis of all feedback and complaints through the Global Feedback Unit in Melbourne, so that we have a clear picture of themes, trends and systemic issues as they emerge across the service delivery network.

And we are now up to strength with our new case managers who will facilitate the resolution of exceptional cases, where clients have complex circumstances or are especially vulnerable.

We also did a lot of work on our Client Service Charter, consulting with over 700 stakeholders to make sure the Charter provides an overview of our service commitment to our clients, so they know what to expect when dealing with us, and how they can provide us with feedback or complain.

I have also insisted that my senior executives regularly spend some time at the front counter of the client service areas of our state and territory offices.

Detention was obviously a key area of concern in the Palmer and Comrie reports, and we have reviewed our longer-term detention requirements and begun to implement a new Onshore Detention Strategy to provide a more appropriate environment for people held in immigration detention.

This includes major upgrades to the Baxter Detention Centre and putting Detention Review Managers in place to ensure decisions to detain people are made lawfully and reasonably.

The College of Immigration — with the Advisory Board now chaired by Mick Palmer — has been a key part of our effort to equip staff with the skills and knowledge for better decision-making and improved client service.

The department has also made significant steps forward in improving our planning, accountability, leadership capability, communication and training.

To accommodate the needs of the new programmes and extensions, the department has continued to grow, reaching around 7000 staff at the end of June this year.

For any members who wish to know more about our reform and improvement programme, I draw your attention to the feature article in our most recent annual report.

Work underway on engaging partners and external stakeholders

The third of our strategic priorities is to build community and stakeholder confidence.

I see the tribunals as partners which make you key stakeholders. I do recognise the importance for your credibility and effective operation that you maintain your independence from the department.

We can learn much from you about how we can improve our business, and also benefit from your role as a benchmark as to whether we are meeting the expectations of independent and knowledgeable observers of the department.

While there are some notable exceptions, stakeholder engagement is an area where we largely dropped the ball for many years. Prior to the Palmer report, the department had an inward culture, and was not as open to the views of outsiders as was healthy.

Now, I want everyone in the department to recognise that our stakeholders are an asset, rather than a liability or an obligation, and I want all my staff to work constructively and effectively with them.

Our engagement with stakeholders in general offers an opportunity to understand how our activities impact on the wider community, and then make sure we understand community needs and expectations.

I have devoted senior level resources to this initiative with Des Storer as Principal Adviser and Fran Parker in charge of the Stakeholder Taskforce.

Our aim over the longer term is to engage with the right people and organisations as effectively as possible to ensure our work is informed by a good understanding of stakeholder perspectives.

We also want our key stakeholders to feel they have a ‘way in’ and can be confident that we will listen, and respond where possible.

This is especially true of how we go about the daily business of implementing government policy.

Our stakeholders need to be confident their views are seen as legitimate and their concerns are recognised.

To implement this initiative, we are developing a Stakeholder Engagement Model to guide our practice, and we have established Client Reference Groups in all States.

We also have consultations underway with a range of stakeholders to identify issues of concern, and this is proving very useful in directing our activities and thinking.

This will be an ongoing process, not something that will be fixed overnight or addressed in a one-off fashion.

We will be continuing to map and re-map our key stakeholders, identify and address the major issues and continue to monitor the effectiveness of our engagement.

Current operational issues

I would like now to step quickly through some significant aspects of the operational relationship between the tribunals and the department.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) we signed a year ago is working well and has strengthened the relationship between us.

The upcoming review of the MoU should take into account much of the department's organisational change and the changes experienced by the tribunals.

I am very pleased that we have been able to establish data exchange between your CaseMate system and our Integrated Client Service Environment (ICSE).

We have benefited from improved notification of review application lodgements and Member decisions from the tribunals and in ensuring information relevant to the status of non-citizens in Australia is up-to-date.

With the development of *Systems for People*, there is clearly scope for further links which should help greatly in the discovery phase of your inquiries.

To this end, we are looking at a range of options that will improve access to the information required for review work.

I know my compliance officers have found the tribunals' 24-hour telephone information service to confirm the review status of clients very helpful.

Improved record-keeping —while not glamorous — is vital to the effective operation of the Australian Public Service, as Peter Shergold has reminded us on a number of occasions.

While *Systems for People* will help with this, I am very pleased that we have already significantly reduced the backlog for both the tribunals.

Finally on current issues, I just want to comment on how well the Legislative Change Programme is progressing.

I know the tribunals have needed to manage approximately 500 remittals over the past 12 months due to the SAAP/ Al Shamry case — however, amendments expected to be introduced this sitting period should alleviate the situation.

Looking to the future

To round off my presentation today, I would like to quote from a few people and organisations who have recently gone on the record about the department's performance.

Foremost of course, Minister Vanstone has made a number of positive statements which are strongly supportive of the department's direction.

I was also pleased to see the Commonwealth Ombudsman recently say that there had been 'significant culture change' in the department.

One of our long-term NGO stakeholders recently wrote to the department to say that they felt they could now have a meaningful and mutually respectful dialogue, and were optimistic that they could work with us to address community concerns.

And one of the migration agents wrote recently to say that 'there has been a very marked improvement in the responsiveness of DIMA in the last 12 months or so. This has certainly made our life easier and increased client satisfaction. ...overall you and your staff are to be congratulated on progress to date'.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight my awareness of the important role of the tribunals and that you also face significant challenges in terms of your workload.

While we in the department have no wish to compromise your independence, it is nevertheless in our common interest to work together to achieve positive outcomes for our mutual clients.

For my part, I am keen to see the department reducing your workload by improving our decision-making and record-keeping.

In return, I welcome your feedback on how we can do our job better and also support you in doing your work as effectively as possible.

Thank you.