

**Opening Statement to Senate Estimates  
Parliament House, Canberra**

**19 February 2008**

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Madam Chair, firstly, on behalf of the department and myself, can I congratulate you on your appointment as chair of this most important committee of the Senate, and also Senator Barnett on his appointment as deputy chair. Both the department officers and I look forward to working very constructively with you over the period ahead. Thank you for the opportunity to deliver a short opening statement.

As you would recall, I have provided a statement at each Senate estimates hearing since mid-2005 to highlight key elements of the progress on the department's significant change and reform agenda brought about by the government's response to the Palmer and Comrie reports in relation to Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez. Over the period, the reforms in themselves have attracted a good deal of interest and scrutiny from external agencies.

It is now eight months since the last Senate estimates hearings, in May last year, and there has been considerable further progress—and I am pleased to see some encouraging external commentary.

External scrutiny, particularly by the Ombudsman and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, continues and is welcomed by me.

In 2007 the Ombudsman published a number of specific reports on the results of the 247 cases referred to him in 2005, and a separate report which derived a number of lessons learnt applicable to all areas of government. I regarded that as a very useful and timely report. In January this year the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission published a summary of observations, following the inspection of mainland immigration detention facilities in 2007. While these reports by external scrutiny bodies continue to identify areas where our processes or capacity need to be improved or where policy changes are recommended, there has also been positive comment. The Ombudsman noted:

*... substantial improvement in the quality of administrative activity and the efficiency of the internal systems within Immigration.*

There is no doubt the substantial reform program that has been under way since the cases of Cornelia Rau and Vivian Alvarez has made a major difference to Immigration administration.

At the end of last year, almost 80 per cent of the separate initiatives under the Palmer Plus program had been integrated into the department's ongoing business. The other 20 per cent of projects, representing the longer term and more complex work, are still in the development phase.

The improvements are nowhere more apparent than in the area of health services for people in immigration detention, where they have been achieved working with key external stakeholders who are professionals in the field and with our service providers. This work has been led by a number of departmental officers, principally Bob Correll, the Deputy Secretary, Lyn O'Connell and Dermot Casey. Dermot was recently awarded the Public Service Medal—on Australia Day—for his excellent work in this area. Progress has continued within the Systems for People program, especially in supporting the key areas of compliance, detention and border operations.

The changes in detention and compliance have not been restricted to information technology and infrastructure. We believe that staff are now much better supported by training, some of which is certainly accredited, through revised policy and procedural instructions and through our case management system.

The department is nearing the conclusion of a significant revision of its entire holdings of immigration instructions, including bringing all instructions into the one format and developing a number of new ones. As well as being updated, the instructions in key areas more directly reflect the operational processes to make them more usable. A rigorous process of ongoing review is being put in place.

We as a department continue to invest in good governance at all levels. Following an independent review of our governance arrangements in 2007, improvements have been made to the governance framework, including the functioning and strategic focus for the highest level committees.

Information about values, standards and accountabilities has been expanded, and there are robust frameworks in place for better managing stakeholder and client relationships, and departmental performance generally.

In 2007 the second staff survey was conducted since the Palmer report. The survey is a mechanism to monitor cultural change and to identify areas for ongoing effort. A major effort indeed was and continues to be put into the follow-up activity to pursue that reform. While I believe that considerable progress has been made, we believe that more work is needed, including on our IT improvement program, on records management, on further enhancements to training and on advancing the outcomes from our community care pilot. We have systematically worked to improve our engagement with key external stakeholders and clients.

In our 2007 client satisfaction survey, 80 per cent of clients were satisfied or very satisfied with the service they received. Key stakeholder feedback has similarly been positively identified and outlined in the 2006-07 annual report.

In conclusion, Madam Chair, I would like to record my appreciation of the efforts of my deputy secretaries and, indeed, all departmental staff in continuing to provide effective services while implementing this significant reform agenda.