



28 November 2024

Oliver Smith

**BY EMAIL:** [foi+request-12237-e1b0456a@righttoknow.org.au](mailto:foi+request-12237-e1b0456a@righttoknow.org.au)

**In reply please quote:**

FOI Request: FA 24/10/01737

File Number: FA24/10/01737

Dear Oliver Smith

**Freedom of Information (FOI) request – Decision**

On 28 October 2024, the Department of Home Affairs (the Department) received a request for access to document under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982* (the FOI Act).

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with a decision on your request for access under the FOI Act.

**1 Scope of request**

You have requested access to the following document:

*Under the FOI Act, I seek a copy of the Ministerial Brief provided to the office of Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke on 12/8/24 with the PDR No. MS24-001063.*

**2 Authority to make decision**

I am an officer authorised under section 23 of the FOI Act to make decisions in respect of requests to access document or to amend or annotate records.

**3 Relevant material**

In reaching my decision I referred to the following:

- the terms of your request
- the document relevant to the request
- the FOI Act
- Guidelines published by the Office of the Information Commissioner under section 93A of the FOI Act (the FOI Guidelines)
- advice from Departmental officers with responsibility for matters relating to the document to which you sought access

## **4 Document in scope of request**

The Department has identified one document, with 2 attachments, as falling within the scope of your request. This document was in the possession of the Department on 28 October 2024 when your request was received.

**Attachment A** is a schedule which describes the relevant document and sets out my decision in relation to it.

## **5 Decision**

The decision in relation to the document in the possession of the Department which falls within the scope of your request is as follows:

- Exempt one document in full from disclosure

## **6 Reasons for Decision**

Where the schedule of documents indicates an exemption claim has been applied to a document or part of document, my findings of fact and reasons for deciding that the exemption provision applies to that information are set out below.

### **6.1 Section 33 of the FOI Act – Documents affecting National Security, Defence or International Relations**

Section 33(a)(iii) of the FOI Act permits exemption of a document if disclosure of the document would, or could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the international relations of the Commonwealth.

The phrase 'international relations' has been interpreted as meaning the ability of the Australian Government to maintain good working relations with other governments and international organisations and to protect the flow of confidential information between them. The expectation of damage to international relations must be reasonable in all the circumstances, having regard to the nature of the information; the circumstances in which it was communicated; and the nature and extent of the relationship. There must be real and substantial grounds for the conclusion that are supported by evidence.

I consider that the release of the information marked 's33(a)(iii)' in the document would, or could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the Australian Government's international relations.

I am of the view that the disclosure of parts of the document could reasonably be expected to inhibit future negotiations between the Australian Government and a foreign government. This could damage Australia's international reputation with foreign governments as well as with international agencies.

As such I have decided that the information redacted and marked 's33(a)(iii)' is exempt from disclosure under section 33(a)(iii) of the FOI Act.

### **6.2 Section 42 of the FOI Act – Legal Professional Privilege**

Section 42 of the FOI Act provides that a document is an exempt document if it is of such a nature that it would be privileged from production in legal proceedings on the ground of legal professional privilege.

I am satisfied that parts of the document comprise confidential communications passing between the Department and its legal advisers, for the dominant purpose of giving or receiving legal advice.

In determining that the communication is privileged, I have taken into the consideration the following:

- there is a legal adviser-client relationship
- the communication was for the purpose of giving and/or receiving legal advice;
- the advice given was independent and
- the advice was given on a legal-in-confidence basis and was therefore confidential.

The content of this document is not part of the rules, guidelines, practices or precedents relating to the decisions and recommendations of the Department. The document does not fall within the definition of operational information and remain subject to legal professional privilege.

I have therefore decided that parts of the document are exempt from disclosure under section 42 of the FOI Act.

### **6.3 Section 47C of the FOI Act – Deliberative Processes**

Section 47C of the FOI Act provides that a document is conditionally exempt if its disclosure would disclose deliberative matter relating to the deliberative processes involved in the functions of the Department.

*'Deliberative matter'* includes opinion, advice or recommendation obtained, prepared or recorded, or consultation or deliberation that has taken place, in the deliberative processes of an agency.

*'Deliberative processes'* generally involves *"the process of weighing up or evaluating competing arguments or considerations"*<sup>1</sup> and the *'thinking processes –the process of reflection, for example, upon the wisdom and expediency of a proposal, a particular decision or a course of action.'*<sup>2</sup>

The document contains advice, opinions and recommendations prepared or recorded in the course of, or for the purposes of, the deliberative processes involved in the functions of Department. I am satisfied that this deliberative matter relates to a process that was undertaken within government to consider whether and how to make or implement a decision, revise or prepare a policy, administer or review a program, or some similar activity.<sup>3</sup>

Disclosure of this deliberative information could reasonably be expected to inhibit full and frank advice from the Department to its Minister, and, as a result, full consideration by the Government on any potential future consideration of amendments to legislation. Disclosure of some deliberative information, on which a decision has not yet been taken, could also reasonably be expected to prejudice consultations with relevant stakeholders.

Section 47C(2) provides that "deliberative matter" does not include purely factual material. I have had regard to the fact that "purely factual material" does not extend to factual material that is an

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<sup>1</sup> *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962 [18]

<sup>2</sup> *JE Waterford and Department of Treasury (No 2)* [1984] AATA 67

<sup>3</sup> *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962

integral part of the deliberative content and purpose of a document, or is embedded in or intertwined with the deliberative content such that it is impractical to excise it.<sup>4</sup> A factual summary prepared to aid a complex issue may be classed as purely factual material, but may also be of a character as to disclose a process involving opinion, advice or recommendation. As such, a conclusion which involves a deliberative process may well prevent material from being purely factual<sup>5</sup>.

I am further satisfied that the factors set out in subsection (3) do not apply in this instance.

I have decided that the information is conditionally exempt under section 47C of the FOI Act. Access to a conditionally exempt document must generally be given unless it would be contrary to the public interest to do so. I have turned my mind to whether disclosure of the information would be contrary to the public interest, and have included my reasoning in that regard below.

#### **6.4 The public interest – section 11A of the FOI Act**

As I have decided that parts of the document are conditionally exempt, I am now required to consider whether access to the conditionally exempt information would be contrary to the public interest (section 11A of the FOI Act).

A part of a document which is conditionally exempt must also meet the public interest test in section 11A(5) before an exemption may be claimed in respect of that part. In summary, the test is whether access to the conditionally exempt part of the document would be, on balance, contrary to the public interest.

In applying this test, I have noted the objects of the FOI Act and the importance of the other factors listed in section 11B(3) of the FOI Act, being whether access to the document would do any of the following:

- (a) *promote the objects of this Act (including all the matters set out in sections 3 and 3A)*
- (b) *inform debate on a matter of public importance*
- (c) *promote effective oversight of public expenditure*
- (d) *allow a person to access his or her own personal information.*

Having regard to the above I am satisfied that:

- Access to the document would promote the objects of the FOI Act.
- The subject matter of the document may have a general characteristic of public importance.
- No insights into public expenditure will be provided through examination of the document.
- You do not require access to the document in order to access your own personal information.

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<sup>4</sup> *Dreyfus and Secretary Attorney-General's Department (Freedom of information)* [2015] AATA 962 [18]

<sup>5</sup> *Harris v Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Others* (1984) 1 FCR 150

I have also considered the following factors that weigh against the release of the conditionally exempt information in the document:

- Disclosure of the conditionally exempt information under **section 47C** of the FOI Act could reasonably be expected to prejudice the ability of Departments across government to provide full and honest advice to stakeholders in future proposals to legislative amendments.
- A Ministerial Submission plays an important role in the relationship between a Department and its Minister. Its purpose is to provide frank and honest advice. It is inherently confidential between the Department and its Minister and the preparation of a Ministerial Submission is essentially intended for the audience of that Minister alone. A precedent of public disclosure of advice given as a part of a Ministerial Submission would result in:
  - concerns existing in the open and honest nature of advice being provided which may then hinder future deliberations and decision making processes for the Department and the Government as a whole and
  - future Ministerial Submissions being prepared with a different audience in mind, which would compromise the quality of the advice being prepared for the Minister.
- I consider that the public interest in protecting the process of the provision of free and honest confidential advice by a Department to its Minister has, on balance, more weight, than the public interest that might exist in disclosing the deliberative matter. Endangering the proper working relationship that a Department has with its Minister and its ability to provide its Minister with honest advice confidentially would be contrary to the public interest.

I have also had regard to section 11B(4) which sets out the factors which are irrelevant to my decision, which are:

- a) *access to the document could result in embarrassment to the Commonwealth Government, or cause a loss of confidence in the Commonwealth Government*
- b) *access to the document could result in any person misinterpreting or misunderstanding the document*
- c) *the author of the document was (or is) of high seniority in the agency to which the request for access to the document was made*
- d) *access to the document could result in confusion or unnecessary debate.*

I have not taken into account any of those factors in this decision.

Upon balancing all of the above relevant public interest considerations, I have concluded that the disclosure of the conditionally exempt information in the documents would be contrary to the public interest and it is therefore exempt from disclosure under the FOI Act.

## 7 Legislation

A copy of the FOI Act is available at <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/C2004A02562>. If you are unable to access the legislation through this website, please contact our office for a copy.

## 8 Your review rights

### *Internal review*

You do not have the right to seek an internal review of this decision. This is because section 54E(b) of the FOI Act provides that, when an agency is deemed to have refused an FOI request under section 15AC of the FOI Act, the applicant does not have the right to seek an internal review of the deemed decision.

The Department was deemed to have refused your request under section 15AC of the FOI Act because it did not make this decision within the statutory timeframes for the request.

While the Department has now made a substantive decision on your request, section 15AC of the FOI Act continues to apply to your request, which means that any request you make for internal review will be invalid.

### *Information Commissioner review*

You can instead request the Australian Information Commissioner to review this decision. If you want to request an Information Commissioner review, you must make your request to the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) within 60 days of being notified of this decision.

You can apply for an Information Commissioner review at: [Information Commissioner review application form on the OAIC website](#).

If you have already applied for an Information Commissioner review, there is no need to make a new review request. The OAIC will contact you shortly to give you an opportunity to advise whether you wish the review to continue, and to provide your reasons for continuing the review.

You can find more information about Information Commissioner reviews [on the OAIC website](#).

## 9 Making a complaint

You may make a complaint to the Australian Information Commissioner if you have concerns about how the Department has handled your request under the FOI Act. This is a separate process to the process of requesting a review of the decision as indicated above.

You can make an FOI complaint to the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (OAIC) at: [FOI Complaint Form on the OAIC website](#).

## 10 Contacting the FOI Section

Should you wish to discuss this decision, please do not hesitate to contact the FOI Section at [foi@homeaffairs.gov.au](mailto:foi@homeaffairs.gov.au).

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lavinia', is written over a faint, light blue grid background.

**Lavinia**  
**Position number 00003354**  
**Authorised Decision Maker**  
**Department of Home Affairs**

**ATTACHMENT A**

**SCHEDULE OF DOCUMENTS  
REQUEST UNDER *FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 1982***

**FOI request:** FA 24/10/01737

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No.	Date of document	No. of pages	Description	Decision on release	
1.	Undated	12	MS24-001063 and Attachments - Unsigned	Exempt in full	s. 33(a)(iii) s. 42(1) s. 47C(1)