

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

**APPOINTMENT OF MR JOHN BARILARO AS SENIOR TRADE AND
INVESTMENT COMMISSIONER TO THE AMERICAS**

CORRECTED

At Room 814-815, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday, 31 October 2022

The Committee met at 8:00.

PRESENT

Ms Cate Faehrmann (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Farlow
The Hon. John Graham
The Hon. Daniel Mookhey

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Peter Poulos

* Please note:

[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.

[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.

[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the eighth hearing of the Public Accountability Committee inquiry into the appointment of Mr John Barilaro as Senior Trade and Investment Commissioner to the Americas. The inquiry is examining the circumstances leading up to the appointment of the various commissioners, including the processes, probity and integrity measures undertaken.

I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Today we will hear from one witness, Mr Paul Webster, Trade and Investment Commissioner, UK and Europe, Investment NSW. I thank Mr Webster for making the time to give evidence to this important inquiry. Before we commence, I will make some brief comments about procedures. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, the House has authorised the filming, broadcasting and photography of Committee proceedings by representatives of media organisations from any position in the room and by any member of the public from any position in the audience. Any person filming or photographing proceedings must take responsibility for the proper use of that material. This is detailed in the broadcasting resolution, a copy of which is available from the secretariat.

While parliamentary privilege applies in New South Wales to witnesses giving evidence today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the hearing. Therefore, I urge witnesses to be careful about comments they may make to the media or to others after they complete their evidence. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. If witnesses are unable to answer a question today and want more time to respond, they can take a question on notice. Written answers to questions taken on notice are to be provided within 21 days. Finally, everyone should turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing. I welcome Mr Webster as our witness for today.

Mr PAUL WEBSTER, Trade and Investment Commissioner, UK and Europe, Investment NSW, before the Committee via videoconference, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Mr Webster, I take the opportunity to thank you for agreeing to appear today at what is a difficult time difference. I understand it is 9.00 p.m. where you are appearing from today and it is 8.00 a.m. our time. It is the best we could do. Thank you. Would you like to start by making a short statement for the Committee?

PAUL WEBSTER: No. I have no statement.

The CHAIR: We will go straight to questions from the Opposition, Mr Daniel Mookhey.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you, Commissioner Webster, for joining us. You can hear me clearly?

PAUL WEBSTER: Very clearly. It's Mr Webster, I don't have a title, Mr Mookhey.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Can I establish some preliminary details, if that is possible. You are the Trade and Investment Commissioner, UK and Europe, are you not?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I am.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You have been in that position since March 2022?

PAUL WEBSTER: That is correct.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: What were you doing prior to that?

PAUL WEBSTER: I led a consulting business that I founded when I relocated to the UK and continued to lead that business in providing services in economic development to national and regional governments across UK and Europe as well as agencies in Australia.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Prior to that, did you work with the Department for International Trade in the United Kingdom?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I did, and in Australia.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Was that DFAT or Austrade?

PAUL WEBSTER: As you would appreciate, many different names in government, but originally UK Trade and Investment, that then became the Department for International Trade, and regionally actually, and the Foreign Office too.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: What did you do there?

PAUL WEBSTER: In Australia I was the director of Australia-New Zealand, bringing Australian and New Zealand companies to the UK to expand globally. And then later I set up my business to consult to them to support global business across all sectors and markets to come to the UK.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You were effectively working on inbound foreign investment into the United Kingdom from the Australian and New Zealand region?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not primarily—originally, yes, but my remit became much broader than that.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: How long did you do that for?

PAUL WEBSTER: With the British Government from 2012 to 2020, yes, about eight years.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Were you also at that time a director of the Institute of Economic Development?

PAUL WEBSTER: I was, yes, for some of that time, not all of that time.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Is it fair to say that you built your career out of international trade?

PAUL WEBSTER: I call myself a deep general manager in that part, where I did focus my career in the latter half into international trade an investment.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You have a lot of experience in working on inbound and outbound foreign investment, is that fair?

PAUL WEBSTER: "Expertise" is a strong word, but I'm certainly very experienced, yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You effectively were doing that for the UK Government for nearly a decade before this job, is that fair?

PAUL WEBSTER: And other clients, yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: In that role that you did for the UK Government, you acquired a good and solid understanding of both Australian and other international businesses?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, and the competitive landscape in which the governments must operate.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: As well, you would have acquired quite a good understanding of the challenges that businesses would face if they decided to invest in the UK, including the challenges UK businesses would face if they decided to invest in Australia?

PAUL WEBSTER: Absolutely. It's a global market and understanding business is very important to that.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That is perhaps one of the reasons why you felt that you may well be an appropriate candidate for the Agent-General position to the United Kingdom when you made that application?

PAUL WEBSTER: Absolutely, yes. And I will point out, and other candidates as well. Many of my peers are also of the same calibre and in fact I actually saw myself as competitive but also nominated other people as well for the role who I believe would be fit.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Of course, Mr Webster, but we might concentrate on your role and your qualifications, if you don't mind. When did you first develop an interest in becoming the Agent-General to the United Kingdom?

PAUL WEBSTER: When I was made aware in late 2019.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You made an application when the job was first made available towards the end of 2019-20?

PAUL WEBSTER: It's almost three years ago, I couldn't give you specifics but roughly around then. I think the general excitement in the UK that New South Wales was coming back on the global stage, it was a very exciting opportunity, and excited to see that it was potentially going to be back in the market. It is government. I don't think anyone who was [inaudible] on that necessarily would come to life in what time frame, but at the time, yes, very excited by the opportunity.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Why did you want to be the Agent-General?

PAUL WEBSTER: It's an incredible opportunity for what New South Wales is in the global stage. We have certainly been underweight for who we are and what we represent in the Australian economy and there is so much opportunity. It is a great product and the product in further [inaudible] the Australian economy, inside Australia first and foremost and internationally, as you have to talk about Australia. But in that, it's a great product. I mean, look at my background. You don't need to say where we are; it's very clear where we are. We have a fantastic product; a great ecosystem; a large, diverse economy. It's a product the world needs. We need our talent, we need our natural resource, we need our people, and I could see that what the UK and Europe need and what we have to offer were going to be a great match. It would be a fantastic opportunity if I was fortunate enough to be in that position.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I should have asked you, Mr Webster. You are from New South Wales, are you not?

PAUL WEBSTER: More recently. I was actually born in Western Australia, but I migrated in 2004 and my family and myself are from there. I met my wife there, and my three children were born there. I proudly wear the New South Wales colours, rowing for New South Wales. So, yes, I very much consider myself a New South Welsh.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you, Mr Webster. Mr Webster, can we just establish some facts around the application? I just want to be clear that we do appreciate your appearance, and we treat with some sensitivity the issue surrounding the application as well. You lodged an application towards the start of 2020 or when the job was first advertised. That's correct?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You participated in what we now understand is the first selection process. That's correct?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe so, yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You made it through to the short list of that first selection process, did you not?

PAUL WEBSTER: Probably. I have to, again, go back to the three-year time period and the global pandemic that landed in that time. We do have to take things with a little bit of pinch of salt in that. The first process, either when it began or ended, I couldn't actually be very clear on that. Certainly, when COVID struck globally, the UK borders shut hard on 23 March. Any conversation or any progress at that point became effectively moot.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's fair, Mr Webster. We will be in a position to clarify soon with you some of the dates around this, but I just want to be clear that you lodged an application in the first instance. You're quite right to point out that that was interrupted by the pandemic.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: But you were both long-listed and short-listed, to the best of your recollection. Is that correct?

PAUL WEBSTER: I was certainly long-listed; short-listed, I would hope so. But, again, you would have to speak with the people running the process. I can only assume yes because of where I am today.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Mr Webster, you had the opportunity to meet with the selection panel from the first process, did you not, and participate in an interview with them?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I did.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: The only people who were able to participate in an interview stage were the people who were short-listed, which you may not be aware, so we can infer that—

PAUL WEBSTER: I wasn't aware of that.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Yes. We can infer, therefore, that you were short-listed. You did participate in that selection process that was at that time run by NGS Global, did you not?

PAUL WEBSTER: Correct.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: At that time, were you aware that NGS Global's client was the NSW Treasury?

PAUL WEBSTER: I was aware that it was the New South Wales Government.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Okay. And you are right to say that the process was interrupted as a result of COVID.

PAUL WEBSTER: Substantially, to the point that I believe the role might have even disappeared for a period of time, as far as I'm aware, yes. I was [audio malfunction] attention to more important matters.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's true, Mr Webster. It did. And the process was restarted, to the best of your recollection?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I believe it did restart, but we ran into the same issue with Omicron on the global stage.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Indeed. The process restarted effectively towards the end of 2020 around October. Does that accord roughly with your recollection?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe it was resurfaced in the end of 2020, but, unfortunately, my more powerful recollection is returning to lockdown, and I was actually in Kent, one of the first regions to undergo a very hard lockdown in the second wave. Unfortunately, my memory has more focus on what was actually impacted on rather than the specific dates. I can't specifically—

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's okay, Mr Webster. Not much—

PAUL WEBSTER: But sometime later in Q4, yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Yes. That's certainly adequate, I guess, for our purposes. I appreciate that the UK was in its second lockdown at that time, but you did reodge your application and express again your interest in becoming the Agent General to the United Kingdom?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe the application carried on. I don't recall to be filling out paperwork.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's right, Mr Webster. Sorry. But you did reaffirm that you had an interest in continuing with your application?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I was asked if I still had interest and absolutely—

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Those were conversations you were having with Dr Broadbent at NGS Global?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Okay. Mr Webster, do you happen to have access to the documents that we've emailed you?

PAUL WEBSTER: I do.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Can I just get you to turn to page—

PAUL WEBSTER: Which documents, sorry, Mr Mookhey?

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: It's what you should see as "TENDER BUNDLE 001", "28/10/22" at the bottom and at the top it should just say "Webster".

PAUL WEBSTER: [Disorder]. Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You've got that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: If you don't mind turning to page 3.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just tell me when you're there.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I'm with you.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you. Mr Webster, you would not have seen these emails, just to be clear, or this is not a basis for you to have seen these. But these might just help us with some dates, if you don't mind.

PAUL WEBSTER: Of course.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can just see here this is an email which Dr Broadbent has sent to the deputy secretary of NSW Treasury, who's her client, which is Ms Jenny West. I'm starting on the only email on the page, which is clearly identifiable, which is on Wednesday 2 December 2020, 4.34 p.m. Do you see that email?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I do.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can see there is a highlighted section.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: It says here:

Jenny

Greetings. As per our discussions in relation to 'Round 2' of the sourcing, research and interviewing for the Agent-General role we have attached the final Shortlist Recommendations. The key recommendation is that Paul Webster is the strongest candidate. He has a highly relevant background for the role, the right level of experience, a very good mix of commercial and government experience, and strong networks in the UK and Europe.

You can see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just to the penultimate paragraph, under all the dot points, you can see Dr Broadbent says:

We have maintained contact with Paul throughout the year to keep him in the candidate pool. He remains keen but will need a decision soon due to the nature of the business cycle and some major pending work in the UK.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That presumably is reflective of your requirements at the time?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: But you can see here at this point in time, from at least 2 December 2020, you are the key recommendation for the agent general role. That's a fair reading of that, you would agree?

PAUL WEBSTER: You're a smart man, Mr Mookhey, I will take it as read.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you. Do you mind just turning forward a page to page 2? We are just going to go up the email chain.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, understood.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can see, then, what happens after that is Ms West then emails Michael Pratt, who is the Secretary of the Treasury at the time.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can see that this is an email on 7 December, so it's about five days later, at 5.59 p.m. You can see Ms West goes to Mr Pratt:

Mike

As discussed, please find attached the final recommendation in regards to the NSW Agent General role in London.

I have interviewed Paul Webster, who was very strong with deep Trade & Investment knowledge across both the UK and Europe.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Presumably, you did have a conversation with Ms West. Do you recall?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, we had a teleconference.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: In your view, did you interview well?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe so.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Fair enough. As it seems, Ms West does too. You can see that as of 7 December 2020, as deputy secretary, Ms West's recommendation to the secretary—who, notionally, at this point in time is the employer—is that you're the final recommendation. That's a fair reading?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: If you don't mind going up to the page into the middle email.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: This is an email which is sent towards the end of that week, which is 11 December 2020. You can see again Ms West says to Mr Pratt:

Mike

Further to this email, Paul Webster is now the final preferred candidate. We have conducted reference checks and they are outstanding

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Then you can also see that I think Ms West is contacting Mr Pratt's EA or someone who's responsible for his diary and says:

... can you please let me know when Mike might have time for a quick phone call with Paul in the UK

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just going up the page, you can see that this person's EA responds by going:

Mike can do 7:45 AM for 15 minutes on either Tuesday December 22nd or Wednesday December 23rd

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: We can establish from this email chain that you are recommended by the recruiter. You then interview with Ms West. You put in a strong performance, which leads her to consider you to be a very strong candidate. You become the final preferred candidate on 11 December 2022.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: And a conversation is arranged or was meant to be arranged between you and the Secretary of the Treasury. That takes place in 2020. Can I ask you: Did that conversation with the Treasury secretary take place?

PAUL WEBSTER: I honestly can't recall. I honestly don't recall.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Do you recall, just a couple days prior to Christmas, having a conversation?

PAUL WEBSTER: As I said, in the view of what was occurring, I can't recall. I certainly don't—I believe I'd remember if I spoke to Mr Pratt. Because we were again in UK national lockdown, I'm not 100 per cent sure just in the sense of pragmatic family times in the sense for the UK it was a very sudden lockdown, that last one in December. I can't recall if I actually did have that. I genuinely have no information on that. If I did, I can't recall that conversation.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's okay, Mr Webster.

PAUL WEBSTER: If it was, it would've only been a phone call. I don't have a recall or record of it.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's okay. We might be able to assist you, Mr Webster, in your recall.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: When you say you don't have a recall or a record, does that mean you have checked your records in relation to that?

PAUL WEBSTER: No, just I have no recall of it.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's okay, Mr Webster. We might be able to assist. Do you mind turning to page 17 of that tender bundle?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: We have moved forward a bit in time to Wednesday 23 December 2020. This is an email chain that starts with correspondence from Dr Broadbent to Ms West again. Just going down the bottom, you can just see here:

Jenny and [others]

Just a quick note to update you on a couple of things.

- A/G London Paul Webster – Paul was very pleased with the session with Mike P and Paul understands the time frame. I think hearing from Mike that he was the preferred candidate was great. Paul also share with Mike that he knows H.C. Brandies—

which, I think, is a reference to High Commissioner George Brandis, despite the spelling—

and also expects the people in the UK Govt who need to give the OK know Paul too. He understand the timeframe and is OK with that.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I think we can infer from that that you did have a conversation on 22 December, at about 7.45 a.m., Sydney time, with Mike Pratt.

PAUL WEBSTER: It looks like that.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Do you recall having a conversation with Dr Broadbent afterwards?

PAUL WEBSTER: I do remember a phone call with Dr Broadbent. That's all very positive information. I think what's not stated there is the message from Dr Broadbent was how many steps were still required. It was hard to say that the role was signed, sealed and delivered. Certainly, there has been many, many steps to go in approval, is my recollection.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's absolutely true, Mr Webster. There's no doubt about that. There were many more steps to go. To be clear here, I don't think anyone is suggesting that an offer was made to you at this point in time. Do you recall the secretary telling you that you were the preferred candidate?

PAUL WEBSTER: I actually can't recall the phone call. Again, as I said, probably more to the fact of the broader requirements around dealing with family and friends at that time. Mr Pratt is a very expensive executive [inaudible]. Normally, I would've thought I'd certainly remember a call with Mr Pratt. Whatever the reason is, I don't recall that phone call. But I don't argue that it may have happened.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's okay, Mr Webster. Of course, it's near Christmas and you're in lockdown at this point in time and it's been a long process here. But certainly there's a contemporary record from Dr Broadbent in which she says that Mr Pratt did say that you were the preferred candidate and you welcomed this news. I presume you would've welcomed the news. That's probably fair.

PAUL WEBSTER: Certainly.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Also, when Dr Broadbent says that you understand the time frame, that's basically a reference to what you just told us, which is there were many more steps to come.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes. It's, "Congratulations. There's still many steps to go."

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Yes. But, to be fair, I can only imagine the Secretary of the Treasury, who is your employer, telling you you're the preferred candidate would've given you at least some comfort to persist in the process. That's fair?

PAUL WEBSTER: It's fair, but I've also worked with government a long time, Mr Mookhey. So, when I hear the number of steps involved, I'm positive. I'm optimistic. However, any good negotiation or opportunity is never locked and signed until it is finalised. So, equally, I didn't stop marching on with my own business and my own priorities whilst waiting for government to complete the process.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's fair enough and reasonable for a person in your situation as well, Mr Webster, just to be clear here. Do you mind just turning forward a page, to page 16?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: We're just going to work our way up the email chain again. We now return, basically, to 14 February 2021. Effectively, everybody comes back from holidays. But you can see here that this is again not an email that I would've expected you to see. But, effectively, the people in Treasury are trying to action the next steps that you made reference to. Start down the bottom, here. You see that, in one of the paragraphs, it says here—I'm talking about the email that is Thursday 14 January 2021, at 5.22 p.m., right down the bottom. Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I'm just being careful not to name names unnecessarily, Mr Webster, as well.

PAUL WEBSTER: I understand.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can see in the fourth paragraph here that there's at least some reference here that says:

I know this timing will affect when Paul is able to give notice to his current employer, but at least the meeting with Mike went well and he gave Paul some certainty and made him aware of, and comfortable with, the timeframes involved.

You don't have any recollection of that conversation, but that's a record that was made by a person within Treasury, at least as to what they understood. That's a fair reading?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes. The time that is required—certainly the ones I was told were longer than what's written there.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's fair enough. To be fair, if we go up a paragraph, we might find ourselves in a position where that clarifies itself. You can also see here that this HR person in Treasury goes:

We are currently arranging for the meetings with the Premier, Dep Premier and Treasurer ahead of the next cabinet meeting on 1st of Feb, so we can hopefully put his nomination up for Cabinet approval on that date. As we have already noted, after that there will probably be another 6 weeks or so of the process to go.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: To be fair to you, Mr Webster, that basically accords with what you said, which is there was many more steps to go. But the next step here was—certainly the Treasury understanding at this point in time was that you were to, potentially, meet with the Premier, the Deputy Premier and the Treasurer ahead of a meeting on 1 February as well. That was your understanding of perhaps where you were—

PAUL WEBSTER: Not necessarily all at once. I believe it was clearing the hurdle with the Treasurer, then we'd move up ranks, subject to the clearance of each level.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's fair as well. Can I just take you forward now to page 9, if you don't mind, of the tender bundle?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: We're going to go back in time as well, to 22 December 2020, just to pick up on where we were with that potential conversation with Mr Pratt. You see here that this is an email that Mr Pratt sends to Ms West at 9.50 a.m., which I think is about an hour and a half after your conversation with them. You can see here that Mr Pratt, within an hour and a half of meeting with you, says to Ms West:

Hi Jenn,

Please now move ahead with Paul, great that he is still very keen.

You see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: The email continues:

After Christmas –

- 1st interview with Treasurer
- Then Premier and Deputy Premier separately in whatever order you can arrange, please ensure you advise DP—

which is the Deputy Premier—

that we have a strong candidate and are lining up for him to meet early new year.

You see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Then you see down the bottom, in the last paragraph:

This may all take approx. 2-3 months so time not an issue given Paul's current commitments. And also High Commissioner comments about mid year announcement, let's see how all of this goes but we may well be into April before all this is done so perhaps he starts "quietly" with big announcement in July? Also Treasurer may want to be in London for the announcement so with CoVid etc who knows at this point.

Also can you start looking at rem—

which I presume is "remuneration"—

package ...

You see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: At this point, within an hour and a half of meeting with you, Mr Pratt confirms you as the candidate and describes you as "strong". Then he flags, effectively, what you just described, which is that first you'll meet with the Treasurer, and then you'll meet with others. That's fair?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: If you don't mind, just turn over to page 10.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I'm skipping over some of what takes place, but you can see here that this is an email that Mr Pratt sends to Ms West on 28 December 2020—three days after Christmas of that year. You see that Mr Pratt says:

Thanks Jenny, next step brief to Treasurer and set up interview towards the end of January on his return.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I do.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: If you go down, you can see that Mr Pratt is responding to an email he was sent the day before he was meant to meet you, in which Ms West has flagged the advice that she intends, or at least the Treasury intends, to give to the Treasurer. If you go down to the recommendations for the Treasurer, it says:

2. Advise if the Treasurer, Premier and Deputy Premier request to speak to the preferred candidate Mr Webster, prior to his appointment going to Cabinet ...

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Again, at this point there is no ambiguity, at least from a Treasury perspective. You're the preferred candidate, and you're meant to meet with the Treasurer, Mr Perrottet, towards the end of January. That's coming from the secretary. Were you aware that this was all being organised around this time?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe the next steps were in motion, but I never ever received a request to meet with the Treasurer, the DP or the—

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: We'll get to that shortly, Mr Webster. Now that you've flagged it, did you ever actually meet with the Deputy Premier, Mr Barilaro?

PAUL WEBSTER: No.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Did you ever meet with the Treasurer, Mr Perrottet?

PAUL WEBSTER: No.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Did you ever meet with Premier Berejiklian?

PAUL WEBSTER: No.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Were you at all contacted or attempted to meet with them at all?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not to my knowledge.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Did you have any contact with any of their staff?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not to my knowledge. I believe it was either through Dr Broadbent or through the HR teams involved in government. But it was certainly not to my knowledge that I ever had any interaction.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I just want to be abundantly clear about this before we turn to that part. You have no recall whatsoever, or you never did meet with or have any contact or conversation with either Treasurer Perrottet or his staff, or Deputy Premier Barilaro or his staff?

PAUL WEBSTER: Never.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I might pause there for five seconds to see if my colleagues have any questions before we move to the—

The CHAIR: I'm all good.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Were you given an explanation, given that these steps had been outlined, as to why that didn't occur?

PAUL WEBSTER: Given the global context at the time, I didn't really— It had happened previously to [audio malfunction]. Given where we were in the world, I didn't see it any differently to the previous time. Again, I wasn't overly concerned but, equally, as I said previously, I've worked with government long enough to say, "Well, they're getting quite a long list of who they're still to go through." I wasn't holding my breath either. I had a job and a company to run, and I made sure that had my full focus as well.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Mr Webster, you're describing your reaction, which sounds like quite a reasonable one. My question was: Were you given an explanation for why those interviews didn't proceed?

PAUL WEBSTER: I'm not sure I asked for one.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Before we leave this part of the story, can I take you to page 11 of the tender bundle—

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: —just to clarify that this is in accordance with your recollection? At the bottom of page 10 and over to page 11, Ms West tells Mr Pratt what the recruitment process undertaken for the UK agent general role was. She makes the point—I won't go over it all because we've established a lot of this in this inquiry, but you can see on the third point that Ms West says:

A panel was convened to interview seven candidates (one candidate withdrew). The panel was led by Michael Pratt Secretary, Treasury with panel members Tim Reardon Secretary, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Kim Curtain Interim Deputy Secretary, NSW Treasury and the Hon Warwick Smith AO; Chairman ...

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Does that accord with your recollection of who exactly interviewed you or who the selection panel was?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes, I believe so. But with Dr Broadbent in attendance.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: With Dr Broadbent in attendance. Basically, it's a pretty high-level panel. It's the secretary of Treasury and DPC, amongst others, which are the two most senior, or at least two of the most senior, bureaucrats in the State. You would agree with that? It's a pretty high—

PAUL WEBSTER: They're two very established businesspeople, yes. I remember it very clearly.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I think we'll move to exploring the question as to whether or not meetings were required to be held with various Ministers. We might start with the Deputy Premier, Mr Barilaro. Again, your recollection is that you never had any contact whatsoever with Mr Barilaro?

PAUL WEBSTER: Honestly, I have no recollection of ever meeting or conversing with Mr Barilaro.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Or his office?

PAUL WEBSTER: If they were in his office, I didn't know that they were in his office. At that point, I'm dealing with the recruiter or the HR team and its people so, again, not directly—indirectly, potentially. Certainly, not to my knowledge.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I want to be clear, you have no specific recall of having contact with a senior adviser by the name of Joseph Brayford?

PAUL WEBSTER: No.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Can I take you to page 21 of the tender bundle?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: We'll join the story at this point. Again, everyone is basically returning to work. Again, I want to be clear, Mr Webster, I have no expectation that you would have seen this email or be aware of it whatsoever. You can see here that this is an email that Mr Brayford—who is described as a senior policy adviser to the office of the Hon. John Barilaro, MP—sends to Ms West, the deputy secretary, on Friday 15 January 2021. Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: By way of context for you, Mr Webster, at this point in time, the project to appoint the UK agent general is being led by the NSW Treasury. Mr Barilaro is a trade Minister, who is supported by the NSW Treasury at this point in time. It's prior to the formation of the Department of Enterprise, Investment and Trade. You can see that Mr Brayford says:

Hi there

Apologies if this is a Friday memory dump, however, there are a few things on my mind, and your email earlier prompted me.

Can the below please be followed up;

You don't need to worry too much about the Vietnam appointment, but you can see here that Mr Brayford says:

Details for the Agent-General appointment - If a candidate has been identified, I would like their details.

Timelines – the Deputy Premier approved the amended timelines (attached) and kept an eye on things. He was disappointed when Treasury brought the initial delay to his attention, and I fear slippage from the already delayed timeframes is occurring.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can see here that Mr Brayford is telling the deputy secretary at Treasury that he has an interest, at least, in who the agent general is going to be and if a candidate has been identified. You can also see that apparently the Deputy Premier has told the Treasury—the Deputy Premier, at this point in time, was apparently disappointed that there had been some slippage in the timetables, none of which I expected you to know. If you go forward a page—

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: —you can see here that Ms West responds on 18 January—three days later—at 2.43 p.m. Effectively, it is a Friday memory dump that is met by a Monday response, is the way I infer it. You can see here that she asks an assistant, or someone else involved in the process within Treasury, and ccs Mr Brayford, "Can you please schedule a time with Joseph for the Deputy Premier to meet with the proposed candidate for the UK agent general role?" Also, she tells Mr Brayford, "Joseph, just so you're aware, they will also be meeting with the Treasurer and the Hon. George Brandis." Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just going up, Mr Brayford responds a week later at 11.59 a.m. on 25 January, which is one day prior to Australia Day. You can see:

Hi Zalie/Jenny

...

We are going to be very limited with the Deputy Premier's availability over the next few weeks – further, can we get resume's and supporting documents prior to landing a time?

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: So, clearly the Treasury does take steps to facilitate this step, including contacting the Deputy Premier's office, which, to be fair to them, also wants to be involved.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: They ask for a list to go over of who the candidates are, and a time is being moved to set up. That's as of 25 January as well. We might just continue with this email exchange. Will you go forward to page 19?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can see as well that this particular person at Treasury responds to the request of the Minister's office to get access to the information around the agent general search. This person says:

Hi Joseph,

Lovely to hear from you, I hope this email finds you well?

It describes the process:

Treasury engaged NGS Global to conduct Executive search for NSW Agent General and the panel has now concluded the interview process and are recommending Mr Paul Webster for the review and endorsement.

They send across your resume, your job description and your interview notes. Ms Harrison also says:

I'm hoping to be able to narrow down more precise window of availability over the coming days but happy to be guided by yourself on the Deputy Premier's availability. The candidate, Mr Webster is UK based so hours are sometimes a bit tricky but Mr Webster is very accommodating.

Please let me know if there are any dates and times you would like me to explore with Mr Webster

I presume you can see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: If you just go up, Mr Brayford response, which is:

Wonderful – thank you Zalie

I will get some times for the Deputy Premier to meet Mr Webster. However, to assist, would the mornings be best for him? We do not want offer times that would be unreasonable for Mr Webster.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That entire email chain from the 25th takes places over three hours from 11.59 a.m. to 2.20 p.m. so it's quite clear that the Deputy Premier's senior advisor seems to think they are going to have a meeting with you. Are you absolutely confident that no such meeting ever took place?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not that I can recall.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: It's not apparent to us as to what happened which meant that Mr Barilaro never met with you as well, given that they took an interest in the role, they got access to your CV, they confirmed that they wanted to meet with you but then, according to your evidence, the meeting never happened. I asked you, Mr Webster, to be in a position to explain that, but I just want to ask you again for the fourth or fifth time, just to be abundantly clear, that there was no contact whatsoever with you and Mr Brayford or any other member of the Deputy Premier's staff?

PAUL WEBSTER: Certainly, not to my knowledge and [inaudible], no.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: So, Mr Webster, other evidence that has been introduced to us suggests that roughly a week after this period of time, the Deputy Premier, for whatever reasons, starts to have conversations with the person who ends up appointed as the agent general, which is Mr Cartwright. Forgive me, I don't think we are in a position to send you this email because that error is mine, but we have an email from Mr Cartwright to Dr Broadbent that says that at the same time the Deputy Premier wasn't meeting with you, he was apparently talking to Mr Cartwright. Apparently, the Deputy Premier was asking Mr Cartwright to consider the role in early February, roughly approximate to the time that Mr Brayford was trying to organise a meeting with you. I presume you weren't aware of that.

PAUL WEBSTER: No.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I presume the reason perhaps why you weren't aware of that is because, as Ms West has made clear, and as Ms Harrison has made clear, the official application process has well and truly concluded by this point in time? It's not like the job is open for people to continue to apply. Is that fair?

PAUL WEBSTER: I couldn't comment on that. It's not my side of the equation.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Mr Webster, you might not be in a position to comment on this, but I want to put it to you so at least you have the opportunity to give a response. It looks like you're pushed aside for no reason whatsoever as the Deputy Premier decides to headhunt Mr Cartwright on his own volition.

PAUL WEBSTER: I can't comment on a part I'm not a party to.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: It looks as though, despite you being considered a strong candidate, recommended by the Secretary of Treasury and Secretary of DPC, you're shoved aside by the Deputy Premier, without even having the opportunity to contact or speak with the Deputy Premier. Is that a fair characterisation of events?

PAUL WEBSTER: I can't comment on it. I was an applicant in a competitive process. There were still many steps to go. There were a lot of things happening in the world at that time. It's always—we're talking about Australian Day. We know Australian business pretty much closes to the beginning of February. Any delays such as the ones you have shown me wouldn't cause any alarm to me at the time. It's a competitive process. As I said, it's a long time frame to go through so at no point would I have taken the role for granted.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Mr Webster, to be very clear here, at all points in time you've conducted yourself impeccably and at all points in time you've conducted yourself fairly and with tremendous humility, to be frank to you, which is certainly the impression you're giving me. But it looks as though you were knocked out of the competitive process by the Deputy Premier because, fundamentally, he wanted to give the job to someone else. Do you wish to respond to that?

PAUL WEBSTER: It's the choice of the New South Wales Government. I am very pleased with the role that I have, and it's an honour to serve New South Wales in the role that I am doing.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Indeed. We might leave the Mr Barilaro aspect of that and turn now to the Treasurer, Mr Perrottet. Again, did you have any contact with Mr Perrottet or his staff?

PAUL WEBSTER: No.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Do you have any specific recollection of speaking to a person by the name Charis Ombico?

PAUL WEBSTER: It certainly doesn't raise any recall in memory.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Do you have any recollection of having a conversation with a person by the name of Bran Black?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not that I can recall.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: And certainly not with Mr Perrottet himself?

PAUL WEBSTER: Absolutely not.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Do you mind turning to page 31 of the tender bundle?

PAUL WEBSTER: I have it.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just down the bottom again. This is an email which I have taken you to before, but it appears in a different email chain.

PAUL WEBSTER: Okay.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: It is an 11 January 2021 email in which Ms West makes clear to this person who is clearly assisting logistics that the next steps at this point in time is for you to meet with the Premier as well as George Brandis. Do you see that? By the way, did you ever meet with Mr Brandis?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not in this capacity, no.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: If you go up to the response as well, right at the very top you can see that this person is actioning Ms West's request to establish a meeting with the Treasurer. It states:

Thanks for following up—you didn't miss an email 😊

I've been patiently waiting for the Treasurer's office to get back on deck so they can advise the best time and date to meet. The Treasurers EA has returned from leave today.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can see as well, this person is setting out the reasons for why there is some urgency:

As per Mike's correspondence to Jenny on December 22nd the preferred timeline for these meetings is Treasurer then Premier & Deputy Premier ... Once the Treasurer has earmarked a date I will then look to schedule the others as to not mess ... up.

That accords with what you described as the sequence, which was Treasurer first. Assuming that no objections were raised by the Treasurer, you would go on to meet with the Premier and the Deputy Treasurer. But you can see why from their perspective it was important to get a date with the Treasurer because they couldn't action the meetings with the Premier and the Deputy Premier. Is that fair?

PAUL WEBSTER: It would appear so, yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You can see as well that that's taking place on 18 January 2021.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Turning to page 29, you can see as well that when this person is saying, "I've been patiently waiting for the Treasurer's office to get back on deck ..." they are waiting for a response to the email that they sent on this page which is on 12 January as well. On 12 January this person has contacted an adviser in the Treasurer's office by the name of Charis Ombico. I apologise to that person if I have mispronounced their name. But you can see this person says:

Hey C!

Happy New Year, I hope you managed to have a wonderful well-deserved break.

Treasury engaged NGS Global to conduct Executive search for NSW Agent General and the panel has now conducted the interview process and are recommending Mr Paul Webster for review and endorsement by the Treasurer—

who at that time was Mr Perrottet—

Please find attached:

- Resume of Paul Webster
- Job Description
- Interview Notes

Can you please let me know if the Treasurer is available to meet via MS Teams with Mr Webster? Mr Webster is UK based so hours are sometimes tricky but Mr Webster is very accommodating.

You can see that it's basically the same email that's sent to the Deputy Premier's office a few days later, but it's the first recorded time that we can establish in which Treasurer Perrottet's office is informed directly that you are the preferred candidate, or that you're the recommended candidate, at least. Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just going up, on 25 January Mr Ombico responds. He cc's Mr Black, who I believe at this point in time is the Treasurer's chief of staff. He says:

Before proceeding to scheduling in an 'e-meeting' between the TSR and Mr Paul Webster.

The Treasurer has requested a 'short list' of the other candidates that were interviewed, together with a copy of their resume.

When the info is available, can you please send to me and I'll forward to the Treasurer for his attention.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: From what we can infer—actually, before I come to that, I might just finish this email chain. On 25 January 2021 at 6.19 p.m. the Treasurer's adviser is saying that the Treasurer himself has requested a short list of other candidates and he won't yet agree to meeting with you until he's had the opportunity to effectively have a look at that. That is the inference that I reach. If you just go up to page 28, you can see that the Treasurer's request for the short list of the other candidates is indeed supplied. You can see that this person says to Mr Ombico and cc'ing Mr Black:

... Jenny West has kindly sent through the attached emails with details for the recruitment agency NGS Global including the shortlist.

So they actually do send across all the other information.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: It doesn't look as though any response comes forward from Mr Ombico or Mr Black. On 9 February 2021 you can see as well that there is a response there:

I just wanted to check in and offer my assistance with getting this interview/meeting in the calendar, please let me know if there are any other details I can provide.

Do you see that?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: It looks to us as though the Treasurer asks for the other shortlisted candidates and then is doing this somewhat in parallel, at least in the timescale, at the same time as Mr Barilaro is recruiting other candidates to the role. Certainly it looks to us as though, far from keeping himself distant from this process, the Treasurer is quite involved. He has requested a short list of other candidates as well and he is at least wanting to inspect it with a view that he would like access to all the information. I am only pushing this point because it doesn't look as though any contact then takes place between the Treasurer's office and you whatsoever, which accords with your recollection. Is that fair, Mr Webster?

PAUL WEBSTER: The last part I can answer; the other part I can't comment on. But to the last part, no, I wasn't contacted.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Again, you might not be in a position to comment on this, but I'm going to put it to you anyway to give you the opportunity: The inference is, again, that the Treasurer doesn't engage with your candidacy for reasons that are unknown to us, despite you being recommended by his own secretary. Do you wish to comment?

PAUL WEBSTER: I have no comment.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That's fair enough. The only reason I raise that is that, again, in the other correspondence from Mr Cartwright that is sent—and, to be fair, we will have the opportunity to test some of this with Mr Cartwright—Mr Cartwright is mentioning the fact that there is some form of an arrangement between Mr Barilaro and Mr Perrottet to support his candidacy as well. It looks to us as though, Mr Webster, you were the successful candidate in the official process, but you were felled because there was an unofficial process taking place at the same time.

PAUL WEBSTER: All I know is it was a competitive process and the process hadn't been completed, so from my point of view I was one applicant in a competitive process and it wasn't completed and it was in a

very intense time [audio malfunction] in the world. So, again, I don't really have a comment other than it's a competitive process.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Mr Webster, were you given any explanation about the order of interviews that was originally proposed, that you see the Treasurer first and then the Deputy Premier and the Premier?

PAUL WEBSTER: It was just the government chain of command.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: It does seem unusual, though, that the first meeting wouldn't be with the trade Minister.

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe at the time [audio malfunction] global was in PNC and, again, it's the custom of the potential future employer to make their decision on how they go through the recruitment process. It would certainly not be for a candidate to be questioning that process.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes, I definitely agree with that, Mr Webster, which is why I asked the question: Were you at any point given an explanation about that order?

PAUL WEBSTER: No, but nor did I seek it.

The CHAIR: Mr Webster, we are going to take a five-minute break. We will come back at 9.05 a.m.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: We are back live. Mr Webster, are you with us?

PAUL WEBSTER: I am reading you clearly.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Mr Webster, I promise we won't need too much more of your time—or at least I won't. You make the point that around February 2021 there were still many stages to go as well.

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: But you did commence conversations with Dr Broadbent, according to Dr Broadbent, about your remuneration and other requirements around transition, did you not?

PAUL WEBSTER: My personal recollection of that was it was a confirmation of information, not a negotiation.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: What information was confirmed?

PAUL WEBSTER: To not waste anyone's time, pragmatic elements—salary ranges, for example.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Do you recall when in time this confirmation of information was provided to you?

PAUL WEBSTER: No, I can't. I'm sorry.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Was it around February 2021?

PAUL WEBSTER: I think, actually—one of the things I had to clarify is my current employer at the time had quite a substantive notice period, and I needed to also understand that. If that was a problem, then that would take me out of the running as well, so that was also a two-way sharing of information.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Okay. When did those conversations cease?

PAUL WEBSTER: In my recollection, the Omicron element sort of—I felt, in my own personal situation, it brought certainly to a close a very long slowdown. I can't give you a specific date. I can't recall.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: When were you told that you were not to become the agent general?

PAUL WEBSTER: Many, many months later.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Was it April that year?

PAUL WEBSTER: Possibly. Possibly later.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Who told you?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe Dr Broadbent.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: What did she say?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe, "Another candidate has been chosen." There's still opportunity to work, if I was interested. Of course, very proud to serve New South Wales and obviously still interested, so yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just stepping that out, Dr Broadbent told you that another candidate was selected?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe the phrase was "agent general", but yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Again, do you have any recollection of when in time this conversation was had with you?

PAUL WEBSTER: It would have been that conversation that I previously just referenced.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: So either April, May—around that period? April, May, June 2021?

PAUL WEBSTER: My best guess, yes. It was only after around March, Easter, that we saw Omicron wasn't as potent as the previous versions—or, certainly, with vaccination. It was certainly around the world economies opening back up a bit.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Were you surprised to be told that another person has been chosen as the agent general to the UK, despite the secretary, Treasury and others informing you that you were the preferred candidate?

PAUL WEBSTER: As I said, it is a competitive process and certainly it was far from a complete process in my eyes. I was told there's still many steps to go. "Surprise" might be a strong word. I certainly wasn't shocked.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Did Dr Broadbent indicate to you at all the reason why the other candidate was selected?

PAUL WEBSTER: A high-calibre agent general had been identified and was successful in the competitive process.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Did Dr Broadbent indicate to you that that person was effectively nominated by the Deputy Premier?

PAUL WEBSTER: I'm not sure if that information was shared. I doubt it was. It would have been irrelevant to me.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Did Dr Broadbent provide you with any other feedback about why your candidacy didn't ultimately succeed?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe it was a comforting comment, such as "I was a very strong candidate. However, an exceptional candidate had been identified."

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You were then given the opportunity to apply for the role that you currently have?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe so, yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: And then you ended up taking that role?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Okay.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: And that offer was made in that conversation, was it, Mr Webster?

PAUL WEBSTER: No, I believe it was subsequent. The first one was a call, but setting up there might be other opportunities to explore, and then another conversation, I believe, occurred. I don't have it on formal record, but I believe it was "You're a very strong candidate. We're still very interested in you. But the agent general role is going to another high-quality, high-calibre candidate. There might be other opportunities." And I believe that was the second phone call linked to that.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: And that was a phone call from Dr Broadbent?

PAUL WEBSTER: Correct.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you. At one point in that discussion, you referred to yourself as a strong candidate, but then there was an exceptional candidate—another person. Was that—

PAUL WEBSTER: It's how I recall that conversation. They are my words, from my recollection.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Okay. Turning to my colleague's question, though, were you really given any reason, at this point—I'll just press you on that. Were you given a reason in that first call by Dr Broadbent as to why you were not selected?

PAUL WEBSTER: Yes. I answered that question.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Are you suggesting that the reason was the other candidate was a higher quality candidate? Was that the reason conveyed?

PAUL WEBSTER: I believe so, and that would make sense in a competitive process. Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Was the candidate who succeeded at that point named?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not to me, no.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Mr Webster, the final line of questioning I have is in respect to what you describe as a confirmation of information around the conditions of the job. You say that wasn't a negotiation on your part. What did you mean by that?

PAUL WEBSTER: You have to have an offer to negotiate against or with something.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: You were seeking information about what the role's conditions, remuneration and time lines would be?

PAUL WEBSTER: You have to understand that, first and foremost, I wasn't going to create a problem within the process, in the sense of the notice period is substantive and I needed to pass that on, because if it was an active job underway, I didn't want to jeopardise that. Certainly—yes, in any recruitment process you don't want to waste either party's time, so you need to know you are roughly in a ballpark.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Okay. After receiving that information, did you feel that the available conditions and remuneration were within your expectations?

PAUL WEBSTER: Certainly enough to proceed, yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Were they creating any difficulty in your ability to accept the job?

PAUL WEBSTER: Depending on the terms and conditions and requirements of the role, it could have. But, as it stood, it was enough to proceed in the process. As I said, there was no offer to negotiate with at that point in time.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Fair enough. I'm just going to ask you a few questions around whether or not—we want to establish, effectively, what was the expectation. Actually, we want to establish the conduct of the New South Wales Treasury in this process, and necessarily you are—please, Mr Webster, don't infer from this line of questioning any inference about you. This is more so we can establish a baseline in order to assess the conduct of the Treasury and the department thereafter. Were you seeking remuneration of between \$800,000 to \$1.2 million for this role?

PAUL WEBSTER: Was I seeking?

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Yes. No?

PAUL WEBSTER: It certainly wasn't a question put forward by me, no.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Were you seeking an agreement in which the New South Wales Government would meet the cost of your accommodation in London?

PAUL WEBSTER: It would purely depend on the requirements of the role. It wouldn't be out of the question to be looking at that, depending on the demands and requirements of the role. For example, I am here at 10.15 on a Sunday night. There are no trains for me to get home. If that was a standard requirement, obviously that needs to be addressed in some form. So it depends on the requirements of the role of that [inaudible] and the elements to execute those roles and responsibilities, as in any job.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Of course, Mr Webster. But you weren't actually seeking it at that point in time as a prerequisite for your [disorder] into your process.

PAUL WEBSTER: The description hadn't been described so I can't—to be honest with you, I hadn't sighted it.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Were you at all insisting on New South Wales Government support to meet cleaning expenses of your home and the like?

PAUL WEBSTER: Again, an offer hadn't been put down. There was no role, responsibility or activity defined to then require what my lifestyle may or may not require at that time. I think I see where you are going with your questioning but, again, you would have to put where I am in that conversation. There is no role description and there is no description of activity and there is no clarity on the demands of the role. Without that information, I can't [disorder].

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I appreciate that, Mr Webster. Maybe I should rephrase. Was it your expectation that the role would come with the cleaning expenses of your home being met?

PAUL WEBSTER: Again, the role demands, responsibilities and activities would determine what is required. It is something I can only answer if I see what my demands, activities and responsibilities are in that role.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: But after you received the confirmation of information or at least the information that you had—

PAUL WEBSTER: It was very high level. Not to contradict Dr Broadbent, I think it's just a different choice of words to describe what it was. A negotiation has to receive an offer and there was no offer received.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just to be clear, Mr Webster, I'm not asking whether you sought this. I'm asking whether or not, even at this point in time, it entered your mind to seek it or whether your ability to obtain these conditions—

PAUL WEBSTER: It was a much higher level conversation, Mr Mookhey. It wasn't granular.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I've only got two more questions on this line. Was it a reasonable expectation that you may have had at that time that the Government would assist in meeting the school fees of any children that you may have?

PAUL WEBSTER: Again, demands, activities, requirements. If I am expected to travel frequently and I'm not around, then would I need to put children into boarding school, as an example. That is a question I haven't got to because of the granularity. If you look at Sydney, I think we've got more consulate generals than any other city on earth. There is a very good standard guide of what would be required in that role. Again, each role is specific to government across its objectives, it's relativities of the activities, it's length of travel and it's breadth of reach. I really can't comment. We didn't get to that level of conversation. Sorry.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Just to be clear, in the information that you were provided, no reference was made to the New South Wales Government—

PAUL WEBSTER: Again, it was a very high-level conversation. There was no granularity in that. There was no way to determine the needs that would be required by my family in that role.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Indeed, Mr Webster. I'm more focused on what information NSW Treasury disclosed through Dr Broadbent and others than, necessarily, your response now. Just to be clear, at this point, in the information that was provided to you, no indication was made that the Government would entertain paying a salary of \$800,000 to \$1.2 million with the provision of other—

PAUL WEBSTER: It was a very high-level conversation and the parameters were satisfactory to me. That was enough to proceed.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Mr Webster, I might just ask more generally about the role you are performing. When I have asked businesses where this assistance has been valuable, one of the areas that has been indicated where it has been very helpful is the university sector. In fact, they single you out as the person who has been of specific assistance. Is that an area that you specialise in? Why is it that they would specifically be finding you or your role helpful?

PAUL WEBSTER: Because I personally account manage the universities of New South Wales [audio malfunction].

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Just say that again—

PAUL WEBSTER: It's part of our—

The CHAIR: Mr Webster, sorry, I'm just going to jump in. You cut out a little bit there. For the purposes of Hansard, could you please go back and restate what you said from the start?

PAUL WEBSTER: I personally account manage all of the universities from New South Wales with international promotional activities in the UK and Europe. As part of my role within the sectors—we split across

the team operationally and the universities land with me. That's why they have a relationship with me in that regard. However, they have also been supported by many members of the team.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: What sectors are allocated towards you in this current role?

PAUL WEBSTER: Education, specifically, is the one that I look after. The other sectors, based on Investment NSW strategic priorities, are aligned to our operational staff based on their expertise and previous experience.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Is there a division in particular about what you would be dealing with compared to, say, Mr Cartwright?

PAUL WEBSTER: Mine are more operational matters. Mr Cartwright's are certainly more strategic.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Can I ask, under your current responsibilities, Mr Webster, are you currently assisting the New South Wales Government with any ministerial visit?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not to my knowledge, no.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Are you assisting Treasurer Kean in a visit to the United Kingdom or Europe?

PAUL WEBSTER: Not to my knowledge, no.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Webster, once again, for agreeing to appear before the Committee at what is not the best time for you, I understand, on a Sunday evening. We really appreciate that. I don't believe you took any questions on notice. If the Committee does have any further questions for you, the secretariat will be in touch about those. Thank you very much. That is the end of today's hearing.

PAUL WEBSTER: Thank you all very much for your time.

(The witness withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 9:22.