

# Border position under scrutiny

## Top Nat given plum role

James O'Doherty

EXCLUSIVE

The former NSW Coalition government appointed the National Party's federal secretary to a little-known public service job paying more than \$200,000 a year.

State Political Editor

The Daily Telegraph can also reveal that the Office of the Cross Border Commissioner (OCBC) spent almost \$4.5m in 2022-23, with the office tripling in size over three years.

Regional NSW Minister Tara Moriarty has ordered a full review of the office's staffing and expenses as the gov-

ernment seeks to slash spending ahead of the September state budget.

The Department of Regional NSW (DRNSW) – at the time overseen by then-deputy premier John Barilaro – appointed Emma Watts as the assistant Cross Border Commissioner in January 2020. She was, and remains, the federal secretary of the National Party.

The OCBC was established to advocate for communities spanning state lines. Commissioner James McTavish was appointed in 2014.

Before the Covid pandemic, the office employed five full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff with expenditure of just \$840,000.

In 2021-22, at the height of lockdowns, the office employed 13 FTE staff and its expenses had grown to \$1.88m. The office grew to 18.4 staff and \$4.48m in expenditure in 2022-23.

In a statement, a DRNSW spokesman said that additional funding had been provided during the Covid pandemic, when the office "was providing direct support to communities

impacted by border closures". That included helping people visit dying relatives, get access to food and essential services and assisting workers with travel permits across state lines.

Its funding – including staffing arrangements – is now under the microscope as the government looks to bring the

budget back under control.

The review will include "the resources and budget, including staffing arrangements", Ms Moriarty said.

Ms Watts' appointment came two years before Mr Barilaro was mired in a "jobs for the boys" controversy in 2022 over a \$500,000-per-year trade role in New York which he created. The Independent Commission Against Corruption was asked to investigate but said it "did not identify any evidence of corrupt conduct" in relation to the role.

A DRNSW spokesman said Ms Watts was appointed in 2020 because Mr McTavish was busy in his role of Regional Town Water Supply Coordinator, "during the state's worst drought on record".

The Telegraph understands that the department has not raised any red flags with the recruitment process which appointed Ms Watts. There is no suggestion Ms Watts was not appropriately qualified for the role. She was approached for comment.

National Party federal president Kay Hull said Ms Watts' appointment had "absolutely nought to do" with her role in the Nationals.

"There is nothing to hide here," Ms Hull said. "Emma Watts is an amazing woman and her position as Assistant Cross Border Commissioner in my view cannot be questioned."



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5 August 2023

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Date: 27 / 08 / 24
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5 August 2023