

Home Affairs minister Peter Dutton has accused the former Australian Border Force chief, Roman Quaedvlieg, of fabricating evidence to a Senate inquiry and suggested he has mental health issues.

Dutton's attack on his one-time right hand man – who was dismissed earlier this year for misconduct - came after Quaedvlieg claimed that the minister's chief of staff had contacted him in 2015 in relation to a visa issue involving a "mate" of Dutton.

The bitter exchange has raised the au pair affair, already difficult for Dutton and the Morrison government, to a new level.

A Senate committee is inquiring into Dutton's use of his ministerial discretion over visas. He overrode advice from officials when he granted visas to two au pairs who had been detained. One had arrived in Adelaide and the other in Brisbane.

The women had tourist visas and so were not eligible to work but officials concluded they intended to do so.

In each case representations were made to Dutton's office and he acted immediately. In the Brisbane case, the Italian woman was headed to the family of a former colleague of Dutton from his police days.

Quaedvlieg's letter, sent to the Senate committee, said that in mid-June 2015 he had received a call from Dutton's chief of staff Craig Maclachlan.

"He told me that he was ringing me on behalf of Minister Dutton, whom he referred to as 'the boss'.

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Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

"He told me that the Minister's friend, whom he referred to as 'the boss's mate in Brisbane', had encountered a problem with his prospective au pair who had been detained at Brisbane Airport by immigration officials due to an anomaly with her visa."

Quaadvlieg said Maclachlan asked him to chase up details, which he did, including that the officials had found evidence the woman intended to work, in breach of her visa conditions.

Maclachlan had then asked "What needs to be done to fix this? Can the Boss overturn it?"

But Dutton said the claims were "entirely false and indeed fabricated", declaring it was impossible that the conversation had taken place, because he hadn't employed Maclachlan until October 2015.

"Moreover, I did not instruct any member of my staff to call Mr Quaadvlieg in relation to this matter. Nor did any member of my staff speak to Mr Quaadvlieg about it," Dutton said.

Quaadvlieg was dismissed from his job after a prolonged investigation into allegations that he had helped his girlfriend get a job in the organisation.

Dutton said Quaadvlieg had been "under enormous pressure" since the commencement of the investigation by the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity that resulted in his termination as Australian Border Force Commissioner.

"Mr Quaadvlieg remains under criminal investigation by ACLEI and another person related to this matter is subject to charges.

"I can only assume that the pressure and personal toll of these investigations have resulted in Mr Quaadvlieg making an enormous error in judgment by submitting false evidence to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee," Dutton said in his statement.

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Dutton said he had asked ABF Commissioner Michael Outram “to offer Mr Quaedvlieg any support to address his personal or mental health issues.”

It would be an issue for the Senate whether Quaedvlieg “has breached any rules by providing false evidence to a Senate Committee,” Dutton said.

In response, Quaedvlieg said in a statement late on Thursday that he would correspond with the Senate committee “in an attempt to reconcile the anomaly [Dutton’s] statement identifies with the date of the events as I have described in my letter.”

But he said “I am however adamant that they occurred.

“I completely reject his assertion that I have fabricated evidence. I stand very firmly by the description of the events as I have recollected and outlined in my submission.

“I will attempt to correlate them to the date of the ‘Brisbane Case’ or alternatively to another Brisbane case which occurred at a later date and which may not yet be in the public domain”.

“I urge Dutton to desist from personal attacks and casting aspersions over my actions, motivation, integrity, reputation and mental health. I anticipated he may have reacted in this manner.”

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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