

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Budget Estimates May 2017

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 122

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: Pages 134-135, 24/05/2017

Topic: ABC's Stateline Program – Climate Specialists

Senator Roberts, Malcolm asked:

Senator ROBERTS: I am going to make these questions brief. I challenged the ABC's *Stateline* program—I think it was around 2010—over broadcasting Professor Ove Hoegh-Guldberg's misrepresentations of the climate, and I was told that the ABC takes no responsibility whatsoever for what guests say on their program. Why not?

Ms Guthrie: Perhaps Mr Sunderland can talk to that, as he was at the ABC at that point in 2010.

Mr Sunderland: I am sorry to say I am not aware of that precise exchange of communication. I would be happy to take that on notice. If you can provide some more information, I will give you a considered response on notice.

Senator ROBERTS: Thank you. I am particularly annoyed by the fact that the ABC quite often sanctifies people as climate scientists and repeatedly invites the same people back as guests, and these people have distorted science and misrepresented science. That is what I pointed out to the ABC, and they just said, 'We don't take any responsibility.' On what basis has the ABC repeatedly and vigorously promoted such notions?

Mr Sunderland: I do not believe we have. We report that issue, as all other issues, impartially and with balance that follows the weight of evidence.

Senator ROBERTS: Perhaps I will include on notice, rather than take up people's time now, some questions about basic understandings on science. I would like them answered, please, because I think there is something the ABC is missing. On whose science does your organisation rely?

Mr Sunderland: That question makes no sense to me, I am sorry.

Senator ROBERTS: It does not?

Mr Sunderland: No, none whatsoever.

Ms Guthrie: We do not rely on science in that way.

Senator ROBERTS: Which scientific organisations do you take advice from on climate?

Senator DASTYARI: Corrupt ones like the CSIRO!

CHAIR: Senator Dastyari!

Mr Sunderland: We report the facts. We do not take advice on what we should report. We undertake our own journalism and we report the issues based on accuracy, impartiality, diversity of perspectives, and a balance that follows the weight of evidence. That is how we operate. I am not saying we are perfect, but that is how we operate.

Senator ROBERTS: That is why I would like answers to those questions, because, in my view, the ABC has not promoted facts on climate science. That is the nub of my questions.

Mr Sunderland: I understand. If you have a particular issue, then, as with the case of the *Stateline* story from 2010, anything you would like to draw to our attention that goes to the specifics we will happily take on notice and respond to you.

Senator ROBERTS: What is a 'climate science denier'? The ABC uses the term a lot.

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Mr Sunderland: With respect, I am not sure that I can see the purpose or the value of me attempting to provide you with a series of definitions on issues like this. If there are questions you have about our content, I am happy to go on to them.

Senator ROBERTS: I do. On *Four Corners*, they described me as a 'climate science denier', so I would like to know what that is.

Mr Sunderland: In relation to that instance, I will happily have a look at that. I will have a look at the way you were described, and I will respond to you about any labelling and the reasons for it.

Senator ROBERTS: Thank you. I would also like to know why Raf Epstein, your compere on the *Drive* program in Melbourne, clearly stated to his ABC audience, 'Pauline Hanson's One Nation party lies about climate,' with the clear implication to his audience that I lie about climate.

Mr Sunderland: Again, if you can give me the date and any information you have on that, we will happily have a look at it.

Senator ROBERTS: I will. Why did he later tweet specifically that I lie about climate?

Mr Sunderland: Same answer: let us know, and we will have a look and see if that was the case.

Senator ROBERTS: Why, when he makes accusations at anyone, much less a senator representing a state, does he repeatedly refuse to give me a right of reply?

Mr Sunderland: Again, I am happy to take that on notice. I would note that you and I have had correspondence in relation to a specific element of your right of reply, which I have dealt with. If you have instances other than that, once again, as with that case, I will look into it and get back to you.

Senator ROBERTS: Specifically coming back to Raf Epstein's behaviour, he lured me onto his program—and it was my choice to appear—on the basis that he promised me a right of reply, and then once in his studio, he denied me that opportunity. Is that behaviour that you condone?

Mr Sunderland: I would not characterise it that way without making myself aware of the facts. I will happily look into it.

Senator ROBERTS: I am happy to go into details on this. Why then did he repeatedly prevent my finishing statements, never give me the right of reply and simply say he controls the microphone?

Mr Sunderland: I have no idea. Once again, briefly and for the record, I am happy to take all of this notice, but I do not want the impression to be left that I am accepting these characterisations.

Senator ROBERTS: You have made that clear.

Answer:

1. The ABC's response to complaints made by Mr Roberts on 10 and 11 November 2010 in regard to a Queensland *Stateline* program broadcast on 29 October 2010, which featured an interview with Professor Hoegh-Guldberg, did not state that the ABC "takes no responsibility whatsoever for what guests say on their program". The ABC's response made it clear that the views expressed by Professor Hoegh-Guldberg were his and had been clearly attributed to him.

The ABC considered that Professor Hoegh-Guldberg's comments were significant and newsworthy as part of the ABC's ongoing coverage of climate change. Accordingly, no breaches of the ABC's editorial standards were identified in the interview.

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2. In relation to the use of the term climate change denier, this is an accepted reference to views held by individuals that run counter to the overwhelming accepted view of the main scientific voices in this area of research.

In the context of *Four Corners*, this expression was used to describe Senator Roberts' views stated in the program, and most notably the following exchange:

CARO MELDRUM-HANNA: Malcolm Roberts is a former coal mining executive. He's one of Australia's leading climate change deniers.

CARO MELDRUM-HANNA: What do your views on climate change? How are they going to help the people of Australia?

MALCOLM ROBERTS: It'll focus people on getting rid of the nonsense that has been driven by the so-called climate scam, and it'll get us back to being realistic because we don't need solar, we don't need wind. Coal is essential for the future.

3. In relation to Mr Epstein, he has advised that his intention in his comments on air and on social media were to point out that the stand taken by One Nation on some aspects of climate change policy is inconsistent with the established scientific facts supported by key scientific bodies around the world. When Senator Roberts challenged Mr Epstein's comments on this, an invitation was extended for Senator Roberts to appear on Mr Epstein's program again at a future date. This invitation is yet to be taken up.