



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

SENATE

ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS LEGISLATION
COMMITTEE

ESTIMATES

(Supplementary Budget Estimates)

WEDNESDAY, 27 OCTOBER 2010

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS**LEGISLATION COMMITTEE****Wednesday, 27 October 2010**

Members: Senator Cameron (Chair), Senator Fisher (Deputy Chair) and Senators Ludlam, McEwen, Troeth and Wortley

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Adams, Back, Barnett, Bernardi, Bilyk, Birmingham, Bishop, Boswell, Boyce, Brandis, Bob Brown, Carol Brown, Bushby, Cash, Colbeck, Coonan, Cormann, Crossin, Eggleston, Faulkner, Ferguson, Fierravanti-Wells, Fielding, Fifield, Forshaw, Furner, Hanson-Young, Heffernan, Humphries, Hurley, Hutchins, Johnston, Joyce, Kroger, Ian Macdonald, McGauran, Marshall, Mason, Milne, Minchin, Moore, Nash, O'Brien, Parry, Payne, Polley, Pratt, Ronaldson, Ryan, Scullion, Siewert, Stephens, Sterle, Trood, Williams and Xenophon

Senators in attendance: Senators Abetz, Birmingham, Cameron, Fierravanti-Wells, Fisher, Ludlam, Ian Macdonald, Troeth, Wortley, Xenophon

Committee met at 4.08 pm

BROADBAND, COMMUNICATIONS AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY PORTFOLIO

Consideration resumed from 19 October 2010

In Attendance

Senator Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Mr Mark Scott, Managing Director

Mr David Pendleton, Chief Operating Operator

Mr Michael Millett, Director Communications

CHAIR (Senator Cameron)—I declare open this public hearing of the Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee for the purpose of examining the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. These are supplementary budget estimates, and the agencies heard during these estimates are only those which have been nominated by various senators. The Senate has referred to the committee the particulars of proposed expenditure for 2010-11 for the portfolios of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy; Climate Change and Energy Efficiency; and Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities; and other related documents.

The committee has set this Friday, 29 October 2010 as the date by which senators must submit written questions on notice for the ABC to the secretariat. The committee has also set Friday, 3 December 2010 as the date by which agencies must return answers to questions on notice.

Under standing order 26, the committee must take all evidence in public session. This includes answers to questions on notice. Officers and senators are familiar with the rules of

the Senate governing estimates hearings. If you need assistance, the secretariat has copies of the rules.

I particularly draw the attention of witnesses to an order of the Senate of 13 May 2009 specifying the process by which a claim of public interest immunity should be raised and which I now incorporate in Hansard.

The statement read as follows—

Public interest immunity claims

That the Senate—

- (a) notes that ministers and officers have continued to refuse to provide information to Senate committees without properly raising claims of public interest immunity as required by past resolutions of the Senate;
- (b) reaffirms the principles of past resolutions of the Senate by this order, to provide ministers and officers with guidance as to the proper process for raising public interest immunity claims and to consolidate those past resolutions of the Senate;
- (c) orders that the following operate as an order of continuing effect:
 - (1) If:
 - (a) a Senate committee, or a senator in the course of proceedings of a committee, requests information or a document from a Commonwealth department or agency; and
 - (b) an officer of the department or agency to whom the request is directed believes that it may not be in the public interest to disclose the information or document to the committee, the officer shall state to the committee the ground on which the officer believes that it may not be in the public interest to disclose the information or document to the committee, and specify the harm to the public interest that could result from the disclosure of the information or document.
 - (2) If, after receiving the officer's statement under paragraph (1), the committee or the senator requests the officer to refer the question of the disclosure of the information or document to a responsible minister, the officer shall refer that question to the minister.
 - (3) If a minister, on a reference by an officer under paragraph (2), concludes that it would not be in the public interest to disclose the information or document to the committee, the minister shall provide to the committee a statement of the ground for that conclusion, specifying the harm to the public interest that could result from the disclosure of the information or document.
 - (4) A minister, in a statement under paragraph (3), shall indicate whether the harm to the public interest that could result from the disclosure of the information or document to the committee could result only from the publication of the information or document by the committee, or could result, equally or in part, from the disclosure of the information or document to the committee as in camera evidence.
 - (5) If, after considering a statement by a minister provided under paragraph (3), the committee concludes that the statement does not sufficiently justify the withholding of the information or document from the committee, the committee shall report the matter to the Senate.
 - (6) A decision by a committee not to report a matter to the Senate under paragraph (5) does not prevent a senator from raising the matter in the Senate in accordance with other procedures of the Senate.
 - (7) A statement that information or a document is not published, or is confidential, or consists of advice to, or internal deliberations of, government, in the absence of specification of the harm to the public interest that could result from the disclosure of the information or document, is not a statement that meets the requirements of paragraph (1) or (4).

(8) If a minister concludes that a statement under paragraph (3) should more appropriately be made by the head of an agency, by reason of the independence of that agency from ministerial direction or control, the minister shall inform the committee of that conclusion and the reason for that conclusion, and shall refer the matter to the head of the agency, who shall then be required to provide a statement in accordance with paragraph (3).

(d) requires the Procedure Committee to review the operation of this order and report to the Senate by 20 August 2009.

(Agreed to 13 May 2009.)

(Extract, Journals of the Senate, 13 May 2009, p.1941)

I welcome Senator the Hon. Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, and officers from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Minister, would you like to make an opening statement?

Senator Conroy—No.

Mr Scott—No, thank you.

CHAIR—I invite questions. I have Senator Macdonald first.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Thank you, Chair. I just have a few what might be said to be parochial questions, and then I will leave the committee to their more serious deliberations. Good afternoon, gentlemen. Thank you for coming along. Mr Scott, I always have, as you know, bouquets and brickbats for the ABC. As far as ABC radio in rural Australia goes, I think you do a fabulous job. I never say quite the same about your national affairs programs coming out of Sydney, but I do not enter into that debate. You certainly do a great job in regional radio throughout Australia.

I am concerned that the ABC radio station in Townsville has not had a general manager for, as I understand it, several months. I am wondering if you can confirm that that is the case and perhaps indicate to me if there is a reason for that. Is the position about to be filled? What is the process?

Mr Scott—I do not have any specific information about that, Senator. I am happy to take that on notice and come back to you. As you said, our regional radio staff do a very important job. I think increasingly the role they have in providing local news, current affairs and local voices is very important in the changing media market. We have I think 11 local radio stations operating out of Queensland. I do not have specific information on the Townsville vacancy that you discuss but I am happy to investigate and come back to you on that.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—Thank you, I would appreciate it if you did. The station still runs and runs well; it is a very balanced operation. But I think they are suffering a bit from not having a full complement and if there is a reason for that and you could tell us—

Mr Scott—Sure

Senator IAN MACDONALD—and perhaps if you could indicate if there is a time process and when we might expect that to be.

Mr Scott—Yes, absolutely.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—The only other question I have regards a constituent in Far North Queensland who has a proposal for a national children's charity which could be run through the ABC in a similar way to those run by the BBC in London. She made a submission to the ABC and she had a letter back which indicated that the ABC cannot undertake charitable work. Are there any ways in which the ABC could take on the role suggested by this constituent whose name is—I do not think she would mind me telling you—Mrs Patricia West, from Cairns.

Mr Scott—I am happy to look at the specifics of that again. As you would be aware, of course the ABC has numerous requests to help worthy causes and charitable organisations. We have some guidelines in our editorial policies that enable us to run community service announcements and the like. There have been examples in recent times—the most recent one I think is the fund-raising we did around the Pakistan floods—where we do turn our airwaves over to encourage people to give. There was remarkable outpouring of financial support on the back of the reporting we had done from Pakistan and particularly the fund-raising effort driven by ABC radio and all ABC outlets. But in the sense of running charities ourselves and being official sponsors of charities, we have not done that. I suspect it would be a difficult thing for us to be able to manage and to control appropriately. I am happy to look again at the specifics of that example, which I am not familiar with, and to come back to you directly on it.

Senator IAN MACDONALD—That is fine. I understand from my constituent that the sort of project that she is proposing actually happens with the BBC. As you are taking it on notice, could you perhaps alert me as to if it is the same sort of program and why the BBC can do it?

Mr Scott—Yes, I am happy to do that.

Senator WORTLEY—I have a question that has been put to me from a constituent in South Australia regarding the amount of self-promotion on the ABC in advertising with DVDs. He wants to know whether the recent increase—this is what the constituent is saying—is going to continue? He believes that there has been an increase in the amount of advertising on television.

Mr Scott—Under the ABC Act we are allowed to promote activities of the ABC, and ABC commercial is certainly part of that. I am not aware of any increase in the level of promotional activity for ABC commercial. If you look at, say, ABC television—ABC 1—the vast majority of our promotional air time is for other programs on ABC television; what is coming up on Friday night or Sunday night. There are promotional activities there for ABC books, CDs, DVDs and ABC retail, but in a sense it has been ever thus. I am certainly not aware of any policy or commitment to increase the percentage of air time for promoting those commercial activities compared to the promoting of other ABC products. I appreciate that the constituent may have that perception, but that is not the policy as I understand it at this point.

I would also say that all the money we raise from these ABC commercial activities goes back into program making at the ABC. If you look at how much money our commercial activities raise, it does equal between two to three per cent of our operating budget. It is not a massive share at all, but it is significant and we would miss it if it were not there. We need to

keep that dividend stream from our commercial activities up, which is why we promote them. The feedback we get from our audience and some of the research that we do is that they quite like ABC shops, books and DVDs, and that to be aware of what is available there is a worthwhile thing.

But we are conscious of it. We do get feedback from time to time that people do not like the promotions. It is a balancing act for us, but it is not as though there has been a deliberate strategy to increase the percentage of time that is allocated to promoting the work of ABC commercial.

Senator WORTLEY—The constituent's issue was not about the fact that you promote ABC products, but about how it affects the flow of the program. You may want to take this on notice and have a look, because I am only going by the correspondence that has been sent to me, so I have not checked that.

Mr Scott—The only promotional activity for ABC commercial comes between programs, not interrupting programs at all. At the same time as we promote forthcoming shows, that is when we promote commercial activity as well.

Senator WORTLEY—He states that between 1800 hours and 2130 hours on Friday, 15 October he counted 21 advertisements, excluding news updates. That was in a 90-minute period. And again, between 1830 and 2030 hours on Saturday, 16 October there were 22 advertisements.

Mr Scott—I am happy to take that on notice and look precisely at the log. We will be able to get the details of that. I would suspect that they are not all commercial activities; they are also promoting what is coming up on television, what is coming up on radio. I appreciate that there is attention there, but we do want to alert our audiences as to what is coming up, and we approach that seriously. So we will look at that on notice.

Senator WORTLEY—Thank you; I appreciate that.

CHAIR—On this issue of your selling of DVDs and the like, a lot of them are imported. Given the strength of the dollar, are we passing that benefit on to consumers here?

Mr Scott—I would have to check what our pricing is. We are involved in some long-term contractual arrangements with the BBC and others. A relatively small proportion of our content in our shops would be coming from the United States. As you would be aware, the dollar appreciation has had a most significant impact—not as much in relatively recent times against the pound. So we would need to work that through. But I think we generally strike a lot of these deals in terms of the Australian dollar, so currency fluctuations do not have a great impact on our commercial business.

Senator ABETZ—I take you to question on notice ECA31 from last estimates. You kindly provided an answer with I think 15 episodes of *Q&A* and the break-up of the audience. Would you agree with me that there was a significant centre-left bias of your audiences in relation to those 15 segments? Could I ask you on notice to provide us with an update from 17 May to date? Also on notice, could you advise us whether there has ever been a *Q&A* program where there was a dominant audience made up of coalition supporters as opposed to Labor-Green supporters?

Mr Scott—There are a couple of things there. I am certainly happy to provide you with updated information on the audiences. As you know, we look to bring a balance of viewpoints and perspective into the *Q&A* audience. We select an audience of around 2,000 each week. We ask members to register and we do collect basic information. What we want to ensure—it is not simply done on a head count basis. We are just trying to ensure that all viewpoints and perspectives are represented on the floor of the audience, and I think that is what these figures show, quite frankly.

Senator ABETZ—Mr Scott, if I may interrupt, as time is short. We have been through this before and, with respect, I have got similar answers to those you are giving now. It is interesting that the mix that is required always seems to be a mix that has never had—this year at least—a coalition dominance.

Mr Scott—If I look at the material that I give you, it varies week in, week out. On 9 August, 40 per cent coalition, 40 per cent ALP, so—

Senator ABETZ—Sorry, are you referring—

Mr Scott—I have got updated figures here, in anticipation—

Senator ABETZ—I am asking on notice—

Mr Scott—But I am happy to provide you with some evidence verbally. On 6 September, 47 per cent coalition and 37 per cent Labor—

Senator ABETZ—Wait a minute. That August one, where you said 40 coalition and 40 Labor, would you mind telling us the Green audience?

Mr Scott—Nine per cent.

Senator ABETZ—So 40 to 49 per cent—you yet again make my point in relation to the dominance of the left side of politics as opposed to the right. But if you can provide us with the details from 17 May to date, on notice, I would be much obliged and then we can discuss those figures in February.

Mr Scott—Absolutely.

Senator Conroy—If I could say, Senator Abetz, while I admire your persistence in asking questions about this issue, it would be fair to say that you are aware of the ABC's attempts to try to get as balanced as possible. Would that be a fair thing to say?

Senator ABETZ—I am not going to answer your questions, Minister. Estimates works the other way around.

Senator Conroy—No, but I just think it is only fair to say—

Senator ABETZ—No, don't wind down the clock on us.

Senator Conroy—Senator, you have got two hours.

Senator ABETZ—No, I haven't.

Senator Conroy—Well, you might not have but the committee is here for two hours.

Senator ABETZ—Yes, and we are not here to listen to you try to ask questions of senators.

Senator Conroy—I just think it is unfair of you to try to characterise the audience as if the ABC is deliberately stacking it, which is the clear implication you are making.

Senator ABETZ—I made no such assertion.

Senator Conroy—A whole range of efforts are being made to get as much balance as possible into the audience, and I think it should be acknowledged.

Senator ABETZ—If that is the case, why are coalition supporters so reluctant to go on ABC programs? That might be a discussion for another day.

Senator Conroy—Maybe they do not like the discussion. Maybe they do not like the issues thrown up in them.

Senator ABETZ—It is about the general culture.

CHAIR—Could we have a bit of order.

Senator ABETZ—Whilst on *Q&A*—and I trust I will not have any shoes thrown at me for asking this question—

Senator Conroy—My laces are tied.

Senator ABETZ—Who controls the tweets?

Mr Scott—That will be done by the production team that is putting *Q&A* to air.

Senator ABETZ—Surely there must be one person.

Mr Scott—I am not sure of the name of the person, but it is the production team.

Senator ABETZ—All right. Could you get that to us.

Mr Scott—Yes, sure.

Senator ABETZ—I want to ask: does the ABC accept responsibility for putting up a tweet that suggests somebody should throw a shoe at a member of the panel? I just wonder what sort of editorial control and, in fact, just general maturity—let alone balance, decency et cetera—goes into the decision making that allows such a tweet to be shown.

Mr Scott—Let me answer that. I would say at the outset that *Q&A*, I think, has been a tremendous success for the ABC in allowing a range of voices to go to air and a range of questions to be asked in a centre for vibrant discussion. That is why many leaders in this house are very happy and very keen to appear. That is why the audience figures have grown very significantly through the year and why *Q&A* is regularly attracting more traffic on Twitter at the time when it goes to air than any other event anywhere in the world. In fact, when the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition appeared on *Q&A* in August, there were more than 30,000 Twitter messages sent during the hour that they were put on air. What is then put on the screen is a representation of the diverse plurality of views that is coming from the flood. That is what is being put to air. The suggestion in your question, Senator, is that putting that one line to air on Monday night was somehow inciting a member of the audience to respond in that way. As was said on the record yesterday by Mr Tony Jones and others, nobody in the studio audience could see any of those messages. Mr Jones did not see those messages. Mr Howard did not see those messages. It was put on the screen, but there is no correlation between that message going to air and that action being taken by the member of

the studio audience. The ABC immediately apologised for the behaviour of that member of the studio audience. It was unacceptable, we said at the time it was unacceptable and we acted accordingly.

Senator ABETZ—That was a very lengthy explanation. I do not in any way, shape or form blame the ABC for a person throwing their shoes, for not having foreseen that et cetera. To claim that you should have foreseen that, I think, would be, with respect to you, unreasonable. But I also have to say that I think it is quite unreasonable to find it acceptable that such a suggestion should be allowed, through Twitter, to be displayed as a tweet. We now know that the tweet was shown at 34 minutes, 34 seconds into the program, and miraculously at 35 minutes, 43 seconds—some 69 seconds after the tweet was shown—the shoes were thrown.

Mr Scott—A coincidence.

Senator ABETZ—Chances are that it was not. Chances are that somebody decided to send in a tweet and let the audience participant know so that—

Mr Scott—As I said, nobody in the studio audience could see the tweets.

Senator ABETZ—But if they had a mobile phone. Are they allowed to bring in their mobile phones?

Mr Scott—No. The instruction to the studio audience is that mobile phones are not to be turned on or used at any time during the—

Senator ABETZ—That is the instruction, but—

Mr Scott—Yes, and that is our understanding of what happened. It was an unfortunate coincidence.

Senator ABETZ—Do you still think it is good editorial policy to show such a tweet?

Mr Scott—Senator, what the—

Senator ABETZ—Sorry, was that ‘yes’?

Mr Scott—No, I was about to answer you. I will now. What the tweets are attempting to do is demonstrate the plurality of opinions that are being expressed by members of our studio audience.

Senator ABETZ—Mr Scott, please—

Mr Scott—Sorry, Senator, I am happy to answer the question. What Mr Howard’s appearance did on Monday night, as other appearances on *Q&A* do, was trigger a plurality of response from our audience and the tweets were reflecting that plurality. I think that had the unfortunate incident not happened in the studio I suspect we would not be having this conversation, because that tweet would have been one of a number that had been shown through the night, many of which were supportive of the former Prime Minister and many of which were highly critical of him, just as the questions asked in the studio were supportive and critical. That is the nature of the program.

Senator ABETZ—Of course.

Mr Scott—And for you to pull it out and highlight it is linking it to the unfortunate incident that you have said and I have said none of us had any responsibility for.

Senator ABETZ—Exactly. All right, would you take on notice: how many tweet messages were received and what great intellectual, robust activity was undertaken to determine that out of all the hundreds and thousands, if we are to believe you—

Mr Scott—That is true, I understood it was around—

Senator ABETZ—why would you have chosen such a childish, stupid and offensive tweet as opposed to all the others that were prevented?

Mr Scott—Okay, I will take that on notice.

Senator ABETZ—Moving on, how did the convicted terrorist David Hicks get onto the program? Did the ABC pre-record him?

Mr Scott—It was video footage so it was indeed pre-recorded. All the video clips are pre-recorded and not live. So the other—

Senator ABETZ—Did the ABC pre-record him?

Mr Scott—I am not aware of the details of that, so I will take it on notice.

Senator ABETZ—If you would take that on notice. Can you tell us whether the ABC pre-recorded it and helped arrange and organise his appearance on the program? And if so, the cost of it and why it was considered to be a priority—

Mr Scott—Can I say that I thought it was a legitimate question to be asked and I thought the former Prime Minister answered the question fully. And, whilst you are critiquing that program I understand that the former Prime Minister believed it was a strong and robust exchange around a full range of ideas.

Senator ABETZ—Very defensive. I asked whether the ABC did a pre-record of it, whether they organised it et cetera. Once we get the answers to that—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Mr Scott, did I not hear you correctly? You said all those videos were pre-recorded.

Mr Scott—I am saying that the video clips on *Q&A* are not live. There are messages sent in to *Q&A*—there are SMS messages that come in—and they are—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Based on that, the message from Hicks was received prior to the program.

Mr Scott—Absolutely.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—That makes Senator Abetz's point.

Mr Scott—With respect—

Senator Conroy—You can record them yourself and send them in. Senator Abetz's question is: did the ABC go to his house and record it for him?

Mr Scott—What I am saying is that with all those video clips that go to air on *Q&A*, it is not as though all those people are waiting at their homes around the country waiting for a live cross. It is not like a live satellite cross to their homes. They have sent them in and then we put them on air.

Senator ABETZ—I understand that you—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So if you received, for example, 15, 20, 30, 40 or whatever, a choice is made by the ABC as to the ones—

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Perhaps you would like to tell us how many you got in anticipation of that program on Monday and the editorial process that resulted in the choice of Mr Hicks as the one to send to air.

Mr Scott—Absolutely. We do get a range of questions. I understand Senator Conroy still has the record of the number of questions on *Q&A*.

Senator Conroy—Yes. I think I got the first 30 minutes in a row.

Senator ABETZ—And I am sure that is not biased to the minister.

CHAIR—Mr Scott, has the ABC got any knowledge of any legal reason why Mr Hicks should not have been used, if there are any legal issues or if Mr Hicks has got any different status to any other citizen in Australia?

Mr Scott—I believe not. There has been some debate and discussion around Mr Hicks's book, which is certainly not being published by the ABC, and there are questions around proceeds from that, totally separate to this. But Mr Hicks is a member of the public and is certainly entitled to ask that question, as the ABC is entitled to run that question.

CHAIR—People with convictions, no matter how serious their conviction is, are entitled to come into *Q&A*?

Mr Scott—Yes.

CHAIR—So a conviction is not something that says you cannot participate?

Mr Scott—No, there is no reason why we would not be able to put them to air.

Senator ABETZ—But I do not think many Australians citizens have the legal status of being a convicted terrorist on their own plea. We will move on from that. Can I turn to the report of the chairman of the Election Coverage Review Committee of 2010. On page 5 we are told:

The largest category of complaint related to bias (982) of which 545 alleged anti-*Opposition/pro-Government* bias, 330 alleged anti-*Government/pro-Opposition* bias and 107 did not specify.

Were there any complaints that any ABC story through the election campaign was in fact anti-*Green*?

Mr Scott—I will have to check that. There were complaints by the Leader of the Greens about the ABC's coverage, if that counts, Senator.

Senator ABETZ—No, I am talking about these specific data—that is, unless Senator Brown has become part of the audience response.

Mr Scott—Has there been criticism about our coverage of the Greens? Yes, by the Greens, I suppose is the short answer, but I will dig into that.

Senator Conroy—Senator Fielding complained about his lack of coverage as well. I am not sure it quite counts.

Senator ABETZ—Yes.

Mr Scott—I will check on that. I do not have that detail here.

Senator ABETZ—Yes, because that would be very interesting. I must say that, other than somebody like Senator Brown, I think for the average punter listening in, that I understand these audience responses and complaints are—

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator ABETZ—I would be gobsmacked if anybody thought there was any anti-Green bias.

Moving along. Mr Scott, when you became managing director at some four years ago you said you would ensure that the ABC presented a greater diversity of views on social and political issues et cetera.

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator ABETZ—You may be aware of what Mr Henderson wrote in July this year in the *Sydney Institute Quarterly*. Just very quickly, can I ask you to identify one conservative presenter on any of your main television or radio programs?

Mr Scott—I suppose what I would say is that this dichotomy that you are making is not the frame through which I see it. Our broadcasters, under our editorial policies, are to broadcast the principal relevant viewpoints around contentious issues. So my question is more: have all viewpoints been expressed? Is there a forum for vibrant discussion? Does the plurality get expressed in a way that allows our audience to make up their own minds? If Mr Henderson or others want to go around putting ideological stamps on our broadcasters, that is not how I see it, that is not how I view it. If you are asking me whether in fact I think the ABC is a town square where a full range of viewpoints are heard around contentious issues, I would say to you: absolutely, more than ever. A website like The Drum, and Unleashed, where there is a full range of opinions from a full ideological spectrum, from a full range of citizens across the country, is a great asset to that plurality of perspectives that is now evident on the ABC. If you look at a panel like *Insiders* that goes to air on a Sunday morning with guests—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Honestly!

Senator Conroy—It is an excellent show—hosted, might I add, by a Collingwood supporter.

CHAIR—A bit of order!

Senator ABETZ—And a former staffer of whom?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes, a former staffer of whom?

Senator Conroy—We have had this discussion about how many Liberals have become MPs after being staffers—

Senator ABETZ—No, we are talking about main television or radio programs.

Mr Scott—What I would say to you, Senator, is that in the Australian electoral system everybody votes. Everybody casts judgment.

Senator ABETZ—Thank you for that. We know that.

Mr Scott—The question is not how somebody votes. The question is not who somebody used to work for. We have former Liberal party staffers, we have former Labor party staffers—

Senator ABETZ—Not for the main—

Mr Scott—It is the professionalism of how they do their job. It is how they do their job and whether they do their job in a way that respectfully allows a plurality of viewpoints to be heard. On *Insiders*, a full plurality of viewpoints is heard and a full array of discussion—

Senator ABETZ—But not equally, and you know that. But we have had that discussion before and it will continue to fall on deaf ears despite a number of pleas.

Senator Conroy—Because you are wrong.

Senator ABETZ—I beg your pardon.

Senator Conroy—Because you are wrong.

Senator ABETZ—I am happy that that came out of the minister's mouth and not the managing director's mouth, and I will not join with it. In relation to bias—and this has been a repeated theme of mine in relation to the ABC—there has been the anti-Israel bias. If I may, I will take some time because on this particular question, rather than asking each question, I just want to catalogue a number of examples that have been drawn to my attention. Then could you take it on notice and just consider whether or not we can get some balance in relation to this.

The question is: does the following list indicate, at least to some people, anti-Israel sentiment? The examples I have been provided with are as follows. The ABC report on a recent EU declaration stated that it 'also urged an end to rocket and "terrorist" attacks against Israel'. The ABC found it necessary to put the word 'terrorist' from the EU declaration into inverted commas, whereas the EU declaration used the word 'terrorist' without it being in inverted commas.

Mr Scott—Was that on our website?

Senator ABETZ—Yes. That is an example on 17 September 2010.

Mr Scott—Okay, thank you.

Senator ABETZ—Then the ABC frequently refers to Israel's security barrier as a 'wall', which, I note, is a term favoured by Israel's critics. As I understand it, the security barrier is in the form of a fence and not a wall for more than 95 per cent of its length, yet we continually hear about Israel's security 'wall' as opposed to a fence. Those who have brought this to my attention say that when you talk about a security wall people start thinking about the Berlin Wall, the Warsaw Ghetto wall, apartheid walls et cetera. Another example is that areas that Israel considers to be disputed territory the ABC generally refers to as 'occupied territory' or 'Palestinian territory'. On the other hand, South Ossetia, claimed by Georgia as an integral part of its territory, is described as 'disputed territory'. The ICRP, I understand, has commented as follows on the use of such terms:

The unqualified use of either term—

'disputed land' and 'occupied territory'—

by the ABC could suggest lack of impartiality in reporting.

Another example is that we know that Gaza is being blockaded by Israel and Egypt, yet the ABC frequently refers to the 'Israeli' blockade. It rarely if ever uses the term 'Egyptian' blockade. This is the case even for reports concerning the Rafah crossing, which is on the Egypt-Gaza border and which Israel does not control.

I have another two or three examples. On 10 March in the *Midday Report* on ABC TV, Middle East correspondent Anne Barker declared:

The growth of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank is the biggest obstacle to peace.

So apparently for the ABC the ongoing Palestinian terror and refusal to accept Israel as a Jewish state or the insistence of the so-called Palestinian right of return comes somewhere behind the building of houses. That one—to assert that that is the biggest obstacle—is counterfactual. Given what I have just read, that seems a somewhat bizarre assertion to make.

The ABC regularly uses terms such as 'peace activist' or 'human right activist' to describe Israel's trenchant critics; however, supporters of Israel are more likely to be described as members of the pro-Israel lobby. According to the ABC, Jerusalem is holy to Muslims and to Christians. That is absolutely right, but what about the Jews?

There is the list that has been gathered for me by a constituent, who is, I think quite rightly, concerned about that. Mr Scott, I ask you and the ABC to have yet another look at the ways that matters Jewish, Israeli and Middle East are reported to the Australian people?

Mr Scott—Absolutely. I am happy to take those on board. Generally speaking, I would say that there is certainly no part of our international coverage that generates as much comment and as much scrutiny. It does flow a bit both ways. We ran a program on *Foreign Correspondent*, which was I think a BBC program that we ran out of *Panorama*. We had 90 complaints there of alleged pro-Israel bias. So the complaints do flow both ways. It is a complicated area in which to report, but we have a responsibility to get our facts right and to be fair, balanced and impartial. That is what we aspire to do. I am happy to look at those again. I suspect some of them may have been investigated. There are some people who are probably known by name to both of us who are very detailed and forensic in their study of us. We have investigated a number of those matters and I think we have a disagreement on some of the imputations arising, but I am happy to investigate them again.

Senator ABETZ—Thank you, because each one is, if I might say, dismissed in the generality of your description just now, but when you add them all up one after the other you cannot help but detect that there is a cultural issue or a bias issue—I do not know what it is—that does not reflect well on the way that the ABC generally portrays the state of Israel.

CHAIR—Mr Scott, I have just had a look at the definitions of 'fence' and 'wall'. The definition I have picked up on the net is that a 'fence' is a freestanding structure designed to restrict or prevent movement across a boundary and is generally distinguished from a wall by the lightness of its construction. A 'wall' is usually restricted to such barriers made from solid brick or concrete, blocking vision as well as passage. I attended a dinner last night where there was a presentation on Palestine and saw pictures of this so-called fence. It was made of concrete blocks that were eight metres high. Is that your understanding of this?

Mr Scott—I have not seen—

Senator ABETZ—Chair, if I may interrupt very briefly so we do not get bogged down in this.

Senator Conroy—I am happy to assist.

Senator ABETZ—I acknowledge that five per cent of the distance of the barrier is a wall and 95 per cent is in fact a fence. So what Senator Cameron says is not in dispute by me or the person questioning, but the impression that he has given is that the totality of the security barrier is in fact this eight-metre high wall. It is only for five per cent. I thought I made that clear in my question.

CHAIR—It depends what part of the fence the ABC were talking about.

Senator ABETZ—I want to ask about Baiada Poultry. There was a program on ABC *Lateline* in recent times. Did the ABC film the footage that was shown?

Mr Scott—I would have to take that on notice, Senator. I am not aware of it.

Senator ABETZ—Does anybody know? No. If it was not ABC footage, what steps did the ABC take to ensure that it was legally obtained? If it was illegally obtained by a hidden camera, I would ask, Mr Scott, why you would have approved it. The fact that you do not know hopefully suggests that it was not illegally obtained, because I understand that under your editorial policy you would have to make that decision.

Mr Scott—That is right. We do have those policies on hidden camera that should come to me for approval. It certainly did not come to me and I am not aware of the background of it.

Senator ABETZ—So let us hope it was not illegally obtained. I move on to the ABC's *Science Show* where Bob Ward was interviewed to criticise, I understand, a work of Professor Carter. What are Mr Ward's qualifications to do so and does he have any peer-reviewed publications on climate change in any academic scientific journals?

Mr Scott—I do not have all these details. I know that he works for the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, where he is policy and communications director, but I do not have the background of his own output.

Senator ABETZ—Could you find out for us what academic scientific journals he has written in that are peer-reviewed in relation to climate change?

Mr Scott—I do understand he was critical of Professor Carter and Professor Carter was offered the opportunity to respond to Mr Ward's claims, but Professor Carter rejected the offer and submitted a written statement which I think was put on the Radio National website.

Senator ABETZ—Thank you. In the promo for this segment Ward was quoted as saying it was 'the worst paper ever published on the subject'. Can you take on notice for me how often that promo was played around Australia?

Mr Scott—We will try and ascertain that.

Senator ABETZ—What did Mr Ward actually critique and why on that program? As I understand it, he was critiquing an article Professor Carter wrote in 2008 that had very

conveniently happened to coincide in the few days before Professor Carter was launching a new book.

Mr Scott—We will take it on notice, Senator.

Senator ABETZ—It may well be one of those wonderful coincidences that seem to happen, like tweets and shoe throwing.

Mr Scott—I must say that books being published do generate publicity and coverage, there is no doubt about that.

Senator ABETZ—But why does somebody then spend their whole time talking about something that was two years old rather than the actual book?

Mr Scott—I will take that on notice.

CHAIR—I have a request from Senator Ludlam. He has two questions which he says will take less than 10 minutes. Do you have an appropriate time you want to break?

Senator ABETZ—I was about to move on to another question.

CHAIR—Senator Ludlam for a few questions, then back to Senator Abetz.

Senator LUDLAM—I am on deadline, I need to be in the chamber, so I appreciate the opportunity. I will be brief. Mr Scott, did you raise some statistics before about political views of audiences in *Q&A* that I missed?

Mr Scott—Yes, we did cover that.

Senator LUDLAM—Can I very briefly have a recap on that?

Mr Scott—Yes. We already released on notice material for earlier in the year, and Senator Abetz has asked for an update of that material, so I spoke about it in various programs. What you find if you look broadly at the list is that often the coalition and ALP have a similar percentage, and the Greens some weeks will be 12 per cent, some weeks nine per cent, some weeks 16 per cent. It varies around that. In fact, it often falls into a similar kind of pattern.

Senator LUDLAM—All right. I will not pursue that further if that material is in the public domain. I will go back and have a look at what you have tabled. You are probably expecting me to ask you about this. I think we have had two conversations now about the documentary *Hope in a Slingshot*, which probably provides the counterpoint to the conversation you have just been having with Senator Abetz. Can you provide us with an update of whether the ABC has reconsidered its position and how you have gone about finding some other points of view to balance out the point of view in that documentary?

Mr Scott—We reviewed it and we will not be showing it. I think when we first reviewed it there were questions as to the plurality of viewpoints, whether in fact it took a certain perspective and how under our editorial policies we would look to balance that. The filmmaker had some strong views on that. I think you expressed some views on it. I was questioned on it by the filmmaker at a public forum in Melbourne a month or two ago. But it has been reviewed by our television division. We get inundated with documentaries—well, ‘inundated’ is probably too strong a word, but we have a very significant number of documentaries. Documentary filmmakers approach us with films. I think finally the television division came to the view that it was not to the standard that they would want to acquire.

There were some other films that were raised. I think two of the three that were raised by the filmmaker that could be purchased were not in English. But fundamentally the television division came to a view around the quality of the film. They did not feel it was particularly compelling for the kinds of audiences that we would be seeking on ABC1, and that was the final judgment on it.

Senator LUDLAM—But it was initially accepted. You said the issue was quality, so it was nothing to do with the political views?

Mr Scott—I think Mr Millett has had some conversations on this too. I think finally they came to that view irrespective of editorial policy issues. That was not finally the driving force in their decision. They finally came to a view that they just did not think it was a particularly compelling film.

Senator LUDLAM—Are you aware that the producers have updated and edited the film to address the interpretations that they believe have been placed on it?

Mr Scott—I am not sure which edit they have seen, but I understood that they did review the film again after the questioning and tried to look at it with a fresh set of eyes. We have some new people in key roles in our television division—a new head of factual, a new controller of ABC1 and ABC2. I am not quite sure whether the final sign-off has come, but they have decided to pass. We pass on most documentaries, really. But that is the judgment that has been made about this one.

Senator LUDLAM—Yes, there are plenty that we do not raise, and this one caught our interest in particular because it was accepted.

Mr Scott—I understand that.

Senator LUDLAM—You are aware of that. Step us through how you balance this out. You commission or acquire what you call opinion content, which does express a certain point of view.

Mr Scott—Yes, and we do run them. We have run Richard Dawkins. We have run Dick Smith. I will explain what we often do, though, if it is contentious and opinionated—and there is a place for opinion on the ABC. It is allowed. It is in our editorial policies. You want to have some debate. So what you often do, as we have done with Dawkins, as we did with the Dick Smith piece, is have a discussion afterwards. You have a forum afterwards. So, actually, if you are going to run a documentary like that, it needs to have sufficient weight that we are able not just to show it but often to host a forum afterwards for the range of views. I think the feeling was that this film was not up to the standard for that kind of treatment.

Senator LUDLAM—Can you advise, then, how the program *Death in the Med*—or *Collision Course*, I think it is also called—satisfied your editorial policies?

Mr Scott—Which one, sorry?

Senator LUDLAM—*Death in the Med*. I presume ‘Med’ refers to the Mediterranean. Was there a forum that followed that one?

Mr Scott—I am not sure—what was that one about?

Senator LUDLAM—I believe they rioted in the UK when it was screened because it was seen to be—

Mr Scott—I think that was the one that I referred to Senator Abetz about earlier.

Senator LUDLAM—Quite possibly.

Mr Scott—We did have some complaints around that program.

Senator LUDLAM—Was there a forum after that one?

Mr Scott—No, there was no forum after that.

Senator LUDLAM—I struggle to understand how on the one hand you can run opinion content—and it is great that you do, it does not matter whether we agree with it or not—

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator LUDLAM—and on the other hand you have got an impartiality requirement. How are those—

Mr Scott—If you are talking about *Collision Course*—

Senator LUDLAM—Yes, that is the one.

Mr Scott—That was the one that we received 90 alleged complaints of pro-Israeli bias—

Senator LUDLAM—Were they complaints, or alleged complaints?

Mr Scott—They were alleged complaints. But the program was reviewed by audience consumer affairs, who advised that the program was balanced and that they believed those complaints were without basis. However, there are some complaints that are still being worked through. That went to air relatively recently. That was a BBC production that we bought in. I think it is an example of what I tried to indicate to Senator Abetz, that our Middle-Eastern coverage is often controversial and you get criticism from both sides.

Senator LUDLAM—Certainly.

Mr Scott—I think if we had come to an editorial judgment about that program, or our television or news division which is responsible for *Foreign Correspondent* had come to a view that this was opinion, rather than a topical and factual program or news program, then it would have needed a different treatment. That was not the judgment they came to about that program. It might be that some people who watched it have a different view, but that is the judgment our television team and news team have had to make.

Senator LUDLAM—I want to ask about the audio description trial. Is there funding committed to that? Could you just give us a quick update of where you are up to?

Mr Scott—Yes.

Mr Millett—Certainly. The department has been talking to us about the feasibility of a technical trial on audio description. We have come back to them with certain technical issues that we have and also some financial and spectrum issues that we have raised with them. But we are certainly talking to the department about advancing the prospect of doing a trial.

Senator LUDLAM—Has a funding appropriation been identified? Is there a number?

Mr Millett—No, not at this stage.

Senator LUDLAM—When would we see that?

Mr Millett—We are talking to the department about those issues at the moment.

Senator LUDLAM—Do you have a timetable for when you want those discussions to be wrapped up?

Mr Millett—I suspect that the department does, but it is really up to them. We have indicated that, subject to overcoming those requirements, we will be in a position to participate in the trial, but it is up to the department then to indicate when and how.

Senator LUDLAM—Can I ask the Minister to shed any light on that?

Senator Conroy—I am not aware of all the details of where the discussions are up to so I am happy to take that on notice and come back to you.

Senator LUDLAM—Thanks, I would appreciate that. And I thank coalition senators for ceding some time.

CHAIR—Senator Fierravanti-Wells.

Senator Conroy—Can I say that this is an own goal, Mr Scott? If you had been here when estimates was on, Senator Fierravanti-Wells would not be here tonight. So this is an own goal.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Thank you, Mr Scott. I would like to think I may be out of sight but I am not out of mind.

Senator Conroy—You are never out of mind, Connie!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I was reminiscing when Senator Abetz was going. I thought, ‘Gee, some things just haven’t changed,’ Mr Scott.

Senator ABETZ—I am a worthy apprentice!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I would like to ask some questions about *Four Corners*. When is Mr O’Brien starting at *Four Corners*?

Mr Scott—In the new year, for the new system of *Four Corners*.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Does that mean he will get a pay cut because he is only doing one night as opposed to four nights?

Mr Scott—I am not totally across his remuneration, but I believe, yes, he will be a contractor for us. It will be a part-time deal.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—This is a bit like the ABC engaging in active ageing, where—

Senator Conroy—There is still hope for you!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—A facility for retiring ABC luminaries.

CHAIR—Senator Fierravanti-Wells, do you have a question?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I do. I am just asking—

Mr Scott—Let me answer that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Is he going to be just a front, or is he going to actually have some editorial input?

Mr Scott—Thank you for the question. Sue Spencer is the executive producer of *Four Corners*, so she is the editorial executive responsible. *Four Corners* turns 50 next year and for most of its history—for more than 40 years—it has had a host. We think there are some real editorial benefits with a host because *Four Corners* has a different topic each week and a wide array of topics. One of the things we see is that our audience fluctuates quite significantly around the topics. So to have a respected figure such as Mr O'Brien to be able to do the introduction to that program and, at times, to be able to do that kind of discussion and interviews around a program, adds a flexibility to the format that we think will be beneficial to our audiences.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—So he will have some editorial input or control.

Mr Scott—He will be writing. Editorial control lies with the executive producer. Mr O'Brien will be doing the writing and introduction but in association with the executive producer. At *The 7:30 Report* he did have an editorial role as well as a presenting role. He does not have an editorial role at *Four Corners*.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Does that mean that this obsession that *Four Corners* has with non-Labor figures will continue? I am very concerned about—

Senator Conroy—Non-Labor figures? You aren't serious. You just live in the wrong state!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—We will come to that in a moment. I have just had a look at a history of the programs for *Four Corners* in 2008, 2009 and 2010. I have looked at the political figures that have featured on *Four Corners* programs. When you look at 2008, you have 41 programs. Three of those programs involved political figures: 18 February was 'Howard's End', about Mr Howard—

Senator Conroy—It was a very memorable program.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—3 March was 'Beyond Bethany', which was about Joh Bjelke-Petersen; and 21 August was about Malcolm Turnbull. So that was 2008. When I look at 2009 there are no programs about Labor figures for that year.

Senator Conroy—We were very boring that year!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—In 2009 there were again 41 programs, according to your website. One program during that year involved a political figure, and that was on 9 November and was again about Malcolm Turnbull.

Senator Conroy—He is very quotable. Are you objecting to him getting coverage?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—No, I am not. Do not interrupt me. In 2010 thus far we have had 38 programs, three of which involve political figures: one, on 15 March, was about Mr Abbott; one, on 16 August, was about Mr Abbott and Ms Gillard; and one, on 4 October, was about the independents. In three years, apart from one program with Ms Gillard, there has not been one program on *Four Corners* that involved scrutiny of a Labor figure.

Senator Conroy—I am not going to let you engage in this attack on Mr Turnbull any further. He is very newsworthy and, if you are jealous, frankly, you've just got to settle it yourself!

Senator ABETZ—We have a time limit.

Senator Conroy—I understand.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I know you were kidding, but it is a serious question.

Mr Scott—Let me give you a serious answer.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—There is a third force in Australian political life: the ALP.

CHAIR—Spare us the speeches and let Mr Scott answer.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—What about stories on the ALP and ALP figures?

Senator ABETZ—The compromised ALP would have been a good story.

Senator Conroy—We were very boring. According to a whole range of people we were very boring.

CHAIR—That is not a news story anymore.

Mr Scott—If you went back into 2007, if my memory serves me correctly there were profiles of Mr Howard and Mr Rudd in the lead-up to the 2007 election. There is a long history in the ABC of, as you would recall, Labor in power, the Howard years etc. There is quite a long history of trying to document a first draft of history post elections, and that is absolutely what ‘Howard’s End’ was all about. As you will recall, within the period of there being one Prime Minister there were three opposition leaders, so I think it was legitimate to do a profile of Mr Turnbull. It was certainly then legitimate to do a profile of, in a sense, the issues that were causing great stress around Mr Turnbull’s leadership. You will recall that some of the comments made by Liberal Party frontbenchers were very significant in that.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I am not questioning the fact that you did the stories. My question is: why didn’t you do stories involving ALP figures? You just concentrated on one side of politics and did not do it on the other side.

Senator Conroy—Because you had a whole lot of people destabilising Malcolm Turnbull.

CHAIR—Senator Conroy, order!

Senator Conroy—No, that was the next year. That was the following year—a long time ago. I’m sure you got plenty of coverage.

CHAIR—Senator Fierravanti-Wells, Mr Scott is trying to answer the question. The question was a lengthy question and you must give Mr Scott an opportunity to respond.

Mr Scott—Thank you, Senator. So I think to do the different opposition leaders would be fairly standard. As you know, really very close to the election there was the new Prime Minister, so we did do the Prime Minister as part of this profile in the lead-up to the campaign. And then, finally, to do the Independents afterwards again was an attempt to document history. Senator, I see the construction you are putting on it. I think we can defend the legitimacy of all those stories. We can count. If we go back over the history of *Four Corners*, we can count memorable profiles of people for both sides of the parliament. I do not think it is a myopic view that *Four Corners* puts on events, but I understand what you are—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Well, I am happy to wait. In fact, I would have thought, under the circumstances: what about a story on Kevin—Kevin and the faceless men? You know, the political assassination?

Senator Conroy—How many books do you want?

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I would have thought that there is plenty of material there in relation to Labor figures. Coming from New South Wales, I would have thought—

Senator ABETZ—But it is New South Wales Labor premiers—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Absolutely. Senator Arbib—that would make a colourful story. I am sure you could find a few people in New South Wales that would happily help you. You could do it over three nights. It could be a bit like a trilogy, like *The Godfather*.

CHAIR—Senator Fierravanti-Wells, I do not know if there is a question here.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—There is a question. I am asking: when will *Four Corners* be doing stories that involve Labor figures? It is a legitimate question. You talk about balance and bias. Where is the balance in that?

Mr Scott—Senator, if I look—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Do I have your undertaking, Mr Scott?

Senator Conroy—We are very boring!

Mr Scott—I am not aware of the forward list of *Four Corners*. I understand the comments that you are making. I think we can defend the news validity of each of those stories that you have outlined. Are there other stories? Absolutely. Are they stories that we have covered extensively across a range of ABC programs from *The 7.30 Report* to *Lateline* to *Insiders*? I would say absolutely. In fact, Mr Cassidy has written a book about the issues that you have outlined. But I take on board your comments on *Four Corners*, and I am not sure what the forward slate is.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—If you are aware of what the forward slate is, I would be very happy to know, Mr Scott.

Senator Conroy—I do not think that we could—

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I am conscious of time. Could I just ask some questions on ABC 24-hour.

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—On one of my rare visits to the ABC, Mr Scott—

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I do remember my visits to the ABC because they are so rare.

Mr Scott—You are always welcome.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—On this particular occasion it was so memorable because, as I walked into the foyer at Ultimo, there was a bucket in the foyer—

Mr Scott—It is still there—for rainy days, as then.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You obviously have problems with leaks at the ABC at Ultimo!

Mr Scott—We are grateful to receive any leaks that come our way, Senator.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—There was a bucket that was capturing the water that was falling down. But my point is, on a serious note, how is—

Senator ABETZ—That was kept for Mr Rudd during the election campaign, I think!

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes, that is right. Tell me: how is it going?

Mr Scott—We are delighted with the progress of News 24. As you know, we launched it in July this year. Our ratings indicate that, most weeks, around or in excess of 1.6 million Australians are tuning in to News 24, 10.5 per cent of the five-capital-cities reach that we get in the ratings. Strong audience feedback—again, delighted at the range of views and perspectives we can put to air on that channel. I am delighted about a couple of things, too: delighted that we were able to find the money through savings that we made through reviews of our processes and through embracing new technology that enabled us to fund this channel and delighted that it has meant that Australians everywhere have a 24-hour news channel on free-to-air television. We think it is a wonderful thing. It is going to be of great assistance in driving the switch-off of analog television and the take-up of digital television and to showcase the ABC investment in journalism locally, nationally and internationally.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—You can give Sky a run for their money.

Mr Scott—No, they are operating in a different environment.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—No, I am saying that in a positive way.

Mr Scott—Sky have done a great job, and I am a fan of the work that they do. They only appear on pay TV, so they are not in seven in 10 Australian homes. We are looking to be in 100 per cent of Australian homes down the track.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—I just want to ask some questions about *Compass*, if I may, and whether you are aware that Geraldine Doogue is a current board member of the St James Ethics Centre, an organisation which is currently seeking approval from the New South Wales government to have its ethics classes taught in New South Wales public schools. The reason I raise this is that on 12 September this year *Compass* ran a very complimentary story on the ethics classes, yet its presenter, Ms Doogue, did not mention that she was on the board of the St James Ethics Centre.

Mr Scott—Let me take that on notice.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—My point is: I understand from your document on editorial responsibility—it has had a revamp since I was last at estimates; it is a nicely coloured document—

Mr Scott—Editorial policies, yes.

Senator Conroy—We have missed you.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Yes, I know. I had to dust off—

Mr Scott—We continue to update it. There is a new one coming soon. I will send you a copy.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Thank you, that is very good. When I come back, I am sure there will be another version. I understand there is a requirement there for declarations—

Mr Scott—Disclosure, yes.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—Disclosures. I would have thought that, given her involvement and given the parameters of what is happening, she should have declared that association.

Mr Scott—Let me take that on notice.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—If you could. Given also that the ethics classes have been the subject of major controversy and of course there have been quite a number of religious groups in New South Wales that are concerned about those classes—

Mr Scott—Some are, yes.

Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS—There have been, and I would particularly refer you to an article which was in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the National Times. I will give you a copy to save you looking for it, and I would appreciate your comments in relation to it. But, most importantly, I am concerned that Ms Doogue has used her public position to present favourably in relation to her views, and when you look at that, particularly at those provisions dealing with being a participant in a newsworthy event, I think she has breached that. That is my view. I would like you to take on notice that and also what action the ABC has taken—or, if you have not taken any action in relation to Ms Doogue, what action you intend to take.

Mr Scott—Okay, I will take that on notice.

Senator ABETZ—If I may, I will go back to where I left off in relation to Mr Ward's description of Professor Carter's work as 'the worst paper ever published on the subject'. How often was this played, and what sort of editorial policy was used to allow that to be used in a promo? It was, quite frankly, just gratuitous denigration. It did not really add anything to the debate; it was just gratuitous denigration of—

Senator Conroy—That is an opinion—

Senator ABETZ—No. 'The worst paper ever published on the subject'—it is very difficult to put that into any category other than gratuitous denigration unless the ABC had done some genuine analysis to say that, of all the climate scientists around the world, they had looked at all the papers and they had come to the conclusion that this was the worst one. I doubt that that occurred.

Mr Scott—I do not recall the promo, but I would say this: that is not the ABC's view; that is the view of Mr Ward from the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment. So I think the question is: was it a reasonable apprehension on the part of the *Science Show* people, the people who had done the interview, that that was Mr Ward's genuinely held view? Our interviewers, in a sense, ask questions of those guests they have. When we do an interview with you, Senator Abetz, we are not fact checking everything that

you say before we put you to air. We respect that you have a position in society, you have a level of expertise. We reference you and your view is expressed. An offer was made, as I said, to Professor Carter to appear on the program. He declined that but he did issue a statement and we made that statement available.

Senator ABETZ—Yes, but after he has had a promo run against him saying that he had produced ‘the worst paper ever published on the subject’, it is hardly conducive to him then coming on the program, I have to say.

Mr Scott—There would be two views on that, Senator. One would be to let it pass by. The other one would be to take advantage of the opportunity to engage in conversation. I am not judging Professor Carter on it—

Senator ABETZ—No, I am judging the ABC, not Professor Carter, as to why they would run such a gratuitous denigration that is not based on any scientific analysis of the papers or any peer review of Professor Carter’s papers, and that is why I asked about Mr Ward’s qualifications in comparison to Professor Carter. It would be like a paralegal somewhere saying that the Chief Justice of the High Court is the worst lawyer in Australian history, running that as a promo and then somehow saying that that is fair.

Mr Scott—I am not in a position to judge Mr Ward’s expertise.

Senator ABETZ—I am very, very concerned about the editorial policy which would suggest bias in allowing that to occur. In relation to labelling of groups and individuals, you have a policy on that. I understand that the ABC likes to describe people that have doubts about climate change as ‘sceptics’. What label do you apply to those that are the non sceptics?

Mr Scott—I am not sure that there is a label.

Senator ABETZ—That is very interesting, isn’t it? The ABC is so keen to label one side of the debate but just unable to label the other. Let us go to the website of *Q&A* for 18 October 2010. In that I was told that the next program’s panellists would be Tim Flannery, scientist and author, and then below that, Jennifer Marohasy, climate sceptic. Jennifer Marohasy has a PhD and is a fully qualified scientist and an author. Why would you describe Tim Flannery in the wonderful nondescript way as a scientist and author, and Jennifer Marohasy as a climate sceptic?

Mr Scott—I understand the question, Senator, and I understand your criticism of that. I accept that. I suppose what they were trying to do was to indicate to the potential audience that climate change would be discussed, that a plurality of viewpoints would be discussed, and for those members of the audience who are particularly concerned around that issue and want a debate around that issue, that debate would be taking place. But perhaps that was a clumsy way of doing so.

Senator ABETZ—Why wasn’t Tim Flannery labelled? Once again it is the plurality of views—

Mr Scott—On that program there was absolutely a plurality of views expressed on that. The other thing I would say is that Mr Flannery—

Senator ABETZ—Why don’t we describe Mr Flannery as a climate protagonist?

Mr Scott—I suppose I would simply say that as we have demonstrated by our inability to precisely nail the scientist's name, Dr Flannery is very widely known. He was Australian of the Year. He is a globally published author of the best-selling books. He has a new book out now. I am not sure that we really needed much of a descriptor of Dr Flannery. What they were attempting to do in the economy of space was available there was to indicate the perspectives that the other scientists would be bringing to the conversation. That is why they used that phrase. I can understand why you think it might be an oversimplification compared to Professor Flannery, and I accept that.

Senator ABETZ—Dr Marohasy has worked overseas in Africa for six years, so she has worked internationally as well, you see. You did not seem to know that about her, did you, but you did know about Mr Flannery. It is just non-stop out of the ABC. Can you tell us why in relation to the bios for this program for the panellists, she, Jennifer Marohasy, got the shortest? Can you explain that to us as well?

Mr Scott—All I know is that someone would have to have the shortest one, Senator. I am not sure that I can ascribe a deeper motive behind it.

Senator ABETZ—But it is substantially shorter.

CHAIR—Mr Scott, are you aware that Jennifer Marohasy is not a climate scientist?

Mr Scott—No, I am not aware. I was away for that program, so I did not see that.

CHAIR—Are you aware that she has a PhD in biology and when she was in Africa and Madagascar she was there as a biologist?

Mr Scott—I am not aware of that. I would say, though, on this issue of climate, that one of the things that I have noticed is that a lot of the people who are involved in the debate and the discussion are not, in a narrow definition, climate scientists. Dr Flannery is not a climate scientist. Dr Plimer, who is much discussed, is a geologist, I understand. So there is a range of expertise that people bring to the highly complex area of climate science.

Senator ABETZ—Dr Flannery is a palaeontologist, which is very similar to a biologist, I would have thought. Last but not least, in question on notice ECA35 I asked about Professor Garth Paltridge, who was gratuitously described as 'climate change sceptic Professor Garth Paltridge'; his article is 'Overselling Climate Doom'. He, in all his theses, does not challenge the quite real possibility that human intervention may be changing the climate. His only argument is that it is being oversold. So why does the ABC yet again gratuitously classify Dr Paltridge—who, might I add, spent basically his whole career as a climate scientist—as a 'climate change sceptic'? As I said before, it is just not on.

Mr Scott—I accept your argument and, if somebody is saying to us that that depiction of them is an oversimplification and does not represent their views or the nuance of perspective that they bring, it would certainly be inappropriate for us to use that descriptor for them if they do not feel that it fits.

Senator ABETZ—Why is it used?

Mr Scott—I would suspect there are plenty of people who have serious doubts around the science of climate change who are not unhappy that it is used. People use it about themselves. You suggest, Senator, that it is somehow derogatory. Some of the people I have dealt with are

quite happy to put up their hands and say they are doubters and sceptics around the science. I do not know whether it is a term that has all those negative connotations that you appropriate to it. But if someone says that is an oversimplification of the perspective they bring then we should absolutely respect that. But there are many people who wear it as a badge of honour, as far as I have seen.

Senator ABETZ—This was an answer to a question on notice, so it has not been widely distributed or read, but it once again indicates the gratuitous labelling undertaken by, it appears, everybody within the ABC. There is an unfortunate culture of it. I would just remind you of your own labelling guidelines. That is enough from me.

CHAIR—Have any of the people who were named by Senator Abetz in relation to being dubbed climate sceptics complained to the ABC?

Mr Scott—I am not aware of that. I would have to take that on notice and check.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—I do not want to change the tone too much too quickly, but I will start with a bouquet. You did touch briefly with Senator Macdonald on the work the ABC did with UNICEF in relation to the Pakistan crisis. In my meetings with UNICEF—which I have often—they were very grateful for the ABC’s fundraising and the reach across the nation that you were able to achieve.

Mr Scott—Thank you, Senator. Can I place on the record our thanks to the ABC reporting team of Sally Sara and Wayne McAllister, who did a number of remarkable reports for ABC television and radio and online. The feedback that I had from UNICEF was that people had watched and listened to those reports over a period of a week or so, had been deeply moved by them—they were extraordinary reporting—and were then grateful for an outlet and an opportunity to give. I think our foreign correspondents do remarkable work, often under very, very difficult circumstances and often seeing and having to report on truly terrible things. They carry a great weight and burden of responsibility in the organisation, and I think that in a sense the outpouring we had from our audience around that appeal is a tribute to the work of our journalists in bringing this story to them.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—Thanks, Mr Scott. I think we are all in clear agreement on that front. We will move on. In relation to state based current affairs television, what is the current funding level and how has that changed over the last couple of years?

Mr Scott—I do not have those figures immediately on me. We do *Stateline*, of course, in all the states and territories on Friday night. The change that was made to go nationally with *The 7.30 Report* happened, I believe, in early 1996, so it was a long time ago now. So there is no fundamental change to the funding base. It continues to be an important issue for us, and we want to make sure that we are not under-reporting—in that detailed current affairs way—the stories that are of great magnitude to a state but that may not pass a threshold for a national program, whether *The 7.30 Report*, *Lateline* or *Four Corners*. So we continue to balance that. In our planning and thinking on the future of different programs, the weight and importance of state based stories is certainly something that we are considering.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—Could you provide on notice details of the last couple of years. That is all I need in terms of a bit of analysis there.

Mr Scott—Certainly.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—In relation, though, to those state based current affairs television teams, have there been changes to staff numbers committed to them state by state or to staffing responsibilities that you are aware of?

Mr Scott—Not that I am particularly aware of. I am happy to roll that into the question on notice. It has not happened that I am specifically aware of. Some of those people do not operate exclusively within state lines; they will be doing state based stories for *The 7.30 Report* as well as stories for *Stateline*, so there is a bit of pooling that happens there.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—I am interested not just in raw staffing numbers there but also in responsibilities. Obviously technology changes the responsibilities you expect of some of the reporters over time too in terms of desktopping duties and the like.

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—But an indication of just how that has shifted would be helpful. I understand Ms Torney, the director of news, has appointed a review of current affairs programming which includes the operation of *Stateline*. When is that expected to report?

Mr Scott—It is looking specifically at how we deliver in the 7.30 timeslot with Mr O'Brien's departure. He has been anchoring *The 7.30 Report* since it went national in 1996. He has had a key editorial role there. He has carried enormous weight and responsibilities in that position. We have decided that now is the appropriate time to look at the format of that program, what we are trying to do with it, where it strategically fits in the suite of services that we are offering and also what is now available across television. I would say to you that, in the 15 years of the national *7.30 Report*, the landscape of serious current affairs programming across all free-to-air television has become markedly different to the way it was in 1996. So we are reviewing all of that, and part of our challenge is how to report state based stories, national stories and international stories in that important timeslot. We are committed to keeping serious current affairs in that 7.30 timeslot. We have a team of some of our very best people at work on this strategy now. I expect that they will report back to Ms Torney and she will be talking with me on it through the month of November. We would expect that, if there are any changes or finetuning required, we will have announced them by the end of the year. Of course, we do need, in a sense, a new person or new people to anchor that program with Mr O'Brien's move.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—If you would like to make an exclusive announcement at Senate estimates, Mr Scott, Senate estimates could do with the ratings boost, I am sure!

Mr Scott—Thanks for your audition tape, Senator! It was sensational when we reviewed it!

Senator Conroy—Was that an application I sent?

Senator BIRMINGHAM—Much as you are keen to get rid of me, Senator Conroy—

Senator Conroy—No, I am keen to keep you.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—I think you would rather not have me question you on *The 7.30 Report*. Mr Scott, you said that you are committed to maintaining news and current affairs in *The 7.30 Report* timeslot. Are you committed to maintaining on the primary channel, ABC1, some form of regular—at least weekly—state based current affairs programming?

Mr Scott—I understand the intention of the question. We know that we need to be delivering serious state-based current affairs in that timeslot. We are just looking at how we best do that and we will have a good idea of that by the end of the year. So, serious current affairs at 7.30, with a strong state-based element—but what is the best way of doing that in this environment? For a long time it was felt, ‘Let’s give that Friday night slot to *Stateline*, that being the only place to do it.’ I think there are others who say, ‘Well, Friday night isn’t the best night for that’; others who say, ‘We should do more of it during the week’; and there are a range of different formatting approaches you could take. But I do not want to pre-empt that. Actually, the best thinking of our team around that has not come to me yet, so I cannot pre-empt it.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—Has there been a discussion at the board level about at least the minimum commitment that should be made to maintaining that state based presence?

Mr Scott—I think what we have discussed at the board—and it was a fairly general discussion—was the complexity of the situation in which we find ourselves in wanting to deliver serious state-based current affairs and how we best do that. It was a general discussion. I expect that at our December board meeting I will be taking the board through our findings and insights on such an important programming decision. I do not resile for a moment from the very important role that the ABC has in state based current affairs. There is no doubt that a national program at 7.30 limits our ability to do some state based stories, but it also enables us to have a national conversation around issues of great significance. So how we do that mix is what we are looking at.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—I look forward to seeing the answers to the questions you took on notice and indeed to the announcement of where you choose to go. I am sure we can scrutinise that in February if needed! Moving on, at a forum back in July—I cannot quite remember what the forum was—you asked almost a Ruddesque rhetorical question:

... should the ABC get into newspapers and publishing. We’re clearly not going to do that ...

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—Pardon the initial insult in that phrasing! Why not, Mr Scott?

Mr Scott—We have a charter, Senator, and news is an important part of that charter. Fundamentally, what we are trying to do in our news coverage is take advantage of all the communications mechanisms available to connect with our audience and, like other media organisations around the world, we are looking to deliver that on video, on audio and in text, and to create greater opportunities for our audiences to make a contribution as well. That is why for 15 years now we have had an online presence, linked with our news service, and that is an important extension of connecting with our audiences around our news content.

My background is in newspapers, Senator, as you might recall. The kind of printing press I recall is the printing press that Fairfax built to print the *Age* in Melbourne, which cost \$220 million. So I would not think that a priority for us is to get into the printing business, and

there are now great opportunities for us to connect and engage with audiences and to fulfil our charter with regard to bringing news to the Australian people without going down that road.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—So it is primarily a cost factor?

Mr Scott—No. We have finite resources and we have to look at how we use those resources to fulfil our charter and best connect with the Australian people, and I am very happy that we are taking advantage of the opportunities we have, in the right way, in order to be able to do that. We have had strong bipartisan support for our activities in radio and television, which are spelt out in the ABC charter, and for our growth now over 15 years into online activities as well, as an extension of fulfilling our charter, particularly around news. So that is how we see our position, and I can tell you we have never, ever—certainly not in my time there—seriously looked at moving into the newspaper business.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—I am sure, in the general scheme of the ABC's overall budget and the finite resources that you have spoken of, it is not large, but why does the ABC feel the need to be in the online opinion space?

Mr Scott—That is a fair question. We have talked a lot about the ABC being, in a sense, the town square, a place where Australians can come to listen and learn from each other, to speak and to be heard. If you look at ABC local radio, we have been in the business now of having a plurality of views for the best part of 80 years. We have been opening up our airwaves to the views of our audience and to specialists, as far as talkback radio is concerned, for the best part of 50 years. Plurality of viewpoints is absolutely what we are on about.

I would also say that, with the changing of the news cycles, there are relatively few people who wake up in the morning who have no idea about what happened yesterday. With a 24-hour news cycle and online news, people know what has happened. What they are really searching for is analysis about why it happened, what the perspectives are on that and what may happen next. So there is an increased desire for analysis. Certainly we have always been of the view that we want to put as many diverse viewpoints before the Australian public as we can. That is the success of *The Drum*. We created *The Drum*. It has different elements to it. One element is *Unleashed*. We have had more than 1,000 people write for that. The other element is where some of our experts provide analysis. We have had extraordinary growth in the traffic for that website because it is clearly meeting a need of our audience. There has been very significant growth in traffic figures. In fact, the most recent figures from August were more than 3½ million page views. We did that. There are other sites like that too. We have always operated in the Australian model of public broadcasting, side by side with commercial broadcasters. We have operated from the very beginning side by side with them in radio, always side by side with them in television and we are side by side with them online.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—I am not necessarily denying the fact that *The Drum* is popular. That does not necessarily mean it meets the objectives of your charter or even the objectives necessarily of your audience. Yes, it is certainly popular—

Mr Scott—But our charter says that we are to create programming of wide appeal and specialist interest. At no time in the history of the ABC—and we have been operational for nearly 80 years—has it been defined to us that we only operate in areas that nobody else wants to operate in. We have operated in radio for 80 years side by side with commercial

broadcasters, in television for 50 years with commercial broadcasters and in online content for nearly 15 years. The online stuff represents a small investment compared to our radio and television. So the way we look at it is this. Is it fulfilling our charter? Yes, it is. Is it meeting a community need? Yes, it is. Is our audience responding well? Absolutely. Is it allowing us an opportunity to showcase the plurality of community views and opinions? Yes, it is. So, during my time at the ABC and in the time of my predecessors, under multiple different configurations of the ABC board, we have moved into this area of online activity and generated a very strong community response to that.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—The other areas of online activity that you have moved into have predominantly been either replicating, in a sense, services from other media or complementary to them at least—perhaps more information on the gardening website than you could possibly fit into the television or radio programs and the like. This is something that does not particularly complement—

Mr Scott—I would disagree on that, because what *The Drum* does is put in a text form what we are doing on our news and radio programs every day. If you listen to John Fane, Matthew Abrahams or David Bevan in your home city, what they have is a range of different people who come on to speak around a plurality of ideas every day. Very many of those people who are guests on those programs are now writing for us on *The Drum*. Then we will often have an expert—an expert in finance or an expert in politics. Chris Uhlmann will go on *News 24* and try to explain what is happening.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—But there is a difference—and it is a fine line a lot of the time—between analysis and opinion.

Mr Scott—There is, and what we are trying to do with *The Drum*—we are not always successful—is to make it a place where ABC staff can provide analysis that they are often providing on other platforms but where our audience or specialists are providing opinion, the way they do on our news programs and on our radio programs. I would say it is absolutely an extrapolation in an online space of the kinds of activities that we have been involved in for decades. What we are doing, other outlets are able to do—Fairfax is able to do this, News Limited is able to do this, Crikey is able to do this and *The Guardian* is. The BBC is in it. There are a range of outlets that are available to provide this.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—Can you take on notice, because the time is ticking by, and provide us with some information around the cost structure of *The Drum*, the overall budget and the range of fees that are paid for contributions and what type of retainers may exist for—

Mr Scott—There has been some discussion on the payments. We will come back to you on notice, but I can tell you from my newspaper background that we pay far less for people to write for *The Drum* than the newspapers pay for their opinion page. But I think if we have somebody working for us, we should not pay them.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—You mentioned the BBC and you would have seen OECD reports and so on that highlight—

Mr Scott—I have actually studied them. I am happy to talk about them if you want to.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—I am sure you have. I am happy on that front if you can provide the information, the arguments and provide copies of it in response, on notice, to us. That would be very helpful.

CHAIR—Can I just indicate that I have Senator Fisher, Senator Wortley and Senator Xenophon who need to ask questions, so this will have to be your last question.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—It is the last question, and I will place it on notice, relating to international services and the Australian network. Has the board begun discussions with you regarding the renewal of your contract?

Mr Scott—Yes, they have.

Senator BIRMINGHAM—Nothing has yet been finalised?

Mr Scott—Nothing has yet been finalised.

Senator FISHER—I understand that, in terms of audience participation on *Q&A*, if someone wants to participate in the audience they fill in a form. I think you ask how people vote?

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator FISHER—Do you ask where people work and, if so, does that make a difference?

Mr Scott—Let me tell you what I have got here. I have some advice and if you seek more I can get it for you. We spend quite a lot of time selecting an audience of around 200. Each member is asked to register and the ABC collects basic information about the potential audience member's demographics and political activity. We are looking for a range of views, so I do not have further detail on the questions. From time to time, we do identify—political staffers, former political staffers, people linked to political parties from both sides pop up in the audience, but I am not sure we have great detail on where they are currently working.

Senator FISHER—Is it okay for a member of a political party to be in the audience but not okay for someone who may well be a member of a political party but also working as political staffer to attend?

Mr Scott—I can get some more details. I am told that we do not stop party members or members of campaigns from submitting questions but we do our best to ensure the opportunity *Q&A* provides is not manipulated or abused by balancing the audience and moderating the—

Senator FISHER—I understand the balance issue but, in having you take that question on notice, I will let you know that I have been informed of a situation where someone indicated they voted Liberal, they were cleared to attend and then, when it was discovered they were a staffer for a Liberal member of parliament—in fact, me—they were unable to attend. That may be due to some balancing issue, but it is nonetheless an interesting permutation of events.

Mr Scott—We will take that on notice.

Senator FISHER—I have further questions, Chair, so I may ask the ABC whether they are prepared to stay for 10 minutes.

CHAIR—Senator Fisher, you had this discussion with me. You asked me whether we could go longer.

Senator FISHER—You said I could ask the ABC so I asked.

CHAIR—I advised you that I intend—

Senator Conroy—The minister has to leave.

CHAIR—closing this at six o'clock.

Senator FISHER—I will see if there is any further time; thank you.

CHAIR—I must say, that if that is the way you want to operate in this committee, it is not very good.

Senator FISHER—You know that I have had to be in the chamber part of the time.

Senator WORTLEY—You recently received funding for Australian drama production. Can you tell us where we are at and when we can actually see it.

Mr Scott—We are very excited about the drama slate. There is a lot of work being done. We currently have 123½ hours of drama in development. Thursday of next week we debut *Rake*, a new drama series starring Richard Roxburgh with a fabulous supporting cast—cameo appearances of Hugo Weaving, Rachel Griffiths, Sam Neill, Lisa McCune and Noah Taylor, amongst others.

Senator WORTLEY—A good line up.

Mr Scott—There is a telemovie, *Sisters of War*, about a young nun and a young nurse who are POWs in Rabaul during World War II. I think that goes to air on Sunday week. What you will see next year is a significant increase in the levels of Australian drama on ABC television as a consequence of the additional funding that we received through the last trifunding agreement. We have also provided financial support for major Australian movies. We will be showing *Brand New Day* on ABC television in the coming months. We put funding in to Fred Schepisi's *The Eye of the Storm*, which I think stars Geoffrey Rush and Judy Davis—and a range of other activities as well. So there is heightened activity, working with the very best talent in the independent production sector, and there will be quite a ramping up in coming years. As you know, drama takes a long time in development. The funding grows over the three years of the triennium and, as a consequence of that, you will see an increase in output over time.

Senator WORTLEY—And providing jobs for Australian actors.

Mr Scott—Absolutely—actors and production crews too. What we are seeing around a lot of this, and what we are very keen to do, is to see the production take place around different parts of the country, and this is what is happening with the slate we have developed.

Senator WORTLEY—In relation to a question I asked previously regarding 891 ABC Adelaide, I note that there is what I consider to be more balance now that you have—

Mr Scott—a change of cast.

Senator WORTLEY—We have one former Labor and one former Liberal member—

Mr Scott—Yes, both formidable radio talents.

Senator WORTLEY—Former Senator Amanda Vanstone.

Senator Conroy—The Ambassador to Italy.

Mr Scott—The returned ambassador.

Senator WORTLEY—Replacing Christopher Pyne.

Senator XENOPHON—Could I just ask some further questions in terms of local content with current affairs, as asked by Senator Birmingham. As I understand it, when the announcement that Kerry O'Brien would be stepping down from the *The 7.30 Report*, an email went out to ABC staff saying, 'What feedback do you have about the future of current affairs,' which I think was welcomed by staff. Does that mean that the ABC is considering a significant revamp of *The 7.30 Report* format in the coming—

Senator Conroy—We have had quite a discussion on that already. I think Senator Abetz was asking.

Mr Scott—If I can quickly summarise, we have a team of very good people who are doing this review for us. We are committed to serious current affairs in that time slot. There are a number of different things that we are trying to balance, including our commitment to national issues and our commitment to state based current affairs as well. There are of course budget constraints that we always operate under, so we are genuinely doing a serious review of the opportunities that exist for us in this time slot.

Senator XENOPHON—Does that mean that that serious review means everything is up for grabs in terms of the format and, for instance, the future of *Stateline* or a state based current affairs program?

Mr Scott—The one thing I will say is that we are very committed and we are looking for the best way to cover state based current affairs. I think that what it is fair to do, after 15 years in this format—it has been a long time now that you have had *Stateline* on the Friday night. Is that the best night? Is that the best format? Is that the best way of providing the right kind of attention to state based current affairs, which I think is very important, and we want to do well. I just do not want to prejudge it. I think what we want to hear are the best ideas of how we can do it best in that timeslot. The one constraint I have said is that we will be doing half-hour current affairs. There is a lot we need to cover in that area so I want to hear the best ideas.

Senator XENOPHON—In terms of budgetary constraints does that mean that the ABC would not consider a return to local, state based editions of *The 7.30 Report*

Mr Scott—The reason we put this group together is to get their views. It is very expensive. We have costed in the past a return to the pre-1996 model. It does cost a lot of money. It was well before my time at the ABC. I understand that some of the issues back in 1995 were to do with money, but some of the issues were also to do with quality control, what we wanted to do in that timeslot and the consistency in that timeslot. I suppose all those things are still relevant now. We have no more money now than we had in 1995, that is for sure, so how do you juggle those different priorities?

Senator XENOPHON—But you have other stations now.

Mr Scott—Yes, that is true.

Senator XENOPHON—You have ABC2 and the ABC News 24 channel.

Mr Scott—Yes, we are doing three times as much.

Senator XENOPHON—Does that mean that a state based current affairs program could end up on either ABC2 or News 24?

Mr Scott—The only thing I would say is that we are discovering that, if you do a drama for ABC2, it is not that much cheaper than doing a drama for ABC1. This is certainly what we learned from the BBC in our discussions with them. So, yes, you have more space to fill on News 24. You have some more opportunities there but it does not necessarily make it any cheaper to produce.

Senator XENOPHON—You may want to take this question on notice. I have heard that, currently, about 16 per cent of the airtime on *The 7.30 Report* covers stories from South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and Queensland. I am not sure whether that is right, and you might want to correct that. Would you take that on notice, because there is a concern, I know, in my home state that *The 7.30 Report* is focused on eastern states.

Mr Scott—I think that is an issue that this review is specifically looking at. Part of the challenge of managing this is that, when there is a very important story at a state level, that is very important to the residents of that state, but it does not pass an appropriate national threshold, are we in fact under-reporting those stories? I would say that, in the past, possibly we have. Whether your answer, though, is to allocate a rigidity of space or to have the flexibility in your format that allows states to opt out or opt in according to the news that exists at the time are all things that we need to look at.

Senator XENOPHON—There is an issue in terms of editing resources. The complaint that I have heard is about editing resources. Given that *Stateline* generally shares those—at least in South Australia—with *The 7.30 Report*, if *The 7.30 Report* were five nights a week that would probably cause all sorts of problems.

Mr Scott—Yes.

Senator XENOPHON—Finally, who has the inside running on hosting *The 7.30 Report*?

Mr Scott—Thanks for your audition, take 2, Senator. It is a level playing field.

Senator Conroy—I can tell you that there are some sad efforts that have been put in.

Senator FISHER—Peter Gray, the shoe thrower—

Senator Conroy—We have had some discussion on this.

Senator FISHER—Yes, I am aware of that, thanks, Minister. There are allegations that he is a serial activist, having interrupted Condoleeza Rice on a couple of occasions in Australia, having jumped on Morris Iemma's car and apparently there are charges and arrests et cetera. So he seems to have been at the very least a serial activist. What background checks do you on people prior to their audience participation and does stuff like that matter?

Mr Scott—Let me check. I do not know what records are checked and I am not sure what if any are done for this audience.

Senator FISHER—Jonathan Green’s removal of Marieke Hardy’s article suggesting that Christopher Pyne was not the most well-liked person in Australia, shall we put it that way, and I can quote if you wish—

Senator Conroy—Factual accuracy is not a requirement.

Senator FISHER—In fact the language was, ‘Nobody loathes more,’ thank you, Minister. What led to the removing of that article and what was the trigger for the issuing of an apology to Mr Pyne, as was indeed appropriate?

Mr Scott—Mr Green as editor of The Drum made that decision. I think the story was posted and I think he then reflected on it. I think there was some internal commentary on it and he then reviewed it. On reflection he believed it was inappropriate and it was an error in editorial judgment to post that column. So, in a sense quite unusually, he took it down and made a statement on the site that explained his editorial decision making. I think he made the right decision.

Senator FISHER—I will put the rest of my questions on notice, thank you, Chair.

Committee adjourned at 6.00 pm