

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Additional Estimates Hearings February 2014

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 217

Program No. Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

Hansard Ref: Page 111/112 (25/2/2014)

Topic: Centenary of Navy fireworks display

Senator Seselja asked:

I do not know whether this is true, so I will put it to you and you can let us know whether you know if it is true. Did the ABC charge the Royal Australian Navy to cover the centenary of Navy fireworks display which was in October of last year?

Mr Scott: Let me check on that. The one thing I can tell you, and which I am pleased to tell you, is that the celebration of the Australian Navy on Sydney Harbour was the top rating show on ABC television last year. But I am not aware of what the contractual arrangements were for that

Senator Seselja: Would it be surprising if it did charge?

Mr Scott: I am not sure. I will need to take that on notice.

Senator Seselja: Given that it is a pretty major national event, is that the sort of thing you would charge for? You have mentioned sporting events and there is some rationale there, but this was the centenary of the Navy, a critical part of our nation—

Mr Scott: Let me take that on notice. I think, without wanting to prejudge the answer to that, some of these undertakings are very significant and attract big audiences. That one did. There are other ones that do not attract as big an audience. We do make a very significant financial commitment to some of these major events that we cover, such as the Australia Day coverage here.

Senator Seselja: Australia Day Live, for instance, was charged—

Mr Scott: I am not aware of the funding details of that. I do not think so, but I will check that out for you.

Senator Seselja: When you are doing that, can you check, if there was a charge, how much it was. I think you are right, that it was probably a big rating event. You might be able to also report back to us on how it rated in comparison to other ABC programs that would have ordinarily been on that night.

Mr Scott: Sure. The one thing I would say about our judgements and decision making around these matters—and golf is a good example—is that we come to an editorial judgement. We look at the finances and make sure it is a viable deal for our audience, but the thing that drives that decision making is an editorial judgement.

We have talked in this committee previously about the low-level of coverage of women's sport on television in Australia, with hardly anything on free-to-air television and very little on paid television. I am very pleased to say that, on the weekend before last, the ABC broadcast in the afternoon 6½ hours of women's sport on ABC1. I believe it was last weekend that the women's soccer on ABC1 out-rated the men's soccer that was broadcast on television that weekend. It was a great game. We come to an editorial judgement about it, but I am happy to give you some more information about the financing behind it.

Senator Seselja: Just finally on that topic, would you agree that, all things being equal, the cost of televising an event like that really should be a core service of the ABC? We would expect, whether you think the budget is large or not—it is around about \$1 billion—that to be the sort of program of national significance that should be absorbed into a budget like that for a national broadcaster.

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Mr Scott: One of the interesting things about the ABC Charter is that is quite broad and final decisions around the prioritisation of that charter are made by the ABC Board and the ABC management team reporting through to the board. There are undertakings that are very significant. I will give you another example. We certainly do have a deal with the Department of Veterans' Affairs that has gone on for many years to enable the ABC to provide detailed and comprehensive coverage around the country on Anzac Day—Anzac marches in every capital city, the Anzac Day dawn service from Gallipoli and other events around the country. The Department of Veterans' Affairs makes an important financial contribution to that. It is the single largest day of broadcasting that the ABC does. It would be very difficult for us to do that coverage without that. When you are covering marches around the country, some of the audiences for those separately are quite small even though in aggregate it is a significant number. That is another example of partnership. We are delighted to it and it helps us to be able to do it when we have the kind of very productive partnership that we have had with the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Senator Seselja: Maybe on notice you could provide us with the details of the amount of that contract. That would be very interesting. There are often former political staffers on ABC television programs from both sides of politics. Is there a policy in terms of when they are identified as a former staffer? Are they always identified as former staffers? Is there any sort of consistent policy that the ABC seeks to apply to that?

Mr Scott: I can come back to you. I think that, as a rule, we would believe in as much transparency as possible for the audience. One very positive thing that the ABC has done in recent years is create programs like *The Drum*, which allowed—I said 'allowed', though I suppose they are loud at times!—a broad array of voices to be heard and for there to be a vigorous contest and debate. I think it does work well when our audience has no doubt where, if someone is still a political figure, they lie on the spectrum and what their connections are. But as to whether there are specific guidelines on that let me check and get back to you.

Answer:

The Navy chose the ABC to be its host broadcaster for this event. The ABC and the Royal Australian Navy split the production costs of the *Fleet Review Spectacular 50/50*. The Navy received worldwide distribution, DVD and live streaming rights of the footage the ABC created in its broadcast of the event in perpetuity.

In relation to the Australia Day Live Concert, the ABC received some funding from the National Australia Day Council to provide footage of the Australia Day concert in Canberra and for the pre-production of the State and Territory stage of the Australian of the Year Awards.

The ABC funded the remainder of its coverage including the live broadcast of the National Flag Raising and Citizenship Ceremony and the Governor General's Australia Day Address.

In relation to the broadcasting of domestic Anzac Day ceremonies, the ABC is the host broadcaster services of these ceremonies and receives no funding for this.

With regards to the broadcast of off-shore ANZAC Day ceremonies, the ABC receives some contribution to the costs of internal ABC staff travel.

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In response to the query as to whether there is an ABC policy relating to on air identification of former political staff, ABC News programs identify guests as former political staffers and the party or people they worked for if that is the most relevant, accurate and appropriate description in the circumstances. The ABC does not, however, conduct inquiries into all guest's employment history. A past job as a political staffer does not necessarily define a person's views or expertise across a range of subjects, nor is it necessarily relevant to what they may be asked to discuss on air.