

Australian Greens' dissenting report

1.1 Public trust in the journalistic integrity of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation remains higher than that for any other news source in the country. There is no dearth of trust in the ability of the ABC's journalistic output to produce content that is fair, balanced, well-researched and independent of political motivation.

1.2 In this context, there is debate to the extent that this bill will have effect.

1.3 The Government argues that the ABC's editorial standards already require 'fair treatment, and that the ABC is similarly obligated to demonstrate a journalistic balance that follows the weight of evidence. It argues that this amendment is justified plainly for its effect on the ABC's reputation "for providing trustworthy and dependable news and information services".

1.4 It is precisely for the effect that this amendment will have on the reputation of the ABC that it should not proceed. Legislation that does not solve a problem, by the Government's own admission, risks being construed as legislation that is required to correct some concern. The public maintains a reasonable expectation that the time, effort and cost involved in producing legislation should be spent on legislative outcomes that will produce some benefit to some people. Nobody is arguing that this is the case. Moving unnecessary amendments for the purpose of 'reputation' begs the question why this amendment is necessary if the reputation of the ABC is not in question, which it is not.

1.5 While the Government's support for this amendment is muted, others have made submissions offering stronger endorsement of its ambitions.

1.6 Cotton Australia noted in its submission that it had taken issue with one edition of one program that detailed allegations of water theft in the Murray-Darling Basin.

1.7 This view was supported by the submission from the National Farmers' Federation, which took similar issue.

1.8 There is no evidence that the edition in question was borne of political motivation, other than to say it contributed to a debate about the use of taxpayers' money within the context of a heated political debate in which Cotton Australia and the National Farmers' Federation have a demonstrable and sizeable stake. Other coverage of the issue by the ABC has been overwhelmingly favourable to the position of these lobby groups and their interests.

1.9 Support for this amendment would constitute an expression of support for the position of these political lobby groups, which argue less for journalism that is "free of political motivation", and more for journalism that supports their particular political motivation. They take no issue with the favourable coverage they receive, but do not dispute its existence.

1.10 A commitment to being 'fair and balanced' that hobbles the coverage of one side of a political debate with no offsetting restriction on the coverage of another is neither fair nor balanced.

1.11 Further, should such a restriction on both sides exist, the capacity for the national broadcaster to inform the public on matters of political contestation would be hopelessly compromised.

1.12 It is preferable to allow the ABC to canvas the views of a multiple of sources, with a weight of coverage of a position offered in line with the weight of evidence in support of that position.

1.13 Opponents of this amendment have noted that the ABC is already required to report with 'accuracy and impartiality according to the recognised standards of objective journalism' (an argument the Government does not dispute).

1.14 The ABC's Editorial Policies demand independence, integrity, objectivity, impartiality and 'fair and honest dealings'. Section 4 of the ABC Code of Practice defines the principles of impartiality to which the broadcaster is bound.

1.15 It is dishonest to suggest that this represents some new statutory requirement on the ABC that has not previously existed. If, as the Government says, this will have no effect on the content of the public broadcaster, then its only effect will be to suggest to its audience that such a legislative amendment was somehow justified based on past breaches of a commitment to fairness and balance.

1.16 It undermines faith in a national public institution by implying it is correcting a problem, even though no problem exists.

1.17 Submissions such as those of Mr Mark Zanker question if it is in the service of public interest that 'discredited views [should] be given equal time... in the name of balance'.¹

1.18 The ABC has expressed concern that if this amendment is to have any of the effect its most strident supporters hope it will, the net effect may be 'a range of unfiltered, unassessed opinions...all given equal weight and served to audiences without context, explanation or appropriate rigour'.²

1.19 In short, if this bill does what the Government says it will do, it should not proceed.

1.20 If the bill does what its supporters say it will do, it should not proceed.

1.21 If this bill does what its opponents say it will do, it should not proceed.

1 Mr Mark Zanker, *Submission 3*, p. 1.

2 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Submission 5*, p. 8.

Recommendation 1

1.22 The recommendation of the Australian Greens is that this bill should not proceed.

**Senator Janet Rice
Senator for Victoria**

**Senator Sarah Hanson-Young
Senator for South Australia**

