

Environment and Communications

QUESTION ON NOTICE

Budget Estimates 2022 - 2023

Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

Committee Question Number: 73

Departmental Question Number: SQ22-000621

Division/Agency Name: ABC

Hansard Reference: Written (16 November 2022)

Topic: ABC - Lobby groups

Senator Claire Chandler asked:

1. Why does the ABC believe that it is appropriate for a public broadcaster with a duty to report impartially to pay membership fees to lobby groups?
2. Why does the ABC believe it is appropriate to apply for, and receive, awards from a lobby group for the Managing Director and for its media coverage, as the ABC has?
3. Does the ABC agree that the organisation and the Managing Director receiving awards from a lobby group has the potential to discourage ABC journalists from scrutinising that lobby group and its positions?
 - a. If not, what is the basis for this assessment?
4. Does the ABC agree that the organisation being a paid member of a lobby group and receiving awards from that lobby group has the potential to discourage its journalists from reporting on government departments and agencies also being paid members of the same lobby group?
 - a. If not, what is the basis for this assessment?
 - b. Has the ABC ever reported on the paid membership of dozens of government departments to the lobby group ACON, and/or its Pride in Diversity, Pride in Sport and Pride in Health offshoots?
5. Have any members of the ABC Board or senior management listened to the extensive BBC Radio Investigation into the lobbying practices of Stonewall and its Diversity Champions Scheme (on which ACON based its Australian Workplace Equality Index)?
 - a. If not, why not?
 - b. If so, why does the ABC believe that the lessons of perceived bias which led the BBC to withdraw from the Stonewall scheme do not apply to the ABC and its paid involvement with ACON?
6. Freedom of Information documents reveal that the ABC submitted evidence of the existence of an internal staff organisation to gain points in an awards from ACON in 2022, and provided evidence to ACON that this internal organisation is involved in

providing 'guidance' on editorial corrections and editorial content. Why does the ABC consider it appropriate to submit evidence of editorial changes to a lobby group in order to seek awards from that lobby group?

7. The ABC has stated that participation in "benchmarking indexes" run by lobby groups "have no bearing on editorial processes". Did the ABC audit all contact between the lobby group and its staff before making this statement?
 - a. If so, how many times did ACON, Pride in Diversity and its affiliates contact ABC staff over the last five years?
 - b. If not, how can the ABC state that its involvement with the AWEI had "no bearing on editorial processes"?
 - c. Can the ABC explain how the statement that participation in benchmarking exercises have "no bearing on editorial processes" is consistent with evidence the ABC submitted in its 2022 AWEI submission to specifically demonstrate that activities it receives points for in the benchmarking index DO have a bearing on editorial processes?
8. What was the total cost (including staff time) for the ABC to participate in and make submissions to the ACON AWEI?
9. The ABC's Diversity and Inclusion Commissioning Guidelines provide a number of targets specifying that 50 per cent of the cast must be "women or gender diverse". Does the ABC accept that a program could feature 0 females and still meet this gender diversity target?

Answer:

1. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) subscribes to memberships with various organisations which advise and advocate on inclusion. By participating in benchmarking indexes we are able to monitor our progress and improve workplace practices, such as those run by the Diversity Council of Australia, Reconciliation Australia and the Australian Network on Disability.

Participation in benchmarking indexes has no bearing on ABC content commissioning processes and no influence on ABC content.

ABC Editorial Policies require all journalists and content makers to:

- Maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC;
 - Exercise ABC editorial control over the content the ABC broadcasts or publishes;
 - Ensure that editorial decisions are not improperly influenced by political, sectional, commercial or personal interests.
2. By doing so the ABC improves its reputation and positioning in the marketplace as an employer of choice. It assists to encourage a safe work environment and aids in recruitment and retention of high profile and high skilled employees.

Participation also provides a platform to draw attention to content which reflects a wider representation of diverse people and views.

3. No.

- a. The participation in benchmarking indexes has no bearing on ABC content commissioning processes and no influence on ABC content.

ABC Editorial Policies require all journalists and content makers to:

- Maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC;
- Exercise ABC editorial control over the content the ABC broadcasts or publishes;
- Ensure that editorial decisions are not improperly influenced by political, sectional, commercial or personal interests.

4. No.

- a. The participation in benchmarking indexes has no bearing on ABC content commissioning processes and no influence on ABC content.

ABC Editorial Policies require all journalists and content makers to:

- Maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC;
- Exercise ABC editorial control over the content the ABC broadcasts or publishes;
- Ensure that editorial decisions are not improperly influenced by political, sectional, commercial or personal interests.

- b. To our knowledge, the ABC has not specifically reported on “the paid membership of dozens of government departments to the lobby group ACON, and/or its Pride in Diversity, Pride in Sport or Pride in Health offshoots”. Where editorially relevant, in ABC content reporting on ACON and its programs, the ABC has referred to organisations involved in those programs; for example, stories on Pride in Sport have reported the sporting codes participating in the index.

5. The ABC is aware of the BBC Radio Investigation into the lobbying practices of Stonewall and its Diversity Champions Scheme.

- a. Not Applicable.

- b. The participation in benchmarking indexes has no bearing on ABC content commissioning processes and no influence on ABC content.

ABC Editorial Policies require all journalists and content makers to:

- Maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC;
- Exercise ABC editorial control over the content the ABC broadcasts or publishes;
- Ensure that editorial decisions are not improperly influenced by political, sectional, commercial or personal interests.

6. ABC Pride is a valued volunteer-participatory group within the ABC to promote community amongst LGBTQIA+ employees. The group does not have editorial authority over ABC content.

Further, ACON is not consulted on editorial decisions. In all matters relating to content, the ABC maintains independence in accordance with ABC Editorial Policies.

7. No.

- a. Not applicable

- b. The ABC's long-standing Editorial Policies dictate the requirements placed upon journalists and content makers, and the ABC is confident in the professionalism of its staff. As noted in earlier answers, the participation in benchmarking indexes has no bearing on ABC content commissioning processes and no influence on ABC content.

- c. The ABC does not agree that "activities it receives points for in the benchmarking index DO have a bearing on editorial processes".

Participation in benchmarking indexes has no bearing on ABC content commissioning processes and no influence on ABC content.

8. For FY2022, a total of \$13,012.50 was paid in relation to ACON. The ABC's involvement with ACON is in line with the ABC's Diversity & Inclusion Plan.

The ABC does not have precise information on 'staff time' but confirms that ABC employees did spend time and effort completing submissions to AWEI. The provision of information and detailed submissions to benchmarking indexes is required to ensure accurate benchmark assessment.

9. The ABC's *Commissioning for Diversity and Inclusion Guidelines* provide a framework to increase representation in our content on screen and behind the scenes to help the ABC meet its goal to look and sound like the Australian community.

Each program is assessed looking at the subject matter and production unique to that program and how it can deliver to our goal from early development stages. Programs are not required to reflect the same or all representation criteria.

Consequently, in this context it is possible for a program to feature no women and still be acceptable under our guidelines if, for instance, it features representations of other communities.