

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Budget Estimates May 2017

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 113

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: Page 128, 24/05/2017

Topic: Coal Bias

Senator Abetz, Eric asked:

Senator ABETZ: It made certain findings about there being no bias, and I will not go into that. Good luck to you guys for getting such a result. I do not know how, but you did. In part of the report the author noted that in response to claims the ABC had a bias against coal:

... it is the ABC's responsibility to reflect the world as it is: coal mining and the commodities sector in general have been in a downturn for the last few years and it is inevitable that the ABC's coverage of the sector will reflect that.

If we take that as given—I don't, but for the purposes of this question—can I put on the record that the price of thermal coal has risen from \$55 a tonne, in May 2016, to \$90 a tonne, in April 2017, and that metallurgical coal has risen from under \$100 a tonne, in May 2016, to over \$200 dollars a tonne, in April 2017. So I am asking: where is the 'inevitable'—to use the language—ABC coverage reflecting this positive element of coal mining? Can you point me to any?

Mr Sunderland: I think you know what I am going to say.

Senator ABETZ: That you cannot.

Mr Sunderland: No, not at all. There is a whole lot of assumptions and issues in there that are probably best taken on notice. I will reflect on that challenge and come back to you with some information about the nature of our coverage.

Senator ABETZ: You justify the negative stories, because of the low prices et cetera, and then the prices surge and Stephen Long and—

Mr Sunderland: Without in any way getting angry or emotional—

CHAIR: Mr Sunderland, excuse me. You both are now talking over each other. He has taken the question on notice—

Senator ABETZ: That is why I stopped.

Mr Sunderland: Yes, but it is difficult, with respect. Any assistance the committee can give me on this would be gratefully accepted. It is very difficult to accept questions that carry with them a number of assumptions that I simply do not, in good faith, accept, and I cannot let them remain on the record without at least noting that.

CHAIR: Senator Abetz, your questions were very clear to me. Mr Sunderland has the questions and can go back and review the *Hansard*. Mr Sunderland, if you do not agree with some of the things you can come back and demonstrate why you do not. You can clearly do that on notice.

Mr Sunderland: I will respond to that.

Senator ABETZ: What are the assumptions that you do not accept—that the price of coal has gone up?

CHAIR: Senator Abetz, this is not a debating competition. You have asked the questions and they have been taken on notice. You said you had a last question.

Senator ABETZ: It was asserted that there were assumptions in my question that you did not agree with and I want to know what those assumptions are, because I thought I stated what the public record discloses about the price of coal having surged, and the quotations, directly out of

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the report, that the ABC quotes with glee. If you are able to have negative stories about coal, because the price has been in steep decline, I was wondering why there was not an inevitability of good news stories when the price surges again? I am just saying that there is a double standard.

Mr Sunderland: I understand, and I will be very brief. I do not want to extend this more than its natural life will allow. But to take one line out a report that was perhaps 100 pages long and characterise it in the way you have, as a blunt assessment that negative coverage flows from low prices—there is a problem with that. So let's tease it out. Let me take it on notice and we will deal with it.

CHAIR: Senator Abetz, this has now definitely become a debate on an issue rather than an appropriate discussion for estimates. You have taken it on notice and if you would like to have this discussion separately you can do so, but we are short of time.

Answer:

The independent May 2016 review into the ABC's review of business coverage identified that:

The reviewer notes that it is the ABC's responsibility to reflect the world as it is: coal mining and the commodities sector in general have been in a downturn for the last few years and it is inevitable that the ABC's coverage of the sector will reflect that.

The review found that in keeping with its standards of impartiality and accuracy, the ABC would inevitably accurately report on the downturn in commodity prices at the time of the review. As evidenced by following examples of recent ABC news coverage of an upsurge in the price of coal and other commodities, the ABC continues to accurately report the current commodities situation:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-11/coal-prices-are-soaring-in-the-wake-of-cyclone/8435638>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-06/coking-coal-prices-post-biggest-one-day-gain-on-record-amid-deb/8421734>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-21/bhp-billiton-returns-to-profit-thanks-to-commodity-price-surge/8290794>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2017-01-17/contract-coal-prices-spike-for-march-quarter/8188066>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2016-11-17/coking-coal-price-reaches-five-year-high/8030898>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-11/iron-ore-coal-futures-surge-again-as-traders-bet/8018292>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2016-10-14/mining-communities-welcome-coal-price-surge/7931900>