

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Budget Estimates May 2017

Communications Portfolio

Special Broadcasting Service

Question No: 64

Special Broadcasting Service

Hansard Ref: Page 91, 24/05/2017

Topic: AME emails

Senator Abetz, Eric asked:

Senator ABETZ: There were 50 to 100 communications?

Ms O'Neil: Yes, and between AME. There was a section for the request that did not relate to the letter as well. It was all communications between Mr Ebeid and his office and Australians for Marriage Equality. That was a separate part of the request in the letter.

Senator ABETZ: Anyway, between, what, 50 to 100?

Ms O'Neil: No, I think it was less than 55, but I would have to check the exact number for you.

Senator ABETZ: What was the nature of these documents? Were they emails, files or records?

Ms O'Neil: I believe they were emails.

Senator ABETZ: Did any of those emails have the signature block of managing director of SBS or CEO of SBS on them?

Mr Ebeid: I might just say every employee at SBS, including myself, is well and truly entitled to send a reasonable amount of personal emails. That is not unusual. I think any organisation has a reasonable use policy for personal emails so whether—

Senator ABETZ: I have not asked for anything of that nature.

Mr Ebeid: Whether it had my email block, it would still be a personal email.

Senator ABETZ: So, you can sign off? That is news to me. I can now sign off as a senator for Tasmania but still make it a personal one. That is an interesting concept of managerial responsibility. I would have thought if it were a personal one it would just be Michael Ebeid full stop, like indeed this letter that is in the public domain.

Ms O'Neil: In response to your question, the applicant to that request was provided with a very comprehensive set of reasons for decision, and there is a review process available.

Senator ABETZ: Yes. I have that letter in front of me. Nevertheless, estimates does allow us to ask these questions, and I ask again: were these emails signed off with a signature block of SBS director or referring to the SBS position of Mr Ebeid?

Ms O'Neil: I do not have the documents with me. I would have to take that on notice.

Senator ABETZ: Are you telling us you cannot recall what was on those 50 or so emails that you have personally seen and gone through in detail so that you can refuse them to my office that you cannot recall the signature block on the bottom of them?

Ms O'Neil: I would have to check each document to be certain. The documents—

Senator ABETZ: That is why I asked whether any—any—of the documents may have had that signature block on it, and you cannot recall?

Ms O'Neil: A decision was made that the documents were exempt under the FOI Act. If the applicant is unhappy with that decision, they have access to a review.

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Senator ABETZ: I know that. I am asking you: you having read the documents, seen the documents, sighted the documents, can you tell this committee whether any of them had the full signature block of the director of SBS at the bottom of them?

Senator DASTYARI: That has been taken on notice.

Senator ABETZ: No.

Mr Ebeid: We have taken it on notice.

Answer:

The total number of documents relating to the Freedom of Information request from Senator Abetz's office was 66 emails. These documents were all deemed personal emails and not relating to SBS activity or business. Two of the 66 emails concluded with Mr Ebeid's automated signature block.