

**Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications**

**Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice**

**Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearings October 2016**

**Communications Portfolio**

**Department of Communications and the Arts**

**Question No: 8**

**Program 1.1**

**Hansard Ref: Pages 16, 95, 96**

**Topic: Tom Roberts**

**Senator Bilyk, Catryna asked:**

**Senator BILYK:** We will try a couple, because some are for the minister as well. Minister, the family for the acclaimed Australian artist Tom Roberts sought to donate a family heirloom. I am sure you are aware of the situation. It was a coin and a handwritten letter. The coin had been minted in 1873 and engraved with the Impressionist painter's initials. They sought to donate that to the prime ministerial collection last December. We know that it went missing somewhere. I am not accusing anyone of any unlawful act; I will be very clear on that. I understand that it was referred to the AFP. Is that correct?

**Senator Fifield:** I am not aware of it. I do not have any specific knowledge. Obviously, I am aware of the issue, but I do not have any specific knowledge as to the handling of it. I stand to be corrected, but I do not think that it is anything that our department has involvement with.

**Ms O'Loughlin:** I will check, but I do not believe our department is involved in that issue.

**Senator BILYK:** I understood that the AFP had done some interviews and things, and that the staff that it had been handed to had resigned. Are you able to clarify that?

**Ms O'Loughlin:** It was a staff member of the then minister's office. So it was not departmental staff.

**Senator BILYK:** Minister, do you know if the previous minister's office staff has resigned?

**Senator Fifield:** As I said, I do not have any specific knowledge of this matter.

**Senator BILYK:** So you would not know whether the minister or the department have met with the family of Tom Roberts about this issue?

**Ms O'Loughlin:** I think it was the responsibility of the former minister.

**Senator BILYK:** That does not absolve the current minister. I mean, if everything is dropped when a minister changed, there would be no accountability anywhere.

**Ms O'Loughlin:** Because that staff member had moved to different offices, we have not been involved in this process since then. I understand, though, that the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet may have taken some questions on this issue yesterday. I would just like to check with them about whether they have some knowledge of that process.

**Senator BILYK:** The other question I would like to know the answer to is if anybody from the department—obviously, not from the minister's office—has met with the family of Tom Roberts about the loss of these artefacts? Has any offer of compensation been made and, if so, what is that offer? Also, has there been a formal apology? I am a bit surprised to hear that, Minister, to be honest. This is a significant issue and they were significant cultural artefacts from a very respected Australian artist. I am a bit surprised for you to say to me that it was the former minister as though that absolves you of any information or knowledge about it.

**Senator Fifield:** Neither I or my office have had any interaction or involvement in the events in question. It did not involve an interaction with me or my office.

**Senator BILYK:** Even though it is a significant issue around a cultural artefact, as such, and one

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of Australia's most renowned artists? Are you saying that the blame stopped at the former minister?

**Senator Fifield:** No, I am just making a statement of fact that the issues in question did not involve me or my office, or any interaction between me and my office and the parties involved in that matter.

**Senator BILYK:** I think Ms O'Loughlin said she will try to come back to me.

**Ms O'Loughlin:** I recall now that it was a private donation from the individual, and the coin was provided to the Prime Minister at the Tom Roberts function at the National Gallery last year. Hence, I would like to check with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

**Senator BILYK:** It was then handed to an adviser?

**Ms O'Loughlin:** That is my understanding. That is why the issue had been taken forward by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. It had not come to this department at all. But I am happy to talk to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and see whether any of the people over there have met with the family, or can help with the other parts of your question.

**Senator BILYK:** I do not suppose you are able to tell me then if the staff person is now working in another minister's office? You probably don't know the answer to that, Minister?

**Senator Fifield:** I do not have a whole-of-government perspective on government staffing.

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**Senator BILYK:** Was it going to be displayed in the National Gallery?

**Ms O'Loughlin:** No, it was a private donation.

**Senator BILYK:** Yes, but was it going to be displayed?

**Ms O'Loughlin:** That is not my understanding but, again, as it was a matter for PM&C I am happy to take it on board, follow it up with PM&C and report back to this committee.

**Senator BILYK:** What sort of timeline would that take?

**Ms O'Loughlin:** I am happy to do that hopefully in the next few days.

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**Senator BILYK:** This is a media article where I found the information that the issue had happened. Dr Lisa Roberts, who is a descendent of Tom Roberts, is quoted as saying, 'I'm disappointed. I've done everything that I can to be transparent in my dealings with people but I don't think it's been a two-way street. It's shaken my trust in cultural institutions.' That is where my concern comes in, Minister. They are part of your portfolio, cultural institutions. She goes on say, 'I probably won't donate anything again.' So my question is not only who has spoken to the family but whether there was any compensation suggested. I want to know the whole thing, from go to whoa, about how the family has been treated?

**Ms O'Loughlin:** I am happy to take that up with Prime Minister and Cabinet.

**Answer:**

On 17 October 2016 the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet advised the Senate Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee that it would make enquiries with the Prime Minister's Office. Any further enquiries on this matter should be directed to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.