

Economics Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Industry and Science Portfolio
Budget Estimates Hearing 2015-16
3 and 4 June 2015

AGENCY/DEPARTMENT: AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF MARINE SCIENCE (AIMS)

TOPIC: Letter from Britta Schaffelke – Courier Mail Article

REFERENCE: Question on Notice (Hansard, 3 June 2015, pages 98-99)

QUESTION No.: BI-18

Senator WATERS: Thank you. I will check on my figures and put on notice how we can explain that discrepancy. I am not sure how long you have been in Portugal, Mr Gunn, and thank you for phoning in from there. A couple of weeks ago—on Tuesday, 12 May—there was a front-page story in Queensland's *The Courier-Mail* that referred to some work of AIMS. My understanding is that the author of the report has since had some concerns about the fact that her work was misrepresented. I am not sure if you are familiar with this or if either Mr Souter or Mr Mead are. Could you share whether or not you thought that coverage was a fair reflection of your work or, if not, what parts were not?

Mr Gunn: I think you are correct. There was a report in *The Courier-Mail*. It is one of a series of articles they wrote, on the Great Barrier Reef, leading up to the UNESCO decision. The report was on the basis of quite an informal chat between Dr Britta Schaffelke, from AIMS, and a journalist from NewsCorp., Brian Williams. He wrote an article. We were forced to have some commentary on that. Britta Schaffelke went into media the following day, basically trying to clarify the situation. I thought it might be worth reading a letter back from the journalist, Mr Williams, to my scientist, Britta Schaffelke.

Senator WATERS: Yes please; thank you.

CHAIR: I would be very pleased to have you do that.

Mr Gunn: It says:

Dear Britta,

I accept responsibility for the quality of my story. I wanted you to know that I did not write the headline or the material that appeared on the front page. I am sorry that you were upset about it. I did not write that the reef had recovered or that corals and seagrasses were blooming. My copy read that there were likely to be slight improvements.

In fact, that is pretty much as we had discussed with him. It is a case of a journalist and a scientist having a factual conversation ending up in something that was less than factual on the front page of a newspaper.

Senator WATERS: Would you mind tabling that letter for us, Mr Gunn, so that we can have a bit of a closer look at that? Thank you. I appreciate that you have taken the chance to clarify that.

ANSWER

The letter received from the journalist is copied below.

Britta Schaffelke

From: Williams, Brian <brian.williams@news.com.au>
Sent: Saturday, 23 May 2015 11:48 AM
To: Britta Schaffelke

Dear Britta,

I heard you on ABC Radio regarding my water quality story.

I accept responsibility for it but wanted you to know that I did not write the headline or material that appeared on the front page. I am sorry that you were upset about it.

I did not write that the Reef had recovered or that corals and sea grasses were blooming.

My copy read that there would likely be a slight improvement as had occurred the year before which could be due to drier weather conditions. I also recorded your comments about difficulties in trying to plot a trajectory while not having enough long term data to make a definitive call.

I'm sorry it turned out this way.

Kindest regards,

Brian Williams.

--

BRIAN WILLIAMS
environment reporter

Cnr Mayne Road & Campbell Street Bowen Hills QLD 4006
GPO Box 130, Brisbane, QLD 4001
T +61 7 3666 6021 M +61 407 596 428
E brian.williams@news.com.au W www.NewsCorpAustralia.com
