



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

# Official Committee Hansard

JOINT COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND AUDIT

**Reference: Role of the Auditor-General in scrutinising government advertising**

WEDNESDAY, 21 OCTOBER 2009

CANBERRA

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**JOINT STATUTORY  
COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND AUDIT**

**Wednesday, 21 October 2009**

**Members:** Ms Grierson (*Chair*), Mr Georgiou (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Barnett, Mark Bishop, Bushby, Feeney and Lundy and Mr Adams, Mr Bevis, Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Bradbury, Mr Briggs, Mr Butler, Ms King, Mr Neumann and Mr Robert

**Members in attendance:** Senator Feeney and Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Georgiou and Ms Grierson

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

The role of the Auditor-General in scrutinising government advertising

**WITNESSES**

**WEBSTER, Ms Sally, Lecturer and Course Convenor, Advertising, Marketing and  
Communications, University of Canberra..... 1**



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**Committee met at 12.28 pm****WEBSTER, Ms Sally, Lecturer and Course Convenor, Advertising, Marketing and Communications, University of Canberra**

**CHAIR (Ms Grierson)**—I declare open today’s public hearing, which examines the Auditor-General’s role in scrutinising compliance with guidelines on government advertising campaigns. In June 2008 the government announced new guidelines for its advertising, including a formal scrutiny role for the Auditor-General for all campaigns over \$250,000 to help ensure that the guidelines are being met.

I welcome Ms Sally Webster from the University of Canberra and thank her for attending today. The focus of today’s hearing is on advertising principles generally rather than our usual focus on specific government advertising campaigns, but that does not mean in any way to limit the areas you would wish to present to us on. Do you wish to make an opening statement?

**Ms Webster**—Yes, I do. I have prepared some information that will hopefully provide highlights of the advertising and marketing communications industry as it is now as well as looking at some campaigns and how I think that could impact on federal government campaigns.

In recent years, the term ‘advertising’ has developed way beyond the conventional definition of an advertisement in a newspaper or a 30-second ad on television. It now loosely defines a range of marketing communications activities that can be anything from a clip on YouTube of a gorilla playing drums to Phil Collins In the Air Tonight that implicitly promotes Cadbury chocolate, to a designer painted bicycle ridden by Lance Armstrong in the Tour de France that promotes his cancer awareness foundation Livestrong, to the brand that is Apple and one that has become an iconic symbol of cool and individuality even though Apple products have mass appeal and sales.

While these are international examples of advertising communications, Australia has its own influence in the industry even though it is a small player. We certainly have the ability to punch above our weight. Australia was recently ranked fourth in the world for its advertising creativity by The Cannes Report 2009. We received this ranking for winning 45 Cannes Lions International Advertising Awards—the industry’s equivalent of the Oscars, which is pretty big.

Earlier this year Australia stole the show at the 56th Cannes Lions International Advertising Awards. The Tourism Queensland campaign ‘The Best Job in the World’ won three Grand Prix awards for direct campaign, PR and cyber—online version—campaign, with an additional eight awards in the general Lions advertising categories. This campaign also won the prestigious American One Show Ad of Year award. This international recognition came on top of the three Gold Effies awarded by the Advertising Federation of Australia. It is interesting that this advertising campaign won Gold Effies in the categories of Government Advertising and Most Original Thinking campaigns. The ‘Best Job in the World’ campaign is a good case study to review how effective and creative government advertising can be and how government processes can impact upon a successful and penetrating campaign.

I expect you would know this advertising campaign, which was essentially a job advertisement for an island caretaker at the Great Barrier Reef offering a six-month contract with

a salary of \$150,000. The campaign, managed by Brisbane based creative agency CumminsNitro—now known as SapientNitro Brisbane—was developed earlier this year with what would be considered by industry standards a small budget of \$1.5 million. That compares to the current average federal government spend of around \$5 million. However, the goal of the campaign was big, and that was to increase international awareness of Queensland's islands of the Great Barrier Reef and transform a popular daytrip destination into an international tourist's dream holiday? The advertising campaign began with a simple job advertisement strategically placed in the recruitment pages of the leading daily newspapers in key Tourism Queensland markets. These included New Zealand, Germany, Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, England, Ireland, Nordic countries, and the United States. The focus of these job ads was the call to action—directing people to the website [www.islandreefjob.com](http://www.islandreefjob.com) that requested people to submit a one-minute video of themselves explaining why they should be selected for the 'Best Job in the World'.

Queensland Tourism's target or its hope was for 14,000 video applications. It received 34,684 applications from 201 countries and more than 7.5 million web visits. The campaign became a leading news story and achieved global news coverage in all media formats, including feature news stories on CNN, BBC and in Time magazine. It is estimated that it achieved approximately \$150 million in free PR. However, this is a conservative estimate as the campaign still has a strong profile on social media outlets, such as YouTube Facebook and Twitter. Many media organisations set up their own 'Best Job in the World' Twitter sites to encourage their online readers.

The campaign was ranked eighth on the international list for the world's top 50 public relations stunts of all time by internationally renowned public relations company Taylor Herring. This campaign demonstrated what is now becoming an international industry standard in advertising-marketing communications. As Todd Sampson, CEO of Leo Burnett creative agency explained earlier this year on the ABC TV's the Gruen Transfer, before a creative campaign is even developed the creative agency should be able to explain to the client what the public relations and media outcomes will be. This further reinforces what I highlighted earlier, that the traditional definition of advertising has broadened.

Recognition should be given to creative campaigns like Australia's own the 'Best Job in the World' for changing global industry approaches. It may be of interest to the committee that the industry in Australia has recognised the broad scope of advertising by announcing this week the establishment, in January 2010, of an industry peak body called the Communications Council that will feature the tagline 'Commercial creativity and connection'. It is anticipated that the Communications Council will incorporate the merged industry groups of AWARD, the Australasian Writers and Art Directors Association, the AFA, the Advertising Federation of Australia, and the APG, the Account Planning Group.

The 'Best Job in the World' advertising communications campaign successfully demonstrated what can be achieved on a small budget and within a short timeframe through an integrated marketing communications approach. It also demonstrated the imperative of identifying and understanding the target audience, strategically reaching them and engaging them so they believe what CumminsNitro, the creative agency, set out for them to believe, that is that you do not truly experience something unless you immerse yourself in it. It is very easy for us to say, 'Wow! What an amazing campaign' and 'How fantastic! It was a brilliant idea', but that is with the safe

knowledge of knowing that it had cut through with its target audience, it increased visitation to the Great Barrier Reef—and the expectation is it will increase further—and it is internationally recognised through all the awards it has won. It also provided human interest, humour and a distraction from a depressed social environment.

As we would all know, getting this campaign approved would not have been simple as it would have needed to go through a range of Queensland government hoops, including endorsement from the Minister for Tourism.

**Mr GEORGIU**—They do not actually endorse anything. They just oversee the process and tick off on it, if the Auditor-General agrees that—

**Ms Webster**—This is the point I am getting to.

**CHAIR**—We will let Ms Webster finish her statement.

**Ms Webster**—It is important to consider that the ‘Best Job in the World’ campaign was established in a confronting climate that included the global financial crisis, at a time when there was a reduction in consumer spending and rising unemployment, and prior to the Queensland state election. As Queensland Tourism is an agency of the Queensland government it could be perceived that the campaign was established to assist in promoting brand Queensland and the incumbent Queensland government just prior to the election.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—Amazing!

**Ms Webster**—The decision to back this campaign—

**CHAIR**—We have some conspiracy theorists among us.

**Mr GEORGIU**—I have never known governments to run out something to enhance their reputation. That would be too much.

**CHAIR**—We are enjoying this inquiry.

**Mr GEORGIU**—I have never seen it in federal politics.

**Senator FEENEY**—Or in Victoria.

**Ms Webster**—The decision to back this campaign was bold and it certainly paid off.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—The taxpayer paid for it.

**Ms Webster**—I have focused on this campaign as I believe it highlights a range of challenges when developing government communications activities. Some of these challenges I will speak to later.

During the 2007 federal election campaign the Australian Labor Party made a commitment to reduce government advertising if elected. The Rudd government has maintained this promise by reducing federal government media spend by 28 per cent—based on a spend of approximately \$130 million per annum—during the past financial year. Since this government was elected in November 2007, the federal government has dropped from being No. 1 media buyer or advertiser in Australia to No. 4.

**Mr GEORGIU**—I do not mean to interrupt, but the data generated by the ANAO indicates—which is arguable—that the spend increases towards elections. Are you comparing—

**Ms Webster**—That was an annual—

**CHAIR**—Keep going.

**Mr GEORGIU**—Which year?

**Senator FEENEY**—That is certainly the pattern over the last 11 years.

**Ms Webster**—That was the past year.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—A non-election year.

**Ms Webster**—But also those figures were from—I would need to check on my references—Nielsen AdNews.

**Mr GEORGIU**—I think you know what I mean.

**Ms Webster**—Yes, I know.

**CHAIR**—We are getting to that.

**Ms Webster**—We are getting to that, yes. As I said, the federal government has dropped from being No. 1 media buyer or advertiser in Australia to No. 4.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—Did that happen after the 2004 election as well?

**Ms Webster**—I have not referred back to that.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—It is only meaningful if we see that.

**Mr GEORGIU**—That is what we are talking about—apples with apples.

**Senator FEENEY**—But if we follow your advice, the numbers will get better for Ms Webster, not worse.

**Mr GEORGIU**—If the ANAO's generalisation is right—

**CHAIR**—It is a fair point.

**Ms Webster**—And I do not have the numbers, though.

**CHAIR**—We do not have the figures to compare.

**Ms Webster**—I think it is about some other issues, not just about the numbers.

**Mr GEORGIU**—I am sorry, I was just responding to the 28 per cent.

**Ms Webster**—This decrease in government advertising activities and reduction in media spend has had an impact on the industry, with many creative agencies rationalising and downsizing. Job vacancies have been in limited supply. The industry has faced more than a 50 per cent staff reduction in the advertising-media industry—

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—What was that figure?

**Senator FEENEY**—Crosby Textor and others have suffered very grievously.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—That is true.

**Ms Webster**—From July 2008 to June 2009, which is a result of a range of factors, including the downturn in the economy and what industry describes as the Rudd factor, a reduction in federal government advertising. This is not meant to be a criticism, this is just an explanation of the impact on the industry when governments reduce their advertising.

**Mr GEORGIU**—You are saying a 28 per cent reduction in government advertising has an impact of 50 per cent employment in the industry?

**Ms Webster**—No, I did not say that. I said there was a range of factors, including that.

**Mr GEORGIU**—What has the general drop in advertising been across-the-board?

**Ms Webster**—I am sorry, I would have to take that on notice. I do not have those figures.

**CHAIR**—We will get to that. We will ask some more specific questions on that area in a moment.

**Ms Webster**—This is not meant to be a criticism. This is just an explanation of the impact on the industry when governments reduce their advertising. I also know that some in the industry are using this cutback in spending as an opportunity to demonstrate creative skills on limited budgets. In my view, the ‘Best Job in the World’ showed that this is possible.

**CHAIR**—Are you suggesting it was a low-budget ad?

**Ms Webster**—It was; \$1.5 million is incredibly low. Would the current federal government advertising processes support this innovative campaign? That is a question I would ask of the

committee. Something that I believe needs to be considered by this committee is: do the current accountability processes allow for bold, pioneering decisions in government advertising?

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—Why should they?

**CHAIR**—Keep going.

**Ms Webster**—Anyone who has worked in government advertising could provide colourful details of the pros and cons, and especially the frustrations, of the approval processes managed through the Hawke-Keating governments with aNiMLS—the National Media Liaison Service—or with the Howard government’s MCGC, Ministerial Committee on Government Communications. These committees usually boasted members who were highly experienced campaigners. Therefore, they expected exacting standards of the government agencies coordinating the communications campaigns, and demanded a real understanding of the target audience and how to reach this audience with creative impact.

**Senator FEENEY**—Petro is glowing with pride.

**Mr GEORGIOU**—No, I am just laughing.

**Senator FEENEY**—A band of brigands you are elevating to such noble heights. They were experts in how to re-elect Liberal governments.

**CHAIR**—I am just wondering if you are suggesting that the ANAO has all those skills.

**Mr GEORGIOU**—That is so unfair.

**Senator FEENEY**—Like Kamahl: ‘Why are people so unkind?’

**Mr GEORGIOU**—No, I think you missed the point.

**Ms Webster**—While it was timely for the Rudd government to review the Government Advertising and Communications Guidelines so as to introduce more transparency and accountability, I cannot help but wonder if these changes have aided in a risk averse approach where public servants are afraid to be bold and innovative in their choice of creative campaigns due to the range of auditing and approval processes that are now in place.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—I hope so.

**Ms Webster**—We are all aware of the public criticism of government advertising and at times this can be valid. There is a perception that government advertising has the sole purpose of only promoting the incumbent government. This debate, regardless of its legitimacy, has the potential to limit discussion and analysis of the broader public benefit of government advertising no matter when it occurs.

From an industry view, and from my own practitioner’s experience, the debate about politicisation of government communications can reduce the public focus from the benefits of any government’s work that needs to be promoted so as to encourage social behavioural change.

Advertising has its place and can make a positive impact. In my view, yes, advertising does matter. I doubt that a Grim Reaper television advertisement, a strategic shock campaign developed in 1987 that assisted Australia in reducing AIDS in the general community, would receive approval through the current federal government processes.

**Senator FEENEY**—Can you point out where in the current guidelines you think it would fall foul?

**CHAIR**—We will get to that; this is really important.

**Ms Webster**—This award winning federal government campaign is still recognised as being innovative and a leader in social change marketing. I also doubt that the feel good campaign of the ‘Best Job in the World’, recognised internationally for its innovation and creativity, would receive approval through the federal government processes.

By way of a different example, the 2009 winner of the Advertising Federation of Australia’s Grand Effie was the ‘Pinkie’ campaign created by Clemenger BBDO for the New South Wales Government’s Roads and Traffic Authority. This ‘Speeding—No-one thinks big of you’ campaign has been highly successful not just because of the number of awards it has won but because it has penetrated into the minds and souls of the target audience, that is, Aussie blokes aged around 17-25 who love to drive and speed.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—How do we know that?

**Ms Webster**—Within a few months of this campaign launching in 2007 awareness with the target audience reached 97 per cent and 95 per cent among the general public. The campaign had an enormous impact, with road deaths in the target age group dropping by half in its first year of the campaign’s circulation. Due to these powerful results, the campaign has continued and with each subsequent year road deaths in the target age group have continued to drop dramatically.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—That is young men driving cars?

**Ms Webster**—Young males drivers aged 17 to 25. That ‘Pinkie’ campaign has worked because it hit young male drivers where it hurt most. As Clemenger BBDO has explained, the ‘old cliché rang true: these guys were thinking with their penises. Driving was an opportunity to be the “big man” and let all their mates know about it.’ However, this social marketing campaign nearly did not happen. Initially it was rejected through the state government processes and it was due to the belief and determination of Clemenger’s creative staff who orchestrated a chance meeting with the then Minister for Roads, Eric Roozendaal, so they could pitch their creative concept directly to him. As history shows, the minister bought the concept.

Clemenger’s now assert that the ‘Pinkie’ campaign has saved at least 56 young lives in the past two years and saved \$264 million in accident related hospital costs. Imagine these results if the campaign was developed when first pitched to the RTA in 2004.

I have deliberately focused on state government advertising communications campaigns to illustrate my points as I did not want to single out any federal government campaign for criticism for these purposes. However, the list provided to this committee from the Department of

Finance on 1 June provides some worthwhile examples for possible future discussion within the committee.

The current guidelines produced by the Department of Finance stress the need for research, clear campaign objectives, understanding and reach of target audience, campaign approach and evaluation. As I explain to my students in the Advertising-Marketing Communications program at University of Canberra, these are all crucial components of a successful campaign. However, I also add that without a bold approach to innovation and creativity in communications campaigns and the ability to take a risk with the creative concepts so it talks to the target audience there is little point in producing the campaign as it will no doubt have limited recall, which generally means there will be no impact on knowledge and attitude, and as such will unlikely deliver the objectives and achieve behavioural change.

Accountability and transparency is crucial in government advertising, but these should not be the only aspects that are taken into consideration. Government advertising is not just about procedures and keeping the number of government campaigns to a minimum. Any communications campaign, and especially government communications because it is funded through public monies, must also incorporate true evaluation measures and have creative cut through with the target audience. I think the examples I provided did have that. In other words, the advertising focus should not just be about the spend, it must reach the target audience in a creative way that informs and persuades. This would be real value for money.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. That is very provocative. It certainly leads us into some very exciting areas. We are going to start with Senator Feeney.

**Senator FEENEY**—Thank you very much for your remarks this morning. I agree with your thesis, which is that the government must have a system that can encompass bold creativity. The guidelines' principal obsession is to bleach political sentiment and political motive out of our advertising. Its motive is not to take out good creative that accomplishes the advertising mission at hand. I think the government and indeed this committee understand the importance of social change marketing and believe in its power. I do not think you have made the case about how these guidelines operate to stifle that sort of creativity. For instance, if a bold creative concept is bold into an advertising process, and governed by these guidelines, it does not get strangled at birth simply because it is a bold creative concept. Obviously there are—

**Mr GEORGIU**—It should be strangled at birth under these guidelines, by definition.

**Senator FEENEY**—For instance, with respect to the case study at hand, the 'Best Job in the World', there is no reason why that creative concept would be strangled by these guidelines. If you do not agree with me about that I would be interested in hearing—

**CHAIR**—The two cases you have put up, marketing brand Australia and marketing road safety, would seem to me to be really bipartisan-type issue anyway that perhaps would not have any risk factors with these concepts. Certainly, Senator Feeney, continue.

**Senator FEENEY**—That is my question. How is it those case studies would fall foul?

**Ms Webster**—I have deliberately chosen those case studies and deliberately chosen them because I know that they would have bipartisan support. Looking at the list that the Department of Finance provided you on 1 June, there is Defence Force Recruiting, skin cancer awareness, climate change, and the Australian Better Health initiative. All of those in my view should have bipartisan support. I am not wanting to get into the politicisation of the campaigns because that is one issue, and that debate is being had out there.

**Senator FEENEY**—And in here.

**Ms Webster**—And in here.

**CHAIR**—Value for money is always an issue.

**Ms Webster**—I think value for money is crucial. I do believe with the current processes, because of the arrangements that have been made both through the ANAO and the Department of Finance, the focus has almost become the focuses and procedures; creativity is being lost in that system. It does not mean that they are not correct procedures and that there might just be some adaption to them.

**Senator FEENEY**—I understand your proposition, but point me to the guidelines. Where do the guidelines strangle creativity in the way you are describing?

**Ms Webster**—I do not think it is actually pointing to the guidelines. I think it would be actually looking at/reviewing this list in front of me here from 1 June, and yourselves actually, and saying, ‘Have they had that penetration?’ and looking at whether they are reaching the target audience. I do not want to criticise the hard work of any of the public servants or even of the creative agencies.

**Senator FEENEY**—Be my guest. I am inviting you to.

**Ms Webster**—I do not want to do that, though.

**Mr GEORGIU**—Can I just pick up one point. You used one example that I think is really important—the anti-AIDS campaign. Would you say that that complied with an objective treatment that distinguished between comment, opinion and fact? You said in the context of your presentation that the key issue is that the agency has to have people believe what they wanted it to believe, with which I agree. The nub of the issue that addresses us is that—and I believe in emotive, opinionated, creative ads, say, ‘Unchain my Heart’; that works. I am quite serious.

**Senator FEENEY**—It was a good ad.

**CHAIR**—It was a good ad.

**Mr GEORGIU**—The real question that confronts this committee, which I think is important across a wide range, is: can an individual such as the Auditor-General of Australia attest that these are not emotive or that they are not partisan promotion of government policy? Everything you have said is axiomatic; there has to be the partisan promotion of government policy. That is what we are interested in. I agree with you about the fact that if people are only

interested in outcomes rather than processes they will let the creative agency have their head, and then beat their heads in if they are not doing it properly. But what we are after is: can we put in place a structure where the Auditor-General has some unique capacity to say, 'That complies with the guidelines'? I will stop there.

**Ms Webster**—I am not sure I have clear in my mind what you are asking of me. I was asked to present here about the current approach of the industry. One of the big things in the industry at the moment is what I had mentioned, that Todd Sampson and others in the industry have also mentioned. It is not about not just saying, 'Okay. What is the creative?' It is: 'What is that outcome?'

**Mr GEORGIU**—What is the outcome, yes.

**Ms Webster**—From what I can see with the federal government advertisements currently—and I am not talking about ones in the past, because some of those could be questioned as well. I cannot see that current industry approach happening in those ads. I am not sure that the processes allow for that. I would have thought that, say, with the Grim Reaper ad—and I can only speculate on this; and don't get me wrong, I firmly believe in focus testing and evaluation—there are at times, too, when one wonders how that community response and focus testing is interpreted, and even as to the skills of the people who are interpreting that. I think if the Grim Reaper ad were focus tested at the time the reaction would have been highly inflammatory—exactly how it did happen in the community.

**Mr GEORGIU**—That was my question. Could that get by these guidelines?

**Ms Webster**—I do not believe so, because of that very reason, the reaction from the public servants.

**Senator FEENEY**—Petro has asked you a question.

**Ms Webster**—Sorry, Senator Feeney. The guidelines are one thing. It's then the actual—

**Senator FEENEY**—That was not Petro's question. Petro did not ask for your vibe of the thing.

**Mr GEORGIU**—No, my question was about the guidelines.

**Senator FEENEY**—Mr Georgiou asked you: do you think that ad could get through the guidelines? In theory, how could it not?

**Ms Webster**—Could I just add some information there? The guidelines were also about the people who actually carry them out.

**Mr GEORGIU**—It is emotive.

**Ms Webster**—There is a guideline that "material should be presented in an objective, fair and accessible manner", and also says that "where information is presented as a fact it should be based on accurate, verifiable facts and expressed in conformity with these facts". My recollection

of the Grim Reaper campaign is that it was very proactive very early in the experience, and it was a shock tactic to get out there to make sure that the full—

**Senator FEENEY**—It was presented in a manner that was free from partisan promotion of government policy.

**CHAIR**—It would have been very negative.

**Ms Webster**—The reaction would have come back that it was not objective.

**Senator FEENEY**—Well, who knows?

**Ms Webster**—I believe it probably would have, in my personal view, being sanitised and sanitised so that it would have got out there and not had the impact.

**CHAIR**—And there were people who would have challenged the scientific evidence of those times.

**Mr GEORGIU**—They did.

**Ms Webster**—There was very limited scientific evidence and that was also the challenge with that. The Minister for Health at the time, Neal Blewett—

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—There was an outrage about it at the time, because it said that everybody was at risk when the public believed that was not so.

**Ms Webster**—And there was not the data to demonstrate that the public were at risk. We actually decided as a nation, or the federal government did at the time, to actually get out there first, when America did not.

**CHAIR**—You might make a comparison with the advertisement that is current about sexual patterns, et cetera, sexual partners and therefore the risk of sexual disease. It does not have the same shock tactics.

**Senator FEENEY**—But the Grim Reaper was a dramatic device.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—It was stunning.

**Mr GEORGIU**—It worked. But you could not do it.

**Ms Webster**—I am trying not to criticise the campaigns, but I find that quite a bland campaign.

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Ms Webster**—And that is exactly one point; there is a demonstration there. In talking about the guidelines, when you look at Grim Reaper ad, the objectives and some of the first points that

you raise there, I do not believe it would have got up. It was a risk to put it up in the first place, and I think the people who put it up need to be applauded.

**CHAIR**—It was highly successful.

**Ms Webster**—We then became, and now have become, leaders in AIDS awareness and prevention.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—As to the technique used to enable that ad to happen—it was three people. Ita Buttrose was one. I forget who the other two were.

**Ms Webster**—There was Bill Bowtell.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—They were given the authority to do the campaign. It was done totally outside government.

**CHAIR**—Ms Webster, you raised an important point in terms of changing social behaviour where there is an imperative that is not totally tested or evidenced but the opinion of the government is that it is a high risk for the public, and therefore they proceed with a campaign.

**Senator FEENEY**—You can talk about Bill Bowtell and his previous work and you have remarked about the ministerial communications team that used to operate under the previous government. Your thesis is that for bold advertising and for bold creative you need to have individual, dare I say it, change agents in government who can cut through the bureaucratic processes, who can cut through the timidity of a public service and make a bold campaign a government campaign; is that your thesis?

**Ms Webster**—No, that is not what I am saying. That is one approach, but that is not what I am saying. I am saying that these could still be achieved through government processes.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—But not these ones?

**Ms Webster**—I think the Grim Reaper one is a very good one. That ‘Pinkie’ one is also a good one, too. But as to the Grim Reaper one, the reaction when it aired was just tremendous—the negativity and criticism. I think in this current climate the ad would have been pulled very quickly, whereas it continued.

**Mr GEORGIU**—It would never have been made, actually. Sorry, it would never have been put to air.

**Ms Webster**—But even if it got put to air, I think after a short time—

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—Can I ask—

**Ms Webster**—I was just going to continue.

**Mr GEORGIU**—We are a very interruptive committee.

**Senator FEENEY**—Press on.

**Ms Webster**—I applaud it, and I think it is great that this discussion is being had. I was a public servant for 10 years.

**CHAIR**—And that is what I want you to elaborate on, too. You are obviously making some judgements about the approaches by our government departments to advertising and so I think that is interesting, because it is your understanding.

**Ms Webster**—I am also very mindful that when I left the public service I signed a declaration, so I cannot talk in detail about the campaigns—

**CHAIR**—No, of course not.

**Ms Webster**—and knowledge that I have from that time of 10 years.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—Can we just put into the mix the fact that most ads fail?

**CHAIR**—We will save that for later.

**Ms Webster**—They do not need to, though. I do not believe that they need to.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—Of all advertising that is done, most of it does not register.

**Ms Webster**—Yes, but I do not believe that necessarily needs to be the case.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—But in fact that is what happens.

**Senator FEENEY**—And we want government to produce ads that get through.

**Ms Webster**—You could even look at, say, the Kraft Vegemite iSnack2.0. That one did not fail at all. Because now the penetration and cut through has been tremendous.

**Senator FEENEY**—Nothing kills a bad product like good advertising.

**CHAIR**—You might also like to direct your comments on how you would see an effective government advertising campaign being developed to deliver a desirable position.

**Ms Webster**—I think I would rather take that on notice, because there are a lot of factors at play. I think with the people actually charged with coordinating the government campaigns—this is the public servants who are doing it—perhaps it gets down to maybe some more skills development, even more linkages with industry.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—We do not need that in the Auditor-General, do we?

**Ms Webster**—But the challenge I think with the processes is that public servants tend to be risk averse and careful. Also in the current processes I think that some of the people making the

decisions on the IDC finance, while they are highly skilled operators and they may have seen a number of campaigns, they are now making some decisions on things that they may not have the detailed campaign experience in terms of what might be operating across Australia in local suburbs and community areas. There is also more caution with having the secretaries and CEOs having the sign-off. That is also providing more caution. In the past it used to be the sign-off from the minister.

**CHAIR**—Much of this is outsourced to industry. A lot of the government advertising is outsourced for creative development. Are you thinking that the industry also plays down or tones down its advertisements if they are presenting them to government?

**Ms Webster**—No. That can also depend on the brief provided. Giving a plug to the University of Canberra and the students—

**CHAIR**—Why not?

**Ms Webster**—I am in this industry after all.

**CHAIR**—I have employed people from your university. I can attest to their strengths.

**Ms Webster**—This is one of the things that we train the students up in. A crucial component is writing a good campaign brief. Again, I have seen some briefs that have gone out to creative agencies that have had limited information. That is a challenge from the industry, too. There would be people at this table who would have seen some of those briefs.

**CHAIR**—You have also put out there that there is a role for government in terms of social change, and for all sorts of reasons. We are looking at these guidelines not just in terms of what they do and do not do, but what changes may be needed, too. If you accept that there is a role for government to be an agent of change, not everyone will accept that. Not everyone will accept that government leads. Some will suggest government follows. The Grim Reaper campaign was very much government leading and being ahead of the public when often that is not the case.

**Ms Webster**—Not just government. The Australian government led in the world on that one.

**CHAIR**—That is right. We did. If you were going to alter guidelines to take that into account, what sorts of provisions would be needed to be incorporated in any advertising guidelines, rules and procedures?

**Mr GEORGIU**—And if that does not take up your time.

**Ms Webster**—I apologise because I would probably prefer to get back to you on that in the sense that that was not one of the queries or comments that was asked of me.

**CHAIR**—But it leads from what you have been saying.

**Ms Webster**—As I pointed out, there were pros and cons with the previous systems and there was a real need to review these guidelines and also to ensure accountability and transparency in the processes. But I just feel, while you are saying that, yes, it is easy to say, ‘Let’s look at the

guidelines and tick things off to say: can creativity get through this door or not that door', the challenges is that in the way it is being managed, and being managed within the departments, there is the natural tendency to be overcautious, because the responsibility will come back to them.

**CHAIR**—Some of the debate—

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—Can I just have one word?

**CHAIR**—with the climate change advertisement has been that it pre-empts and tries to bring about change.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—Can I say that there is a major problem—

**CHAIR**—I am going to go to Mr Georgiou first.

**Mr GEORGIOU**—No, go on.

**CHAIR**—You will defer to Mrs Bishop?

**Mr GEORGIOU**—I will defer to Mrs Bishop.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—There is a major problem in the scenario the chair just put to you and it is this. If you want government to be an instrument of social change it has to put its policy out there and be fair dinkum with the Australian people about what it is about. Advertising has the ability to spin it, and does so frequently. What we have in place are guidelines to stop the spinning of what are true facts to try to distort the message that is getting out. That is why they are conservative, and that is why they are boring. The question is: do they work?

**CHAIR**—If you would like to address your comments on spin that would be excellent.

**Senator FEENEY**—They do. She is assuring us that advertising is bland and boring. You should be thrilled.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—I am.

**Mr GEORGIOU**—I agree with Mrs Bishop most of the time, but I think what you have crystallised is two things for me. Firstly, advertising is a social change thing. Advertising involves emotion. Advertising involves persuasion. Ultimately the people who are judged on their advertising and their social change are governments, not Auditors-General. There is a real distinction between accountability and transparency and who is ultimately judged. What you have underscored is that there are other side costs in terms of the ability to have an impact which flows from this system. That has been really useful.

The Grim Reaper? I would say, no, there is no way that that could be made under these guidelines and under this system. It took a minister to put the balls in the air and wear it. At the

end of the day that is what people judge. The attempt to sanitise the process, while conducting social change through advertising, is futile.

**Ms Webster**—I would add to that, too, because it is public money and so there is the accountability from that process. I do not support that the comment before—sorry, Mrs Bishop—on the point that the majority of advertising does not work.

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—It doesn't.

**Ms Webster**—But if it does not work it does not mean that it cannot work and why should we not be trying to—

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—But in fact it does not.

**Ms Webster**—Why should we not be achieving and aspiring to a goal where it will be successful, especially when it is government advertising and using public funds? For me, being a public servant for over 10 years, I know the value many of the policies and the operational information that needs to get out to the public. Why should that be undermined and undervalued?

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—That is the job of advertising and these guidelines. It is to put out information, and form.

**Senator FEENEY**—No, it is more than that. It is also sometimes to change behaviour.

**Mr GEORGIU**—Yes.

**Ms Webster**—I worked over different governments. I am not talking about it from a Labor government or a coalition government's point of view. I am talking about how governments can impact and actually influence.

**CHAIR**—You raised the issue of a brief from government to an advertising company for a campaign, and how that can be very much something that sets limits, restricts or whatever. Can you elaborate on that? Are they a standard format? Do you feel that is an area that needs more looking at? We could have a private chat about this.

**CHAIR**—We are obviously—

**Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP**—I wanted to bring up the trade union's campaign, but I cannot.

**CHAIR**—Ms Webster, thank you for presenting today. There were some issues raised that we do not wish you to be exploited on in terms of presenting any information to us. But if there were areas that were raised and questioned on today that you can present to us on in written form we would appreciate that follow-up. We have just touched the surface of an incredibly interesting area.

**Ms Webster**—Thank you.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Bishop**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 1.13 pm**