

Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Hearing
Broadcasting Service Amendment (Material of Local Significance) Bill 2013

May 2013

ABC responses to Questions on Notice

1. ABC News in Tasmania

Question:

Senator BILYK: It would be remiss of me if I did not ask: are the one news job and four news jobs respectively in Burnie and Launceston in Tasmania safe?

Mr Millett: As far as I am aware, they are safe.

Senator BILYK: I just wanted to check, because of the issues with the production unit.

Mr Millett: I would have been surprised if you had not asked.

Senator BILYK: Having listened to your conversation with Senator Xenophon about the technological changes, I wanted to check on those.

Mr Millett: To clarify, your question is about the news presence in Tasmania?

Senator BILYK: Yes. I understand there are four people in Launceston and one in Burnie.

Mr Millett: As a result of restructuring in Hobart, there is one additional person to do state based current affairs. I do not know if that person has started yet, but that was part of the deal.

Senator BILYK: Perhaps you could take that on notice and get back to me on that.

Answer:

ABC News has 4.2 journalist positions in its Launceston newsroom and 1 journalist position in its Burnie news bureau. As noted by the ABC's Director of Corporate Affairs at the hearing, there are no current plans to change this staffing level.

ABC Radio also has 2 staff in Burnie and 11 in Launceston staff in Tasmania that contribute to ABC's overall news coverage.

The additional position recently created in the Tasmanian News Division, referred to at the hearing by the ABC's Director of Corporate Affairs, has now been filled. The new staff member is due to commence work on 27 May 2013.

2. Definition of news

Question:

CHAIR: I asked WIN about the definition of news. Does the ABC have a definition of news? I am happy for you to take that on notice.

Mr Millett: Having spent 30 years in the news business, I can probably give you a response: news is what someone thinks is important and relevant to them. You are not going to satisfy everyone in terms of their news priorities, but you have to be sensitive to the fact that what is important to a national audience is different to what is important to a local audience.

CHAIR: Is this your personal position or is that the ABC's formal position?

Mr Millett: It is pretty much the way we operate in the news business. I will come back with formal words if you want.

CHAIR: The ABC has lots of definitions for lots of things; I was just wondering if you had any for 'news'.

Mr Millett: I am sure there is a piece of paper somewhere that can deliver.

CHAIR: As you are aware, sometimes it is quite confusing to know whether you are watching news or commentary.

Mr Millett: I suppose, in a sense, we have quite detailed editorial policies, and it may be that I can come back on editorial policy.

CHAIR: I would be interested, and I am sure the committee would be interested in that.

Answer:

The ABC does not have a formal definition of “news” under which it operates, any more than it has a formal definition of drama, comedy or any other content genre. Formal definitions are less useful in practice than formal policies about the editorial standards that apply to content.

The ABC has publicly available policies that commit the organisation to creating content which is accurate and impartial, and which take account of principles such as those relating to fair dealing, privacy, harm & offence.

The ABC’s News and Current Affairs contains news, analysis and context, but at all times that analysis is required to be impartial and reflects a balance that is based on the weight of evidence. The ABC’s guidance note to staff on this matter says the following:

“The ABC has statutory duties to maintain its independence and integrity and to ensure that its presentation of news and information is impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism; and

The ABC does not adopt a single editorial position on public issues in the way, for instance, newspapers commonly adopt positions and express them in unsigned editorials.”