

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Budget Estimates Hearings May 2015

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 56

Program No. Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: Written, 27/5/2015

Topic: Interviews

Senator McGrath, James asked:

1. Why did Sarah Ferguson not apologise after an independent auditor found her interview with Treasurer Joe Hockey to be hostile and a breach of the ABC's bias guidelines?
2. How does the ABC consider that the interview conducted by the 7.30 Report's Leigh Sales with Treasurer Joe Hockey after this year's Budget was fair and unbiased, given that the Treasurer was interrupted 14 times and Ms Sales took up 40 per cent of the interview time?
3. How does the ABC consider that the interview conducted by Lateline's Emma Alberici with Finance Minister Mathias Cormann after this year's Budget was fair and unbiased, given that the Finance Minister was interrupted 10 and that Ms Alberici took up one third of the interview time and asserted in the middle of it that the Budget debt figure was 'nonsense'?

Answer:

In relation to the 7.30 interview on budget night 2014 between Sarah Ferguson and Federal Treasurer Joe Hockey, the reviewer Colleen Ryan did not find the interview to be in breach of the ABC's impartiality guidelines.

A perception of incivility or aggression by viewers does not necessarily mean that the interviewer is hostile or has failed to demonstrate due impartiality. Ms Ferguson's interview was tough and tenacious but her approach was even-handed and objective. In the ABC's view, no apology for the interview was warranted. ABC News' response to Ms Ryan's review can be found here:

<http://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ABCNewsResponseToEditorialReview4.pdf>

When interviewing experienced politicians, particularly in situations where there is a large amount of complex and contentious content to be discussed, interviewers will often play "devil's advocate" presenting criticisms that had previously been identified in analysis of the budget in the form of questions. Presenters legitimately interrupt interviewees to clarify questions and to seek clear answers when questions are being avoided. This is what both Leigh Sales and Emma Alberici did in their post budgets interview with the Treasurer, the Hon Joe Hockey MP and Senator the Hon Mathias Cormann, Minister for Finance, respectively. The number of interruptions and the quantity or length of questions is not indicative of bias, and the Ministers were given the opportunity to answer the questions they were asked.

It was entirely fair for Emma Alberici to challenge Senator Cormann on the reference to \$667 billion as the projected debt under Labor. The use of the word "nonsense" was regrettable, but was not indicative of bias in the conduct of the interview.