

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications

Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice

Supplementary Budget Estimates Hearings November 2014

Communications Portfolio

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 580

Program No. Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Hansard Ref: In Writing

Topic: John Howard documentary

Senator McGRATH asked:

1. Why did the ABC refuse to do a major television interview series with former Prime Minister John Howard despite previously airing a four-part programme on former Prime Minister Paul Keating?
2. Why did a spokesperson for the ABC say at the time that a Howard series would be 'difficult to slot' into the ABC's schedule?
 - a. What specific scheduling challenges would the ABC have faced?
 - b. Why did the ABC find no difficulty in fitting a Keating series into its schedule?
3. How far did discussions progress with respect to commissioning a Howard series?
 - a. How long did they run for?
 - b. Who was involved?
4. Who made the final decision not to proceed with a Howard series?
5. When did ABC Managing Director Mark Scott first find out about the ABC's decision not to proceed with a Howard series?

Answer:

1. The ABC was offered the broadcast rights to the John Howard interview by Janet Albrechtsen. It declined the offer as it had a number of political interviews and programs in production which completed the programming slate for 2014. This includes a series with George Megalogenis interviewing ex-Prime Ministers, including Mr Howard, due to air in early 2015 and a series which went to air in December 2014 chronicling the history of The Nationals. Further, the ABC is currently developing a project with Mr Howard based on his book chronicling the Menzies era.

2. In commissioning and scheduling new programs, the ABC must have regard to past and future programming. The ABC had broadcast the four-part documentary series *The Howard Years* and *Q&A* program with John Howard prior to 2014 and at the time that the broadcast rights were offered to the ABC, its political programming for 2014 had been allocated. The ABC had also declined the broadcast rights to a similar proposal from journalist Ray Martin to interview former Prime Minister Julia Gillard. However, Ms Gillard will appear on the ABC in a forthcoming series, as will Mr Howard.

3. In April 2014, Ms Albrechtsen submitted the proposal about the interview series to the ABC. In early July, Ms Albrechtsen informed the ABC she had received an offer from another television network, effectively concluding further discussion about any broadcast rights.

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4. The Head of Programming for ABC Television and the Director of Television were responsible for this decision.

5. The ABC Managing Director was advised of the decision informally through the course of regular meetings with the Director of Television. The Television Division is wholly responsible for programming decisions, and it is not standard procedure to escalate the outcomes of these discussions to the Managing Director.