

Ombudsman's Report - 25 May 2023

King Charles 111 Coronation Coverage - 6 May 2023

1. Background

The ABC presented 8 hours of continuous coverage of the Coronation of King Charles, from 4pm until midnight, that commenced with the 60-minute documentary *Charles R: The Making of a Monarch* and concluded with the King and his family on the Buckingham Palace balcony at the conclusion of the formal parade and ceremony. In addition, the ABC presented a range of King Charles related content across its networks and on iView, in honour of the day's events and as an example of the life and work of King Charles.

The ABC had access to the BBC feed for the Coronation coverage and in recognition of the BBC's knowledge of key moments, adopted the feed and BBC commentary for the event itself from 8pm (the scheduled start of the Coronation Service). Heads of State were scheduled to arrive from 6pm and the ABC had promoted and scheduled the following local programming to provide an Australian perspective.

| CORONATION COVERAGE GUEST SUMMARY | | | |
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| 4pm-5pm Pre-arrivals show Hosts: Lorna Dunkley & Elias Clure | 5pm-5.15 (approx.) Live cross to Nick Dole in London setting the scene. 5.15 - 6pm Discussion Hosts: Jeremy Fernandez & Julia Baird | 6pm-7pm Arrivals coverage Hosts: Jeremy Fernandez & Julia Baird | 7pm-8pm Discussion Hour Hosts: Jeremy Fernandez & Julia Baird |
| Guests Amar Singh Julie Bishop Juliet Rieden | Guests Stan Grant Craig Foster Julian Leeser Teela Reid | Guests Juliet Rieden Anne Twomey Kathy Lette (UK) Angelica Ojinnaka Anglican Bishop Michael Stead Julian Leeser | Guests Juliet Rieden Anne Twomey Rev Michael Stead |

The first 15 minutes of the 5-6pm block of coverage (three hours before the official Coronation ceremony began) included a 'scene-setter' with the hosts telling audiences how events would unfold over the next 7 hours. A live cross from reporter Nick Dole on the ground in London added further context about the event. In the



introduction to the hour the presenters highlighted "tonight we take in the colour and pageantry, and talk about what the monarchy means to Australians and the Commonwealth today... for many around the world including here in Australia, the coronation attracts interest, curiosity, and invokes a sense of celebration. And there are others who are not entirely onboard or consider it a pure anachronism and some who consider the history of empire a serious blot on the crown".

For approximately 45 minutes the panel examined critical perspectives on the role of the Monarchy in modern Australia. That discussion considered the relevance of the Monarchy in 2023, what impact Colonialism had on Australia and the broader Commonwealth and what type of King, Charles III would be. The discussion also included reference to royal traditions, the role of the Monarchy through its history and details on the ceremony as it unfolded.

2. Complaints

It was the 5.15-6pm programming block that attracted most complaints and criticism. To date 1,832 complaints have been received. Many complaints relate to the ABC's judgement for scheduling this discussion while guests were entering the Abbey when it might have been expected that the anticipated audience wanted commentary on the proceedings rather than a broader discussion about history. Concerns relating to the timing and format of the panel discussion are matters of editorial judgement and not for the Ombudsman's consideration.

A total of 61 complaints broadly relate to the ABC editorial standards. These complaints are categorised as content complaints and are the <u>focus of the Ombudsman's Office</u>. In summary, the complaints contend that the panel discussion between the 5 and 6pm hour was unbalanced, biased, disrespectful, inappropriate, offensive, anti-monarchist and poorly timed. While some complainants referred to inaccuracy concerns, no specific facts were disputed, and the concerns raised were in reference to the perceived lack of alternative views.

After reviewing the footage, it is my opinion that the content complaints received by the Ombudsman's Office are most appropriately considered against the following impartiality standards.

- Gather and present news and information with due impartiality (standard 4.1)
- Do not unduly favour one perspective over another (standard 4.5)



3. Response from ABC News

The following strategic News and ABC-wide strategic initiatives are relevant to major event coverage:

- Providing underserved communities a more prominent voice in our news coverage
- Engaging younger audiences with our programming (noting younger Australians have differing views generally to older Australians)
- Increasing diversity on and off-air to ensure our coverage better reflects the community it is serving
- Covering a diversity of views, a key aspect of the ABC's Charter obligations
- To journalistically cover issues that other broadcasters will avoid and do so in a sensitive way
- The Reconciliation Action Plan also speaks to the ABC's commitment to hear more Indigenous perspectives in our storytelling and, as part of the nation's conversation about reconciliation, have a more robust conversation about our past and history.

ABC News successfully covered the event in a way aligned to the strategic objectives of both the organisation and ABC News as part of the Five-Year Plan.

The ABC's rolling coverage of the Coronation went for 8 hours. The Coronation was a major news event, and it is central to the ABC's role that it provides substantive analysis and a diversity of perspectives. By presenting this discussion, which went for 45 minutes in total, we ensured that across the whole coverage a genuine diversity of views and perspectives was presented......

Many people who responded negatively to Saturday's coverage believe the discussion shouldn't have been canvassed at all. ABC News believes strongly it was an important discussion to have and that it was important that at some point in the lead up to the Coronation event other perspectives were canvassed. It was decided the conversation should take place as early as possible in the coverage, during the first block anchored by Jeremy Fernandez and Julia Baird. It is important to note that the order of events describes this hour as pre-Coronation events.

Often in news coverage journalists are told 'now is not the time' to discuss certain issuesThis line of argument is often used to shut down uncomfortable debates and to silence critical perspectives. While they may be uncomfortable, important topics and discussions are often best discussed alongside important events when the public is engaged and is open to discuss them.



Discussing the function of the Crown in relation to Indigenous people for perhaps a sixth of the three-hour coverage before the ceremony itself began was not disproportionate given the importance and contemporary focus on the history of colonisation in Australia and elsewhere in recent public discussion and debate.

Across the coverage as a whole, including the discussions between 17.00 - 19.00, there is no doubt that all principal perspectives were fairly presented as required by the editorial policies. Apart from Stan Grant, Teela Reid, a young lawyer who also provided a youth perspective, and Craig Foster, who contributed Indigenous and republican views, guests included Liberal backbencher Julian Leeser, Deputy Editor of The Australian Women's Weekly Juliet Rieden, Australian Local Hero of the Year in 2023 Amar Singh, Anglican Bishop of South Sydney Michael Stead, UN youth rep Angelica Onjinaka, constitutional law expert Anne Twomey and author Kathy Lette, who has personally met King Charles III many times. They discussed royal traditions, the role of the monarchy and details on the ceremony as it unfolded. We do not accept that any particular perspective was unduly favoured. Julian Leeser, an articulate and prominent Monarchist and Liberal Party MP, was given ample opportunity to respond to them, furthermore he continued on the panel after they were gone. Other supporters of the monarchy and the constitutional status quo joined the discussion, providing a diverse range of mostly supportive perspectives. The editorial policies do not and never have required equal time for different arguments on matters of contention.

It is distorting to see the approximately 40+ minutes in isolation from the coverage as a whole.

While the program canvassed difficult topics it was at all times conducted respectfully, as has been remarked on publicly by the panellists. There were no errors of accuracy.

4. Ombudsman's Finding

It is acknowledged that the Crown represents different things to different people. The broadcast recognised the multicultural character of the Australian community and the 5pm to 6pm hour sought to reflect what the event meant to different cultures including the impact of Colonisation on Indigenous Australia.

Each panellist was clearly introduced and identified to the ABC audience, and it was made clear that the discussion intended to canvas significant issues of context relevant to an Australian audience about the crowning of a new Monarch. I also note



advice from ABC News that "a range of conservative voices were invited to appear on the coverage to contribute their perspectives but declined."

The panel's views were robust but fair and the conversation was courteous and respectful allowing audiences to make up their own minds about the matters that were discussed.

While the ABC should on all occasions be fair, accurate and open minded, the impartiality standards do not require that every perspective receives equal time, nor that every facet of every argument is presented.

It is also relevant that this forty-five-minute panel discussion formed only part of the extensive coverage of the coronation across ABC television and digital radio platforms. In addition to live coverage of the Coronation, ABC iView featured *Charles R: The Making of a Monarch, Camilla's Country Life; A Grand Royal Design;* and *Prince Charles: Inside The Duchy Of Cornwall* in honour of the day's events.

I also note that the matters discussed, and opinions shared, were not novel and did not bring up specific accuracy concerns. These are issues to consider when reflecting on matters of impartiality. Furthermore, the discussion reflected the contentious element of the role of the Monarch for many Australians. This contentious element is difficult to ignore and while potentially uncomfortable for the anticipated audience, is also a consideration in determining due impartiality.

The role of the Monarchy to modern Australia and the Indigenous perspectives presented were legitimate and newsworthy topics for discussion on the rare occasion of a Coronation and in the context of ABC's extensive coverage. In these circumstances, and for the reasons outlined above, I do not find a breach of the impartiality standards.

While the broadcast did not breach the Corporation's editorial standards, it was the decision to schedule the panel discussion between 5-6pm while footage of the arrivals at the Abbey was being broadcast, that attracted the most criticism and complaints received by the ABC. There were clearly instances where the footage being presented from London did not relate to the nature of the critical discussion being had by the panel in Australia, which was jarring and distracting for some of the audience as evidenced by complaints received.



5. About the Ombudsman's office

The ABC Ombudsman's Office is independent from the Corporation's content-making divisions. The Ombudsman's Office is led by the ABC Ombudsman who reports through the Chair of the ABC to the Board.

The Ombudsman, Fiona Cameron, was appointed in late September 2022 and has recently implemented a new **complaint handling process** which is detailed <u>here</u>.