Response to Editorial Review No. 4—Budget 2014

ABC News, February 2015

ABC News welcomes the findings of Editorial Audit Number 4 relating to coverage of the Federal budget in news and current affairs programs on ABC TV. News particularly welcomes the final conclusions of the review: that the overall quality of the budget coverage was excellent; that it complied with the ABC's guidelines on impartiality; that programs presented a diversity of perspectives without any sense of misrepresenting or unduly favouring one perspective over another; and that there was no hint that any perspective was the editorial opinion of the ABC.

ABC News also notes that the reviewer had some reservations about three of the 76 news and current affairs reports she analysed. News welcomes the opportunity to address those concerns.

In relation to the 7.30 interview on budget night between Sarah Ferguson and Federal Treasurer Joe Hockey, the reviewer referred to the interviewer as "aggressive" and said the "tone of the questioning in this particular interview could have been interpreted by some viewers to be a potential breach of the ABC's impartiality guidelines".

As a political interviewer, Ms Ferguson is tough but demonstrates a consistently civil and objective approach. She is insistent that those she interviews do not evade important questions and often focuses on contradictions either within policy positions or in the responses of interviewees. The fact that this may make interviewees "uncomfortable", does not necessarily mean that the interviewer is either aggressive or is failing to demonstrate due impartiality.

The review notes that the "performance of an interviewer can have a big impact on the perception of whether the tone of the questions breached impartiality guidelines. The Treasurer ... performed very poorly in this interview". The reviewer, in comparing this interview with one that followed it, with the Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen, says "Bowen performed extremely well in the interview – as opposed to Hockey who appeared tired and rattled". ABC News believes that it is a matter for the interviewee whether he or she performed well or poorly. ABC News believes that the fact that an interviewee may have found the questions challenging, or was not expecting particular lines of questioning (questions ABC News believes were relevant and appropriate in the context), or appeared "tired and rattled", does not point to a lack of impartiality on the part of the interviewer.

In the interview with the Treasurer, Sarah Ferguson started by querying the relationship between budget announcements and political promises. She returned to the theme during the interview. This was an appropriate and compelling series of questions, and she captured the political vulnerability of the budget on the night it was delivered. In opposition, the Coalition had made trustworthiness a key election promise. Ms Ferguson framed a central question around policies that appeared to break election commitments. Her question about whether the Treasurer found it "liberating ... to decide election promises don't matter" was appropriate in this light. A Macquarie dictionary definition of liberate is "to free from convention". ABC News does not believe Ms Ferguson's questions were hostile or unbalanced; rather they were astute and prescient. The government's capacity to sell the budget measures in light of the election promises remains at the heart of commentary about the government's performance.

The second area the reviewer raises concerns about is the 7.30 Tasmania program on May 16, describing it as the "least balanced of the State-based 7.30 programs in budget week". The reviewer observed that the entire program was on welfare cuts and the response of charities and university students. She also said there

was a lack of balance in the reports and that they were overwhelmingly negative and the program overall was not comprehensive.

In response, News notes that a third of Tasmanians get some form of Commonwealth benefit, and Tasmania has a high unemployment rate, and the poorest health and education outcomes of any of the States in Australia. In this context, a focus on welfare and education was appropriate, but ABC News agrees that there should have been a broader approach to the budget reaction.

In the first story, the reporter spoke with three major charities, and focused on the fact that people who had not been looking for assistance previously had now started coming to them.

The second story was a short piece involving two students. They talked about the problems they face because of the delay in benefit payments starting after they finish their university courses.

The third item was an interview with the State Director of Mission Australia on what community service programs might go. News believes that this third story should have been replaced with a broader political story about the budget, perhaps including a senior Coalition MP from Tasmania.

The third program the reviewer raised concerns about was *The Drum*. The reviewer said the presenter, Steve Cannane, was balanced in his questioning and repartee with the panellists and the discussion was robust. But the review found that "the balance of panellists could be improved: that is, in this program there were two obviously pro-Labor panellists against one with more conservative views". The reviewer said, "It is important in terms of impartiality obligations that the goal be to seek balance whenever feasible". News acknowledges the panel should have been more balanced.

The ABC's Editorial Policies require program makers "to present, over time, content that addresses a broad range of subjects from a diversity of perspectives". But the Editorial Policies also state, "Impartiality does not require that every perspective receives equal time". News notes that over the course of the week the Budget was delivered, the producers of The Drum sought to have a range of guests on the program every episode, to present a range of perspectives.

On Budget night itself, two episodes of The Drum were produced. The first featured the former Liberal ACT Chief Minister Kate Carnell, Cassandra Wilkinson from the Centre for Independent Studies and ABC Economics Correspondent Stephen Long. The second episode featured the former Liberal leader John Hewson, News Corp Economics Correspondent Jessica Irvine, ABC Chief Political Writer Annabel Crabb and economist David Hetherington from think tank Per Capita.

For the Budget night coverage, the producers also lodged interview bids with several Government representatives including the Finance Minister Mathias Cormann, the Assistant Minister for Education Simon Birmingham and the former Assistant Treasurer Helen Coonan. All were unavailable to appear on the two programs.

ABC News has also taken on board the reviewer's comments about making more use of ABC economics and business editors and reporters in current affairs programs and about the need for more focus on macroeconomic aspects of the budget in some areas of the coverage.

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