



## Media Release

**14 November 2021**

### **Statement from Ita Buttrose, ABC Chair: complaints processes**

The inquiry into the ABC's complaint handling process announced by Senate Communications Committee Chair, Senator Andrew Bragg, appears to be a blatant attempt to usurp the role of the ABC Board and undermine the operational independence of the ABC.

As Senator Bragg is aware, in October the ABC Board initiated an independent review of the ABC's complaints system by two eminent experts, Professor John McMillan AO, former Commonwealth and NSW Ombudsman and Jim Carroll, former SBS Director – News and Current Affairs. The terms of reference for the review are comprehensive and wide-ranging.

This review is consistent with the duties of the Board under the ABC Act. Under Section 8 of the Act, the ABC Board has the legal responsibility for developing codes of practice relating to programming matters and to ensure that the gathering and presentation by the Corporation of news and information is accurate and impartial.

The fact that these powers are given to the Board not to the Government of the day, is a key pillar of the ABC's operational independence.

This review is well underway and members of Parliament including Senator Bragg, have already been interviewed as part of the review process. An issues paper will be released shortly, and the review will then be seeking public submissions. The review will be rigorous and thorough, and its findings will be released by the ABC board in April 2022.

Instead of respecting the integrity of this process, the Senate Committee under the leadership of Senator Bragg has decided to initiate a parallel process. I will leave it to Senator Bragg to explain his motives, but the impact of this action is clear. As Chair of the ABC Board I am duty bound to call out any action that seeks to undermine the independence of the national broadcaster.

Once again, an elected representative has chosen to threaten the ABC's independence at the expense of the integrity of this irreplaceable public service. Any incursion of this kind into the ABC's independence should be seen by Australians for what it is: an attempt to weaken the community's trust in the public broadcaster.

This is an act of political interference designed to intimidate the ABC and mute its role as this country's most trusted source of public interest journalism. If politicians determine the operation of the national broadcaster's complaints system, they can influence what is reported by the ABC.



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A fundamental democratic principle underpinning the ABC has been its independence from interference by those motivated by political outcomes. Politicians, like all citizens, are welcome to criticise anything they find wrong or objectionable that is published by the ABC, but they cannot be allowed to tell the ABC what it may or may not say.

Transparency and accountability are important, and the Senate Committee performs a vital role. The ABC attends Senate Estimates hearings on multiple occasions every year and answers hundreds of questions on notice. It is extremely regrettable however that the Committee has, on this occasion, sought to undertake a task that is not only already underway but also is the legal responsibility of the ABC Board.

When Parliament resumes later this month, I respectfully ask the Senate to act to defend the independence of the ABC, as Australia's national broadcaster, by passing a motion to terminate or suspend this inquiry until the independent process commissioned by the ABC Board has been completed.

**Ita Buttrose AC OBE**

Chair, ABC

<https://about.abc.net.au/press-releases/abc-announces-independent-review-of-complaints-handling-processes/>

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