

10 December 2020

Senator the Hon. Scott Ryan
President of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr President,

RE: Notion of Motion 934

On 9 December 2020, the Senate ordered that there be laid on the table by the Minister representing the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts, by no later than midday on 10 December 2020, the report by Kerry Blackburn (the 'Blackburn Review'), commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), in relation to the ABC's coverage of the 2019 election (the Report).

While the ABC has chosen to produce the report in this instance, we do so while maintaining our strong objection against its production on public interest grounds. While it would be unproductive to canvass those complaints in full here, they are consistent with the grounds that appear below in support of a request for a non-publication order. We reserve our ability to take formal objections to similar motions should they occur in the future.

We enclose a copy of the report in compliance with the Senate's order and request non-publication for the reasons given below. The Managing Director and I also wish to state our serious reservations that use of this Senate power will potentially create an unfortunate precedent undermining the ability of the ABC board to properly deliberate on governance matters in the future and the ABC's statutory independence.

Request for non-publication

In accordance with the established procedures of the Senate in dealing with orders for the production of documents, the Managing Director, Mr David Anderson and I, ask that the Report be received *in camera*, that is, that it not be further published beyond the Senate.

We raise 3 grounds in support of the non-publication of the Report, outlined below.

First ground: interfering with the development of program material

The Report was commissioned, by the ABC Board in accordance with its obligations under the Act. The Report was one of a number commissioned by the ABC Board. Two other reports were published – the iSentia Share-of-Voice report and the Election Coverage Review Committee report.

The Report was commissioned by the ABC Board to examine a small portion of the 5 weeks of election coverage to assess whether coverage in that sample was accurate, reflecting an appropriate diversity of perspectives and duly impartial.

As the reviewer, Kerry Blackburn, noted the review is not a comprehensive analysis and was intended to give ABC editorial managers starting points for discussion.

The ABC Board determined that it was deliberative material for program makers and should be used internally.

There is a public interest in the ABC being able to deliberate on and develop ideas for its program material in a confidential way. This places it on a par with other news media entities with whom it competes in an aggressively contested commercial environment.

The Parliament has recognised the force of this public interest by enacting a special exemption for the ABC from the disclosure of documents under the *Freedom of Information Act 1982*. Under s 7 of that Act, read with Schedule 2 to the Act, the ABC is exempt from the operation of the FOI Act in relation to its program material. The Federal Court of Australia has confirmed that the exemption applies not only to program material itself (eg a recording of a program) but also information relating to program material (such as a complaint about a program, or, as in this case, a review of a program or programs): *Australian Broadcasting Corporation v The University of Technology, Sydney* [2006] FCA 964.

The ABC's exemption (unlike some others in the FOI Act) is not conditional upon a weighing of competing public interests. It is absolute. This serves to underline the emphatic nature of Parliament's intention that the ABC be permitted to operate in a confidential way with respect to its program material.

To be clear, the ABC does not resist production to the Senate in this case. However the public interest identified above justifies an order that the publication be limited to the Senate.

The ABC's purpose is to deliver valued services that reflect and contribute to Australian society, culture and identity. It does this primarily through its delivery of quality program material. It is in the public interest that the ABC be able to fulfil this important purpose. Public discussion of its internal deliberations on program material will hinder the free exchange of ideas about program material, and this is to the detriment of that public interest. For that reason, it is in the public interest that the Senate receive the report on an *in camera* basis.

Second ground: interfering with the proper workings of the ABC, including its Board

As noted above, the Report was prepared for the purpose of the Board's deliberations with respect to the ABC's programming, both past and present. It was presented to the Board and was the subject of discussion at a Board meeting.

We are concerned that disclosure of this Board paper will undermine the Board's ability to properly deliberate on governance matters in the future. It is a longstanding and well understood principle that the deliberations of boards are confidential, for the very same reason Cabinet deliberations are confidential, to allow robust debate between members to ensure the organisation they are responsible for, is run in the best manner possible. The ABC Board operates on this premise.

It is in the public interest that the ABC's governance frameworks operate robustly and effectively. The confidentiality of the Board's deliberations is an important ingredient in making sure the Board is as effective as possible. Requiring public disclosure of Board materials undermines the governance framework, and thereby undermines the public interest in effective governance of the ABC.

We accept that on this occasion it is appropriate to comply with the Senate order. But for the reasons outlined, again, this should be on an *in camera* basis.

Third ground: interference with the rights and interests of third parties

As a final matter, we note that the Report contains a substantial amount of commentary on the contributions made to programs by third parties (such as guest panellists on television programs). In many cases the commentary reflects on those third parties directly and personally, such as commenting on whether those third parties contributed content of a particular quality or whether their contribution might be aligned with a particular political point of view. We are concerned that public disclosure of that commentary could be prejudicial to the rights and interests of those individuals. That is contrary to the public interest in and of itself.

The ABC sought to manage this risk in the course of commissioning the Report, by asking that third parties not be named (which they are not). Nevertheless, given the Report comments on published program material, the ABC believes that the individuals will still be readily identifiable by comparing the commentary in the report with the programs as broadcast.

It is in the interests of avoiding prejudice to the third parties, and consequent prejudice to the ABC's future programming, that the Senate receive the Report on an *in camera* basis.

Your consideration of our concerns is appreciated.

Yours sincerely,



Ita Buttrose
Chair
ABC

ABC Editorial Review No.19

Impartiality of the Federal Election 2019

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About the reviewer

Kerry Blackburn is a BAFTA award-winning senior journalist with more than 30 years experience in newspapers, radio and television. She has held a variety of senior editorial roles in the UK at ITN, the BBC and Channel Five.

Ms Blackburn was an executive producer at Channel Four News for 11 years. As a Westminster lobby (press gallery) journalist, she launched and produced a daily political program from Westminster. She was also the executive producer in charge of Channel Four's coverage during two British general elections. It included roles as the series editor of a nightly political discussion series which ran throughout the election campaigns.

Prior to Channel Four News, Ms Blackburn was at the BBC. She was the BBC TV field producer for all by-elections leading to the 1992 General Election and led the BBC's election coverage in Scotland. She was also David Dimbleby's producer for the BBC in Washington for the 1993 election when Bill Clinton became President.

At the 2015 UK General Election, where the incumbent Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron was returned with a majority, despite predictions of a win for the Labor Party, Kerry was the Executive Producer of *The Wright Stuff* on Channel Five, a long-running daily current affairs show, perhaps best described as a hybrid of *The Drum* and *The Project*.

In the Australian context, Ms Blackburn covered the 1996 election for Channel Four News, heading out on the campaign trail with Paul Keating and John Howard. And in 1999 she was again in Australia as executive producer of a live Q&A style discussion program which was recorded at the SBS studios during the referendum on the monarchy. It was broadcast on Channel Four in the UK and in Australia, on SBS.

Most recently, for 10 years until 2017, Ms Blackburn was the senior editorial adviser to the BBC Trust, which was then the governing body of the BBC. Amid significant turmoil at Westminster she guided trustees through the issues as they reached impartiality judgements on the most high-risk, sensitive and complex political complaints. The findings were written by Ms Blackburn; publication often brought considerable media attention.

Kerry is a dual citizen of the UK and Australia. She lives in Melbourne.

1 Introduction

Australian audiences turned to the ABC in overwhelming numbers on election night when the live results program eclipsed all its rivals: ABC TV reached 5.3 million Australians and ABC News Digital was the top news website in Australia with an audience of 2.7 million. And it was the ABC's Anthony Green who called the result, declaring at around 9.30 that he couldn't see a route for a Labor win and that the Morrison Government had been reelected. The coverage was timely, authoritative and comprehensive.

But what of the five weeks of the campaign? The ABC's coverage was framed in the context of almost 100 successive opinion polls since December 2017 which had pointed to a Labor victory. Even those in the media, including some commentators on the ABC, who outlined a path for a Coalition win, were only arguing it was possible, rather than likely. An unnamed Labor strategist was quoted in an article on ABC News Digital on 12 May; it sums up the default narrative which prevailed through to election day:

'Our path to victory is a freeway, theirs is a goat track.'

There is no direct relationship between a failure to contemplate the result and the extent to which the ABC was or was not impartial in its coverage. While the outcome of the election overshadows this review, it does not determine its findings. Nevertheless, analysis of ABC content for this impartiality audit does suggest some explanations for how virtually the entire Canberra press corps could have been so wrong-footed.

As a seasoned unpacker of editorial content, I am accustomed to having the benefit of hindsight, and the luxury of time not usually available to journalists working to tight deadlines. But this is the first time I have reviewed an issue where the outcome has been so contrary to the prevailing narrative, and where the matter of contention is so fundamental to the purpose of the ABC.

Impartiality is not a binary judgement where the measure of its achievement is whether equal treatment is given to each side of an argument. It is why the word 'due' is placed in front of the key anti-bias markers, i.e. due weight, due accuracy, due impartiality. In the context of an election campaign, the major parties would be 'due' broadly equal time to put across their case, and the range of topics aired would be expected to cover the principle issues at the election. But beyond that the balancing is more subtle.

The asymmetric character of this election stretched the interpretation of what might constitute 'due' impartiality to its limits. With the exception of the Prime Minister and his Treasury team, the Coalition frontbench was essentially absent from the campaign and so was the Government's agenda for the next parliament. Whereas Labor just kept giving the media more and more to talk about. As a political commentator speaking on an RN Breakfast Panel said on 9 May:

'Scott Morrison's whole campaign has essentially been about pulling apart Labor's agenda. I mean, this isn't a criticism, it's just an observation. It's just how it is because Labor's the one you know, as one of their MPs said at the start of the campaign, "we've got our bum hanging out in the breeze".'

This review is essentially a case study in why 'due' is the most important word in the impartiality lexicon - and how the ABC, for the most part, applied it appropriately.

As with any issue of contention, editorial content during an election is required to follow the weight of evidence. So, for example, if one of the parties did or said something particularly inept, the ABC would be justified in calling that out, and characterising it as inept. The story might also marginalise that day's policy announcements by a rival party. That too could be consistent with due impartiality; it would be false balance to elevate another issue of lesser importance just to attempt to achieve a notional equality.

Likewise, a narrative which put the major parties on an equal footing going into the election would likely not be duly impartial. The hegemony bequeathed from all those opinion polls and Coalition disarray supported a narrative framed through the prism of an anticipated Labor victory, at least at first. But as the polls began to tighten and Labor's primary vote went into reverse, that narrative appeared resistant to recalibration. Only in the final few days was there a slight pivot towards the possibility of a hung parliament, albeit still framed in the context of Labor forming the minority government. Was the prospect of a Coalition win 'due' more weight at that point? Or is that just easy to say after the event?

A note on the scope of this review. It is an examination of a segment of content with the specific purpose of assessing how well it met the impartiality standard. It is not a review of the ABC's journalism. So, while the review may, incidentally, provide some explanations for the disparity between the narrative which prevailed throughout the campaign, and the unexpected result, it is not a comprehensive analysis. But alongside other editorial reflection, it is hoped the conclusions in this review will give ABC editorial managers some starting points for discussion.

It is always an honour to be asked to review the creative output of my journalist colleagues. On every occasion I approach the task with respect for the material and its authors. I know how hard we all work to get it right, under what are increasingly difficult circumstances for our disrupted industry. I hope I have done justice to the sample, that the ABC finds the content, conclusions and recommendations informative and constructive, and that the audience is encouraged by the ABC's transparency in subjecting its output to independent oversight.

Kerry Blackburn

October 2019

2 Conclusion

The ABC has a statutory duty to ensure that the gathering and presentation of news and information is impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism. Put simply, the ABC is expected not to take sides and to present information in a way that enables audiences to make an informed decision on the issue before them.

When I was commissioned to write this review, I approached it with an expectation that on the big picture the ABC would have nailed its brief. I am not unaware of the climate in which the ABC operates; this is the seventh review I have conducted for the ABC since 2008. Throughout that time prominent conservative voices in Australia have argued that the ABC is left-leaning in its news and current affairs output. But while I have found some faults in some of the coverage in previous reviews, I have not found any evidence of bias.

This review has been more challenging. At first analysis, the review identified potential problems of imbalance across some significant segments of ABC content: to borrow from Barnaby Joyce, it was Labor, Labor, Labor. But that was hardly surprising given the slimness of the government's policy package and its campaign focus of attacking Labor, contrasted with Labor's significant raft of policy and spending promises. And if Labor had been the beneficiary of extra media attention, which party had that ultimately benefitted? These are the questions that I ponder in these pages, and where the conclusion reached, having considered all the evidence, is that ABC content for the most part followed the weight of evidence and was duly impartial. The finding overall is that the content met the impartiality standard.

An important note about the status of the finding outcomes

This has not been designed to be a pass/fail review of the ABC's election coverage because it is only a sampling of one week of some of the content and is not an analysis of the whole of the five-week campaign across all platforms and genres.

The findings are intended to assist the ABC's thinking on potential improvements to its editorial processes at election time and more generally, and to inform its approach to achieving impartiality.

The reviewer is confident that her findings for individual editions of programs or items of content can be relied on. But it is not suggested that a negative finding for one edition of one program could be reliably extrapolated as applicable to all of the ABC's coverage of the 2019 Federal Election, or even to other editions of the same or similar programs.

This is a review of the ABC's election coverage and not an assessment of individual performance. Where the review quotes from output it is to illustrate a point and not to single out any individual – either for praise or criticism. Therefore, while all citations are from broadcast ABC content, contributions have been largely de-identified to support a focus on the issues rather than personalities.

2.1 Plurality of political perspectives in discussion panels

There was one aspect of the coverage where the reviewer considers the ABC may be too narrow in its interpretation of the impartiality standard. The reviewer recommends some internal reflection in the interest of better editorial outcomes. The concerns relate primarily to the nightly current affairs discussion program, *The Drum*. There was a related but more tentative finding for the other discussion-based program in the sample, the ABC's flagship weekly political show, *Insiders*.

In three of the five editions of *The Drum*, initial viewing and analysis suggested that there was a predominance of views which favoured Labor and/or the ideas and policies most often associated with the Left of politics. Further detailed content analysis and coding of a section of that content was undertaken. The findings, which are discussed in detail in Chapter Seven, support the recommendation in this review that the ABC would benefit from broadening its pool of contributors to better reflect the range of perspectives available to discuss a given topic. This is particularly important during any period when controversy around the issues being discussed is at its greatest, i.e. during a federal election.

Initial review of the four *Insiders* programs aired during the election period identified similar, but less serious concerns in two of the programs. There appeared to be a substantial shortfall in positive reflection of the Coalition's prospects, policies or performance compared to Labor. This was not related to the expression of opinions but the weight of analysis, where the positive impression for Labor across all contributions in two episodes far outweighed that for the Coalition. The consideration was whether the imbalance could be justified by Labor's lead in the polls, its more extensive policy platform and campaign events.

The guests on *Insiders* are political journalists whose role is to offer their expert analysis of election events and themes. That is entirely consistent with the best standards of objective journalism and the whole point of *Insiders*. The comments of political journalists on such a program would not normally engage the impartiality editorial standards so long as their analysis followed the weight of evidence. The overall conclusion is that the individual contributions were evidence-based and constituted professional judgement.

But the findings highlight that notwithstanding that individual contributions were found to be largely consistent with evidence-based professional judgement, when those individual contributions are considered together across a program and result in an overwhelmingly more favourable impression of one side than the other, the ABC might benefit from reflecting on the impact that can have on the overall balance of the program and how it might mitigate that risk in the future.

The boundary between analysis and opinion is often so thin that it relies on careful calibration of panel composition to better fulfil the spirit of due impartiality. Again, the detailed analysis can be found in Chapter Seven.

2.2 Framing of the narrative in online content

Two further issues were identified which engaged impartiality, but where following analysis the content in both cases was determined to have met editorial standards. The issues related to the framing of the election narrative in online content and the weight given to voters' voices. The conclusions are summarised here and in 2.3 below.

Analysis of articles in the Australia Votes pages of the ABC News website found that while there was a fairly even representation of official Coalition and Labor voices, the framing of the content was found to have been significantly unfavourable towards the Coalition and significantly favourable for Labor.

Content analysis of 51 items found that articles were four times as likely to reflect a negative assessment of the Coalition than to reflect a negative assessment of Labor.

The conclusion is that the content was nevertheless duly impartial. The review unpacks the complexity of factors that are weighed in determining impartiality and explains how content which might at first appear biased can be duly impartial.

Chapter 8 is a detailed discussion of how the determination has been reached.

2.3 The application of due weight to voters' voices

The third substantial discussion concerns the weight applied to relevant voice perspectives and how a greater awareness of the elements of impartiality can support better journalistic outcomes.

The conservative voice in Australia that was determined to be under-reflected in interviews and panel discussion, was fully present in the vox pops in the content sample, which were mostly from marginal constituencies. Voters who spoke to the ABC collectively articulated a lack of enthusiasm for Bill Shorten and a Labor government, and a continued tolerance for the Coalition, despite its leadership changes. The voices reflected disengagement with the election, little knowledge of the detail of policy announcements and a significant engagement with local issues. Many indicated a willingness to depart from their normal behaviour and to vote for independents and minor parties.

The vox pops featured in ABC output during the sample week foretold with remarkable accuracy the story of election night. The review has considered whether the ABC gave due weight to those voter voices. Should it have put more emphasis in its analysis on what voters were telling ABC reporters, alongside information from their own experience and party sources? Was an opportunity to nuance the output missed in not making more use of what reporters in marginal electorates were being told? Had the dots been joined might another narrative have gained traction?

The ABC aired the vox pops in primetime news and current affairs output and they were trailed across the output throughout the week, including in headline soundbite clips. It was clear that vox pops as a relevant voice perspective were given due prominence. And the conclusion, which was not difficult to reach, was that the content in relation to the reflection of the views of voters was duly impartial. However, in reaching that conclusion, I reflected on the disconnect between what voters were telling the ABC, and

the issues that commentators were weighing and had determined to be decisive; the two narratives were worlds apart.

Chapter 9 discusses the argument for applying more weight to vox pops during an election.

2.4 The content overall

This was a big review: 158 separate items and 9 hours of live discussion was logged and analysed, reflecting a representative sample of one week of the ABC's election coverage. There was much to commend. ABC content in the review sample came from every state and territory and reflected the range of topics which have been identified as relevant to the election outcome. The degree of accuracy and the level of detail in recorded packages and live crosses was exceptional and would easily have met, and likely surpassed, audience expectation. To summarise the positives:

- the review found that all the interviews with the leaders and frontbenchers of the main parties, on Radio National, Insiders and the 7.30, were fair and open-minded
- the content overall reflected a breadth and depth of storytelling, analysis and straightforward information likely to satisfy even the most committed political junkie
- innovative audience engagement enabled the presentation of a diversity of issues, evidenced by the 1.6 million people who participated in Vote Compass and the more than 15000 who submitted questions to You Ask, We Answer
- those two projects supplied a different dimension to the coverage and demonstrated that the ABC was listening to its audience; in the sample assessed for this review the ABC used the data it gathered imaginatively and thoughtfully
- discussions on The Drum, which did deep dives into themes such as health and Australia's changing demographic, offered insight into public policy unavailable elsewhere
- Australia Votes on ABC News digital complemented rather than duplicated coverage on the other platforms

3 The scope of the review

A review of all the ABC's election coverage on every platform over the five-week campaign would not have been a proportionate use of the ABC's resources.

The approach chosen on this occasion to best capture how the ABC engages with its impartiality standards has been to assess the coverage through the experience of a typical audience member. This person might start the day listening to some of the news and current affairs output on Radio National with AM and RN Breakfast, dip into the ABC News digital Australia Votes content over lunchtime, and then perhaps watch The Drum, their state 7pm News and then the 7.30. And at the weekend, the Sunday morning political discussion show, Insiders, rounds off one political week and sets the tone for the next.

A seven-day period was considered manageable, and also capable of producing a valid outcome. 6-12 May, the penultimate week of the five-week campaign, was the timeframe chosen. And because it is only broadcast once a week, all four editions of Insiders which aired during the election campaign have been included in the sample.

Table 1 is a breakdown of the content in the review sample.

Table 1: Breakdown of review sample by program/genre

Number of items	Program/platform	Genre
65 items	Australia Votes	ABC News Digital
43 items	RN Breakfast	Radio Current Affairs
23 items	AM	Radio Current Affairs
18 items	7pm News (Victoria)	TV News
9 items	7.30	TV Current Affairs
5 x 1 hour	The Drum	TV Current Affairs
4 x 1 hour	Insiders	TV Current Affairs

To improve the level of confidence in the findings, election content across the five weeks of the campaign was randomly sampled. The additional viewing included Australia Votes on most days of the campaign, RN Breakfast on most weekday mornings and additional episodes of The Drum and 7.30. Particular attention was paid to live crosses from the ABC's political reporters, especially in the final days of the campaign.

4 Summary of formal findings and recommendations

4.1 The review questions set by the ABC

1. Were packaged reports, online opinion and analysis pieces, interviews and panel discussions impartial and constructed as objectively as possible, reflecting an appropriate diversity of relevant perspectives?
2. Were interviews and discussions carried out in an open-minded fashion and were interview subjects treated fairly?
3. Were significant relevant perspectives reported and were they accurately presented?
4. Were any perspectives either misrepresented or unduly favoured?

4.2 The finding outcomes

Packaged reports (AM, RN Breakfast, The Drum, 7pm News and 7.30)

- consistently reflected a diversity of perspectives and covered a broad range of policy and campaign issues
- analysis identified some minor issues relating to context

Australia Votes: online articles, analysis and opinion

- Australia Votes web pages on ABC News digital were found to be a rich resource of detailed and useful election information, analysis and feature articles on a diverse range of topics
- the 65 articles in the sample were found to have complemented and added value to the election coverage on ABC TV and radio
- as noted in Chapter 2, analysis of the online content found a statistically significant negative bias in the framing of the Coalition perspective; the conclusion however was that the content was duly impartial
- there were numerous minor editing errors, particularly at the weekend; the findings indicate a potential editorial quality control issue perhaps related to experience or staffing levels

Recommendation: The ABC is recommended to review its editorial processes for Online commissioning and editing.

Interviews with federal politicians (AM, RN Breakfast, 7.30, Insiders)

- there were 18 interviews with federal politicians and candidates in the sample: 6 Labor, 5 Coalition, 4 Greens and 2 independents. There was also an interview with Senator Cory Bernardi.
- all interviews were found to be fair and covered the range of relevant perspectives

Non party-affiliated interviews and panel discussions (The Drum, AM, RN Breakfast, Insiders)

- there were 52 guests in panel discussions or in standalone interviews during the sample week
- the live panel and interview content constituted half of the content considered for this review
- the discussions were of the highest quality: well-informed, accurate and exceptionally well-hosted
- interviewees and panellists were treated fairly and with respect both by their hosts and fellow guests
- there were some issues identified in some of the output which engages the impartiality standards
- a potential imbalance in the reflection of a diversity of perspectives was found in three of the five editions of The Drum, where the weight of contributions and discussion was found to unduly favour the ideas and policies from the Left of the political spectrum
- additional detailed analysis of two of those editions further supported the initial impression and found that in one of those programs the disparity impacted the program's impartiality
- two editions of Insiders were found also to be weighted substantially favourably towards Labor and negatively towards the Coalition;
- however the framing of comments which rated positively or negatively was determined to be largely the result of the legitimate exercise of professional judgement, where the commentary followed the weight of evidence; the prevailing consensus that Labor was heading for an election win and other relevant factors supplying the explanation for the disparity
- climate change was an issue during sample week: in the three standalone radio interviews on the topic expert contributors represented a perspective which advocated for greater action on climate change: two on RN Breakfast and one on AM. While those interviewees – with one exception - were not advocating for a particular party, the positions they held tended to be more closely aligned with the policy platforms of left of centre parties than with parties of the Right.
- climate change was an election issue, where the two main parties were advocating distinctive policies on what action is needed. Those programs which broadcast climate change interviews would have benefitted from broadcasting – in a relevant timeframe - an alternative perspective to 'greater action', i.e. which spoke for example to the Coalition's policy in that area

The bullet point commentary above reflects distinct issues about distinct programs and is not intended to be interpreted as a single finding; the live interview and discussion content has been grouped here only to reflect the phrasing of questions the reviewer was asked to address rather than any cohesion of genre.

Nevertheless, the impact overall has been less testing or reflection of the Coalition platform and, very broadly, conservative ideas in live discussions and interviews, than of the ideas and platform of Labor and the Left.

This is considered by the reviewer not to be optimal, particularly during an election period.

Recommendation One: the ABC is encouraged to review the composition of panellists on The Drum to achieve a better balance of voices from across the spectrum of ideas and politics, in particular where a program is covering an issue where controversy is at its height, e.g. during an election period

Recommendation Two: It is hoped that the ABC will find useful the detailed content analysis of the two Insiders programs. It is recommended that the ABC consider how it might ensure a better reflection of the range of principle political perspectives, particularly at election time.

Recommendation Three: It is recommended that the ABC consider the Impartiality standards in their widest possible interpretation; the Editorial Policies and the accompanying guidance notes (for example the sections on open-mindedness) can support the achievement of better editorial outcomes. The Editorial Policies are not a journalistic straitjacket and can be part of the solution to better serving audiences.

5 The sample week story timeline

Coverage of any election is generally a combination of set piece events and things that happen. The two main parties' campaign launches book-ended the coverage in the sample week. In between there was the final leaders' debate, the release of Labor costings and some policy announcements. They constituted the planned events. Paul Keating's comments about relations with China, the Daily Telegraph story about Bill Shorten and his mum, the attempted egging of Scott Morrison and the forced withdrawal of more candidates because of their comments on social media were the principle unplanned things that happened during the review week.

Table 2: The sample week stories and events

Day	Diary Items	Election News
6 May - Monday	Labor campaign launch (Sunday) Newspoll and Ipsos Press Club: Frydenberg & Bowen	Fallout from Paul Keating China remarks Palmer High Court case
7 May - Tuesday	Bill Shorten on Q&A (Monday) Biodiversity report RBA Interest rate decision	Scott Morrison egging
8 May - Wednesday	Leaders' debate (evening)	Daily Telegraph Shorten's mum
9 May - Thursday	Leaders' debate (from Wednesday)	Wong/Birmingham clash Forced resignations Border security Death Tax scare against Labor
10 May - Friday	Labor costings	More resignations
11 May - Saturday	Labor's \$75m for mid-career women	
	Previews of Coalition launch	
12 May - Sunday	Coalition campaign launch Infrastructure spending First Home Buyers Loan	

The review benchmarked the ABC's coverage for story selection against that of The Australian, The Guardian, Crikey, the Daily Telegraph, Channel 10 and Sky News. This is a standard check to ensure that nothing significant has been omitted or misrepresented. The review found that in respect of the prominence and known facts of the principle news stories, the ABC was broadly in alignment with the selected benchmark media.

6 Election topics (the principle relevant perspectives)

Analysis of the coverage reflects that both the planned and the unplanned received the level of coverage which would likely meet audience expectation, consistent with the impartiality standards' requirement to present a diversity of perspectives over a relevant timeframe.

The principle relevant perspectives for the election were determined with reference to:

- the principle concerns of voters as reported to pollsters (e.g. Roy Morgan Research)
- the policy areas which the parties chose to focus on
- issues arising during the campaign

These were determined to be the principle policy issues at this election:

- the cost of living
- tax and economic management
- climate change and environmental issues
- health
- employment and wages
- childcare
- housing
- immigration

The Adani mine bubbled as an issue throughout the campaign. It was determined to be less a separate perspective, more a worked example which illustrated well the tension between the clash of priorities that was being argued at the election: a binary choice of jobs and the economy, or the environment.

During the review week additional issues were determined also to be relevant perspectives for the purposes of achieving due impartiality:

- the flow of preferences
- relations with China
- advertising spend by Clive Palmer's United Australia Party
- campaigns in marginal seats targeting individual politicians
- social media postings forcing the withdrawal of candidates

There were few major policy announcements during the sample week. The election news agenda was dominated by the fallout from the Daily Telegraph story and campaign events, such as the leaders' debate and the Coalition campaign launch.

On the Friday of the review week the round of interviews about Labor's policy costings with politicians from both main parties were found to have provided as much heat as light, as might have been expected. The ABC noted that 'a lot of big numbers are being bandied around' and that it was unlikely that voters could meaningfully engage in what they all meant. The Drum invited the Economics Correspondent from the Age/SMH to get beyond the politics, to explain the economics behind the figures and examine the likelihood of a Labor government delivering on its promises. Full length program interviews and packaged interview clips with both parties' treasury teams on morning

radio and on television gave the ABC the opportunity to test and probe Labor and the Coalition's economic platforms. Even in the absence of a live debate between Josh Frydenberg and Chris Bowen or Mathias Cormann and Jim Chalmers on ABC output, presenters made good use of direct quotes to challenge them with their opponent's critiques of their respective policies.

There is always a tension between reporting the political colour around an issue and including sufficient information and context about the actual policy. The 7pm News from Victoria on the Sunday night of the Coalition campaign launch was an excellent example of achieving a successful balance. There was a comprehensive report about the launch, followed by detailed explanations for the Victorian public of the infrastructure commitments from Labor and the Coalition, including sophisticated graphics. And there were live crosses with both the state political reporter and the ABC's Political Editor. Such comprehensive treatment of a story is a luxury in time-starved linear output. It was noted that context lost out to colour on a few occasions on the 7pm News across the week. The skill is in finding a way of using the colour to supply the context.

The online content on Australia Votes was found to be excellent in engaging with policy detail and addressing what the audience wanted to know about policies. Stories emanating from Vote Compass data, and in response to questions posted by the audience in the You Ask We Answer strand, were packed with policy detail: electric cars, education spending, climate change policy and childcare are some examples of the issues tackled.

RN Breakfast, The Drum and Australia Votes were the most policy heavy in content of the programs and platforms analysed. All benefit from time and space. Insiders was dominated by discussion of party politics and campaign events, which is entirely consistent with its remit.

Overall, it was determined that the principle relevant perspectives were reflected with due prominence and due accuracy.

7 Plurality of political perspectives in live interviews and discussions

This chapter addresses the following questions, as set by the ABC in the terms of reference for the review:

- Were interviews and panel discussions impartial and constructed as objectively as possible, reflecting an appropriate diversity of relevant perspectives?
- Were significant relevant perspectives reported and were they accurately presented?
- Were any perspectives either misrepresented or unduly favoured?

7.1 Introduction

The reviewer has been asked to consider a disparate range of programs and content under the umbrella of interviews and panel discussions. The content includes *Insiders*, *The Drum*, *AM*, *RN Breakfast* and the *7.30*. While the Editorial Policies apply equally across the content, each program has its own remit, and different audience expectations, and has therefore been considered on its own merits.

In considering the impartiality of content during an election the principle relevant perspectives are the policy platforms and campaigns of the parties contesting the election. Most straightforwardly that is achieved by giving equal airtime to interviews with and content about the main parties.

There also needs to be a fair opportunity for the minor parties and independents to participate in appropriate ways, consistent with their likely level of support at the polls.

As noted elsewhere in this review, analysis of the sample content in respect of formal party political share of voice and balance in recorded packages and online content found the quantity, conduct and content of such interviews to be consistent with the requirements for due impartiality.

This chapter considers the spoken content which falls outside of the calculation of formal share of voice. It is an assessment of programs which featured voices not officially representing a political party, who contributed in interviews and discussion panels which engaged with the election and discussed election-related topics and issues. Additionally, where a discussion-based program includes some recorded content, such as politician soundbites or vox pops which have been used to introduce topics for example, these have been considered alongside the live content.

The Federal Election was effectively a two-party contest, in the sense that only the Coalition or Labor had a realistic chance of forming the next Government. Given that, the reviewer considered it appropriate to focus primarily on whether the policies and prospects of the two parties were reflected fairly in interviews and discussion panels. And given the terms of reference for the review, she has paid specific attention to the composition of interviews and panel discussions to assess the extent to which they could be regarded as 'impartial and constructed as objectively as possible'.

The reviewer appreciates that contemporary politics does not fall into neat categories, that there are complex cross-currents and issues which are resistant to categorisation and can transcend party allegiances. While right and left in their political sense are perhaps overly blunt terms in which to frame any analysis of political impartiality, they have the virtue of being comprehensible and are a helpful starting point from which to analyse the content. They remain meaningful in the context of a review examining the impartiality of the ABC's coverage of the Federal Election, where the principle relevant perspectives are those of the two major parties and the political principles and ideologies on which their policies are broadly based.

7.2 Due impartiality – what does it mean?

So how would the typical audience member have expected the content would reflect the principle perspectives of the parties beyond the set piece interviews and coverage of party announcements? They would likely have expected to hear voices in discussions and interviews which reflected fairly the range of political opinions and ideas that were being contested at the election.

Fair does not mean equal. The major parties might be due more or less equal space to pitch their platforms, but the weighing of their chances – for example in analysis offered by political commentators on *Insiders* – would be expected to consider the range of factors which would likely determine the winner. This is where 'due' assumes its place. For example, it would be duly impartial for a commentator to express the opinion that Labor was expected to win, or that the Coalition had been badly damaged by successive changes of leader, or that the resignation of another Liberal candidate for an ill-advised posting on social media could be assessed as damaging to the Coalition. None of those examples are indicative of bias, they would constitute commentary which followed the weight of evidence, even though they could be assessed as favourable or unfavourable to one of the parties. That is what is meant by due impartiality in this context.

7.3 Methodology

Allocation of perspectives and making a judgement on whether the content is duly impartial is not a scientific calculation. It considers multiple factors. For example:

- who is speaking
- the selection of topics for discussion
- whether commentary is pure opinion, professional judgement which follows the evidence or perhaps something in between
- whether any views or perspectives have been omitted or under-represented

The assessment is a process, where each step builds on the impressions and findings from the previous step as the reviewer reaches for a reliable conclusion. These were the steps taken to verify the content:

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Stage 1 | The reviewer listened to and watched all content in real time as it aired, noting her first impressions as if she were the notional typical audience member |
|---------|---|

Stage 2	The content was reviewed and formally logged; an initial assessment was made of anything that struck the reviewer as potentially problematic <u>at this stage the majority of interviews and discussion content was found to be duly impartial and was not considered further</u>
Stage 3	Where content was flagged for more detailed scrutiny, the reviewer made a verbatim transcript

Stage 4 considers the entire content of four selected programs: two editions of The Drum and two editions of Insiders. The potential issue that the reviewer had identified from her initial viewing of some editions of both Insiders and The Drum was a lack of positive analysis, reflection and testing of the policies and prospects of the Coalition, or of ideas generally associated with the Right of Australian politics.

The methodology which has been used to analyse each relevant program as one piece of content is a simple but standard coding approach. The transcribed material has been allocated an attribute, known as the valence (either positive, negative or neutral) of the content. The coding is an objective judgement of the impression that would likely be left by the content. Five codes are available to the reviewer for any given sample of content:

Neutral

The content was coded Grey when it met any of the following conditions:

- the contribution contains no election-related content
- the content is about the election but is purely descriptive or factual with no positive or negative connotations for any of the parties
- it is neither favourable or unfavourable to either of the main parties (or to the Left or Right)
- or alternatively it is equally positive or negative for both, i.e. the content cancels itself out

Favourable to Labor/the Left

The content was coded Green when it met the following condition:

- it appeared to contribute to a positive impression of Labor and/or the policies and ideas most-commonly associated with the Left of politics

Favourable to the Coalition/the Right

The content was coded Blue when it met the following condition:

- it appeared to contribute to a positive impression of the Coalition and/or the policies and ideas most-commonly associated with the Right of politics

Unfavourable to Labor/the Left

The content was coded Red when it met the following condition:

- it appeared to contribute to an unfavourable impression of Labor and/or the policies and ideas most-commonly associated with the Left of politics

Unfavourable to the Coalition/the Right

The content was coded Yellow when it met the following condition:

- it appeared to contribute to an unfavourable impression of the Coalition and/or the policies and ideas most-commonly associated with the Right of politics

The assigning of those attributes, where the outcome is determined to be either negative or positive for one of the parties is not to be construed as an assessment of the speaker's political position, rather it is an objective evaluation of the impact their words are likely to have, the impression the audience might take away. It is neither good nor bad to get a positive or negative, it is a factual label to describe that content and the method by which the impression can be scored.

While the two discussion-based programs have each been considered in their own right and weighed in the context of their specific remits, the same coding approach has been applied to both Insiders and The Drum.

7.4 Findings: The Drum

7.4.1 The Drum, 6 May

The reviewer was not looking for absolute neutrality. She expected to find the commentary overall to be more positive for Labor, given that the prevailing consensus throughout the campaign, informed by opinion polling, was that Bill Shorten was headed for victory.

The coding analysis does not differentiate between analysis and opinion. It is simply a means of calculating whether, in the context of the issues which have been defined as principle relevant perspectives for this election, a contribution would likely contribute to a positive, negative or neutral impression for either of the main parties and/or the broader political constituency in which they sit.

The reviewer conducted a detailed analysis of The Drum episode which was broadcast on 6 May. It was one of the three shows identified from initial viewings as appearing to unduly favour Labor and the Left. Six topics were discussed in the hour-long show. They were:

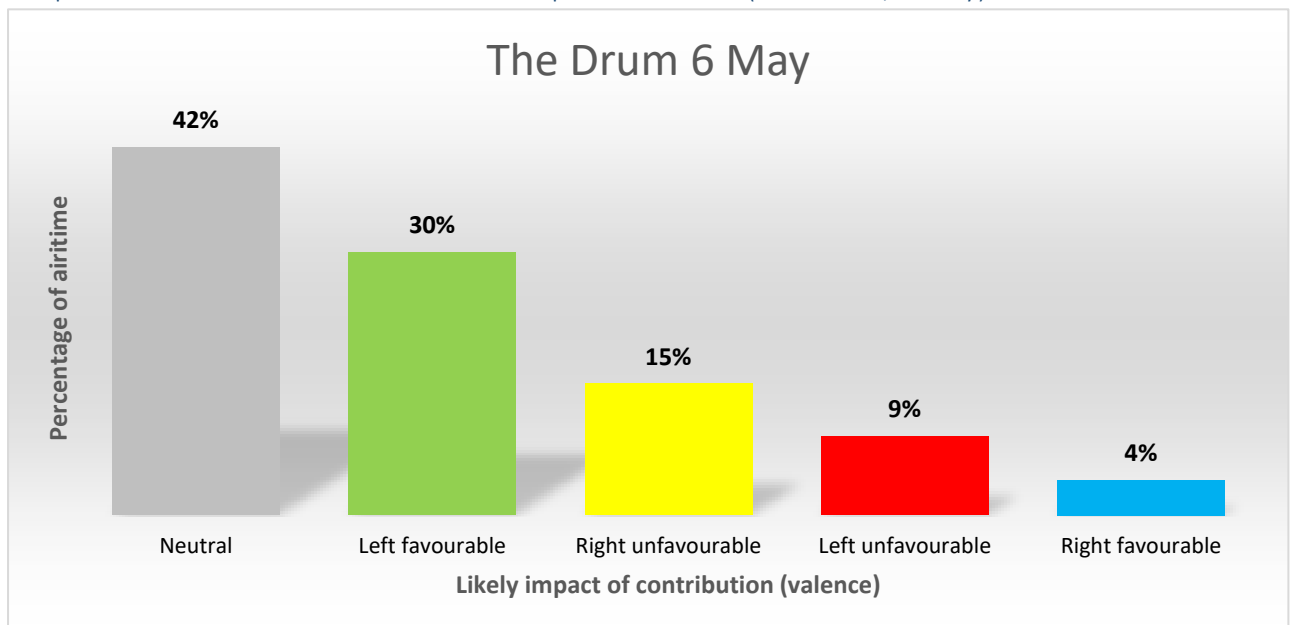
- tax
- Labor's campaign launch
- whether the Coalition platform lacked vision
- Paul Keating's comments on China
- Israel Folau and hate speech
- Newstart

Of the six issues, it might be anticipated that three (Labor’s campaign launch, Newstart and whether the Coalition had a vision) would likely contribute to a positive impression of Labor and/or a negative impression of the Coalition. Tax and Paul Keating’s comments on China could have been expected to perhaps contribute to a positive impression for the Coalition and/or a negative impression of Labor. The Israel Folau discussion might have been anticipated to reflect neither positively or negatively for either party.

The decision on what issues to include is a matter for editorial judgement and not generally something which would engage impartiality. The exception might be where there was no obvious editorial justification for a topic and the effect of its inclusion had been to unbalance the coverage in favour or against one of the main parties. All of the topics chosen for discussion on 6 May were found to be of contemporary relevance at the time of broadcast because they concerned running news stories or hot button election issues. The reviewer determined that on balance the topics selected for discussion weren’t unduly weighted towards themes that would benefit Labor more than the Coalition.

Graph 1 below is a visual representation of the key findings from the coded analysis of relevant content from The Drum on 6 May (including video inserts):

Graph 1: The distribution of attributes to spoken content (The Drum, 6 May)



The data shows that:

- content was more than seven times as likely to contribute to a favourable impression of Labor and the Left than to a favourable contribution of the Coalition and the Right

30% Labor/Left positive compared to **4% Coalition/Right positive**

- with respect to content likely to leave a negative impression, there was less negativity overall, but where there was, it was more likely to be negative for the Coalition than for Lab

15% Coalition/Right neg compared to **9% Labor/Left neg**

- the net effect after subtracting the negatives from the positives is an overall positive impression for Labor/the Left and a negative impression for the Coalition/the Right:

Labor +21 compared to **Coalition -11**

Analysis of contributions for each of the six topics found that for every segment, apart from the discussion about Paul Keating and China, there was a more positive impression registered for Labor than the Coalition. The China segment was almost equal (137 seconds overall beneficial to Labor compared to 144 seconds beneficial to the Coalition).

Below is a selection of panellist comments from the program that illustrate coding decisions.

Positive for Labor (Coded Green)

On tax and spending:

The thing about the tax situation is that there are structural problems with our tax system. They are skewed towards the elderly. Benefits to them. They are skewed to hurt the young. They are actually skewed to make it difficult for people in that lower 40 per cent ... You have to make some big calls and everyone has pushed that can down the road... Labor's prepared to deal with it. And the Coalition wants to just keep kicking.

On Labor and its record on promoting women:

I don't want us to be cynical about this. This (Labor) is a major political party that has worked extraordinarily hard at every level of the party to achieve the kind of gender equality that we're seeing, in its representation. And the women who spoke at the party launch hold the most senior roles in the party. And they should have been there. The fact that we are seeing as a community, wow, look at the women on the stage, is the fact that on the other side, we're not and we've had a huge debate about the role of women in Australian society.

I think the Labor team is a very strong team. I think the women on that are very credible, coincidentally I happened to work for both Chris Bowen and Tanya Plibersek when they were ministers, when I was the chair of a government company, you know, very competent individuals. So there's a competency on both sides, but I think that the Labor party will win out because they have more women.

Praise for the Shortens:

Labor is trying to sell a team and there are very strong partners. It's also a case you know, Chloe's gold...She knows what it is to commit to your country and make your country better.. Bill has woken up every single morning for six years, a particular paper in this country has put him on the front cover and explained that he's responsible for cancer... Basically he's dealt with relentless attacks.

I'm surprised that Chloe Shorten hasn't been more front and centre. Because there is no doubt she is an electoral asset. ... 29th of July in Melbourne, (there were) 1000 people with Bill Shorten making his speech to the ARM, and Chloe Shorten, I mean, she was the star of the room. She worked that room. She lifted, sparkled it up. She was like Bill Clinton. She was moving and she was shaking hands, and talking to people. And yesterday she was terrific. But it does surprise me, given what a strong electoral asset that she is, that she's not been more front and centre. Well the thing about Bill Shorten, we're mentioning, with women. That the women, like Penny Wong and Tanya Plibersek, are very electorally popular and he's not. So it does make sense to put them forward. The line I wanted to use was Bill Clinton's, which I overquote. But Bill Clinton said, I want a cabinet that looks like America; I want to look around the cabinet table and see some people with disabilities, some people of different religions and ethnicities and so forth, and different sexualities. And I think one of the strengths of the Labor Party is they do have a cabinet, a shadow cabinet at least, that looks more like Australia.

Positivity about the prospect of a Labor Government:

I've got to say if you look at Labor's policies there is going to be a lot of change. There's going to be systemic change. One of the reasons they've articulated the policy so aggressively over 12 months is because there's going to be regulatory change at almost every level. And one thing they won't change is the public service. They will implement though from day one. So I think we're going to see a different Australia....

And I think they've made the case. Most people don't pay attention until the last week or so...But by the time they stand in that booth they will realise that they're voting for the future or the past.

Action on climate change:

Generally the one thing that stands out is climate change. There is a strong feeling that if they vote Labor, if the people vote Labor, there will be a much more rigid focus on accepting the science of climate change and doing something.

Support for Labor's hate speech policy in the section on Israel Folau:

I'm very pleased that Labor has said it will bring in legislation that will make that clear (that hate speech is not okay), ...It isn't a light matter. It isn't just, oh everybody's entitled to their belief. There are some words that get spoken that are as damaging and as violent as physical violence. And this is the kind of thing that does tip young people over the edge and older people too.

Positive for the Coalition (Coded Blue)

Apart from two video inserts: a clip of Mathias Cormann stating that his Government were increasing funding to hospitals and schools on the back of a strong economy and Josh Frydenberg asserting that the Government had helped create jobs for 1.3 million people, just two comments in the whole program were coded as positive for the Coalition; they were both made by the same panellist:

I think there is a great concern in the community. And the chatterati, which is my friends, and the kind of the people that I talk to in the gym and the younger people, to me - there is a great concern out there about the economy. In fact there are four or five golfers that said to me, they were playing golf yesterday: 'No, no, we thought about voting for Shorten but no we're going to stick with Morrison because we're a bit worried about the economy. And so there's a perception that the Liberal Party handles, or the Liberals, Conservative governments, handle the economic situation better.

... I think what you've got in the Liberal team, even though there have been quite a number of Liberals who have retired at this election, you've also got people who have been members of parliament for quite some outstanding period of time.

Negative for Labor (Coded Red)

The majority of comments likely to have contributed to a negative impression of the Labor Party were in the video inserts featuring Coalition politicians and in the comments from an ANU strategic defence expert in the segment on Paul Keating and China.

On the appearance at Labor's campaign launch of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard

... I just thought it was very humorous that they were able to convince both of them to be in the same room, sitting next to each other, looking as though they were absolutely buddy-buddy. But I don't think there was very much warmth and communication between the two of them at the time. And of course it left the door open for former Prime Minister, Mr Keating, to do a throw to vaudeville and make it all look very smart.

On Paul Keating's comments:

But the term itself - nutters - is I think a little bit overblown. In fact, really, it's almost Trumpian, in terms of over-dramatising the effect. What we've got at the moment is a situation where what's told inside the hushed corners of the security space in Canberra is actually not quite the story we're hearing in the public. Although it's starting to get out there. And what we've seen is that people who have not been exposed to the sensitive source material that the intelligence community tends to share with those who have got special privileged access such as ministers and senior appointments of government, is that there really is a going concern about security challenges writ large. And China is part of that mix. In fact it's great that Paul has mentioned the elephant in the room. Or dare I say the dragon in the room, because China is really a fundamental question we need to grapple with. But to describe the security agency heads as nutters is unfair and unreasonable. The bottom line is, these people are privy to information that when you think about it is pretty dark, stark, pretty sobering. And pretty challenging. And that means that when they brief people, and this is something that happened to Malcolm Turnbull. Before he was Prime Minister, he was quite strong on being pro-China and building ties, and then when he got briefed-in his tone changed dramatically. Why? because he got access to the privileged information about foreign interference: about the scale of the security challenge inside and outside of Australia, about the scale of China's

action inside South East Asia and the Pacific, and the threat that this poses to Australia's interests. And that's I think where, I think Paul might have it a little bit wrong.

I was I think a little bit surprised by Keating's comments that, he understands, Keating understands very clearly that this is an area about which we have to tread very warily and very carefully. I'm just wondering if it was a bit of relevance deprivation.

Negative for the Coalition (Coded Yellow)

There were a few substantial comments which would have contributed to a negative impression of the Coalition. These included:

- a panellist asked how we were going to afford 'eye-watering tax cuts'.
- another panellist was critical of what he called the 'high end tax cuts'
- a panellist criticised Josh Frydenberg, accusing him of implying that people on benefits were lazy.
- a panellist said Newstart should go up and the country's wealth should be shared more equally:
 - 'we've actually let go of what was the original Menzies philosophy, which was by all means look after yourself, but allow yourself to look after others as well'.
- a panellist criticised the Liberal Party's lack of encouragement of women

7.4.2 The Drum, 8 May

The reviewer conducted a second detailed analysis. This time of The Drum episode which was broadcast on 8 May. It was second of the three shows identified as potentially unduly favouring Labor and the Left.

There were five topics discussed on the program on 8 May. Only three topics were coded. Of the other two, the first was found to be wholly neutral and the second, about assisted dying, was unrelated to the federal election.

The topics coded were:

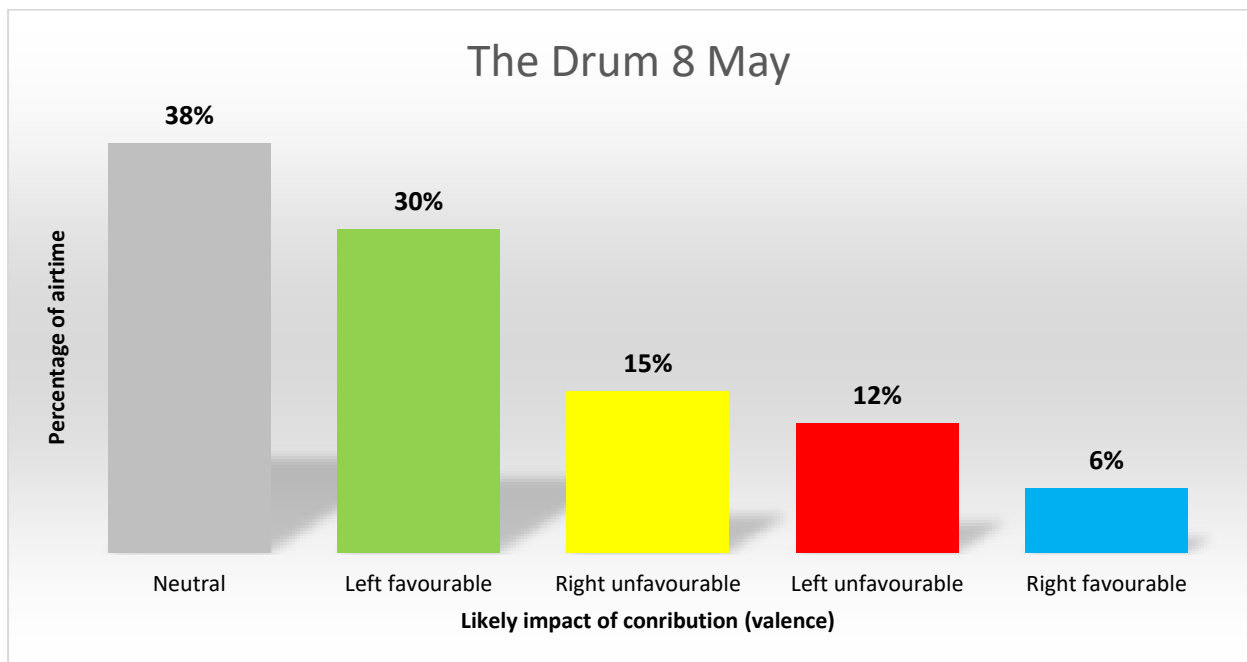
- The Daily Telegraph article accusing Bill Shorten of failing to give the full picture about his mother's career
- The Western Australian political battleground at the Federal Election: Coalition seats vulnerable for the first time in years
- The joint Bob Hawke-Bill Keating letter which argued that economic reforms brought in under former Labor administrations were responsible for the decades of stability of the Australian economy

The first topic could be expected to rate well for Labor, where the analysis would likely contribute to a positive impression of Labor. The second topic would not have been expected to leave a favourable impression of the Coalition; the thesis being discussed was that for the first time in decades a handful of WA Liberal seats were in play. The third topic might have gone either way.

The reviewer concluded that a program featuring those topics and which reflected a more positive impression of Labor than the Coalition would not necessarily be inconsistent with the achievement of due impartiality: two of the topics were running news stories and it was clearly editorially justified to include them in the program. The discussion about Liberal Party seats at risk in WA included a filmed report and had clearly been planned for some time.

Graph 2 below is a visual representation of the key findings from the coded analysis of all the relevant content from The Drum on 8 May (including video inserts):

Graph 2: The allocation of attributes to spoken content (The Drum, 8 May)



The disparity was still pronounced, but less stark than for the program on 6 May:

- content was five times as likely to contribute to a favourable impression of Labor and the Left than to a favourable contribution of the Coalition and the Right

30% Labor/Left positive compared to **6% Coalition/Right positive**

- with respect to content likely to leave a negative impression, it was slightly more likely to be negative for the Coalition than for Labor

• **15% Coalition/Right neg** compared to **12% Labor/Left neg**

- the net effect after subtracting the negatives from the positives is an overall positive impression for Labor/the Left and a negative impression for the Coalition/the Right:

Labor +18 compared to **Coalition -9**

There were some key contributions, and these resulted in a narrower coding gap than the 8 May program. For example:

- one panellist, a former National party politician, contributed substantial commentary that could be interpreted as favourable to the Coalition
- another panellist offered a different perspective on the Telegraph story which was critical of Bill Shorten, accusing him of cynicism and a lack of ethics; her impression was that he had known exactly what he was doing in omitting to mention that his mother had been called to the Bar later in life. It was a lengthy response and accounted for more than half of the content found to have contribute to a negative impression of Labor

The presence of the former Nationals politician enabled a greater diversity of perspectives to be reflected in the discussion of the economy than had been the case in the earlier program. For example, here is the panellist discussing the joint Bob Hawke/Paul Keating joint letter:

Presenter

What does this mean about contemporary politics, the campaign that we're running today, are we bereft of big ideas in contemporary Australian politics?

Former National Party politician

No, there's still big ideas... I think the Liberals would say, and the Nationals would say that, even those substantial economic reforms that Hawke Keating did introduce, was supported in a bipartisan way. But then, you know, there have been other periods of coalition governments where they've done, you know, substantial reforms.

Presenter

What sort of reforms apart from GST?

Former National Party politician

Well, as part of a former state coalition government, it's actually the discipline. It's actually spending discipline that I think is the actually the main feature of conservative governments. That they do make difficult decisions. And that's why they seem sometimes a bit harsh, because there is spending discipline. I mean, when we came into government in New South Wales, the cost of government was increasing at 7%. And revenues were growing at four and a half percent. You just can't sustain that. To bring those revenues, to bring those costs down, required you know, reforms to the public service, which means job losses and other reforms, and you have protests. That's why coalition governments are often seen as harsh because they do, they do make difficult decisions that are unpopular. And Labor governments tend to you know, expand the public service.

7.4.3 [The Drum, 10 May](#)

The reviewer chose not to formally code the episode of The Drum from 10 May, the third program which she had flagged from her viewing and initial analysis as potentially overly positive for Labor. Based on the coding of the first two programs and her knowledge of the program from a number of viewings she would be reasonably confident to predict that the outcome would fall somewhere between the two.

The main election topic discussed was Labor's costings, which had been released earlier that day. Had the program been coded, the two comments below, for example, would have coded green, i.e. likely to leave a positive impression of Labor policies.

A panellist discussing Labor's potential closing of tax loopholes:

The figures that are truly remarkable are the figures of the revenue, the revenue that can be raised by blocking just a few tax loopholes in our economy. I'm an old journalist. 40 years ago we were writing stories about the rorting of family trusts. And nobody has made a serious effort in those 40 years... This looks like the first serious effort to bring some fairness into the realm of family trusts.

It's remarkable. It's so brave. And Bowen today delivered this extraordinary speech where he's saying, look, you know, when you look at dividend imputation, you're talking about 4% of the community. And here is the government going into bat for 4% of the community. For this useless rort to continue. A gift of cash on the most immense scale. \$5 billion a year at the moment and moving steadily towards \$8 billion a year. And there is the government saying 'Oh, this is outrageous'. All this muttering. And just look at those figures.

A second guest on the program said he was looking forward to a (Labor) budget which he hoped would make things a little fairer:

Do I think that young people are going to worry about the closing down of family trusts or franking credits? No. They're not going to cry they're already doing it hard. Do I think that people from the bush are going to hurt? I don't think the average punter who's a labourer out at [indecipherable place name], they aren't going to be crying because a loophole has closed down. They're going to see a group in the community who've done really well out of a prosperous country, line up and help us across the line.

This contribution would have been coded Red, as negative for Labor:

Look, I think the idea about how, you know how strong the public feels about whether Labor can continue to can deliver good economic management, the big problem Labor has is that, you know, historically it hasn't. So, if you look at when, when Australia has been in deficit, it's historically when there's been a Labor government, and you look at when they've been in surplus, it's typically been when there's a Liberal government. And that's over a long period of time you see that pattern. So it's really important for them to come out with this message that, you know, we've got a strong economic, you know, strong economic handle on things, and we're going to deliver this really big surplus. I think the issue is whether you can really believe those figures and whether they're going to, you know, change peoples' minds in the last few days.

7.4.4 [The effect of the deficit in positive impressions of the Coalition on whether the content was duly impartial](#)

This is Stage 5, where the reviewer considers the coded analysis and weighs it up with the other considerations to reach a view on whether impartiality has been compromised. The coded analysis is quantitative not qualitative, it's an efficient method of highlighting an imbalance in voice perspectives but it is not determinative of a failure to be duly

impartial. It is simply an indication that further investigation is needed to consider whether there is an explanation for the disparity.

The reviewer has concluded that taking all the above into account, the program on Monday 6 May was a problem. The disparity was too great and the nature of the disparity - i.e. not just a positive impression for policies identified with Labor's platform but also at times a marked enthusiasm for a Labor victory - so pronounced, that the program was one-sided. At election time it is incumbent upon program makers to structure discussion panels to ensure a diversity of views and analysis.

It is not a criticism of the panellists or their contributions. The program benefits from informed voices. The Drum provided the most detailed policy analysis in the output sample and hosted some excellent discussions, made possible by the presence on the panel of people who really knew their subjects. The Health Special during the sample week was exceptional in explaining the complexities of the system and arguing the case for a holistic approach and radical reform. But the discussions tended to revolve around a narrow suite of policy options, and the solutions discussed positively by the panellists tended to favor the policies of Labor and the Greens rather than the Coalition. The better informed the voices, the more likely they are to be politically active, not in a party sense but because they are mobilised to advocate for policy reform. It is the program's responsibility to consider those issues when assembling a panel, particularly at election time and specifically when topics that are being discussed are major election issues.

There is also a more subtle challenge for the ABC, which was demonstrated in the program on May 8. There was a better spread of each panellists' contributions across the coding categories compared to those of the 6 May panel, indicating less partiality. Yet still the program struggled to come anywhere near balancing the positives for Labor and the Coalition.

Some of this can be accounted for because the choice of topics marginally favoured Labor; their selection has been found to be editorially justified. And the major election news stories of the week, with the exception of Paul Keating's comments on China, were more favourable to Labor than the Coalition. But there were other factors in play which combined to contribute to a more negative impression of the Coalition than of Labor, at least in the two episodes which were coded.

7.4.5 The Drum: Conclusions

Following the 'weight of evidence' to explain away significant disparities can only take the assessment so far. It doesn't explain the almost total absence of positivity for the Coalition. They might have been behind in the polls, but the gap wasn't so huge to render them irrelevant.

There is one more explanation, which is not about evidence but something less tangible. The reviewer has concluded that there were some factors over which the ABC had little control. The ABC is not immune to the effect of the climate created by trending hashtags such as #mymum, or the momentum that builds around a campaign where a consensus has developed around the idea that Bill Shorten will be getting the keys to the Lodge. Subconsciously at least, even if nobody came right out and said so, a Labor

victory was effectively considered a foregone conclusion. The reviewer noted two presenter slips which referred to Bill Shorten as the Prime Minister, with only one picked up and corrected. Many news stories on the ABC, and elsewhere, started from an assumption that Labor would shortly be in government; there was no other explanation for some of the angles taken.

In such circumstances, how hard could any guest realistically be expected to try if they felt in their heart that the Coalition were the losing team, regardless whether they would prefer that not to be so? Might they even feel some embarrassment or a potential loss of professional credibility if they, against all the evidence, spoke positively about the Coalition's vision? Is it a surprise that even those guests who might be expected to speak positively about the prospect of a Coalition government were less enthusiastic in articulating its potential virtues, more inclined to find commonality with the favourites and more likely to start the inquest on the likely reasons for defeat? All of this would help explain the extent of negative impressions for the Coalition in the programs which were analysed. It is human nature to want to be on the winning side, or at least be seen to have understood why their team is winning and yours is losing.

Hearing more on panels, from commentators and contributors whose experience and advocacy was more aligned with ideas from the right of politics, would have afforded an opportunity for greater scrutiny of Coalition policies. It would also likely have provoked other panellists to probe and to test those ideas, and conversely would have supported greater testing of Labor's strategy and policies.

7.5 Findings: Insiders

Only one edition of Insiders was broadcast in the sample timeframe. A decision was made to include in the review sample all four editions of Insiders which were broadcast during the election campaign, reflecting the importance of the program in the ABC's coverage of politics.

Insiders has two principle elements: a political interview and a panel discussion. All of the political interviews on the program during the election were watched and logged. None flagged up any concerns; they were found to have been conducted fairly and to have covered an appropriate range of topics.

The ABC summarised the purpose of the panel discussion for the reviewer:

'...to provide viewers with insights on the conduct and strategy of politics and analysis and explanation of policy issues. It is not intended to be partisan and guests with current party affiliations are not invited onto the panel. Some regular guests have been political operatives in the past but they are expected to be non-partisan analysts.'

7.5.1 Insiders, 14 April

Two editions of Insiders were coded for this review. The first was the program on April 14, just a few days after the election had been called.

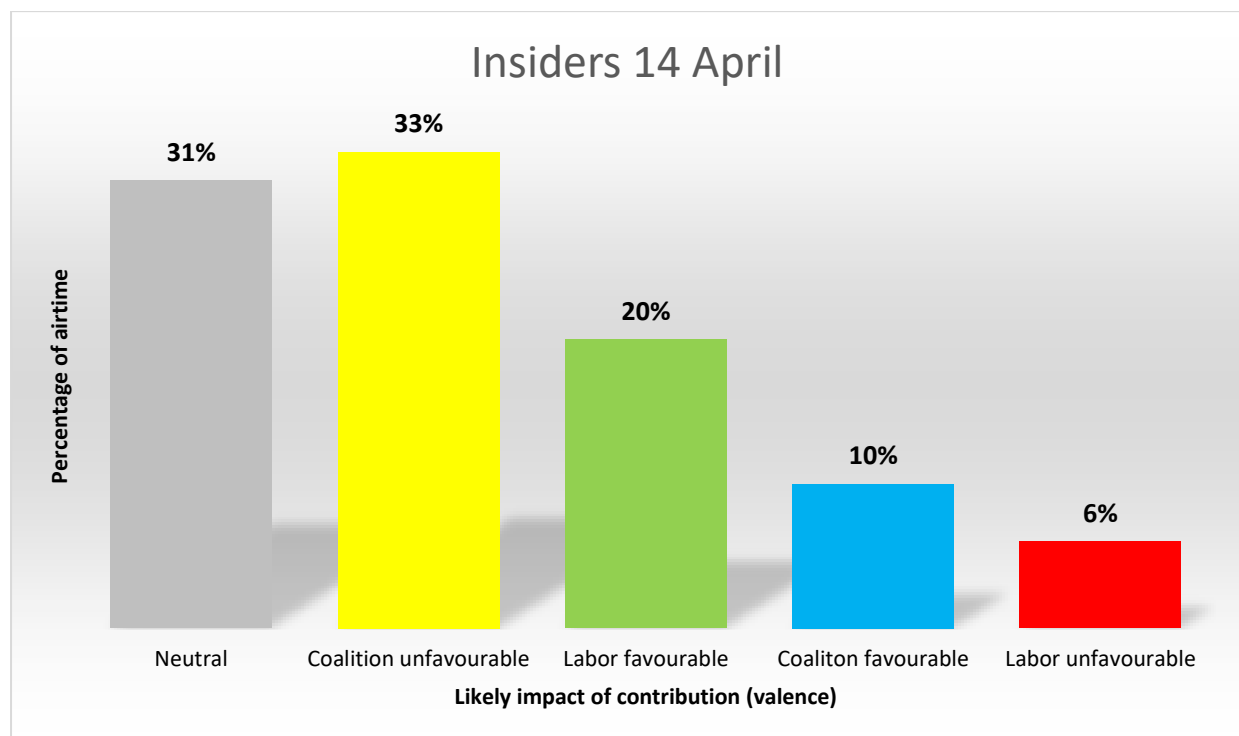
The topics discussed were:

- the Sunday papers (regular slot)
- Christina Kenneally, the 'Bus Captain'
- a tweet by Tony Abbott
- the parties' key messages
- the election battleground
- taxation
- Chinese interference in Australian politics (Four Corners investigation)
- electric cars
- Adani
- candidate resignations
- final thoughts

The selection of topics was determined to be consistent with the legitimate exercise of editorial judgement reflecting the range of election-related stories bubbling around at the time.

Graph 3 below is a visual representation of the key findings from the coded analysis of all the relevant content from Insiders on 14 April (including video inserts).

Graph 3: The allocation of attributes to spoken content (Insiders, 14 April)



The data shows that:

- content was twice as likely to contribute to a favourable impression of Labor than to a favourable contribution of the Coalition

20% Labor/Left positive compared to **10% Coalition/Right positive**

- with respect to content likely to leave a negative impression, it was significantly more negative for the Coalition than for Labor

33% Coalition/Right neg compared to **6% Labor/Left neg**

- the net effect after subtracting the negatives from the positives is an overall positive impression for Labor/the Left and a negative impression for the Coalition/the Right:

Labor +14 compared to **Coalition -23**

Further analysis of the content reflects that positive coding for either of the parties tended to be primarily the result of a panellist explaining a party's position on an issue in broadly factual terms.

For example, this contribution was coded positive for the Coalition. The panellist is responding to the presenter's observation that the words heard most often in the previous two days from Scott Morrison had been 'strong economy':

That's about it isn't it. That is the core of Morrison's re-election bid. A strong economy delivers everything. You can't have better health, you can't have better education, unless you have a strong economy. So his, almost his entire pitch, is based around that. And also border protection. I don't think he's going to deviate from that unless it's to attack Bill Shorten and higher taxes. So, it will be the two prongs: the one the positive, stick with us, trust us and we'll strengthen the economy, provide more jobs and a budget surplus. But if you're silly enough to vote for the Labor Party then you put all that at risk.

Another panellist explained Labor's economic pitch, which was coded positive for Labor:

Look I think there is some risk associated with this for the Government because, what you say is correct about the dividends of a strong economy. That is what he (Scott Morrison) is arguing. But clearly Labor's research is showing that even with a strong economy there's always dissatisfaction, always umbrage in the electorate about whether we are seeing the dividends of that strong economy. We see flat wages, we see people concerned about the costs of healthcare and the availability of it. The same with education. Same with training. So really Labor's speaking to that umbrage and saying, yes you can have a strong economy but it has to actually be a fair one, it has to, there has to be benefits for everyone. And these are really the two different pitches I think.

These contributions about Labor and electric cars were coded positive for Labor or negative for the Coalition:

I think Labor would be very happy to have the government frothing and fulminating about electric cars and about these sorts of things because consumers are voting with their feet on a whole range of these questions... Voters are in a different place from this, on these questions, on these things than the government and I think that reflected very poorly on the government. It was very puerile.

I don't think you will be hearing too many people speak about it for the rest of the campaign.

That's right. For a party to say that Bill Shorten's coming after your weekend when you've been very happy to see the end of weekend penalty rates. I mean really...

7.5.2 [Insiders, 12 May](#)

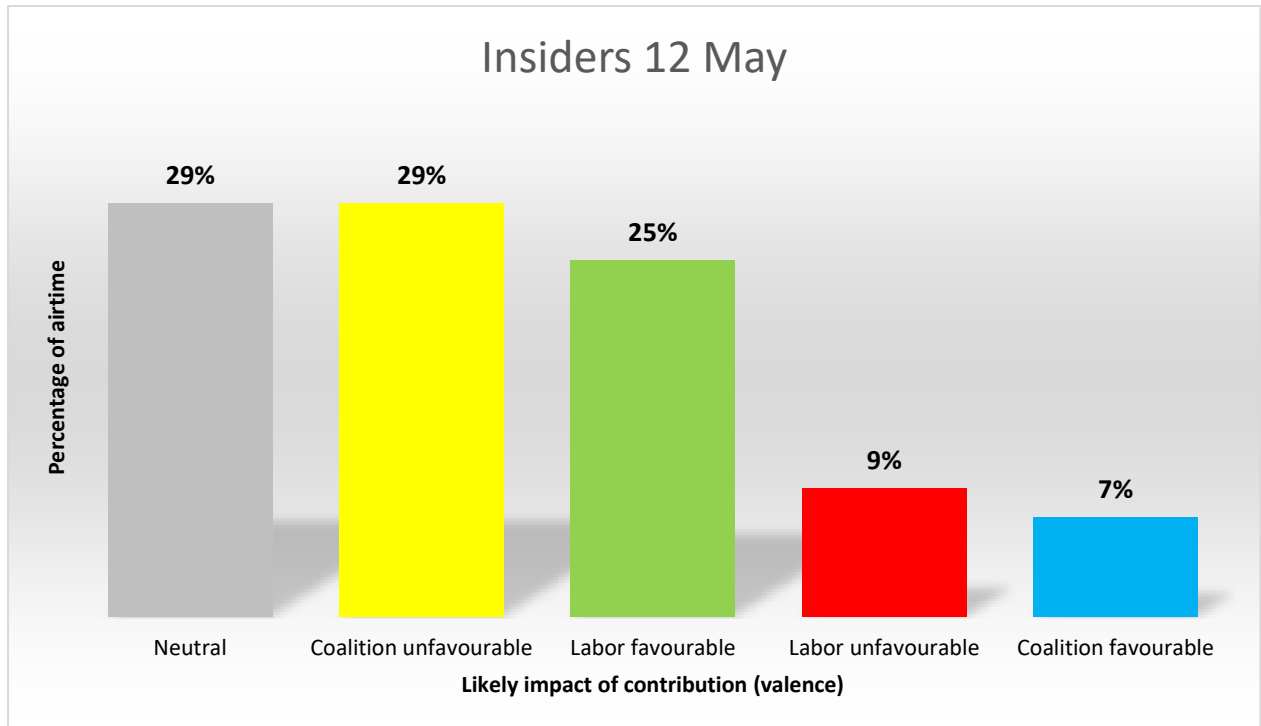
A second coded analysis was conducted of the last program during the campaign. The following topics were discussed:

- the Sunday papers
- Labor's policy costings
- Daily Telegraph article on Bill Shorten's mum and the egging incident
- candidate resignations
- Paul Keating's comments on China
- the UAP and the Coalition preference deal
- leader debates and pre-polling
- final thoughts

The selection of topics was found to be consistent with the legitimate exercise of editorial judgement and reflected the range of issues making election news that week.

Graph 4 below is a visual representation of the key findings from the coded analysis of all the relevant content from Insiders on 12 May (including video inserts):

Graph 4: The allocation of attributes to spoken content (Insiders, 12 May)



The data shows that:

- content was 3.5 times as likely to contribute to a favourable impression of Labor than to a favourable contribution of the Coalition

25% Labor/Left positive compared to **7% Coalition/Right positive**

- with respect to content likely to leave a negative impression, it was significantly more negative for the Coalition than for Labor

29% Coalition/Right neg compared to **9% Labor/Left neg**

- the net effect after subtracting the negatives from the positives is an overall positive impression for Labor and a negative impression for the Coalition:

Labor +16 compared to **Coalition -22**

Key findings:

- Labor benefitted from sympathy from across the political spectrum following the Daily Telegraph article and that, along with a generally positive account of Labor's costings release, were found to have been the primary reasons for Labor's high positive coding.
- there was a lively panel discussion about the Liberal Party launch and who was expected to be there. It coded overwhelmingly negatively for the Coalition.

This, for example, was some of the discussion about the release of Labor's costings:

PRESENTER

So in every election there's pressure on the opposition to bring out costings. So ... this time they did. A little ahead of time, but only just. But this time - a plus or a minus?

PANELLIST ONE

I think definitely a plus for Labor. It was the sort of final piece of the puzzle of what they're offering the public this election and they're saying yes, unashamedly, we're taxing more on what Labor calls the top end of town. That will provide for better services, people on low and middle incomes will be better off, but Labor's saying they'll have bigger surpluses over the eight years and there will be a cap on the overall tax take from the economy at around about the level of the Howard years. So it's sort of their answer to the 'they'll tax you' scare campaign and it's the final piece of the puzzle which is designed to show that they're economically responsible, that they can do this unashamedly redistributive program without wrecking the economy in the way that Scott Morrison is claiming that they will.

PRESENTER

So ... the Government's response really is 'don't believe them'?

PANELLIST TWO

Yes. There's a lot of trust going on here. But I think a lot of voters are bedazzled by the sums of money being tossed around as if it was just spare change that you kept in the ashtray of your car. As well as the fiscal calculation I think what's important is the political one. And Labor has done that to some degree, some detail. As Chris Bowen has pointed out, 96% of Australians are unaffected by the franking credit reforms. 95% unaffected by changes to superann. 98% unaffected by changes to etc etc etc. It's calculated quite clearly that it can get \$154-\$160bn over 10 years without upsetting more than 4% of voters. And it's willing to take that punt.

The next topic was the Daily Telegraph article, which was uniformly judged by the panel to have benefitted Labor.

This was set against more Liberal candidate resignations and some poking of fun at the Prime Minister for apparently claiming – in the context of a major UN report on species extinction – that he had taken some action on the matter; a panellist reported that it transpired Mr Morrison had actually been talking about ending cosmetic testing on animals.

It was less than a week to the polls and the gap was narrowing between the parties. The discussion turned to Scott Morrison's performance:

PRESENTER

Now Scott Morrison I think is winning some respect all the same by the energy that's required to run the one person show.

PANELLIST THREE

He is. Everything about this campaign is really for the Coalition, Scott Morrison trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. I mean the strategic decisions he has taken are the ones into which he's been forced by circumstance. And if he's in a situation where half his cabinet he can't campaign with because they're suffering some personal opprobrium or were part of the coup against Malcolm Turnbull or are about to lose their seats, so they're confined to barracks, then he's making a virtue out of that by saying I'm not really interested in the party hoopla anyway.

PANELLIST ONE

Although probably in the longer term it'll be a far greater virtue to have a functioning front bench.

And as the negative valence for the Coalition continued to climb, panellists found little to poke Labor with.

7.5.3 The effect of the deficit in positive impressions of the Coalition on whether the content was duly impartial

The disparity between high positivity for Labor and high negativity for the Coalition can be substantially explained by considering the prevailing consensus, the opinion polls and election events; the commentary was found overall to follow the weight of evidence.

The distinction in outcome between Insiders and the Drum is that a proportion of the positive valence for Labor on the 6 May edition of The Drum for example, was found to have been the result of support for Labor policies, and also in some cases for the idea of a Labor government. Whereas on Insiders, almost all of the positive valence for Labor was the result of members of the panel making evidence-based observations about how a particular issue was determined to have played out that week.

In both programs it was noted that hosts encouraged contributors to engage with an alternative viewpoint on occasion. For example, on Insiders it was put to panellists that Bill Shorten couldn't say everything was going up but wages when inflation was at zero. And Labor was called out for accusing the Coalition of 'cutting' funding for education, when the presenter noted that the reality was that the Coalition was not pledging to spend as much as Labor on education.

Nevertheless, while the conclusion is that Insiders met the impartiality standard, the ABC is encouraged to reflect on how it might improve the reflection of a diversity of perspectives during an election period. While the intent for the Insiders panel is that it is non-partisan, the effect of this during the programs reviewed – where so many issues were determined to have played so well for the Labor campaign – was that there was not sufficient challenge to the prevailing consensus. As a result the return of the Morrison government was never seriously contemplated.

One solution would have been to have secured more conservative-leaning political commentators as panellists. Those conservative voices could have articulated, with conviction, that there was a Coalition path to victory. Theirs would still have been a professional judgement, drawing on evidence, albeit they might have a particular starting point. Audiences are generally sophisticated enough if they are given adequate information, to make up their own minds about what weight to place on a contribution. The missing narrative was available: a few commentators were articulating just that view in the pages of *The Australian* and *The Spectator* for example.

It is understood that some of the more well-known conservative voices have chosen not to appear on the ABC. But Australia is a big country and 40% of those who voted preferred the Coalition. Impartiality requires the reflection of a diversity of principle relevant perspectives, particularly when the matter of contention is at a critical point. The final weeks of a federal election campaign meet that threshold.

7.6 Climate change interviews

There was considerable activity around climate change in Australia during the election campaign but happening independently of the campaign. A UN report on species extinction was published midway through the sample week. Also that week, leading global climate change experts happened to be in Melbourne attending an Australasian emissions reductions summit. Some summit attendees were interviewed on the ABC as part of this activity. In a number of those interviews the topic of the Australian election was introduced.

Climate change, and the parties' very different approaches to dealing with it, was identified as one of the principle issues at the election. A listener to ABC output would hear the interviews with various climate change thought leaders alongside the election coverage. While the reviewer acknowledges that the interviews would not have been planned as part of the ABC's election coverage, where those interviews touched on the election, the listener would be unlikely to differentiate.

Three interviews about climate change which were broadcast in the review week, and where the election was discussed, were therefore determined by the reviewer to be in scope for inclusion in the election review sample. Other ABC interviews about climate change during sample week, but where the election wasn't mentioned, were determined not to be in scope for this review.

The climate change interviewees have not been de-identified for this review for a combination of reasons:

- they are major figures in the climate change debate and their views are widely known and published
- these were standalone interviews on a single topic where the interviewees were appearing because they are part of the climate change debate, not commentators on it

- knowing who they are is important context and necessary for a reader of the review to understand their contribution

Kevin de León was interviewed on RN Breakfast on 9 May. He is a former leader of the Democrats in the California State Senate and the architect of a bill, now law, which commits California to 100% clean energy by 2045. He was in Australia to attend a carbon reduction summit. Most of the interview discussed his initiative and was generally a call for greater global action. At the end of the interview he turned to the subject of the Australian election:

Kevin de León

I'm here in Australia to meet with the shadow minister and other folks here. Because I believe here in Australia, in a few days, about nine days, you have a potential inflection, political inflection point, where the country can clearly go in a different direction and be a leader, a regional and global leader on renewable energy and clean energy. That's why I think these are very exciting times for the Aussies."

An interview with Aote Tong, the former President of Kiribati on RN Breakfast on 8 May was centred around the forthcoming election. He was explicitly asked about Labor's emissions reduction target compared to that of the Coalition; his responses reflect that he did not advocate support for either of the main parties:

Presenter

The two major parties in this election have different climate policies and are different politically, most obviously in terms of their emissions reduction targets. The Coalition is sticking with its Paris commitment of 26-28% cut in emissions. Do you have hope that that kind of target will be enough to limit global temperature rises to one and a half degrees Celsius?

Aote Tong

...the sad reality is Australia cannot contain its emissions within its borders. So, it's got to look beyond its borders in order to understand that the impact of whatever policies are in place in Australia, can be disastrous for countries right next door

Presenter

And in those terms the Labor opposition in this country has a target of 45% reduction in emissions by 2030. But within its plan, its policy, it would allow the heaviest polluting companies in the businesses in this country to offset their emissions with international credits. So that would be basically, you know, some say, exporting our problem to other countries. What's your view of using international credits?

Aote Tong

...I think we've got to be really genuine about what it is we're trying to do. You know, let's not play with numbers. I think we must really understand that the challenge of climate change is not about politics, in any one country, but it's about the collective responsibility to respond to what nature is calling for...

Presenter

And just before I leave the policy debate within this election, one of the major

issues in this campaign has been around the Adani coal mine in Queensland. If that mine proceeds, under either a re-elected Coalition government or a newly-elected Labor government, how would that be regarded more broadly in the Pacific in terms of Australia's commitment to tackle climate change? Would that have any impact do you believe?

Anote Tong

Almost certainly I think the position of the Pacific island countries was very clear. And they did support the moratorium on the opening of new coal mines. And of course, the science is very clear that we should not open new coal mines. In fact, we should leave what's there in the ground. Otherwise, we're headed for certain catastrophe.

On AM on 6 May Professor Tim Flannery, head of the Climate Council, was invited to comment about the divisive debate in Australia about energy. He noted that significant change was needed at federal level but didn't say what or by who. Elsewhere in the interview he kept his answers general, reflecting only that the system was at fault and that it was resistant to change.

Of the three interviews, only that with Mr de Leon explicitly favoured a political party. Each interview though highlighted the need for more action.

Given the fact of these interviews, that climate change was a hot button issue in the election, and that Labor (and the Greens) are identified most closely as favouring more action, it would have been good practice had the ABC perhaps found room for an extended interview, or a place on a discussion panel, with someone who was able to articulate why the Coalition policy is sufficient to address the challenge. The only detailed discussion of the Coalition's policy in sample week, outside of responses in interviews with Coalition politicians, was found in an article in the You Ask We Answer series on the Australia Votes pages of the ABC website.

For the avoidance of doubt, the reviewer is not suggesting that the ABC reflect the perspective of those who do not accept the scientific consensus on climate change, i.e. that it is happening and that it is primarily due to human activities. Her concern is whether the ABC achieved an appropriate balance in reflecting the range of views on the best approach to mitigating climate change.

The missing perspectives would have enhanced the climate change coverage and would have added to the diversity of voices. Had the ABC been able to include an interview, for example, with one of those businesses which the Coalition claimed were desperate for information on what impact Labor's climate change policy would have on their bottom line, there would have been an opportunity to further test and probe the Coalition's agenda. This was particularly important given the unavailability of the Environment Minister, Melissa Price and the limited access to the Energy Minister, Angus Taylor. It may be this did take place outside of the sample week.

8 The framing of perspectives

The most difficult consideration in any assessment of content for impartiality is reaching a view on whether the framing of a perspective is duly impartial. The content may have a balanced share of voice, it could include a representative range of contributors offering information on the topic of contention. The facts might be accurate. But it could nevertheless fail to achieve impartiality.

For an item of content to achieve due impartiality it does not have to say equally nice or equally negative things about both or all sides. Nor does it have to be neutral. But any conclusions that are reached should follow the weight of evidence. So, for example, an item which concluded that it had been a bad day for Scott Morrison because two more candidates had resigned following offensive postings on social media, would likely be duly impartial, notwithstanding that the article was not favourable to the Government.

This is the aspect of the review that considers the 'angle' of an item of content. It considers the totality of the item: the reporter's scripted words, potentially images and headlines, quotes, prominence in the rundown.

The easiest way to achieve due impartiality is for content to stick only to demonstrable facts and to ensure that the principle sides of an argument are reflected. The more analysis in a story, the more it leaves itself open to criticism that it unduly favours one side over another. But giving the audience sufficient context and helping them to make sense of conflicting information is central to the ABC's purpose. The ABC publishes the guidance it issues its journalists. The guidance note, 'Differentiating between factual reporting, analysis and opinion' explains that:

'...there are many roles in the ABC where people have either been hired for their specialist knowledge of a subject area or have been encouraged to develop expertise in a particular round. These people will often draw upon immediate evidence and long experience to provide a combination of reportage and professional judgement or analysis within their stories. Examples of this might include:

- An experienced political reporter describing a development as 'surprising', based on years of observing parliamentary process...

'All of this content should be impartial, based on demonstrable evidence and professional experience and judgement. Even specialists should stop short of prescriptive conclusions or overt advocacy of one position over another.

The guidance note suggests that 'Analysis' is equivalent to professional judgement. It states:

The primary purpose of analysis is to aid understanding and provide richer context and information, rather than to pass judgement or sway opinion. Analytic content attempts to offer the audience a deeper understanding of an issue, often through detailed examination of the facts and by making connections between them which may not be immediately apparent. This includes providing context and background against which current events can be better understood.

Overall, analysis of the packaged content and live interviews with the ABC's political reporters did not find a pronounced bias in the framing of the narrative in favour or against either of the main parties, other than that which followed the weight of evidence.

For example, analysis of three 7.30 segments during the sample week determined that where the reporter reached a conclusion it was possible to track back to the editorial justification for the judgement. On Monday 6 May the reporter said of the previous day's Labor campaign launch:

'Labor has taken a massive risk at this election by making itself such a policy target'

Later in the same report the Shadow Treasurer, Chris Bowen, agreed when the suggestion was put to him:

'There's no doubt we're taking political risks'

In the same report, the reporter commented that images of unity and women were 'laid on with a trowel'. It is a negative metaphor, but fair comment: the 'entire shadow ministry' was on the stage and 'all the warm-up acts were female'.

Later in the week the Coalition was referred to as having raised border security 'hysteria'. Generally, adjectives are best avoided when aiming for impartiality. But the assertion was supported with facts as to why the Coalition 'scare story' as it was characterised, was unfounded:

'The coalition has finally brought out the whole border security hysteria today based on the fact that Bill Shorten has talked about looking at the New Zealand offer to take people from Manus and Nauru. And Tanya Plibersek said that she hoped the US would take more people as well. Now in fact these were positions that essentially Peter Dutton, in a rare sighting in this campaign, was sort of saying the same thing. That as long as the back door as it was called is closed from New Zealand that the Government was possibly prepared to look at it.'

On the Sunday, there was an even-handed appraisal of the Coalition's launch on the ABC's main television news bulletins. The reporter noted the stage management of the event, and that Scott Morrison had brought his wife on stage, but reflected that so had Bill Shorten the weekend before. The analysis, that it was probably the most presidential campaign launch Australia had seen, was a fair judgement based on the evidence.

Across the sample overall, analysis of reporter scripts and live crosses noted a tendency on occasion to frame the Coalition's assertions with more scepticism as compared to the treatment of similar assertions by the Labor Party. Given the parties' respective positions in the polls, the Coalition disarray of the previous few years, and the unusual strategy the Coalition had adopted for the campaign, the framing was determined to be consistent with the weight of evidence.

However, an initial scope of the output picked up that Australia Votes, the election-branded landing page of ABC News Digital, carried a lot of stories about the Coalition. And a high proportion of them were found to be unfavourable to the Coalition:

- 18 articles featured only the Coalition perspective (compared to six for Labor)
- of those 18 articles which featured the Coalition perspective and did not reflect a Labor perspective, 12 (67%) were found to have a negative framing
- whereas of the six articles which featured the Labor perspective and did not reflect a Coalition perspective, only 2 (33%) were found to have a negative framing.

It was decided to conduct a more detailed analysis of the Online content to determine whether the selection of stories and the framing was editorially justified or whether it indicated a failure to be impartial.

8.1 [Australia Votes, ABC News Digital – content overview](#)

A snapshot of the Australia Votes landing page was captured each day at midday, for the seven days of the sample week:

- all articles which featured on the Australia Votes menu from 6-12 May at midday were analysed
- analysis and opinion articles tended to remain on the landing page menu for several days; they were only counted once

The Australia Votes sample consisted of 65 articles, approximately 8-10 items per day. A single day's sample typically included:

- a round-up of the day's main campaign events and election news was put together by an ABC political reporter (these were often several small stories; they were broken down as such in the sample and referred in the table as 'CRU')
- standalone news stories of election events and news from around Australia
- feature articles related to the election but without a specific news peg
- analysis of election themes by ABC political reporters
- opinion articles written by an external contributor
- write ups of Vote Compass findings
- researched answers to questions submitted by the audience in the You Ask We Answer series

8.2 [Australia Votes - share of voice](#)

A quantitative data analysis of the sample was conducted to determine formal share of voice. The gold standard would be a balance of Coalition and Labor voices across the 65 articles in the sample. Where an outcome finds an imbalance, it is a flag to look more closely. Numerical disparity alone is never conclusive as there are often explanations which do not engage the impartiality standard.

For the purposes of this analysis:

- share of voice relates to quotes within articles, attributed to an official party voice
- it did not include any count or analysis of video content which might also be available on the page
- a decision was made not to include video because of the large number of extracts from speeches made by Scott Morrison and his team in the Australia Votes live blog of the Liberal Party launch on the Sunday of the sample week

- if video inserts had been included in the share of voice analysis it would have skewed the result; it was noted that a similar blog ran on the website the previous Sunday for the Labor launch, which was not part of the sample week

The share of voice for the sample was found to be:

- Labor 54%
- Coalition 46%

This outcome was determined to be consistent with the asymmetric character of the campaign: the Government had restricted the availability of senior ministers whereas Labor had made more of its frontbench available. This would likely result in the inclusion of more direct quotes from Labor politicians and did not necessarily indicate a failure to observe due impartiality.

Three of the articles had recorded that the Government, or a particular Coalition politician, had been invited to comment, and had evidently declined to do so. Considering the parties' diverse strategies, and to enable a broader understanding of how the content reflected the diversity of perspectives, a second dataset was prepared.

8.3 Australia Votes: diversity of perspectives (tone and framing)

A content analysis of the sample was conducted to determine:

- the share of overall coverage for each party
- whether the content in each case could be considered neutral, positive or negative for the party

The identification of a disparity, or of a negative or positive bias, would not in itself indicate an issue for concern, rather it would flag the need to look further.

The following methodology was adopted:

- an initial sift removed those articles which did not contain substantive content related to either of the main parties
- 51 items remained; articles excluded from analysis were those concerned with either the minor parties, or general election matters: e.g. why pencils are used in polling stations, whether terminally ill people can vote early
- each of the 51 articles was analysed and a score recorded as to whether the article was determined, on balance, to have been a neutral, positive or negative reflection of that party in that instance
- a finding that an article was negative in relation to a party might not reflect that it was wholly negative, but that on balance it was predominantly negative (or positive).

Qualitative analysis is not a scientific calculation and there is inevitably a degree of subjectivity in applying the scores. Confidence in the validity of qualitative findings relies on the skills, experience and judgement of the reviewer. For transparency, a list of the individual articles in the sample and the scoring which has been applied, have been appended as Annex A.

8.4 Australia Votes: the findings

The outcome for the sample revealed that:

- a Labor perspective was reflected in 47% of the content
- a Coalition perspective was reflected in 53% of the content

(The figures reflect the article as a whole and not just the share of voice)

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the framing scores for Labor.

Figure 1: The framing of the Labor perspective in Australia Votes articles

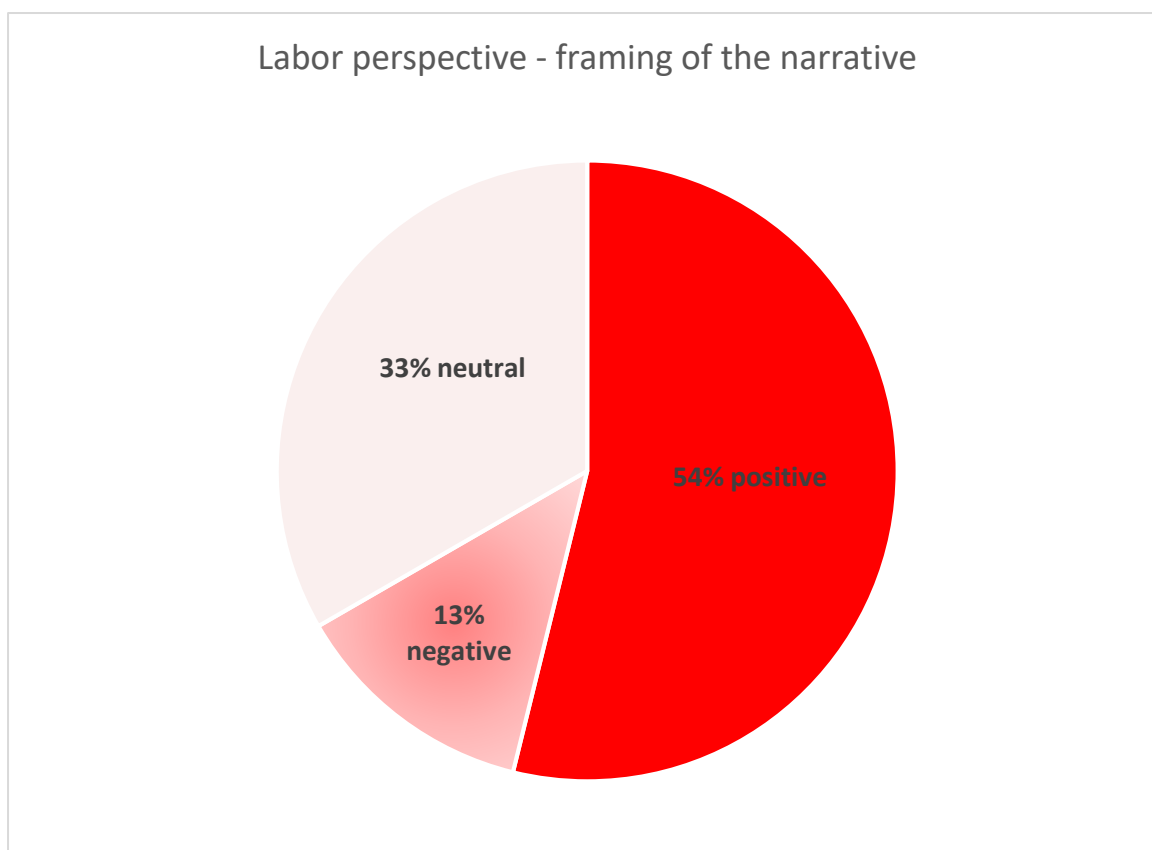


Figure 2 demonstrates that the Labor perspective was found to be present in 39 (76%) of the items in the sample. On balance, of those 39 articles:

- 54% were found to reflect a positive framing for Labor
- 13% were found to reflect a negative framing for Labor
- 33% were found to be neutral

Figure 2 is a visual representation of the Coalition perspective in Australia Votes articles.

Figure 2: The framing of the Coalition perspective in Australia Votes articles

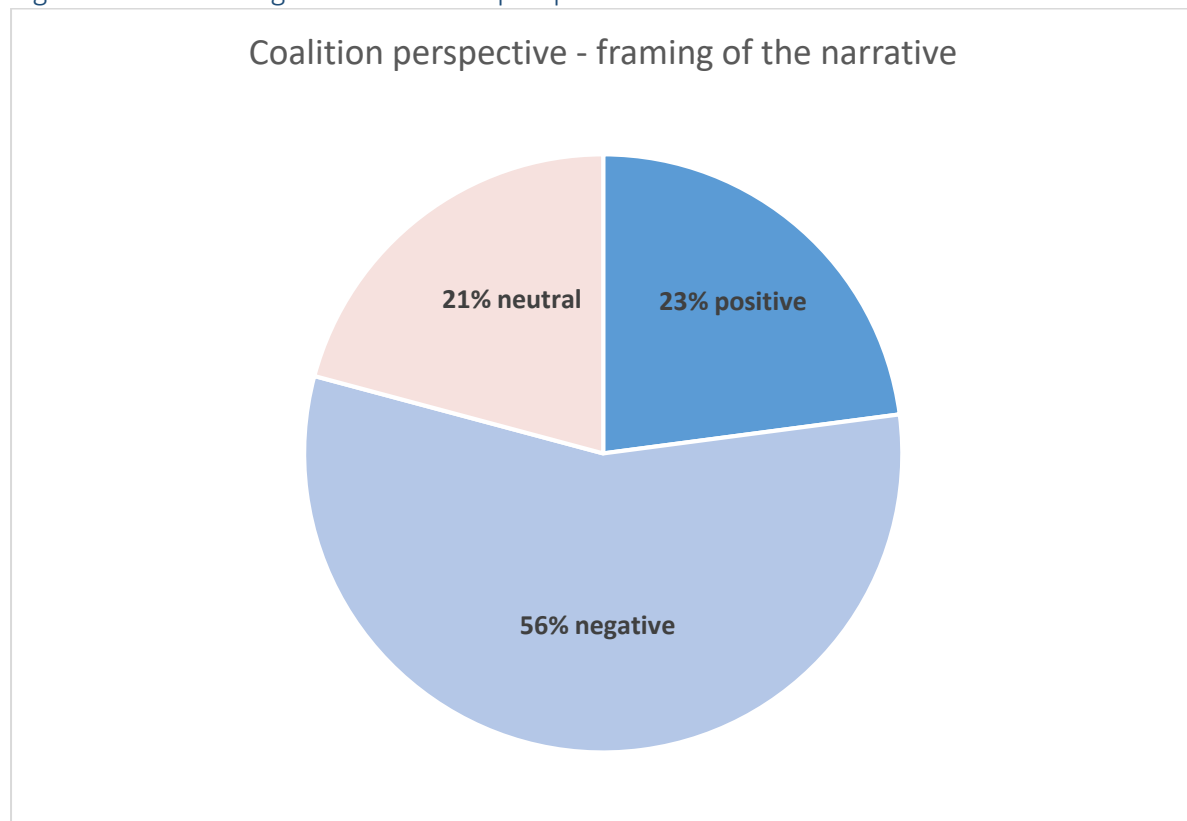


Figure 2 demonstrates that the Coalition perspective was found to be present in 48 (94%) of the items in the sample. On balance, of those 48 articles:

- 23% were found to reflect a positive framing for the Coalition
- 56% were found to reflect a negative framing for the Coalition
- 21% were found to be neutral

The finding indicated the need for further investigation. The difference in strategies between the two parties cannot account for the degree to which each party received positive or negative coverage and should not have had any impact on the finding in this respect.

8.5 Australia Votes: selection of stories and framing of perspectives

A finding that 56% of the coverage of the Coalition in the sample was found to have been negative, compared to only 13% for Labor, is not determinative of bias. For example, a reporter who concluded that it was 'a bad day for the Coalition' because another Liberal Party candidate had been forced to resign, could be said to have reached a reasonable judgement which followed the evidence. There were several news stories in the sample which were found to have met that criteria, including:

- two more Liberal Party candidates had been forced to resign because of postings on social media
- local polling in Warringah was suggesting Tony Abbott was in trouble

- several prominent international climate change activists from around the world were in Melbourne for a conference; a few took the opportunity to intervene in the election campaign to attack the Government's perceived lack of action

Labor's week was dominated firstly by its campaign launch, and then by the Daily Telegraph story about Bill Shorten's mum and his emotional response:

- the Daily Telegraph story eclipsed other news for the first half of the week and continued to resonate until Mother's Day; it was widely interpreted as a positive for Labor
- the release of Labor's costings on the Friday, which forecast a greater surplus than the Coalition, was generally reported as a positive story for Labor

The principle negatives for Labor in sample week:

- the fallout from Paul Keating's remarks about China (which was over by Monday)
- the tightening of the polls; the ABC has a policy of being cautious in reporting polls hence this was an undercurrent in the coverage rather than ever being a principle theme of a story
- concerns that ambiguity over Adani were harming Labor's chances in Queensland
- the Government's assertion that Labor would be soft on boat turnbacks

Given that there were negative issues for Labor during the sample week, there would perhaps be an expectation that this would be reflected in a higher negative score than the 13% that Labor received. On balance, it has been determined there is a valid explanation for the high positive:

- the stories which rated positively for Labor received greater prominence and more coverage than the stories which rated negatively for Labor
- this was consistent with the stories' relative importance in the news agenda and was comparable with the stories' prominence in the rest of the media
- the low negative framing score was therefore determined to have been justified on news values

In summary, week four of the campaign was found to have been overall a good week for Labor; the coverage reflected this. The positive bias appears to have followed the weight of evidence and does not engage the impartiality standard.

But while that might explain Labor's low negative score, it does not explain the high negative score for the Coalition. Analysis found that several stories were published on Australia Votes which were predominantly related to the Coalition and were generally outside of the main daily news cycle. Some were labelled as 'exclusive' or 'background briefing', some were in the 'You Ask We Answer' series.

For example:

- an article in the You Ask We Answer series answered audience questions about whether electric cars could tow; it found that Scott Morrison's assertion at the beginning of the campaign that they could not was overstated
- an article by one of the ABC's business reporters cited RBA analysis to challenge the Coalition's claims of a strong economy

- an article labelled exclusive implied that the Liberal Party might be behind an environmental organisation that had “infiltrated” the Stop Adani Movement
- a Nationals candidate in a marginal constituency was accused of using misleading election marketing
- an ABC investigation into why Peter Dutton left the police force in 1999 prior to his election as an MP in 2001 had found evidence that he had been injured while on duty and that until now it appeared that the information was not in the public domain
- a ‘background briefing’ about the battle for Tony Abbott’s seat in Warringah featured anti-Abbott Liberal party members, one of whom claimed that she had been denied voting rights in the local branch and was supporting the Independent Candidate, Zali Steggall.

Table 3 below is an overview of the articles headlined on the Australia Votes landing page on Saturday 11 May, in the order they appeared on the Australia Votes menu. The table gives an indication of the range of content in the sample:

Table 3: Articles headlined on Australia Votes landing page, 11 May

Story headline	Genre	Coalition	Labor
Cheque mate: Nationals' Katrina Hodgkinson called out over netball funding stunt	News story	x	
Examining why Peter Dutton left the force reveals a strange coincidence	Feature	x	✓
Dubious environmental group 'infiltrates' Stop Adani movement	Exclusive	x	
Bigger fish to fry': Here's what shooters really think about parties looking to change gun laws	Feature	N	
The economy is not strong, despite what the Coalition says	Analysis	x	
This election, is anyone thinking about waste and recycling	Feature	insufficient party differentiation for inclusion	
Poverty in Australia has been pushed to centre stage	You Ask We Answer	x	N
Why political texts can't be blocked	Hidden Campaign	insufficient party differentiation for inclusion	
Bill Shorten finds his feet in tectonic shift in federal election campaign	Analysis	x	✓
The third federal election debate contained messages about and from Scott Morrison and Bill Shorten	Opinion	x	✓
Federal election turns quiet as politics becomes personal for Bill Shorten	Analysis		✓

Table 3 demonstrates that:

- most of the stories which were available from the Australia Votes landing page on 11 May were not part of the news cycle
- those stories which feature a Coalition perspective were overwhelmingly determined to be unfavourable to the Coalition, indicated by a cross in the column
- while there were fewer stories reflecting a Labor perspective, all those that did were determined to be either positive or neutral for Labor, indicated by a tick in the column.

The examples below indicate the factors considered in reaching a determination on whether an article is neutral, positive or negative for either Labor or the Coalition.

Example One:

Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd reunite to help Bill Shorten sell Labor federal election unity (Analysis, 6 May)

The article was about the Labor campaign launch:

- it reflected positively the optics of Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd sitting side by side, and asserted that Labor's entrenched factions had called a truce to maximise its chances of winning government
- but it reflected also that it was just an image, implying the stage management of the event would not necessarily persuade the electorate that hatchets had been buried
- This was contrasted with what was characterised as the Government's lack of women and their problems of leadership change:

'The framing of the Labor launch brings with it a dilemma for Scott Morrison... what image will he send to the nation when he takes to the stage for the Liberal campaign launch?

(lists the Coalition women leaving or in 'witness protection')

'Miss Gillard and Mr Rudd's reunion was almost a decade in the making. Theirs was a messy affair that ended the political careers of a generation of future Labor leaders.

'The Liberal Party doesn't have that time if it's to mend the wounds of its leadership changes from Tony Abbott to Malcolm Turnbull. It's also out of time to solve the problem of a lack of women in its ranks...'

Decision: neutral for Labor; negative for the Coalition

Example Two:

Scott Morrison is a one-man band, playing the federal election stage on his own (Analysis, 10 May)

The article quoted Mr Morrison saying that his party launch would not be 'a hoopla event', that it was more about who was watching than who would be there. The reporter wrote:

'So many demented things have happened so far during this election campaign that our sense of what is deemed normal is now officially warped beyond recognition...'

'The trouble, of course, is that when a reasonable person looks to a political party, they do actually expect to see a political party, as entertaining as it is for a while to watch a guy who can play the piano accordion with his toes.

'And while nobody would envy the reality of Mr Morrison's position, which is that there isn't a conference facility in Melbourne with the sort of public liability insurance that would permit his two prime ministerial predecessors to attend an event simultaneously, the truth is that it is an extremely weird look.'

Nevertheless, Mr Morrison was given credit for making the most of the situation:

'On one level, it's an extraordinary tale of survival... And it has to be said that for a man with essentially one tune to play, and nobody to accompany him, Scott Morrison's doing a transfixingly good job.'

It was decided, on balance, to attribute a negative framing to the article because the positive comments related to Scott Morrison and his performance; observations about the party's wider problems were wholly negative.

Decision: negative for the Coalition

Example Three:

'Bill Shorten finds his feet in tectonic shift in federal election campaign'
(Analysis, 11 May)

The main thesis of the article was that the Government's campaign had run out of steam, whereas the Opposition's had moved up a gear.

This is the framing of the Coalition perspective that opened the article:

'You may have heard the sound of something snapping in the federal election campaign this week.

'In the wake of the last of the leaders' debates, and the debacle for the Coalition of the Daily Telegraph attack on Bill Shorten over his mum, the leaders got back on their planes and buses to visit electorate across the country.

'But something had shifted.

'The Prime Minister didn't have anything much to say out on the road: he was back defending Coalition seats. There was increasing pressure to explain where all his ministers were. There were conflicting messages about how he really did believe in climate change but didn't want the economy tied up in green tape.

'There was a sense within the Coalition that its campaign had run out of steam, even before the official "launch" of the campaign in Melbourne on Sunday.

'On the ground around the country, Coalition assessments have turned much blacker in the past week; Tony Abbott is gone in Warringah. The NSW seats of Gilmore and Reid seem lost, and the Coalition may not even pick up Lindsay from Labor. Cowper may be

lost to Rob Oakeshott, and Farrer, despite Sussan Ley's 20 per cent margin, to a local mayor.

'Senior cabinet ministers are panicking and drawing in resources to protect their own seats.'

A potential balancing contribution from the Coalition, reacting to the release of Labor's costings, was included in this quote attributed to the Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg:

'Labor's surpluses cannot be believed, and the Australian people know that.

'They know the last time Labor delivered a surplus was 1989 and the Berlin Wall was still standing. Wayne Swan promised surpluses that never eventuated.'

But the script which followed effectively neutralised its balancing effect:

'The Coalition's only problem with this argument is that, before it came to office in 2013, it promised a surplus in "each and every year" of its first term. And we are still waiting for that promise to be delivered.

'Or in the splendid tense-contorting language of the Prime Minister this week, "We've brought the budget back to surplus next year".

'Labor's promises were also made as the global financial crisis relentlessly tore away at government revenues...'

This was why the article was assessed to be positive for Labor:

Shorten finds confidence

'The Opposition Leader, on the other hand, has grown increasingly confident.

'Mr Shorten is prepared to take more risks in how he answers questions and how he presents his policies. In a political world where we have lost a tolerance for nuance, the Opposition Leader has been prepared to inject more of it into his answers...

'The Labor leader is finding room to recalibrate messages...

'Mr Shorten's economic frontbenchers are out there saying "yes, we are offering a very different take on how the country should be run".'

Decision: positive for Labor; negative for the Coalition

Story selection in itself is not an issue which engages the impartiality standard. The choice of what to include or not to include in content is a legitimate exercise of editorial judgement. Nor does the attribution of framing indicate there has been a failure to observe due impartiality. The test is whether the framing was determined to have followed the weight of evidence.

8.6 Australia Votes: analysis that follows the weight of evidence

The first two articles above have been determined to have reached conclusions which, on balance, can largely be supported by the facts and follow the weight of evidence. For example:

- the Coalition had changed leaders on several occasions
- one of its own ministers had noted that the party had a problem with female representation
- the campaign did feature Mr Morrison almost to the exclusion of everyone else in his government

There was however some evidence of editorial overreach in example three as explained below:

- the headline said there had been a 'tectonic shift' in the campaign, suggesting perhaps that something monumental had happened to scupper the government's chances of being re-elected:
 - the media was calling it an election-defining moment
 - #mymum trended on Twitter; a listener told RN Breakfast that Bill Shorten's comments on ageism had hit a chord with her group of women aged 40-plus
 - but there was no evidence that it was translating into votes for Bill Shorten, which would justify the 'tectonic' shift description
- the article asserts that the story in the Daily Telegraph about Bill Shorten's mum had been 'a debacle' for the Coalition
 - there is no evidence offered for the statement
 - Scott Morrison had been widely praised for unambiguously condemning the article and showing solidarity with Mr Shorten
 - it would have been reasonable to have characterised the episode as unfortunate for Mr Morrison in that it swallowed up election airtime for a few days, but 'debacle' suggests a fiasco for which the Coalition bore some responsibility there was an assertion made in the article that Mr Morrison was under increasing pressure to explain the whereabouts of his ministers:
 - the call was coming predictably from Labor - and from the media
 - there is no evidence that voters were demanding news of their whereabouts

The chart in Annex A reflects the assessment of whether the attribution of a negative or positive framing in each case is justified by the weight of evidence:

- more than 90% of the framing outcomes for each party – whether positive or negative – were found to have constituted a professional judgement which followed the weight of evidence
- 3 articles (8% of the sample) which were allocated a positive framing for Labor were determined, on balance, not to have followed the weight of evidence
- 3 articles (6% of the sample) which were allocated a negative framing for the Coalition were determined, on balance, not to have followed the weight of evidence

8.7 Australia Votes: Conclusion

The determination that in 90% of articles the framing was found to have been editorially justified and therefore did not engage the impartiality standard, was a significant reduction from the number of articles that had been identified as potentially problematic on first analysis.

The consideration as to whether the online content was duly impartial came down to just six articles.

The content has been tested against the following clauses from the Impartiality standard:

- 4.1 Gather and present news and information with due impartiality.
- 4.4 Do not misrepresent any perspective.
- 4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

In relation to the selection of stories it was concluded that:

- the choice of which issues to pursue is an editorial decision and does not engage the guidelines
- the publication of articles which reflected negatively on the Coalition in a greater proportion to those which reflected negatively on Labor was determined to have been an incidental outcome of a legitimate exercise of editorial judgement

In relation to the framing of perspectives:

- Labor was assessed to have had a relatively good week; there were more stories of greater prominence that reflected the party in a positive light than reflected negatively
- whereas the range of issues which were judged to be standing in the way of the Government being re-elected were found to be numerous and substantial; any reasoned assessment of the Coalition's prospects would recognise that to be the case
- judgements about the likely effect of those obstacles on the election outcome were determined to have been made in good faith and were found to be overwhelmingly evidence-based, notwithstanding that those judgements may have proved in hindsight to have been incorrect
- the judgements were broadly consistent with the prevailing media consensus in Australia in the relevant timeframe
- except for a handful of articles, the framing of perspectives demonstrably followed the weight of evidence

Decision:

- a determination that the framing was not duly impartial would have required a substantial pattern of negative framing across the series of articles, which could not be justified by the weight of evidence.
- those articles for which the framing could not be wholly justified were small in number, and as a percentage of the overall sample: 6 articles in total representing 6-8% of the content

- the imbalance was found to have resulted more from editorial overreach or hyperbole in vocabulary than explicit bias
- the failings were both numerically and qualitatively insufficient to reach a view that the online content failed to achieve due impartiality.

While the online content has been found to be duly impartial, ABC News Digital is encouraged to reflect on its commissioning policy and to consider whether increased editorial oversight of the content, with a focus on the overall body of material available at any one time, could further improve compliance with editorial standards, particularly during an election - and so avoid any perception of bias.

9 The weighting of perspectives during an election

9.1 Vox pops and the analysis disconnect: when voters become the decision makers

This section considers the extent to which the ABC was open-minded in its consideration of the diversity of relevant perspectives it found to be present during the campaign, and the respective weight it accorded them. It examines what was found to be a disconnect between what the ABC was hearing about issues and voting intention from voters in electorates – and what its commentators were saying on air about those same issues and likely outcomes.

The vox pop content has not fallen short of editorial standards. Quite the opposite, the inclusion of those voices enhanced impartiality and supplied the diversity of perspectives that the editorial standards require. But the issue perhaps highlights a mindset amongst content makers that vox pops are fun and add richness and texture to the content, but that they play no direct role in the outcome of an issue. While that is arguably a fair consideration for most of the political cycle, it makes less sense during an election campaign. The ABC's own editorial guidance articulates why.

In traditional content analysis a reviewer will examine an item of output and accord weight to a voice, according to its perceived authority. The ABC's guidance note on impartiality defines the four relevant viewpoints which might articulate a perspective, according to their degree of influence on the eventual outcome of the matter of contention. The list starts with the perspective perceived to have the greatest power:

Authority: The people who have legitimate power or authority to decide outcomes on the matter.

Experts: People or bodies with recognised expertise in the matter to hand. These will include academics, leading business analysts and the like.

Influencers: People with influence by virtue of their public standing or following, who have established a voice in the issue. For example, charitable organisations with experience in caring for the homeless.

Affected parties: People or bodies whose interests will be affected by the outcome of a contentious matter.

At election time the model gets tipped on its head and the 'affected parties' are also the 'authority', because they are the ones holding the absolute power to decide the outcome of 'the matter'.

There were 10 sequences of vox pops broadcast across the week on AM, RN Breakfast, The Drum and 7.30, (several articles published on Australia Votes also included a wide range of voters' opinions):

- more than 50 voters' voices were heard, many in the most marginal constituencies
- they provided insight into voting intentions and expressed sentiments not reflected elsewhere in the output
- the collective story they told was of a lack of appetite for a Labor government, a dislike of Bill Shorten, slightly more enthusiasm for the Coalition, a general

mistrust of the major parties - and some approval of Clive Palmer and One Nation in some of the key Queensland marginals

- almost no weight was applied to those voices in election analysis heard on the ABC
- yet the collective story they told reflected the eventual election outcome more closely than the analysis of political commentators

Despite the rich seam of information they contained, the vox pops were not treated as having authority. There was no recalibration of their weight from that accorded to vox pops outside of election time. Specifically, there was almost no feedthrough of what was said by voters into the analysis heard during the sample week as to the likely election outcome.

Had more weight been placed on the voices of voters, given that they are the decision makers for the purposes of this matter of contention, a different narrative might have gained some traction.

It is acknowledged that the content reflected the tightening of the polls; as election day approached commentators became more cautious about the extent of the Labor victory that was being predicted. A hung parliament began to be discussed as a real possibility. And there were frequent references to general voter mistrust of the major parties and disinterest in the campaign, evidenced by the high levels of pre-polling.

But the greatest interpretive weight was found to have been placed on information from a relatively narrow range of mostly unnamed party sources. And there was found to be a propensity for commentators to project their values as representative of wider Australian values.

The ABC publishes guidance for its journalists reminding them of the necessity of keeping keep an open mind when weighing up the evidence. This is an extract from the relevant section of the guidance note on impartiality:

'Being open-minded means being open to evidence and arguments, irrespective of your personal views or predispositions, and this is the biggest personal challenge when it comes to impartiality. We all have opinions, shaped by instinct, belief and experience, and it may be very difficult to transcend these in the face of the stories you will work on.

'You have to work hard to be objective, and curiosity is one of the best qualities you can bring to bear on this... 'Explore the intellectual arguments you might personally tend to ignore and do your best to understand why others believe in them.'

Below is an example which illustrates the disconnect. On 5 May Insiders panellists discussed the prospects for One Nation's vote in the light of Pauline Hansen's emotional response to the resignation of Steve Dickson, the party's leader in Queensland, over his behavior in a strip club.

The factors the commentators in the studio considered decisive were in stark contrast to what the voters, who had the authority to decide the outcome, said when asked about whether events might change their view of One Nation. This example demonstrates why it would have been helpful had the ABC placed more weight on what voters were telling them.

The Insiders panel collectively reached a view that Steve Dickson's behavior would likely harm One Nation because:

- Pauline Hansen keeps attracting the wrong kind of people
- One Nation's reputation has been damaged by the NRA sting
- men and women everywhere are sure to be revolted by Steve Dickson's behavior towards women

The voters vox popped in the Queensland electorates of Capricornia and Petrie did not appear fazed by Steve Dickson's behavior, nor deterred from voting for One Nation, variously stating they felt sorry for her, that she was clearly unaware of what her team were up to, and that every party has problems.

On May 18:

- One Nation improved their House of Representative vote nationally, up 1.8% to 2.6%
- In Queensland One Nation captured 8.7% of the primary vote, compared to 5.52% in 2016
- there was a 17% swing towards One Nation in Capricornia
- there was a 7% swing towards One Nation in Petrie

The party's best-performing candidate in the lower house race was Stuart Bonds. He captured 1 in 5 votes in the NSW seat of Hunter. This was despite a video emerging during the campaign which reportedly depicted him saying, 'the only thing worse than a gay person is a woman'.

Below is a transcript of the relevant comments from Insiders and the vox pop sequences.

5 May, Insiders

Presenter It all began with Steve Dickson and the strip club video. And of course, he lost his spot. Then Pauline Hansen went on a Current Affair to explain herself.

VIDEO INSERT: Pauline Hansen

I see farmers being forced off the land, kids with no hope for the future. And people are hoping and praying that I'm going to be the voice for them. And I cop all this shit all the time and I'm sick of it. Absolutely sick of it.

Presenter Now the question is, does Pauline Hansen get the sympathy vote or not?

Panellist One Well she may have at one time. I'm not sure whether she will this time.

Presenter They are her candidates. She attracts these people.

Panellist Two Again and again and again.

- Panellist One** And she is also on the record as saying that she personally vets her candidates. So you know she's got to carry a responsibility.
- But I think because of what Steve Dickson and James Ashby got up to in Washington DC with the NRA ...the reputational damage done to One Nation has been so great that I don't think she's going to get much sympathy at the moment...
- Panellist Two** But also that Steve Dickson stuff. I mean, that footage was just revolting. If you're a woman anywhere that's revolting. And for most men too I'm sure.
- Presenter** It wasn't the appearance at the strip club that cost him his job, it was the way that he behaved, what he said whilst he was there
- Panellist Two** It was what he said and what he did. And we got an eyeful of it and he got an eyeful of it. And it was revolting. And the Nats are already having some issues with women I think. And this does not help them aligning themselves with One Nation in the same week that you get that footage.

6 May RN Breakfast, Petrie near Brisbane

- Reporter** What about the criticism levelled against Pauline Hanson over her honesty and over things like electoral funding, the meetings over gun lobby money?
- Vox Pop 1** I think that she got caught up in something that she didn't really know about to be really honest with you

7 May RN Breakfast Capricornia

- Reporter** So have you decided who you'll be supporting?
- Vox Pop 2** It won't be Labor. It will probably be One Nation or Katter. Something like that. I'm not really a fan of the two major parties, either of them. But I'll be voting Liberal before I vote Labor. That's for sure.
- Reporter** One Nation's had a few troubles. Does that sway you at all?
- Vox Pop 2** Which party doesn't? I mean they target her a lot more than any other party too. They see her as a threat. She doesn't help herself with her own rantings I suppose sometimes. But she's got the right idea and I think and she's not a bad thing. I'd soon as see her get on as an honest person than someone else. But at the end of the day it's all politics. It doesn't really matter who gets in, it's all a bunch of bullshit anyway.

Reporter	[Vox Pop 3] says he'll probably back Pauline Hanson, although Clive Palmer's message resonates with him... What is it then about Clive Palmer that appeals to you?
Vox Pop 3	He tells the truth. And the second one is Pauline Hanson. And they all went against her. They get her out because she tells the truth.
Reporter	Perched at the bar is [Vox Pop 4]. He's upset about politicians' entitlements and the lack of wage growth. His vote is going to One Nation. What about the problems she's been having though with her party?
Vox Pop 4	Well look at every party. They've all got in-house problems. No one's perfect.
Reporter	The next pub is at the tiny coastal town of Carmila.... I asked [the licensee] how the mood compares in this campaign to 2016 when she picked up growing support for Pauline Hansen's One Nation.
Vox Pop 5	I think there's a lot of support for her. Even Clive Palmer. I think same thing, they they've had enough of the main, the main two parties just not living up to what they say they're going to do.
Reporter	Has the troubles that Pauline Hansen's party had had any impact on people do you think?
Vox Pop 5	I think they actually feel sorry for her.

The vox pops broadcast during that week discussed the range of issues that voters said were likely to influence their decision. The analysis picked up that even where voters said their priority was childcare and health, when asked they could not distinguish between the major parties in relation to those issues. This despite Labor's promise the previous week, for example, of significant assistance with childcare costs if they were elected.

The 7.30's Political Editor was the only commentator in the sample who referenced the vox pops from elsewhere in the coverage directly in analysis. Writing on 11 May in an article for Australia Votes she said:

'Listen to the "vox pops" on radio reports and you are constantly reminded how little attention people actually pay to election campaigns.'

Despite that observation, the review has found that commentators continued to analyse, interpret and predict outcomes based on voters actually paying attention to what was happening in the campaign.

9.2 Differentiation in analysis: what appears interesting to commentators versus what voters say matters to them

Live crosses, analysis in discussion programs, and commentary in articles consistently made direct connections between voter intentions and campaign events, such as party launches, Q&A appearances, the leaders' debates.

On 12 May an article for Australia Votes listed 10 marginal seats which could constitute 'a conservative path to victory for Labor'. The reporter wrote:

'But there is a real sense it could be much larger than that, particularly after the last week, which saw strong performances by the Labor leader on the ABC's Q&A program, Press Club debate and of course his emotional response to the Daily Telegraph's report on his mother.'

Analysis of the content found that political commentators regularly reflected about events in the campaign which had resonated with them and their sources, and extrapolated to suggest those events would also have resonated with voters.

The Bill Shorten mum saga is a good example. It was declared to have been an election-defining moment for Bill Shorten. This was an article published on ABC News digital on 8 May, shortly after Bill Shorten had delivered an emotional response to the Daily Telegraph attack on his portrayal of his mother's career:

'Today, in a doctor's surgery in Nowra, you could hear a pin drop. One thing was loud and clear, though: this was a turning point in the election campaign.'

It reported Labor sources saying that staff at Labor HQ in Parramatta were in tears as they watched their leader's explanation broadcast live. The article concluded:

'Deafening silence as a campaign shifted, suddenly and dramatically.'

On Insiders on 12 May a contributor said, 'the Labor party is taking points out of this' Discussion about the impact of the Bill Shorten's mum story dominated the ABC election coverage for two days. It was a strong news story, but while it is true that the hashtag 'my mum' trended that week on social media, there was no evidence found in research for this review to support that it had any impact on support for Bill Shorten or for Labor. There was also no mention of it influencing votes in any of the vox pops or discussion panels with voters broadcast during that week.

Another assumption was that record early voting was bad for the Coalition. This is from an analysis article published in Australia Votes on 4 May"

'The staggering number of pre-poll votes in the first three days of the pre-polling period bodes ominously for the Government.

Around 510,000 people, or 3 per cent of the all-time record number of people who have registered to vote, had raced to pre-polling stations within 7 hours of them opening, an enthusiasm which will send a chill through many MPs."

Data from the Australian Electoral Commission analysed in *The Australian* found that the Government was the beneficiary of early polling, in the marginal constituencies at least:

'Early voters supported Coalition'

by David Tanner and Rosie Lewis

There was widespread speculation throughout the election campaign that the record pre-poll turnout of 4,271,276 ordinary votes would favour Labor because Australians were animated to throw out the government.

In fact, the Coalition fared better than Labor at pre-poll voting in 13 of the 20 most marginal seats, with only Macquarie and Greenway in NSW, Lilley in Queensland, Cowan in Western Australia, Indi and Dunkley in Victoria, and Solomon in the Northern Territory favouring the ALP candidate.

The Australian, 7 June 2019

The Drum on 8 May included an informative discussion about the waning influence of leaders' debates over the years:

Presenter

I know we've all cancelled our dinner plans tonight because the leaders are meeting again to face off at the Press Club. Tony, this is the third and final leaders' debate tonight. You've written about this once being a milestone of mass theatre and now it just seems to be an afterthought. Whatever happened to great election debate nights.

Panellist

People just stopped watching television... It's not as simple as that of course. Look, it did become a bit of a sideshow... back in 1993, 71% of respondents to a very major survey said they watched Paul Keating and John Hewson go head to head in a major debate. Well that's been falling and falling and falling ever since. Until in 2016 it was 21%. So there are a lot of reasons. It's the way the debate has been presented. It's the, for lack of a worm perhaps remember the worm... people are actually disengaged from politics at the moment in a way that we haven't seen for quite some time.

An SMS opinion poll carried out by Roy Morgan Research which was reported on the 7.30 on 29 April found that 71% of the electorate were paying little or no attention to the election.

9.3 Conclusion

Live crosses with political commentators, panel discussions, and analysis in online articles, drew conclusions about the likely election result and placed considerable weight on aspects of the election which an abundance of intelligence demonstrates would not necessarily have had a significant impact on how people voted. Whereas, there was almost no discussion in those same segments of what voters were telling the ABC about how they were planning to vote, and what was most likely to influence their vote.

The reason this final section has been included in a discussion about impartiality is to draw attention to the importance of the weighting of perspectives. It is not argued that the ABC should not have covered leaders' debates or party launches or the fallout from the Daily Telegraph article. Or even that they received too much coverage. That is an

editorial decision. The observations in this final section are to highlight the importance of putting events into perspective when drawing meaning from them.

It is hoped that the discussion here and in the previous section, about the re-weighting of perspectives during an election period and the recalibration of what constitutes an authoritative voice, might assist in the ABC achieving a better alignment of editorial outcomes at future elections.

10 Matters arising

While analysing the content a few relatively minor issues were picked up. They are noted here for completeness, and to assist the ABC as appropriate to improve its editorial processes.

10.1 Australia Votes

10.1.1 Story prominence

Figure 5: a snapshot of the Australia Votes landing page at midday on 11 May

The screenshot shows the ABC Australia Votes landing page. At the top left, there is a 'Politics news delivered straight to you' newsletter sign-up box with a photo of Annabel Crabb and a 'SUBSCRIBE' button. Below this is a 'HIDDEN CAMPAIGN' calculator section. The main content area is titled 'Election News' and features a large photo of four women in blue and black jackets holding a netball. The main article is 'Cheque mate: Nationals' Katrina Hodgkinson called out over netball funding stunt' by Michael Wronner and Stephen Hutcheon. Below this are several other articles: 'Examining why Peter Dutton left the force reveals a strange coincidence', 'Dubious environmental group 'infiltrates' Stop Adani movement', 'Bigger fish to fry: Here's what shooters really think about parties looking to change gun laws', 'ANALYSIS: The economy is not strong, despite what the Coalition says', 'This election, is anyone thinking about waste and recycling?', 'Poverty in Australia has been pushed to centre stage', and 'Why political texts can't be blocked'. On the right side, there are several smaller articles: 'Antony Green's swing calculator', 'What you need to know to cast your vote early', 'Heatmaps show where leaders have been in the first half of the campaign', and 'The app that helped Trump win is targeting Australian voters'. At the bottom left, there is a 'More Election News' button.

The midday snapshot reflects that a relatively minor regional story got top spot and disproportionate prominence on the page.

This is problematic for the following reasons:

- Audiences are accustomed to an editorial publication signalling the importance of a story by the prominence it accords it, generally understood to mean that the most important story would get top billing
- the Australia Votes landing page above was heavily cross promoted by the ABC throughout the election and the audience would likely have arrived there expecting the ABC to have curated the page to fit those expectations
- as the example above shows, the main article was a minor story about a candidate who had been accused by a rival of misleading voters with a pretend cheque
- whereas an important analysis article by the 7.30's Political Editor which had been uploaded at 9.30 that morning did not even appear on the main Australia Votes page, nor was there any article on the page reflecting what was happening nationally

10.1.2 Sub-editing

The content review found numerous typographic errors, poor grammar, missing words and a general lack of sub-editing evident across the sample. It was particularly bad at the weekend. It can be difficult to read a story when words are missing and misspelt and tenses don't match. Mistakes also undermine the authority of the content.

The nature of the errors would suggest inadequate training and insufficient editorial oversight.

Here are a few examples:

- 'Cases where people cannot provide a **"valid and sufficient reason" to vote** can end up in court' (6 May)

In this example, the word 'not' (to vote) was missing; this was an article about whether terminally ill people are obliged to vote

- 'A letter from "Peter Dutton from Enoggera" appeared in Brisbane newspaper The Courier Mail in 2000, more than a year **before he became a MP.**' (11 May)

It should read 'an MP'

- 'He **accidentally** sent a text to a journalist' (11 May)
- 'Later in the day, the independent MP sent a letter **the AFP**' (7 May)
- 'Ms Lightfoot was catapulted into poverty around the time her son was born eight years ago, **due to a bank engineer fault**, and then faced a separation from her partner' (11 May)

I have struggled to understand what this sentence could possibly mean. What is a bank engineer fault? How can it catapult someone into poverty? Is it a typing error?

10.2 The Drum

The strength of The Drum was the depth in which it covered issues and the quality of the information and knowledge collectively held by the panellists who appeared. The failure to include on the panel a sufficient diversity of perspectives on some occasions is not a reflection on the quality of discussion.

There was one issue which The Drum may wish to consider: giving the audience more information about the guests:

- for some guests there was a fair amount of information in the introduction, but for others there was almost none
- it would have aided audience understanding to have been given a fuller biography of the members of the panel; introducing someone only as 'a non-executive director' for example, as happened on the program on 8 May, told the viewer nothing of any use about the guest
- it is helpful to know at least a little about a guest's background as it helps the viewer decide what weight to place on their contribution on a given topic.

10.3 Minor Parties and Independents

The reflection of the participation of minor parties and independents in the election was logged. Analysis highlighted no concerns with the level or content of coverage.

The potential flow of preferences from minor parties and independents was discussed on a number of editions of Insiders and featured in live crosses on radio and tv.

Greens

On first analysis there appeared to be a disproportionate number of interviews with Green Party politicians, given that their share of the vote is a fraction of the share of the two major parties. Richard Di Natale appeared as a standalone interviewee on three separate ABC programs during the week.

However, further research found there was only one other substantive interview on national ABC output with Mr Di Natale over the rest of the campaign (it was on RN Breakfast on 1 May and pegged to his speech to the National Press Club announcing the Greens would support a Labor government). It was coincidental that the Greens main campaign interviews on the ABC were all scheduled during the sample week.

Across the content overall the Greens received coverage determined to be consistent with its likely share of the vote. There were three interviews with Richard di Natale over the week, on the 7.30, Insiders and AM. The Greens leader, Richard Di Natale, used his platform on the 7.30 to respond to an attack on him by Scott Morrison on the same program the night before. Jason Ball, the Greens candidate in Higgins was a member of the panel in a discussion on RN Breakfast.

The Greens perspective was mentioned frequently in online content, particularly in items related to climate change. Greens policies were discussed frequently on The Drum, which highlighted their support for dental care under Medicare in the Health Special. And an interview on RN Breakfast about investment in science and technology research noted Greens policy in that area.

Coverage of the Greens preferencing of an anti-vaccination candidate ahead of a Coalition candidate in a northern NSW electorate was the only substantial negative coverage.

United Australia Party

There was considerable coverage of Clive Palmer's United Australia Party, both because of the preference deal he had reached with the Coalition and because of the money being spent on advertising. There were also two stories in the online content about Clive Palmer's attempt to get the High Court to ban reporting of election outcomes on election night until polls had closed in the west.

There were several radio interviews, packages and vox pops which reflected the strategic impact the UAP might have on the election, in particular the possibility the party would have a balance of power position in the Senate.

The only concern noted was the absence of any analysis of the party's platform. Even an observation that there didn't appear to be too many settled policies would have been useful.

One Nation

Coverage of One Nation was consistent with its relative position as a minor party. It has been noted earlier in the review that a greater effort might have been made to better understand the appeal of the party to those who vote for it.

Independents

Independent candidates featured in discussions throughout the week, particularly in electorates where a high-profile incumbent was considered to be under pressure. The race in Warringah for Tony Abbott's seat received considerable coverage consistent with the importance of the story there. An article in Australia Votes discussed Zali Steggall's campaign.

The 7.30 ran a short clip from an advert put together by a group of Independent candidates followed by an interview with the program's Political Editor about the positioning of the independents as a group.

Two independents – Julia Banks and Oliver Yates - joined a panel in Higgins for RN Breakfast.

On Insiders, a panellist made the point that a significant part of the appeal of independent candidates is the voter mistrust of the major parties where there is a perception that wealth appears to buy political influence.

Annex A – The framing of Australia Votes articles

DATE	ARTICLE SUMMARY	Labor positive	Labor negative	Labor neutral	Followed weight of evidence?	Coalition positive	Coalition negative	Coalition neutral	Followed weight of evidence?
Monday	Vote Compass: penalty rates; minimum wage	1			✓				
	Labor campaign launch	1			✓				
ANALYSIS	Gillard and Rudd unite at launch			1	✓		1		✓
	Labor Childcare Proposal Grattan Institute analysis	1			✓			1	✓
	Keating China comments			1	✓	1			✓
	CRU:Disendorsement of candidates		1		✓		1		✓
	CRU:Debate and Scott Morrison body language	1			✓		1		✓
	CRU:Nazi logos deface posters					1			✓
	YAWA: Parties' stance live animal export trade	1			✓	1			✓
OPINION	Shorten firm after Scott Morrison early surge	1			x		1		✓
ANALYSIS	Darkest day for Liberals hints at civil war to come						1		✓
ANALYSIS	Campaign dogged by scandals and climate confusion			1	✓		1		✓
Tuesday	Scott Morrison egging incident	1			✓	1			✓
	Confusing fight for Gilmore	1			✓		1		✓
	Parties court immigrants in Banks			1	✓			1	✓
	YAWA Immigration has changed Shepparton			1	✓	1			✓
	Shorten defends neg gearing and frank cred propos.			1	✓				
OPINION	Post election cabinet clearer for Labor than Coalition	1			✓			1	✓
ANALYSIS	Climate Change party policies	1			✓		1		✓
Wed	UN climate leader intervenes in election						1		✓
	DT story on Shorten mother "new low"	1			✓	1			✓
	Egger on drug and assault charges	1			✓	1			✓
	Christmas Island and climate change spending					1			✓
	Lab/Green preference anti-vax before Coalition			1	✓				
	RdiN: Scott Morrison the 'real extremist'						1		✓
Thurs	Chinese media mocks Australia in WeChat								1 ✓
	Death taxes is fake news says Labor	1			✓		1		✓
	Ex-lib cand Whelan on legal notice			1	✓		1		✓
	Nationals woo bush voters					1			✓
	CRU: Shorten holds back tears	1			✓				
	CRU: Penny Wong refuses to shake Liberal's hand		1		✓			1	✓
	CRU: PM allows Liberal to remain in his ranks						1		✓
	What it's like to be a Chinese-Australian voter			1	✓			1	✓
OPINION	Third debate: messages about SM and BS	1			✓		1		✓
ANALYSIS	Campaign quiet as becomes personal for Bill Shorten	1			x				
Friday	Hobart doing it tough; concerned at costs		1		✓				
	Labour costings: \$154b savings over a decade	1			✓			1	✓
	Liberal candidate Singh resigns over rape comments						1		✓
	Fact Check: Can an electric vehicle tow a boat trailer?						1		✓
	CRU: Workers snub Bill Shorten		1		✓				
	CRU: Liberal making a Grindr appearance			1	✓		1		✓
	CRU: Peter Dutton heads north to attack Labor			1	✓			1	✓
	CRU: Missing minister campaigning in the west						1		✓
ANALYSIS	Scott Morrison is a one-man band						1		✓
ANALYSIS	Keating 'nutters' comments: saves Mike Pezzullo?			1	✓				
Saturday	Foul play: Nats candidate election stunt						1		✓
	Peter Dutton: why he really left the police	1			✓		1		x
	Stop Adani infiltrated by dubious environment group						1		x
	Where gun owners votes are going							1	✓
ANALYSIS	RBA "economy not strong", despite Coal view						1		✓
	YAWA Are major parties ignoring welfare issues?			1	✓		1		✓
	Bill Shorten finds feet; tectonic shift in campaign	1			✓		1		x
Sunday	Scott Morrison launches campaign					1			✓
	Labor's strategy in Liberal strongholds	1			x		1		✓
	Abbott secret recording: "pretty personal"						1		✓
	Fact Check: Did SM cut \$14bn educ when Treasurer?		1		✓	1			✓
	Christians on the left: growing voting bloc	1			✓			1	✓