

Kim Williams, Chairperson of the ABC

(MEDIA WATCH QUESTIONS SUMMERISED)

- How do you know Sandy Gutman?

I am not anything other than an acquaintance of Sandy Gutman, who I do not know well. I know his work and respect his standing as a performer. We had a brief involvement some 27 years ago when he was cast for a theatrical moment attaching to the opening of the sound stages at Fox Studios in Sydney. He may be a friend of my former wife Kathy Lette, however I couldn't speak about that with any authority. Kathy left me in 1988, although she remains a friend.

We understand that Mr Gutman contacted you by various means on five occasions. We also understand that your interest in the matter consequently became known to ABC executives and other ABC managers some of whom passed this information on to local radio teams. Bearing in mind the significant weight carried by the position of Chair, was this appropriate?

I spoke to Mr Gutman and had some written exchanges with him and he indicated that he couldn't get an interview for some performances he was giving regionally and asked whether I could do anything to assist him. I spoke with a radio colleague and asked him to look into it. There were subsequent representations from Mr Gutman which I passed on - that was the limit of my response.

I did not at anytime issue any instruction and any suggestion that is the case is inaccurate. It didn't happen.

Sandy Gutman had obtained multiple interviews on the ABC prior to your interventions. What was your motivation in seeking to assist Mr Gutman obtain further airtime on the ABC to promote his shows?

I responded to Mr Gutman in a basic style of "I will speak to a colleague to look at the matter". That was the limit of what I said.

Considering Mr Ben Latimer did not have responsibility for regional radio, why did you seek his assistance in these matters?

I spoke to Mr Latimer because he came to mind – clearly I was in error and should have spoken to someone else. Subsequently I copied the relevant ABC executive, Donna Field, into an exchange but never spoke to her about it. I had a couple of subsequent messages from Mr Gutman, that you have identified and on which I spoke to Mr Latimer, because he knew the context. I acknowledge that I should have sent it elsewhere. I did not, by the way, ever ask or seek an inappropriate intervention. That simply didn't happen.

We understand that on one occasion Mr Latimer spoke to you to express his dissatisfaction with Mr Gutman and your representations on his behalf. Can you tell us when this occurred, and provide any more detail?

I have no memory of the precise date but I took his counsel.

We understand that on at least two occasions, decisions made by the local teams to not put Mr Gutman to air were reversed as a result of the interventions described above. One was an interview with Mr Gutman which was broadcast by ABC North and West SA on 7 August 2024, and the other was an edited replay of an interview which was broadcast (the replay, that is) by ABC New England NW on 7 December 2024. How do you respond?

You have identified to me an email from Mr Gutman and subsequent follow up by me to ABC colleagues. Until now I had not reflected on the detail you have set out of either matter in August and December but did not seek to impose any view.

In that email you have drawn to my attention, I acknowledge that it is open to interpretation, however I was referring to what I saw as an offhand manner in dealing with talent. On reflection that was inappropriate. I did not speak on this matter directly and the reference to the backstory was to the fairly vigorous representation made originally by Mr Gutman – nothing more or less.

One ABC employee affected by these events has provided us a statement:

"I was outraged ... Local teams know our audiences better than anyone and the Chairperson has no right to involve himself in that way. If I received that call from the Chairperson I would've thanked him for his suggestion, but told him it's not his place to dictate our content. If the Chairperson has time to intervene and influence teams to conduct an interview about a comedian's regional tour, what else is he influencing? This was an alarming failure of several levels of ABC management who should've stood up to the Chairperson."

How do you respond?

I did not at anytime intervene and would never seek to override editorial judgement from local teams. My comment was about responding to talent. I accept that my comment can be seen as gratuitous.

I respect the right of local teams to make any call as they determine is appropriate for their own regional audiences and the personality of their programming. Any suggestion that I directly interfered and directed is simply wrong.

We understand Sandy Gutman, in his conversations with staff, made claims the ABC was antisemitic, and this was why some of his interview requests had been declined. Did you intervene out of concern that he may make allegations of antisemitism against the ABC?

I indicated to you that I was aware there were suggestions of antisemitism, and I understand the sensitivity which surrounds such matters and have sympathy with the way that misunderstandings can arise from time to time and where people can take offence. I do treat antisemitism very seriously as I do all matters attaching to prejudice of any kind.

Did your personal relationship with Sandy Gutman, and his stated desire to leverage that friendship for a commercial benefit, constitute a perceived conflict of interest under the ABC's editorial policies? If not, why not?

I do not have a personal relationship with Sandy Gutman. I asked for a simple examination of the matters. There was no instruction or suggestion of intervention made. I do not believe that I have acted in any way inconsistent with ABC editorial policies. It is important to keep these matters in proportion and not to amplify it into something it was not.

Did your actions constitute a potential breach of the ABC's editorial policies, specifically Standard 1.1 and 1.3, which requires that employees "ensure that editorial decisions are not improperly influenced by political, sectional, commercial or personal interests"? If not, why not?

There was no request beyond a review of the matters and never at any stage an improper exercise of authority or any matter of personal interest.

Media Watch may criticise you for having overstepped the boundary which should exist to protect the integrity of the ABC's programming and reputation. We know that this episode has already damaged trust in the office of the chairperson at a local level, and we may say as much on our program. How do you respond?

I disagree with your preliminary view and believe this has been amplified beyond what has actually occurred. There was at no time an attempt to impose actions or outcomes on any editorial managers. I emphasise that is just not the case. If there have been

misunderstandings in the process, or erroneous assumptions I genuinely regret that they may have arisen.

I understand and respect that there may be a divergence of views on these matters from others and naturally respect their views. I emphasise the respect I hold for both ABC editorial personnel and their roles, and for ABC editorial policies, which are central to the work of the Corporation. I understand my own role and the difference it has from that of the Managing Director and his senior leadership team and the obligations which repose on us separately.