

Response from an ABC spokesperson:

The ABC has always acted in the public interest in reporting on the police investigation into Cardinal George Pell and in investigating other allegations made against him. The ABC firmly rejects claims that it pursued a “witch hunt” against Cardinal Pell, that it engaged in “vigilante” journalism or that its coverage was one-sided or unfair.

At every stage of this story the ABC has presented a wide range of opinions on the case. At every stage of the court process the ABC has reported the legal proceedings objectively, accurately and impartially. In discussions and analysis it has always sought a full range of perspectives on related issues.

The ABC has always sought responses from Cardinal Pell himself to specific allegations during its coverage of the allegations of sexual misconduct against him and the subsequent court actions. It has also sought and presented the opinions of his supporters as well as independent experts on the various issues that have arisen.

The first allegations against Cardinal Pell surfaced in 2002 and were considered serious enough for him to step aside while a Church-initiated investigation was conducted. That inquiry concluded that the complainant was honest but that there was insufficient evidence to corroborate the claim.

In 2016 Melbourne’s *Herald Sun* revealed that a police investigation had begun in 2013 into further allegations against Cardinal Pell.

Neither of those allegations was originally revealed or encouraged in any way by the ABC. However, considering the very high profile and influence of the Cardinal, and his pivotal role in managing sex abuse allegations within the Catholic Church, it was entirely appropriate for the ABC to investigate the allegations.

Journalists are not judges or juries. Their role is to objectively and impartially assess whether allegations are sufficiently credible to justify publication in the public interest. It is not to decide whether people are guilty of crimes. The ABC’s role is not to prosecute the case for or against Cardinal Pell and it has never done that.

The ABC sets a high bar on whether to publish serious allegations. There must be a clear public interest and every possible effort must have been made to both corroborate allegations and to seek evidence that may reveal inaccuracies, inconsistencies or other flaws in allegations.

The subsequent story produced by 7.30 in July 2016 was subject to the most rigorous scrutiny and oversight. Months of work was done by experienced journalists to verify, check and corroborate allegations to the greatest extent possible.

In addition to the normal supervision of the program's executive producer and supervising producer, the program was subject to exhaustive review by senior ABC management and legal counsel.

The same processes were followed in each of the ABC's two later major investigations into Cardinal Pell: by *Four Corners* in March 2019 and in the recent *Revelation* series.

All were subject to rigorous impartial oversight, contained new allegations and were clearly in the public interest.

In every case, Cardinal Pell was made aware of all the allegations against him well before the programs were broadcast and given every opportunity to address and respond to them.

The role of other ABC programs is distinctly different from that of the investigative programs that initially revealed the allegations against Cardinal Pell. Daily news, current affairs and discussion programs should report developments, discuss and analyse related issues and seek reactions from interested parties.

Obtaining interviews with Cardinal Pell's supporters was not always easy; reporters and producers covering the case for ABC News, local radio and daily current affairs often had interview requests declined.

Nonetheless, many of the Cardinal's most prominent supporters have regularly appeared on major ABC programs, and the ABC's coverage has consistently included a wide diversity of voices, accurate news and authoritative analysis of the many complex legal issues raised by the case.

For example, in the days immediately following the original jury verdict on 26 February 2019, when Cardinal Pell was found guilty of sexually abusing two choirboys while he was archbishop of Melbourne, more than 80 different voices/interviews/reactions were used across *RN Breakfast*, *RN Drive*, the *Religion & Ethics Report* website, *7.30, AM*, *The World Today*, *PM*, *The Drum*, *ABC Melbourne Mornings*, *ABC Melbourne Drive* and in the analysis/opinion section in ABC News Digital.

A rough breakdown reveals the following broad categories:

- 26 of those interviewed could reasonably be categorised as independent, impartial reporters and observers either here in Australia or overseas (notably including Vatican watchers)
- 14 were sexual abuse survivors or their family members
- 13 were unofficial voices from within the Catholic Church – priests or parishioners
- 10 were lawyers or legal experts providing dispassionate analysis
- 8 were experts in the field of child sexual abuse generally
- 7 were lawyers representing the accusers
- 5 were official church or Vatican spokesmen

Several prominent people who could be described as either supporters of Cardinal Pell or representatives of the Catholic Church were interviewed or appeared on panel discussions: Father Frank Brennan (twice – an interview with Leigh Sales on 7.30 and with Rafael Epstein on *ABC Melbourne Drive*); leading Catholic figure Francis Sullivan (twice); Archbishop of Melbourne Peter Comensoli (twice, including the longest interview of all, lasting 30 minutes); *The Australian's* Greg Sheridan (on *The Drum*); Paul Collins, a former priest; and Terry Laidler, a former priest and former *ABC Melbourne Drive* presenter, now a psychologist, who had attended most of the trial. Comments from Professor Greg Craven and former Prime Minister Tony Abbott were also included in the package leading *PM* that day, along with Cardinal Pell's statement.

Historical critics of the Cardinal also were interviewed but were balanced with other perspectives. For instance, journalist and author David Marr appeared on *ABC Melbourne Mornings* along with Terry Laidler and Francis Sullivan on 26 February and Archbishop Comensoli did an extended interview on 27 February.

In addition to these, others were contacted and asked to appear on programs but declined to participate. For instance, Archbishop Comensoli and Archbishop of Brisbane Mark Coleridge both declined invitations to appear on 7.30. On subsequent days Archbishop of Sydney Anthony Fisher, Archbishop Coleridge, Archbishop Comensoli, former Prime Minister John Howard and Father Bob Maguire all declined invitations or were unavailable.

The News Channel approached both Professor Craven and Francis Sullivan for interviews but were declined. Reporters and producers for ABC News, Radio Current Affairs and local radio programs sought interviews with a wide range of known Cardinal Pell supporters or Church spokespeople but were generally declined.

RN's *Law Report* interviewed Associate Professor Jason Bosland, a media law expert in suppression orders, and Terry Laidler.

Coverage of the decision of the Victorian Appeals Court on 21 August 2019, which rejected Cardinal Pell's appeal against his conviction, also included a wide range of perspectives. Appropriately, the focus was on explaining the decision and what options Cardinal Pell would have for appeal and how that would work.

7.30 covered the decision with a packaged story which prominently included comments by Melbourne Bishop Peter Elliott, a close friend for over 50 years, strongly defending Cardinal Pell and expressing his disbelief in his guilt. Archbishop Coleridge, who is also President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, was also included.

The *PM* package included Cardinal Pell's denials and an interview with prominent conservative Lyle Shelton saying he was unconvinced by the decision. Unsuccessful requests for interviews included Professor Craven, Archbishop Coleridge and Archbishop Comensoli.

The Drum's discussion included commentator Kathryn Greiner, who described herself as a long-time friend of Cardinal Pell who believed in his innocence.

The coverage on the News Channel focused strongly on analysis of the legal aspects of the decision, with interviews with Ben Mathews, Professor, School of Law, Queensland University of Technology; Chris Geraghty, Retired NSW District Court judge and former priest; and Melbourne University Criminal Law Professor Jeremy Gans.

Marco Blanco, a child protection expert; Gerard O'Connell, *America Magazine* Vatican correspondent; and Elise Harris, *Crux* Senior Vatican Reporter, were also interviewed.

The *Law Report* interviewed David Marr and Professor Gans. Priest and lawyer Father Frank Brennan declined, saying he did not want to comment until the High Court decision.

The immediate coverage of the 7 April 2020 High Court decision to quash Cardinal Pell's conviction included interviews with Professor Craven on the ABC News Channel and on *ABC Melbourne Drive*, with his comments also included in reports on other programs, such as *PM*; and interviews on *7.30* with Bishop Elliot and Professor Gans.

The *Law Report* interviewed David Marr, Professor Gans and Justin Hannebery QC. Father Frank Brennan declined to be interviewed, Professor Craven was not available and another prominent Catholic barrister/Cardinal Pell supporter also declined.

Other coverage included an interview on the *Religion and Ethics Report* with Dr Bernadette Tobin from the Plunkett Centre for Ethics, a close friend of Cardinal Pell, and an analysis piece by ABC religion expert Noel Debien.

This is by no means an exhaustive audit of the coverage.