

**ABC Editorial Review no.6: Content, conduct and panel  
composition of the Q&A program  
(February – June 2015)**

December 2015

## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Questions</b>	
<b>#1 Topics</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>#2 Panel Composition</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>#3 Moderation of Discussions</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>#4 Questions</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>#5 Studio Audiences</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>#6 Twitter Stream</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>List of Recommendations</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>Terms of Reference</b>	<b>105</b>

## Introduction

The ABC Board announced on July 7, 2015 that it had appointed us to undertake a comprehensive, independent review of the weekly television program Q&A.

Together, we have almost a century of media experience in both public and commercial broadcasting, over three continents.

This is the sixth in a series of reviews commissioned by the ABC in fulfilling its requirements under the ABC Act.

The Terms of Reference, which are attached at the conclusion of this report, specifically asked the reviewers to examine 23 episodes of the program from Feb 2, 2015 until June 29, 2015 against the relevant Editorial Policies and Guidelines adopted by the ABC.

We were also asked to make recommendations about the program and any other related matters to the ABC Board.

Previous reviews commissioned by the ABC Board required the reviewers to base their conclusions solely on their assessment of the content of the relevant programs. This review required us also to examine the production and editorial processes under which Q&A operates.

To that end we questioned senior members of the production team, attended Q&A production meetings and observed the live production from both the audience seating and the control room. We were also given access to the Q&A database covering panelists, questioners and studio audiences.

On a visit to London in late September Ray Martin interviewed Ric Bailey, the former Executive Editor of *Question Time*, the long running BBC program in the UK which has a similar structure to Q&A in many respects.

Although not required to do so, we believed it relevant, and indeed critical by way of comparison, to also look at a significant number of Q&A programs in 2012 when the Federal Labor government was in office.

Despite some newspaper editorials and columns suggesting otherwise this was never intended to be an overall review of the ABC. Nor was it commissioned in response to the highly controversial program of June 22, 2015. The review of Q&A had already been identified by the ABC in advance of the controversial appearance on the program of Zaky Mallah, a former terrorism suspect.

Both the ABC's Managing Director and Board subsequently apologised for the decision to allow Zaky Mallah to appear live on Q&A as part of the studio audience. The program's Executive Producer, Peter McEvoy, also received a formal warning under the ABC's misconduct provisions.

This review does not re-visit the issue of Zaky Mallah's appearance.

In the weeks following this controversy the media – in particular News Corp newspapers – expressed outrage at Q&A and the ABC in general.

The former Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, imposed an immediate boycott on Government Ministers appearing on Q&A, colourfully arguing that the program was “*out of control*” and run by “*a lefty lynch mob*”.

In a number of editorials ‘The Australian’ newspaper variously commented that Q&A was ‘an antagonistic forum’, that this was ‘a scandal about bias, good taste and the responsibilities of the national broadcaster’, adding that the host and producers of the high-rating, flagship program ‘indulge themselves in green-left issues and advocates’ and feature ‘leftist comedians, vulgar bloggers and visiting anti-American Americans.’

The Coalition Senate Leader, Senator Eric Abetz of Tasmania, was even more acerbic, remarking a fortnight after Zaky Mallah's appearance that the Q&A panel

*“ is always stacked, the interruptions are always one-way traffic, the audience are hardly ever balanced and you sometimes shake your head and say ‘ Who is genuinely sitting back in ABC headquarters saying that this is a fair, reasonable, balanced show?’ “*

On the other side of this prolonged public slanging match, the ABC Board issued a statement that read:

*“Q&A is an important program in the ABC television schedule. It attracts a large, loyal and engaged audience. The Board considers that the program should have a long future on the ABC...”*

It was against this emotion-charged national divide that we began our detailed review of 23 episodes of Q&A.

**Ray Martin**  
**Shaun Brown**  
December 2015.

## Executive Summary

It is inevitable in a review of this nature that our findings tend to focus more on perceived shortcomings of the program than on areas where it operates well.

So it is appropriate to state in this summary that overall we have found Q&A to be a responsible, professional production that strives to meet the standards expected of it by the ABC and by the wider community.

We believe that acting on our conclusions and recommendations, usually in consequence of identified shortcomings, will assist the program to build on that foundation and will also provide the public with increased confidence in the program's standing.

It is also one of the features of this type of review that it will identify deficiencies that may not be readily apparent to the production team. In particular what may seem to be appropriate production decisions in one program may be less valid when seen in the context of the cumulative effect of similar decisions across a number of programs.

Our review identified four key areas into which most of our conclusions and recommendations can be grouped. They are characterised by their relevance not to just one of the questions posed in our terms of reference but to several of them.

## **Government Scrutiny**

**The most commonly expressed criticism is that the program lacks impartiality and maintains a left wing anti-Coalition bias. We believe, after close analysis, this general impression is not substantiated.**

As can be seen from our report the program tends to provide a platform for critical (sometimes even hostile) scrutiny of the Government's performance.

But, significantly, that negative focus, evident through the public and moderator questions, the panel commentary and the reaction of the studio audience and the Twitter stream, was applied in similar measure to the ALP when it was in Government in 2012<sup>1</sup>.

During the 2015 review period the program represented a challenge to the Coalition Government not because it was the Coalition but because it was the Government.

We have concluded that, to a substantial degree, the persistent challenging of the Government of the day is not only inevitable but also desirable. Q&A functions not only as an arm of the Fourth Estate, with its attendant responsibilities to hold accountable those who exercise power, but it is also an important conduit for direct public participation in that process.

Government representatives, usually highly capable, senior Cabinet members, have much more time on Q&A than anyone else to answer the criticisms.

The focus on the Government of the day, although challenging, does not in our view breach ABC standards on impartiality. But it does place on the Q&A team a responsibility to ensure such scrutiny does not overwhelm other legitimate perspectives on the program. Or, particularly in the case of the Twitter stream, permit it to descend into cynicism.

---

<sup>1</sup> Also 2013 in the case of the Twitter stream.

On occasions, in this report, we have recommended the program adjust that focus to ensure a broader diversity of perspectives including those that may represent a more positive view on the performance of the Government of the day.

## Gender Balance

**The representation and participation of females on Q&A panels was significantly below that of their male counterparts. There were fewer female panelists and those that were selected were asked fewer questions and permitted far less time to speak.**

The under-representation of women in Q&A discussions may not have been readily apparent to the program's producers as it was created by the cumulative effect of a number of different decisions, some of which the producers may have felt were outside their control.

The program invariably having a male moderator heightened the perception of female under-representation.

But this is not a matter of perceptions alone. There were fewer female panelists in total (46% female to 54% male)<sup>2</sup>. This was due mainly to the under-representation of women selected to appear on behalf of the Coalition Government. Only 11% of Coalition panelists appearing in programs where they were matched against representatives of the Opposition were women.

The effect of this under-representation was then amplified firstly by the dominance of the Government contribution to discussions (from which the female perspective was largely absent) and secondly from the lesser amount of time and involvement made available to individual female panelists by the program moderator.

We acknowledge that there were fewer female Coalition members to choose from and that the final decision on which Government representative was to appear on Q&A may have been subject to party approval.

---

<sup>2</sup> When two single gender programs are excluded the ratio is 57% male to 43% female.

But notwithstanding those constraints we concluded that Q&A has an obligation to:

1. Provide higher levels of female representation among political panelists and in particular among those representing the Government.
2. Ensure panels are not routinely composed of more men than women.
3. Ensure women panelists are treated equally in the allocation of questions and time.

We are not confident that the ABC Editorial Policies offer sufficient guidance on the equal treatment of women in information programs and recommend they be amended to rectify that.

## **Broadcast Location**

**Broadcasting nearly all the programs under review from a single Sydney location<sup>3</sup> renders Q&A's compliance with ABC Editorial Standards 4.2<sup>4</sup> and 4.5<sup>5</sup> impossible. It also undermines the program's claim to represent "democracy in action".**

We should state from the outset that we accept that Q&A is broadcast mainly from the ABC studios in Ultimo because of logistical and budgetary constraints. Our understanding from comments made both by the Q&A team and ABC management is that the ABC would prefer that the program travel to other centres on a more regular basis but that the high financial costs involved have precluded that.

*Question Time*, the BBC program on which Q&A was originally based emanates from a different part of Britain almost every week. While a third of its broadcasts do come from London, they are almost always from a suburban town hall or public venue rather than the BBC studio. This is a deliberate strategy to ensure that the program hears local questions and concerns right across the country<sup>6</sup>.

It is our conclusion that Q&A should also be broadcast from the fullest range of locations across Australia not just because it is preferable but because it is essential if deficiencies in the program's performance against ABC standards are to be remedied.

Broadcasting mainly from a fixed location has created a Sydney-centric bias in the selection of panelists, audience and questions. There were more Sydney panelists than from all the other major cities combined. Around 70% of all audiences and questioners lived in Sydney and about 85% of those came from the central and inner suburbs.

---

<sup>3</sup> 20 programs were broadcast from the Ultimo studios in Sydney, and one each from the Sydney Showground, Melbourne and Canberra.

<sup>4</sup> Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.

<sup>5</sup> Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

<sup>6</sup> Ric Bailey, Chief Advisor, Politics, BBC

One of the consequences of audiences and questioners being drawn from such a constrained demographic “pool” is a high level of repeat attendees (around 20%) in the studio audience and a surprisingly high number of the same people asking questions on more than one program.

However large the population of the central and inner suburbs of Sydney it cannot be regarded as representative of all Australia. The perspectives of those who live elsewhere are not adequately represented among Q&A panelists, audiences, questioners and twitterati<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Contributions to the twitter stream are affected by time zone rather than location constraints.*

## **Program Principles**

**The program should develop and make public an explanation of the processes and protocols it uses to meet the standards required by the ABC Editorial Policies. This would increase public confidence in the program and also provide greater clarity within the production and the ABC generally of the program's operating procedures.**

There were a number of instances where the ABC Editorial Policies and the accompanying guidance notes did not provide relevant advice or instruction on issues arising from our review. We are not altogether surprised by that. Such documents cannot address every circumstance.

Furthermore Q&A does not fit comfortably into the traditional view of an information or current affairs program for which most of the Editorial Policies are written.

Yet we would suggest that Q&A is the ABC program that attracts media criticism and controversy on a more regular basis than any other. It is evident from our report that much of the criticism that we are aware of is not justified; certainly in the extreme language used. Some of it we believe results from a lack of understanding of the processes and protocols under which Q&A operates. That is understandable as such operating procedures are not public knowledge.

We believe they should be. Much of the detail that would belong in a published Q&A Program Principles already exists. The program has internal policies for the selection of audiences, panellists, questions and the twitter stream. But they are not documented let alone published.

There are other areas, such as the role of the moderator, where we believe even the exercise of defining the mandate and limits of that position would be beneficial to all parties.

The Q&A Program Principles should be an explanation of the means by which the program ensures it conforms with the relevant ABC Editorial Policies and should cover all the elements of the program subject to this review: Topics, Panels, Audience, Moderator, Questions and Social Media.

We make this recommendation not with the intention of shackling the program but rather to free it from the sort of ill-informed criticism it has received based on an assumption that the program operates in an arbitrary manner. We believe Q&A has nothing to fear, and much to gain, by offering transparency of process and protocols to all its stakeholders.

## **Other Recommendations**

There are a number of other conclusions reached and recommendations made that fall outside the four key findings described above.

On some occasions we identify shortcomings and make no recommendation on the basis that we believe they are isolated lapses of judgement and not related to any systemic issue. Even the most stringent precautions and professional processes will not eliminate errors from high-pressure, live productions such as Q&A.

Among the formal recommendations we have made are:

In the Panels section we recommend that the selection of panelists be adjusted to provide more Federal Parliamentary representatives from the Greens and Independents. And among the overseas guests greater effort should be made to hear from more Conservative leaning panelists. Consideration should also be given to a modest increase in the number of panelists aged 35 and under.

In the Questions section we recommend that in certain circumstances relevant background information on the questioner's affiliation or qualification be provided by means of introduction – either by the questioner or the moderator. We recommend a greater number of questions be selected from the over-35 age group and repeat questioners should be allowed only on an exceptional basis.

In the Studio Audiences section we recommend the age profile of the audiences be adjusted to include more attendees from the over-35 age group.

In the Twitter Stream section we recommend that the simulcast on ABC News24 be restored so that audiences in different time zones can contribute via social media in equal measure.

## Question #1: Topics

**Featured topics for discussion. Over the relevant time period, were a suitably broad range of subjects canvassed on the program, such as would encourage a desirable diversity of perspectives and reflect the varied interests and experiences of the Australian community?**

In addressing this question and most of the others posed in the Terms of Reference it is necessary to understand the process adopted by the Q&A production team to determine each program's content. Evident in that approach is that, unlike most other discussion and current affairs programs, Q&A's outcomes are not driven by the selection of topics.

The content of a Q&A program is triggered primarily by the make-up of the panel. It is the identity of the panelists that informs to a substantial degree the questions submitted by the public. Yes, topicality of issues also plays a part but in our view it is the identity of the panelists and the questions their presence invites that defines each program.

Clearly for the program's producers the availability of outstanding and/or visiting panellists like, for example, Greek singer and politician Nana Mouskouri, Nobel Prize winning astrophysicist Brian Schmidt, science superstar Neil deGrass Tyson or Dr. Cornel West the African American scholar and poet will determine most topics discussed on those particular episodes of Q&A.

Politicians, comedians and journalists are usually expected to be "all-rounders", ready and able to discuss a broader range of topics, although Peter Grete, the recently imprisoned Al Jazeera correspondent was enlisted specifically to talk about his experience with justice and terrorism in the Middle East.

It is true that once the panel has been locked in and promoted as early as the previous Monday night Q&A publishes an on-line ‘prompt’ to its national audience, suggesting the sort of questions that might be appropriate for this particular panel or one particular guest, such as feminist icon Germaine Greer or the Head of the Australian Council of Social Service, Cassandra Goldie.

But the program-makers’ suggestions remain simply that - suggestions.

The fact is many questions submitted and eventually selected for Q&A do not conform to the “prompts” at all. Sometimes a topic that is in the news headlines of that week – which we witnessed with the coal seam gas furor around Gunnedah – did not even spark a question for the program, until a fortnight after the event hit the newspapers.

According to the Q&A producers, audiences will often take a little while to “cotton on to” an issue that professionals in the news business believe is a certainty to be raised immediately.

Looking through the 23 episodes we noticed that overseas guests are often excused from answering a question that focused on a specific Australian political topic. For example, American anti-poverty campaigner, Linda Tirado and Cosmologist Lawrence Krauss on separate occasions avoided questions about indigenous Australians and other topics, musician and film-maker Michael Franti had no comments about higher education reform or so-called “black armband” history, while “mortician to the stars”, Caitlin Doughty, wasn’t brought into discussion on a total of five separate questions.

We have emphasised this point because, in our view, the term “featured topics for discussion” does not really have application to most Q&A programs.

Topics are not chosen but rather they emerge as a consequence of the questions accepted for broadcast. We prefer, therefore, to deal more fully with the matters raised in this term of reference in Section 5, Questions.

## **Special Programs**

The exception to the general rule that panelists and questions define the program rather than topics is the category of Special Programs.

There were six Special Programs in the first six months of 2015. Five of those were defined by a clear, if broad, topic<sup>8</sup>.

Of those five programs four were prompted by topicality of issues, events or anniversaries<sup>9</sup> and one appeared to be a discretionary choice made by the Q&A producers<sup>10</sup>.

**We believe the selection of topics for Special programs was appropriate.**

---

<sup>8</sup> *The Special not defined by a topic was the Sydney Writers Festival program of May 18.*

<sup>9</sup> *Domestic Violence February 23, Budget May 25, Magna Carta June 15 and Gay Rights June 18.*

<sup>10</sup> *Feminism March 9.*

## Question #2: Panel Composition

**Was the composition of the panels such that over the course of the period assessed, Q&A met its obligations under Section 4 (particularly including the obligation to present a diversity of perspectives over time as outlined in standard 4.2, and to not unduly favour one perspective over another as outlined in standard 4.5)? In your view, does the method currently used to identify panelists work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?**

It is difficult to overstate the importance of panel selection. As indicated previously this is where the genesis of each episode occurs. It is the identity of the panelists that largely drives the nature of the questions asked and topics discussed, not the other way round.

Finding capable panelists is not easy. Many candidates might qualify on grounds of intellect, experience and clarity of opinion. But even those attributes do not guarantee his/her ability to function effectively beneath bright lights, in front of a live studio audience and surrounded by combative and articulate protagonists.

Panelists have to be able to perform in the most difficult of environments. Even seasoned politicians, blooded in the parliamentary arena of Question Time, cannot be assumed to have what it takes to be an effective contributor to Q&A.

It's also high risk for the panelists. They have no advance notice of the questions to be asked of them; they could face the most unexpected and confronting interrogation from the audience, moderator and other panelists.

It's not surprising that many possible candidates are unwilling to entertain the idea of joining a panel.

We understand the business community in particular is reluctant to appear, judging the risks far outweigh any possible benefits. While acknowledging this reluctance, we strongly believe that Q&A should renew its campaign to enlist key panellists from the business sector. The absence of leading businessmen and women leaves a significant hole in Q&A's landscape.

Against that background it is apparent that the producers of Q&A achieve an excellent hit rate in assembling each week the varied talent essential to the program's ability to inform and entertain. The evidence of their success lies in the very strong viewing audience that tunes in each week.

But we have identified some areas where we believe Q&A could improve its performance. Two of those, gender balance and location, are part of our key recommendations and relate to more than just panel selection. Other conclusions are specific to this process.

## **Political Focus**

In Question 3: Moderation of Discussions, we deal more fully with the intensity of the focus on politics in the Q&A programs we reviewed.

But it is a significant issue also in the composition of panels where that intensity was reflected in the number of political representatives present on the panels. Across all 23 programs we reviewed, current or former political representatives comprised 42% of all panelists. Current federal politicians comprised 35%.

So, greater than one third of all Q&A panelists were current members of the Federal Parliament.

The Government had the strongest presence with 19 current representatives (it would have been 20 but for the late withdrawal of invited Coalition representatives from the June 29 program). This includes one program where the Treasurer, Joe Hockey appeared solo<sup>11</sup>. The ALP had 17 representatives, the Greens one, and Independents/Others had three.

**We believe the representation of the Government and Opposition was well balanced. The fact that there were more Coalition representatives than ALP does not in our view constitute a breach of standard 4.5, particularly as two Coalition representatives appeared in Special Programs<sup>12</sup> where politics was not the primary focus.**

But we do question the low level of representation from Independents/Others and, in particular, the Greens. Three of the four representatives of these two groups appeared in the first program<sup>13</sup>, which means that throughout the remaining 22 programs reviewed, only once<sup>14</sup> did an Independent or Greens politician take part in the discussions on federal political issues.

---

<sup>11</sup> *May 25 (Budget Special)*

<sup>12</sup> *Julie Bishop (March 9, Feminism Special) and Bronwyn Bishop (June 15, Magna Carta Special).*

<sup>13</sup> *February 2, all politician panel including Larissa Waters (Greens) and John Madigan and Jacqui Lambie (Independents)*

<sup>14</sup> *May 11, Clive Palmer (PUP).*

The lack of Greens representation is particularly difficult to understand. While they occupy only 5% of the total seats in the Senate and House of Representatives their influence, particularly in the Senate, far outweighs that. The level of their public support is acknowledged by Q&A's audience segmentation. Greens supporters regularly made up around 14% of a Q&A audience. It is difficult to understand why that recognition was not reflected with a stronger presence on the panels.

### **Recommendation #1**

**A greater level representation of politicians from the Greens and Independent/Others parties should be present on panels.**

## Progressive/Conservative

Outside of party political lines the other test that could be applied to determine whether the panel selection met its obligations under standards 4.2 and 4.5 is to measure panel make up on a Progressive/Conservative axis.

We approached this with considerable caution. First it required us to define those labels and then to make a judgment, which inevitably involved a degree of subjectivity, on which panelists fit into which category, Progressive or Conservative?

For this exercise we used broad definitions that identified Progressives as being advocates of social reform, favouring among other policies more rights for women and minorities and redistribution of wealth. For Conservatives we adopted a definition of greater emphasis on traditional values, favouring among other policies free enterprise, private ownership, and socially conservative ideas.

We acknowledge that most people do not fit comfortably into a single category, however broadly defined. But we still believe the exercise has validity.

We adopted a protocol of labeling panelists only where we believed a fit was clearly apparent. If we had doubts about the leaning of an individual panelist we made no attempt to align him/her to a particular category.

Of the 113 panelists, we decided only 75 justified a Progressive or Conservative label. The 75 panelists were split 40 Progressive to 35 Conservative.

**Given our methodology can be relied on for only a broad finding we believe this is a reasonable balance of Progressive and Conservative panelists and is consistent with the obligations under standards 4.2 and 4.5.**

In one particular segment of the panelists –overseas guests – we did find a strong tendency to invite Progressive-leaning visitors on to Q&A. Of the 19 overseas panelists<sup>15</sup> we categorised 11 as Progressives and none as Conservatives. Eight panelists were non-aligned.

Given that the panels overall were reasonably balanced this means, presumably, that a greater number of Australian Conservatives were invited on the program so as to maintain an appropriate diversity of views.

## **Recommendation #2**

**Q&A should achieve a greater diversity of perspectives among its overseas guests by inviting on to panels a greater number of Conservative leaning visitors.**

---

<sup>15</sup> *Including Miriam Lyons, an Australian currently on sabbatical in Europe*

## Gender

During the review period 113 panelists appeared comprising 61 male and 52 female. The overall imbalance may not in itself be dramatic but if you exclude the two single gender special programs<sup>16</sup> then the ratio of 60 male to 47 female is significant.

A more detailed analysis identifies a further underlying issue that is of concern.

The imbalance between male and female panelists was due substantially to the very low level of female representation among the ranks of panelists representing political parties.

Male politicians were twice as likely to appear on Q&A as their female counterparts. Across the 23 episodes 28 male and 13 female current representatives of political parties appeared on the program (68% male to 32% female).

This, in turn, was substantially due to the marked gender imbalance among representatives of the Coalition. Overall, the Government was represented by 19 panelists of whom only four were women (79% male to 21% female). Excluding some special programs<sup>17</sup>, the 16 programs where Coalition panelists were aligned against Opposition panelists featured only two female representatives of Government (89% male to 11% female).

In itself the low representation of female Federal politicians is of concern. But the impact of this under-representation of the female perspective among Coalition panelists is then amplified firstly by the dominance of the Government contribution to discussions (from which the female perspective is largely absent) and secondly from the lesser amount of time and involvement made available to individual female panelists by the program moderator. This is dealt with in the subsequent section covering the role of the moderator.

---

<sup>16</sup> *The Feminism Special on March 9 featured five female panelists and the Budget Special on May 25 featured Joe Hockey on his own.*

<sup>17</sup> *Julie Bishop (March 9, Feminism Special) and Bronwyn Bishop (June 15, Magna Carta Special) were not representing the Government in debate with the Opposition and Joe Hockey (May 25, Budget Special) appeared solo.*

But returning to the question of the gender imbalance among political panelists and Coalition representatives in particular, we are conscious that this is a problem not entirely of Q&A's making. Indeed the program may argue the gender balance of political representation on Q&A is in line with the make-up of Parliament overall and the Government ministry at the time.

During the review period Federal Parliament comprised 157 male and 69 female representatives<sup>18</sup> (69% male to 31% female), which was closely aligned to the 68% male and 32% female political panelist allocation on Q&A. The Government ministry was 25 male and 5 female<sup>19</sup> (83% male to 17% female) again broadly in line with Q&A panelists.

But we question whether this practice, if it is deliberate, is appropriate.

Faithfully reflecting the gender balance in Parliament when allocating places on Q&A panels, in our view, challenges the program's ability to provide an appropriate diversity of perspectives.

Apart from diminishing the female voice in political discourse the program may even be contributing to the underlying issue by creating in the minds of viewers the impression that male dominance of politics is a natural state of affairs.

We are not sure whether standard 4.5 applies to this issue. Does permitting male dominance of political debate on Q&A constitute unduly favouring one perspective over another? We suspect the issue of gender balance was not in the minds of the authors of the ABC Editorial Policies when they drafted standards 4.2 and 4.5. But we believe this is an important issue and we can find no other ABC standards that clearly address it. We make a recommendation on this matter in Question 3: Moderation of Discussion.

### **Recommendation #3:**

**The program should achieve higher levels of female representation among political panelists and in particular among those representing the Government.**

---

<sup>18</sup> *Representation of Women in Australian Parliaments 2014, Dr Joy McCann and Janet Wilson*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

We note that the program did exceed, albeit slightly, the gender balance in the shadow ministry when choosing panelists to represent the Opposition. During the review period the shadow ministry of the ALP was 18 male and 11 female<sup>20</sup> (62% male to 38% female). Representatives of the ALP on Q&A panels comprised 10 male and 7 female (59% male to 41% female).

We acknowledge that the final decision on which politician appears on Q&A may well be subject to the approval of the party leadership. We hope that by identifying this issue and recommending stronger levels of female representation on the program the producers of Q&A will be assisted in their negotiations with the leadership of political parties.

Should that not be the case then we believe the program should investigate other options, including from the State level of politics, to achieve the desired female representation<sup>21</sup>.

In part the under-representation of female political panelists is offset by the female representation among the non-political panelists. In the review period 33 male and 39 female panelists who were not current politicians appeared on Q&A (46% male to 54% female).

It is our understanding that this occurred in accordance with an internal program policy that required panels never had less than two female members.

While in our view the setting of a minimum level of female participation is commendable and consistent with the program's obligation to provide an appropriate diversity of perspectives, too often the minimum also became the maximum. After excluding the two single gender programs<sup>22</sup>, the remaining 21 in the review period featured the minimum two female panelists on 16 occasions (76%).

In other words, three quarters of the Q&A episodes we were asked to examine featured three males (plus the male moderator) with only two females.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>21</sup> *The recent appearance of NSW Premier, Mike Baird shows the potential value of including State politicians.*

<sup>22</sup> *March 9, Feminism Special and May 25, Budget Special*

On only two occasions was there an equal number of male and female panelists and on only three occasions did the number of female panelists actually exceed the number of males.

We accept that female under-representation among political panelists lies behind these findings but we believe the outcome is not acceptable and requires a strong commitment to greater female participation overall.

**Recommendation #4:**

**The composition of Q&A panels should not routinely feature more men than women.**

The male dominance of the panels is further amplified by the fact that the moderator is invariably a male. We are not suggesting this be changed but we do believe it heightens the on-screen perception of gender imbalance.

## **Age Profile**

We assessed the age profile of the panellists by placing them into three groups. Of the 113 panelists, 10 were aged 35 and under (9%); 69 were aged 36-55 (61%) and 34 were aged 56 and over (30%).

It can be argued that the dominance of those aged 36-55 reflected the levels of experience, engagement and authority held by this age group in society generally.

But, having regard to the age profile of the studio and viewing audiences and the studio questioners, we believe there is merit in adjusting the panel make up to include slightly more panelists from the younger age group.

### **Recommendation #5**

**Consideration should be given to a modest increase in the number of panelists aged 35 and under.**

## **Constraints of Location**

One of the key conclusions of this review is that Q&A failed to meet the diversity of perspectives standard defined in 4.2 of the Editorial Policies because the vast majority of programs were broadcast from the Sydney studios. During the period under review 21 of the 23 programs were staged in Sydney<sup>23</sup>.

The impact of this constraint is dealt with in greater detail in Question #4: Questions and Question #5: Studio Audiences.

But, in our opinion, it also had an effect on the make-up of the panels. The following table compares the percentage of panelists from each state to the percentage of population for each of those states and territories. Overseas panelists have been excluded from the calculation.

### **Q&A Panel Composition by State & Territory**

<b>States/Territories</b>	<b>Number of Panelists</b>	<b>Share of Panelists</b>	<b>Share of Population</b>
<b>NSW</b>	43	46%	32%
<b>VIC</b>	24	26%	25%
<b>QLD</b>	8	9%	20%
<b>WA</b>	5	5%	11%
<b>SA</b>	6	6%	7%
<b>TAS</b>	2	1%	2%
<b>NT&amp;ACT</b>	6	6%	3%

---

<sup>23</sup> Programs outside of Sydney were April 20, Melbourne and June 15, Canberra.

NSW based panelists were selected in far greater numbers than the state’s population would suggest is appropriate. Furthermore, overseas guests visiting Sydney were just as likely to appear on a Q&A panel as representatives from the states of WA, SA, Tasmania and the Territories combined.

The Sydney bias is even more explicit in an analysis of panelists from major cities<sup>24</sup>, again compared to the share of the populations of those cities<sup>25</sup>.

### Q&A Panel Composition by City

City	Number of City based Panelists	Share of City based Panelists	Share of Population
<b>Sydney</b>	36	55%	37%
<b>Melbourne</b>	19	29%	34%
<b>Brisbane</b>	2	3%	17%
<b>Perth</b>	4	6%	15%
<b>Adelaide</b>	4	6%	10%
<b>Hobart</b>	1	2%	2%

There were many more Sydney panelists than from all the other major cities combined.

We are not suggesting that Q&A should follow a strict apportionment of panelists according to population data. But, in our view, the number of Sydney panelists cannot have been due solely to selection on merit.

Selection was clearly influenced by the cost and inconvenience involved in other potential panelists having to travel interstate.

<sup>24</sup> The share of panelists is calculated as a proportion of panelists from major cities

<sup>25</sup> The share is calculated as a proportion of the total population of the six major cities

The consequence of that constraint is that the national audience is exposed disproportionately to the views and perspectives of residents of one major city. In our view different regional perspectives are important and audiences in Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane should be entitled to see those perspectives being advanced by members of their communities.

**Recommendation #6:**

**Regardless of the practical difficulties involved Q&A can only satisfy Editorial Policy 4.2 by sourcing panelists from across Australia. Elsewhere we recommend that more episodes of Q&A be broadcast from locations outside of Sydney. If adopted, that will facilitate the selection of a broader range of panelists.**

## Individual Programs

The conclusions and recommendations included elsewhere in this section are based on our assessment of the average panel make-up across the 23 programs.

ABC Editorial Policies clearly permit Q&A to deliver the required diversity of perspectives “*over time*”. While in many respects it is appropriate that diversity of perspectives is achieved across a series rather than in a single program, in some instances we believe an appropriate representation of views should be achieved within the individual program.

The producers of Q&A are obviously cognisant of that obligation. For instance they invariably match Government and Opposition representatives in a single program. Similarly they attempt to maintain a broad balance of Progressive and Conservative panellists within a program and their commitment to never having less than two female panelists on each panel is an attempt to provide some form of gender balance within each program.

With the exception of gender balance, we find the producers manage this obligation well and in the overwhelming majority of programs we reviewed we found an appropriate mix of perspectives delivered by a broadly balanced panel. The concerns we have expressed earlier in this section arise from the cumulative selections across all programs and not necessarily from the selection of individual panels.

But we did identify two programs (out of the sample of 23) where the panels did not, in our opinion, satisfy a reasonable test of a balance of perspectives within the individual program.

The program of June 18 was a special episode discussing progress on the rights of the LGBTI community and was broadcast immediately following the screening of the documentary *Between a Frock and a Hard Place*. It included debate on marriage equality.

The panel comprised five gay or transgender panelists<sup>26</sup> and NSW MP, Fred Nile, the founder of the Christian Democratic Party. The Rev Nile opposed homosexual decriminalisation in 1984, believes homosexual acts are morally wrong and in breach of “God’s law” and strongly opposes same-sex marriage.

We question the panel composition on two grounds.

- 1. The Rev Nile was a single voice on one side arguing against five formidable advocates on the other.**
- 2. The Rev Nile’s fundamentalist views on marriage equality did not adequately represent the range of opinions held by other opponents of this proposed reform. If the merits of this proposal were to be properly debated other, more nuanced perspectives deserved inclusion.**

In our view Q&A had two choices in mounting this special; have a panel comprised entirely of representatives of the LGBTI community (similar to the approach adopted by the Feminism Special on March 9) where the viewing audience would have understood these were uncontested views or, have a panel comprised of a diversity of views where the merits of marriage equality and other issues raised by the LGBTI community could be properly and fairly discussed.

We believe the option taken, to have a token, single and not entirely appropriate voice of opposition included in the panel, was poorly judged.

The other panel composition we question was in the program broadcast on June 22. The panel was expanded to six members four of whom, in our judgement, were Progressive voices and only two Conservative<sup>27</sup>.

While accepting that a complete mathematical balance is not expected or required by the Editorial Policies, we were curious as to how the panel had ended up so lopsided. The tone of the discussion, particularly as the two Progressives from overseas were strident and outspoken, reflected the imbalance.

---

<sup>26</sup> Dennis Altman, Paul Capsis, Julie McCrossin, Julia Doulman and Katherine Hudson.

<sup>27</sup> We assessed Linda Tirado, Joel Fitzgibbon, Dee Madigan and Antony Hegarty as being Progressive and Steve Ciobo and Grahame Morris as Conservative.

We make no recommendations on these conclusions as we regard them as isolated lapses in judgement and not symptomatic of any systemic issue.

### Question #3: Moderation of Discussions

**Were panel discussions moderated in a way that ensured fair treatment was achieved, both in relation to the panelists present and the topic under discussion (with particular reference to standard 4.1)?**

Although we have adopted the description “moderator” to describe the role of the host of Q&A it is apparent to us that the term does not fully cover the performance required of the program’s presenter.

Certainly the obligation to moderate the discussion so that participants (we would include questioners as well as panelists) and subject matter are treated fairly and with “*due impartiality*”<sup>28</sup> is the overriding responsibility of the presenter. The greater part of this section addresses the discharge of that duty.

It is also important, we believe, to acknowledge that more is required of the Q&A host if the program is to continue to attract and engage a large viewing audience.

A live, prime time television discussion involving heavy hitters from politics and the commentariat as well as people of influence and standing from both here and overseas makes considerable demands on the host and requires journalism skills, and dare we say it, entertainment talent that should not be underestimated.

The host’s performance must be commanding, yet not overly intrusive, able to navigate and direct both serious discourse and witty byplay and be able to respond or contribute to the inevitable banter that is part of the program’s attraction.

---

<sup>28</sup> *Standard 4.1 of the ABC Editorial Policies states: Gather and present news and information with due impartiality*

The management of the political panelists is particularly challenging.

From our observations politicians appearing on such programs can be overly assertive, interrupt at will, remonstrate with the moderator, and demand a constant right of reply. They are also skilled at avoiding direct answers and maintaining a pre-determined “on-message” performance regardless of what is put to them.

The host of Q&A has to ensure that in the face of such tactics the questions from the studio audience are properly answered avoiding confrontation where possible and maintaining the fluidity and lively tone that characterises the program.

The success of regular Q&A Coalition panelists like Malcolm Turnbull, Joe Hockey, Christopher Pyne and Barnaby Joyce is evidence of how politically valuable the program can be, for those who know how to engage in debate, challenge the moderator or are agile enough to handle any unexpected question thrown at them.

## **Political Focus**

It is our assumption that the mission of Q&A is to a large degree inspired by the long running BBC program *Question Time* broadcast in the UK. Its raison d'être is *"to give people an opportunity to scrutinise directly senior politicians and others who exercise power and influence."*<sup>29</sup>

Q&A's original mission statement (2008) reflected a similar objective: *"It doesn't matter who you are, or where you're from – everyone can have a go and take it up to our politicians and opinion makers."*

It follows then that there is a deliberate and justifiable focus on politics in most Q&A programs. In the previous section on Panel selection we have detailed the allocation of places to current politicians. We now address the manner in which those politicians are treated.

We analysed this in two ways, assessing the number and type of questions put to the panelists by the moderator and the amount of speaking time panelists were allowed.

The first assessment was drawn from a careful viewing of the 23 programs. We identified two categories of panel management by the moderator.

First, we wanted to find out how audience questions were allocated to individual panelists by the moderator, and also how many times answers were volunteered by panelists without being asked any specific question by the moderator. We have labeled this category Primary.

The second category was when the moderator interrupted or followed up a panelist's answer with further questions. This can take the form of a request for clarification, a challenge, or a related supplementary question. This is labeled Secondary.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ric Bailey, Chief Advisor, Politics, BBC

When adding up the amount of speaking time for each panellist it wasn't practical to carry out a forensic stopwatch analysis of every panelist, across every program.

Instead, we used the program's online transcripts to count the number of lines panelists took to give their answers or engage in discussion. We believe that is a suitable measure of a panelist's air- time.

Across all 23 programs, including those specials that did not include any current politicians, political representatives received 45% of the speaking time available to panellists. Given the political focus of Q&A this is not surprising even though politicians comprised only 36% of panel positions (41 of 113 panelists).

Nor is it surprising that when the six specials<sup>30</sup> were excluded, political representatives received 51% of speaking time although they comprised 42% of panel positions.

Of greater significance though is the dominance of Government representatives in both speaking time and the allocation of questions.

To avoid any distortion in our analysis of time given to, or taken by, politicians we have excluded the previously identified six specials as well as the program of June 29 that was subject to a Government boycott. All the remaining 16 programs featured representatives of Government and Opposition on the same program and, occasionally, representatives of other parties. The moderator for all 16 programs was Tony Jones.

---

<sup>30</sup> *February 23, Family Violence; March 9, Feminism; May 18, Sydney Writers' Festival; May 25, Budget; June 15, Magna Carta; June 18, Gay Rights.*

## Speaking Time by Panelist Group (16 Programs)

Group	% of overall time	Number of Panelists	% of time per Panelist
<b>Government</b>	31%	16	31%
<b>ALP</b>	18%	16	18%
<b>Greens/Others</b>	3%	4	12%
<b>Not Politicians</b>	48%	45	17%

On average a Government representative received 70% more speaking time than a representative of the Opposition (and 160% more than Greens and Others).

We should point out that receiving additional time is very much a mixed blessing for the Government of the day.

While it certainly provides greater opportunity to try and persuade the electorate of the efficacy of its administration, the extra time is much more likely to be a result of the Government representative being on the back foot, fending off challenging questions from the audience and moderator and responding to critical comments from other panelists.

We would maintain that it is this dynamic that generates an oft-repeated criticism of Q&A – that its relentless challenging of the Coalition Government is unfair.

To reach any conclusion on the validity of this criticism it is necessary to understand how the allocation of additional time comes about.

To that end we analysed the allocation of questions by the moderator using the Primary/Secondary methodology described above. We should point out that although we (and the viewers) attribute decisions on question allocation to the moderator, in reality the judgments are not always his or hers alone. The moderator receives regular suggestions and instructions via earpiece from the Executive Producer in the studio control room.

Looking only at the 16 programs where both Government and Opposition are represented, a clear picture emerges.

### Average Q&A Allocation by Group (16 Programs)

Group	Average Primary Q&A's Per Program	Average Secondary Q&A's Per program
<b>Government</b>	10.9	12.7
<b>ALP</b>	7.3	5
<b>Greens/Others<sup>31</sup></b>	5.8	1.8
<b>Not Politicians<sup>32</sup></b>	7.1	3.1

In all, the Government responds to twice as many questions as the Opposition. That this is due, in part, to the thrust and direction of the initial questions posed by the audience members is reflected in the Primary findings.

But the biggest difference occurs in the Secondary grouping where Government representatives are questioned by the moderator directly.

There are a number of reasons why the moderator is justified in stepping in to ask questions.

<sup>31</sup> Greens and Others appeared in 2 of the 16 programs. The average Q&A's relate only to the programs they appeared in.

<sup>32</sup> Non Political panelists appeared in 15 of the 16 programs. The average Q&A's relate only to the programs they appeared in.

1. Perhaps the most important function of the moderator is to ensure that the question posed by an audience member is answered properly. That may require the question being put again to a panelist.
2. If an answer is unclear the moderator may seek further clarification.
3. If an answer is inconsistent with the panelist's previous statements or the position of the party he/she represents then the moderator is justified in challenging it.
4. The answer of one political panelist may require the moderator, on grounds of fairness, to offer a right of reply to his opposite political panelist.
5. An answer may suggest a related supplementary question.

Whatever the justification, it is apparent that the moderator is much more likely to direct questions to and challenge answers from a Government representative than other panelists. That begs two questions:

- 1. Is the more intense scrutiny of Government representatives justified?**
- 2. Is the scrutiny during the review period in any way due to the Coalition being in Government as opposed to another Party?**

Implicit in much of the current criticism of Q&A from certain quarters is that it is biased to the left and therefore treats the Coalition Government unfairly. That view was graphically put earlier this year by the then Prime Minister Tony Abbott: *"...Q&A is a lefty lynch mob."*

It is our view that there is only one way to test whether the Government scrutiny by Q&A is varied according to the party in power. Although not required by the Terms of Reference covering this review we decided that it was necessary to review Q&A programs broadcast during the previous Labor Government, in an identical way.

We identified the comparable period during the last Government's term of office as being the first six months of 2012 (the same first 6 month period of the middle year of office). Of the 22 programs broadcast during this period nine were specials, single panelist or had no party political representation.

The remaining 13 were reviewed using the same approach applied to the 2015 programs.

Using the “line count” methodology the following results were obtained and are here represented against the 2015 outcomes.

### **Comparison of Speaking Time between 2012 and 2015<sup>33</sup>**

<b>Group</b>	<b>% of time per Panelist</b>
<b>2012 ALP Government</b>	29%
<b>2015 Coalition Government</b>	31%
<b>2012 Coalition Opposition</b>	22%
<b>2015 ALP Opposition</b>	18%

The pattern of Government dominance of speaking time is evident in 2012 although not to the same degree as in 2015.

The most significant difference is the greater amount of speaking time allowed to the Coalition when it was in Opposition in 2012 compared to the time allowed the ALP Opposition in 2015.

Similarly we reviewed the 2012 programs using the Primary/Secondary methodology to assess and compare the moderator’s allocation of questions with 2015.

---

<sup>33</sup> 2015 findings are based on data from the 16 programs in which Government and Opposition representatives were matched against each other.

## Comparison of Average Q&A Allocation 2012 and 2015<sup>34</sup>

Group	Average Primary Q&A's Per Program	Average Secondary Q&A's Per program
<b>2012 ALP Government</b>	10.3	9.9
<b>2015 Coalition Government</b>	10.9	12.7
<b>2012 Coalition Opposition</b>	10	7.3
<b>2015 ALP Opposition</b>	7.3	5

Again the pattern of more questions being directed to Government representatives is evident in 2012, although not to the same degree as in 2015.

Allowing for a reasonable margin of error, the differences between 2012 and 2015 that may be considered of significance are:

- 1. The greater amount of speaking time taken by the Coalition in Opposition in 2012 compared to the ALP in Opposition in 2015 (22% compared to 18%).**
- 2. The greater number of Primary questions put to the Coalition in Opposition in 2012 compared to the ALP in Opposition in 2015 (10 compared to 7.3).**
- 3. The greater number of Secondary questions put to the Coalition in Opposition in 2012 compared to the ALP in Opposition in 2015 (7.3 to 5)**
- 4. The greater number of Secondary questions put to the Coalition in Government in 2015 compared to the ALP in Government in 2012 (12.7 compared to 9.9).**

---

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

The difference identified in 2. can be explained, at least in part, by a closer examination of the segments comprising Primary Q&As. In addition to the initial audience questions being allocated by the moderator this category also includes other answers provided by panelists even though they were not specifically invited to do so by the moderator.

In other words it captures occasions where panelists jump in to answer a question not directed to them (and where the moderator permits that to happen).

In 2012 the Coalition in Opposition jumped in on average 3 times per program while in 2015 the ALP in Opposition did so only once per program. This means the number of truly Primary questions put to the Opposition by the moderator was almost the same for 2012 and 2015 (7 in 2012 and 6 in 2015).

Furthermore the extra number of “unprompted” answers provided by the Opposition in 2012 goes some way to explaining the additional time taken by the Coalition representatives compared to the ALP Opposition in 2015 as identified in 1.

In any event it is our observation that, by and large, the Opposition panelists benefit from extra time and “unprompted” answers. Although not immune from challenging questions from the audience and moderator, such panelists are, on balance, more likely to be in attack mode, challenging and criticising the Government’s performance. In our view, any Opposition party should, and probably does, relish such a platform.

It also seems to us that, in comparing 2012 and 2015, it could be said the Coalition in Opposition was more effective in performing that role on Q&A than the current ALP Opposition. Certainly that is supported by the Coalition’s use of the opportunity in 2012 to jump into a discussion and give “unprompted” answers.

It is difficult to determine whether the difference identified in 3. is similarly beneficial to the Coalition.

That conclusion revealed the Coalition received more Secondary questions in Opposition in 2012 than the ALP in Opposition in 2015 (7.3 to 5). Secondary questions comprise three categories – questions seeking clarification, challenges to answers and supplementary questions. The Coalition in 2012 received more clarification questions than the ALP in 2015 (3.3 to .6) but the ALP in 2015 was more likely to be challenged than the Coalition in 2012 (3.6 to 2.5). The ALP in 2015 also received more supplementary questions than the Coalition in 2012 (1.5 to .8).

**On balance, while it is evident the Coalition Opposition received more time and questions than the ALP Coalition, we are inclined to view this as probably beneficial to the Coalition and reflective of the more engaged and assertive performance of its representatives in 2012 than the ALP in 2015.**

But does this demonstrate an inconsistent approach by the Moderator, permitting the Coalition Opposition greater freedom to interject, answer more questions and consume more time than their ALP counterparts in 2015? Although three years apart it could be argued that this would constitute a breach of standard 4.5 (*Do not unduly favour one perspective over another*). We do not believe that to be the case.

**Having observed both sets of programs we are satisfied that the treatment of the two Oppositions was reflective of the circumstances of the time and the dynamics of the issues and panelists featured on the programs. The comparative benefit obtained by the Coalition in 2012 was not, in our view, due to a lack of impartiality by the Moderator.**

But if the Coalition benefited from extra questions and time in Opposition in 2012 it could be argued that the additional Secondary questions put to it in Government in 2015 were not beneficial and instead posed a greater challenge than that put to the ALP in Government in 2012.

We believe this difference is due to the manner in which a handful of programs were moderated at the beginning of the 2015 series. Four programs broadcast during February and March featured an unusually high level of Secondary questions put to the Government representative (and in one instance, the Opposition) by the moderator.

A particular element of this questioning deserves consideration. There were occasions where the moderator seemed intent on securing a new or varied policy position from the panelist despite it being apparent that one was not forthcoming.

The following examples all involve the moderator (not the original audience questioner) directing a persistent line of questioning to a panelist.

Feb 2: Barnaby Joyce questioned on whether the Treasurer's push for state asset sales was a mistake.

Feb 9: Jamie Briggs questioned on whether the proposed Medicare co-payment would be dropped and whether superannuation tax subsidies for the rich should be discontinued.

Mar 2: Josh Frydenberg questioned on how improved childcare and paid parental leave would be funded.

Mar 2: Andrew Leigh (Opposition) questioned on likely funding of ALP proposals.

Mar 16: Joe Hockey questioned on the need for further stimulation of the economy, industrial relations reform and changes to superannuation concessions.

We do not challenge the legitimacy of these questions or that they should be put forcefully. But, because it is extremely unlikely a new policy statement would be forthcoming in such circumstances, we see little point in the questions being repeated (sometimes in slightly different form) on several occasions.

Perhaps it was in the hope of an unguarded comment or a slip up generating a news headline. In any event the repeated questioning served to elevate the Secondary question count and to create a perspective of the panelist being relentlessly pursued for a response.

By way of comparison we could identify only one occasion in our 2012 review period where the ALP Government was similarly questioned in such a sustained manner<sup>35</sup>.

**We hold the view that this style of interrogation and challenge is more appropriate to a one-on-one current affairs format such as the 7.30 Report. It is possible the program's producers reached the same conclusion because this approach was not evident on Q&A after the early episodes.**

The Q&A team was unable to provide us with a program brief which, among other things, would define the role of the moderator. We suggest a documented statement of principles would be useful in clarifying for all parties exactly what is expected of the moderator.

#### **Recommendation #7:**

**A set of Program Principles should be agreed between Q&A and ABC editorial management that, among other matters, define the role of the moderator. It should be a public document, displayed on the Q&A website.**

While the statistical approach has thrown up one or two anomalies we do not believe they constitute a breach of the Editorial Policies. In reaching that conclusion we have had regard also to the general impressions we have from watching all the programs in question in 2012 and 2015.

In our view the Government of 2012 (ALP) had every bit as difficult a time as its counterpart in 2015 (Coalition). In many respects watching the two sets of programs was similar to watching two productions of the same play but with different casts.

---

<sup>35</sup> *February 20, 2012; Bill Shorten*

In both periods there was ongoing discussion about leadership and speculation about a change in Prime Minister, there were charges of economic incompetency, accusations of broken promises and even controversy around alleged abuse of entitlements by the different Speakers of Parliament.

In such periods of heightened political tension it is perfectly valid for Governments to face challenging questions from the public and moderator and criticism from other panelists. Indeed, given the primacy of politics in the Q&A purpose, it is inevitable that much of the debate and question revolves around the conduct of the Government.

**We do not believe the scrutiny of Government apparent during the programs reviewed is inappropriate or in breach of the ABC Editorial Policies. However, we offer the following recommendation.**

#### **Recommendation #8**

**The focus on Government should be moderated so as to permit other issues and non-Government panelists to receive a greater share of questions and speaking time.**

## **Moderator Comments**

There is another area of moderator performance that, in our view, may be a source of some of the criticism of Q&A. In the program of June 29 panelist Tim Wilson made the following allegation:

*“And once again, Tony Jones, you have used this platform to make a snide remark and aside rather than actually addressing the fundamental issue.”*

We should state that on this occasion we do not believe the comment made by the moderator justified Mr Wilson’s allegation, but his claim is one that is often made either on the program or by external critics.

Are comments made by the moderator evidence of partiality or are they part of the general banter that often accompanies the discussions? Is the moderator trying to score a “gotcha” moment or is he/her trying to provide some added humour to the proceedings? Should the moderator be even permitted to make comments?

First, as alluded to earlier in this report, we believe the moderator does have a significant role in contributing to the “entertainment” element of the program. He/she does have responsibility for ensuring the production contains a suitable degree of light and shade.

Furthermore, the panelists are among the brightest and most articulate commentators in Australia. The moderator cannot be a plodding and dull administrator of time and questions uninformed by the wit and banter of the sharp intellects that surround him/her.

So it is our view that the program, if it is to continue to capture a large and varied audience, requires the moderator to be capable not only of managing the serious discourse which is central to the program’s purpose but to be an active participant in the by-play of comment and humour that is essential to the program’s appeal.

This of course requires a balanced approach. The ringmaster is not the main act. Careful judgment is required to ensure he/she maintains an appropriate level of detachment, a sensible gravitas while occasionally, when circumstances permit, adding some spice to the proceedings.

It is inevitable that, within 23 hours of live and often controversial television, the moderator's judgment will not always be perfect.

We identified a handful of occasions where the moderator appears to have overreached himself (the examples all involve Tony Jones), where comments reflect, in our view, questionable judgment.

March 2:

Tony Jones: *Josh Frydenberg, if you had one word to describe Tony Abbott and we should leave out the one that some of your colleagues, at least, would probably give him and this is "doomed".*

March 30:

Michael Franti: *...they're looking for a bigger, better, cheaper Viagra pill, you know, that can sell a lot which I'm sure a lot of politicians would probably like that type of pill but...*

Tony Jones: (to Christopher Pyne) *Do you want to jump in there, Christopher, by any chance?*

April 20:

Tony Jones: (interrupting Dave Hughes speaking about alcohol and sport) *What about Tony Abbott. He doesn't look like a drinker but he is, as it turns out."*

May 4:

Mark Butler: (talking about politicians and humour) *In spite of it often being incredibly uncomfortable, and cringe-worthy sometimes, it is...*

Tony Jones: (interrupting) *Sorry, are we talking about Bill Shorten?*

June 1:

Jack Charles: *To remove us off our – you know the people of the Top End, to remove them from their lands, to develop – you know to take away funding for the remote territories and that, strikes me as peculiar, strange, and I can't I'm trying to look for another word and I can't find another word.*

Tony Jones; *There's actually a phrase and the phrase was "lifestyle choice".*

June 1:

Judith Sloan: (talking about the power to strip Australians of their citizenship) *It's someone who may be able to claim the citizenship of another country. I mean it seems to me that the way I'd like to see it go...*

Tony Jones: (interrupting) *Someone like Tony Abbott you mean?*

We don't intend this handful of examples of overreach or poor judgment to be defining of Tony Jones' contribution. To the contrary, more often than not, his occasional interjects and asides are appropriate and effective, adding piquancy to the discussions without being disruptive or intrusive.

Nevertheless the examples we have given are the type of comments that, in our view, feed into some of the criticism of Q&A and, in particular, the performance of the moderator.

**We have not identified a particular guideline against which such matters should be judged. We can, therefore, offer only our professional view that the moderator should be careful not to exceed the boundaries of his/her role however infrequently.**

## **Gender**

In the previous section dealing with Panel selection we have identified an imbalance in gender composition of the panels generally and in particular among those panelists representing the Government. We now address the consequential impact of this imbalance and the way in which it is further compounded by the allocation of questions and time by the moderator.

For the purpose of this analysis we have excluded the two special programs where only one gender was represented in each<sup>36</sup>.

Using the above “line-count” methodology we estimate that the panelists’ overall speaking time across the 21 programs was split 62% male and 38% female. While this skewed result was heavily influenced by the greater number of male panelists it is also the case that on average a male was permitted to speak for 22% of the available time while a female was allowed only 17%.

Furthermore, in almost two-thirds of the programs, it was a female panelist that received the shortest speaking time.

As explained earlier, this significant imbalance resulted from the fact that Government panelists – who were mostly men - received more questions and speaking time, than every other panelist.

But even if female Government representatives were given the same time as their male colleagues (and they weren’t) it would not have restored the balance overall.

In the following table we compare the speaking time allowed, on average, for male and female representatives of different groups<sup>37</sup>. This demonstrates that in all groups, except the ALP, a female representative was likely to receive less speaking time than their male counterpart in the same group.

---

<sup>36</sup> *March 9, Feminism Special and May 25, Budget Special*

<sup>37</sup> *The calculation measures the average speaking time by for each gender by group measured against the average speaking time available on average across the 21 programs.*

### Average Program Time Allocated by Gender (21 Programs)

Panelists	Average % of Program Time for Individual Male Panelist	Average % of Program Time for Individual Female Panelist
<b>Government Reps<sup>38</sup></b>	34%	26%
<b>ALP Reps<sup>39</sup></b>	19%	19%
<b>Greens &amp; Others<sup>40</sup></b>	14%	11%
<b>Not Politicians<sup>41</sup></b>	18%	16%

So, how does the moderator engage both the male and female panelists? Is there a discernible pattern? We used the Primary/Secondary method of analysis as outlined earlier in this section.

### Average Q&A Allocation by Gender (21 Programs)

Categories	Average Q&A for individual Male Panelists per Program	Average Q&A for individual Female Panelists per Program
<b>Primary</b>	8.2	7.2
<b>Secondary</b>	6.1	2.9
<b>Total</b>	14.3	10.1

<sup>38</sup> Government representatives appeared in 17 of the 21 programs (14 male, 3 female)

<sup>39</sup> ALP representatives appeared in 17 of the 21 programs (10 male, 7 female)

<sup>40</sup> Greens/Others appeared in two of the 21 programs (2 male, 2 female)

<sup>41</sup> Not Politicians appeared in 20 of the 21 programs (34 males, 35 females)

It is readily apparent that in the 21 programs, where both genders were represented, males were likely to be involved more in the questions and answers than women. The biggest contributor to this outcome was the greater level of Secondary engagement directed by the moderator to men.

The table below focuses on the allocation of those Secondary questions to the different panel groupings.

### **Average Allocation of Secondary Q&As by Gender (21 Programs)**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Average Secondary Q&amp;As for Male Panelists</b>	<b>Average Secondary Q&amp;As for Female Panelists</b>
<b>Government</b>	13.4	5.6
<b>All Other Politicians</b>	4.9	3.6
<b>Not Politicians</b>	3.4	2.5

The biggest difference occurs in the treatment of Government representatives.

There were only three female Government panelists, Bronwyn Bishop, Fiona Nash and Kelly O’Dwyer. Maybe because of their lower profiles and Cabinet responsibilities they did not invite the same level of secondary challenging and questioning that their male counterparts received, notably star performers like Barnaby Joyce, Malcolm Turnbull, Josh Frydenberg and Joe Hockey.

The pattern is repeated, although to a smaller degree, in the other two groups.

It is clear that a female panelist on Q&A is permitted a smaller voice than a male. This is substantially due to two compounding and related factors; the extended speaking time accorded to politicians (particularly representing the Government) and the dominance of male representatives (again particularly from Government ranks) among those politicians.

Put simply, most of the females on Q&A occupied places on the panel that are *expected* to have a lesser involvement not because they are women but because they are not politicians and, in particular, because they are not Government representatives.

But the fact is that all female panelists are less likely to be engaged in the Secondary questioning controlled by the moderator than their male counterparts.

**Combined, these actions have resulted in an inadequate level of female representation on and participation in Q&A discussions.**

This is our considered view, but it could be argued that there is no clear guidance in the ABC Editorial Policies that would require Q&A to rectify this imbalance. Perhaps standards 4.2 and 4.5 are intended to address this issue, but we suspect not.

It is possible that the producers of Q&A and the moderator will not have been aware of the compounding effect of their decisions, or if they were, that a solution was not apparent to them. The purpose of this review is to assist by identifying such issues and making recommendations on how they might be addressed.

**We have recommended in the previous section on Panels that Q&A correct the gender imbalance among political representatives (particularly Government) on the panels and that, in any event, panels should not routinely have a majority of male participants.**

**Earlier in this section we have recommended that some adjustment to the time given to Government representatives be made so that other panelists have a greater allocation of time. This may assist in rectifying the gender imbalance in participation.**

**We make these additional recommendations:**

**Recommendation #9**

**The moderator should ensure women are equally involved in the Secondary phase of questions and answers.**

**Recommendation #10**

**ABC Editorial Policies should be amended to include a specific requirement that women are properly represented in discussion and, particularly, political discourse on all ABC information programs.**

## Question #4: Questions

**Did the questions from the public featured in each program provide an appropriate diversity of topics and perspectives (with particular reference to standard 4.5)? In your view, does the method currently used to solicit and choose questions from the audience work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?**

Q&A has a well-established system to solicit and select questions from the public. Some questions may have already been suggested by intending studio audience members but most come in response to a “prompt” letter sent to them on the Friday before broadcast.

The prompt confirms the identity of the panelists and then, having regard to the panellists and to current events, suggests some broad issues that might generate suitable questions. The prompt encourages all studio audience members to submit questions, emphasising that the choice of question is up to each member.

A further updated prompt is emailed to audience members on Monday. The production team estimates that between one and two hundred questions are submitted. In addition about a dozen questions, recorded on video by a prospective questioner, are also submitted. These are not in response to the prompts.

Senior members of the production team together with the moderator go through the questions and reduce them to a short list of around 30. The Executive Producer then joins the meeting and the final list of questions is agreed on.

This list generally features 10 to 12 questions although it is likely that two or three will not get asked because of time pressure.

On occasions the producers will contact the questioner to request that the question be amended so that it is less wordy and more comprehensible and direct.

Audience members whose questions have been selected are informed prior to broadcast. Panelists are not informed of the questions they will be asked.

On occasions additional impromptu questions will be permitted. These fall into two categories; questions from studio audience members who have raised their hand and questions submitted during the broadcast via social media.

We identified only 22 occasions when impromptu questions were permitted, 18 from the studio audience and four from Twitter and Facebook.

Some might be surprised at the small number of spontaneous questions. With the exception of the 18 unprompted questions from the studio audience all questions were subject to a careful and controlled selection process. This means that to a very significant degree the direction of the programs was determined by the production team and not, as some might imagine, by the public.

We understand the reasons why that is the case. The producers have the responsibility to ensure that the questions, individually and collectively, comply with the ABC Editorial Standards.

Randomly selected questions from the audience carry an unacceptable risk not only of those standards being breached but also of the production lacking clarity and direction. When random questions were permitted they were often rambling and repetitive or failed to pose an actual question.<sup>42</sup>

The program requires a diverse range of easily understood and purposeful questions if it is to maintain credibility and the ongoing engagement of the viewing audience.

---

<sup>42</sup> Hence the standard moderator's statement "I'll take that as a comment".

## **Range of Topics**

A wide and varied range of topics was featured in the questions asked during the 23 sample programs. Many of them concerned current events and issues although that was not necessarily the primary driver.

More often the questions were motivated by the identity of the panelists.

We studied newspaper headlines for the Friday preceding each broadcast, the day on which Q&A producers publish the first prompt.

There was no direct correlation between those headlines and the questions selected for Q&A but neither were we conscious of Q&A failing to achieve an appropriate level of topicality.

We also grouped the questions asked into broad categories.

## Top 10 Categories of Questions Asked

Category	Percentage of Questions Asked
The Budget/Economy/Taxation	15.6%
Individual Politicians	8.9%
Women's Rights/Domestic Violence <sup>43</sup>	8.5%
Health	5.9%
LGBT Rights <sup>44</sup>	5.9%
Foreign Affairs/Globalisation	5.6%
Terrorism	4.8%
Religion	4.8%
Citizenship/Civil Liberties	4.5%
Education	4.1%

Other categories that attracted a significant number of questions included the Media, Indigenous Issues and Resources and Energy.

**We concluded that the questions asked by the public reflected an appropriate diversity of topics covering both current and general issues. The top categories were consistent with prevailing public debate at the time, while the standing of the Women's and LGBT Rights categories was influenced by the special programs broadcast on those subjects. We believe, in this regard, the programs met standard 4.5 of the ABC Editorial Policies.**

<sup>43</sup> Two special programs were broadcast covering this category; *Feminism March 9 and Domestic Violence February 23.*

<sup>44</sup> One special program was broadcast covering this category; *Gay Rights June 18.*

## Range of Perspectives

Some questions asked on Q&A were phrased in a neutral manner and appeared only to seek comment from the panellists on a current topic or statement. Many others though did reveal both in content and tone the perspective of the questioner.

For example, a neutral question...

*“Do you believe that nations should have the power to interfere in criminal punishment, especially the death penalty, in other countries?”<sup>45</sup>*

...and one that reveals the questioner’s perspective.

*“The British PM David Cameron has said Britain would not get to surplus on the backs of the poor. Why is your government here in Australia happy to get to surplus on the backs of the poor?”<sup>46</sup>*

There is nothing wrong or inappropriate in Q&A questioners holding and expressing strong views. Individual questioners are not required to be impartial. The program dynamics require the reverse.

It is the responsibility then of the program producers to ensure when selecting questions that they represent an appropriate diversity of perspectives.

From our viewing of the sample programs we have no doubt that an appropriately wide range of perspectives was present within the questions asked. But the term of reference covering this section of our report asks us more particularly to determine whether one perspective has been unduly favoured over another<sup>47</sup>.

---

<sup>45</sup> *Asked of Panel, February 16*

<sup>46</sup> *Asked of Joe Hockey, May 25*

<sup>47</sup> *ABC Editorial Policies 4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.*

There are examples where particular perspectives are consistently and strongly represented in Q&A questions particularly in the special programs.

For instance the questions in the Domestic Violence special adopted a strongly critical position while in the Feminist special most questions were posed from the point of view that the general objectives of the movement were desirable.

While such questions could be deemed to “favour” a particular perspective a simpler explanation is they merely reflect prevailing social attitudes in Australia.

But we suspect critics of Q&A identify what they define as “a lack of impartiality’ not through specific questions, but rather the cumulative effect of a disproportionate number of questions that seem to be motivated by a particular underlying political or social perspective.

Similar to the criticism of the composition of panels and audiences it is often suggested that more questions appear critical of the Coalition government than are critical of the ALP Opposition.

We have attempted to analyse the questions asked during the sample programs to determine whether standard 4.5 is being met. This is not a simple exercise and we should state from the outset that the limitations of our methodology require that the results be treated with caution.

We used the same approach as we applied to our analysis of the selection of panelists, attempting to measure questions that indicate support of or a challenge to a political party.

Most questions, in our judgement, did not qualify for the above categorisation. Apart from those that were neutral, there were many others that, although demonstrating a strong conviction or perspective on a particular issue, simply defied being categorised in the above terms.

We made no attempt to resolve any ambiguities. We measured questions only where the primary purpose appeared to support or challenge a particular political party. We did not categorise questions that obliquely benefited one party nor did we assume that a question challenging one party meant it was therefore supportive of another.

Consequently only 25% of questions asked during the sample programs were categorised. We excluded four special programs from our analysis<sup>48</sup>.

### Political Analysis of Qualifying Questions 2015

	Support	Challenge
<b>Coalition</b>	10.4%	75%
<b>ALP</b>	0%	12.5%
<b>Greens</b>	0%	2%

As can be seen, it was the purpose of very few questions to provide support for a political party; most were challenging in nature. That is to be expected.

As with our earlier findings, it was the Government that was the focus of most of the categorised questions and, overwhelmingly, those questions were likely to be challenging.

But was this negative focus because the Coalition was in power or was it a consistent style of questioning directed to the Government of the day, regardless of which party was in office?

---

<sup>48</sup> February 23, Family Violence; March 9, Feminism; May 18, Sydney Writers' Festival; June 18, Gay Rights

Again we believe it is necessary to compare the 2015 results with those from the 2012 program sample we have utilised in previous sections.

### **Comparison of Political Analysis of Qualifying Questions 2012 and 2015**

	<b>Support</b>	<b>Challenge</b>
<b>2012 ALP Gov</b>	3%	72.7%
<b>2015 Coalition Gov</b>	10.4%	75%
<b>2012 Coalition Oppn</b>	3%	15.2%
<b>2015 ALP Oppn</b>	0%	12.5%

**Questions that challenge the Government of the day are standard fare for Q&A. We believe that is justified. Further, it is apparent that Q&A producers select such questions in a consistent manner regardless of which party is in power.**

We note that from time to time the moderator will provide some background on the questioner, particularly if it gives greater weight to the question being asked. Generally that background emerges after the initial question has been asked.

**We believe the viewing audience, and the panel, would benefit if, when circumstances warrant, appropriate background were provided prior to the question being asked.**

**The type of circumstance that would warrant such treatment is when the questioner has a particular and relevant experience (as with Zaky Mallah), represents or is strongly associated with a particular organisation or, more generally, where audience knowledge of the questioner's background provides an insight into the context and motivation for the question.**

We make this recommendation not with the intention of limiting or in any way qualifying the legitimacy of the questions but rather to provide the audience with the information that the moderator is already aware of and which in all likelihood contributed to Q&A's selection of the questioner.

## **Recommendation #11**

**That, where appropriate, the questioner be introduced (or he/she introduces themselves) so as to provide relevant background on the questioner's affiliation, qualifications and such other matters that might contribute to audience understanding.**

## Gender/Age

The gender of questioners was split evenly (52% female to 48% male).

But the age profile, as was the case with the studio audience generally, skewed young. More than half of those whose questions were selected and who were able to ask them on-air were under the age of 35.

### **Questioners Age Profile v Studio and Viewing Audiences and Panels<sup>49</sup>**

Age Group	Questioners	Studio Audience	Viewing Audience	Panel Members <sup>50</sup>
<b>0-34</b>	54%	60%	16%	9%
<b>35-64</b>	36%	32%	41%	61%
<b>65+</b>	10%	8%	49%	30%

This reveals that the age profile of those who both ask the questions and react to the answers in the studio was markedly different from those who were being asked the questions and also those who were watching the broadcast of the program.

The comments we made about this lack of alignment in Question #5: Audiences apply here. It is possible that the older viewing audience interprets the youthful style and tone of questioning as too direct, bordering on disrespectful and possibly even suggesting the program, in their eyes, lacks impartiality.

We acknowledge that we are speculating, but that view, if it did exist, may lie behind some of the criticisms levelled at Q&A.

The validity of such an opinion is tested later in this section (see Range of Perspectives below).

---

<sup>49</sup> *The data was supplied by the ABC. It does not include those who asked questions via Twitter, Facebook and Video nor those who asked questions because they put their hand up.*

<sup>50</sup> *The age segmentation for panels does not perfectly match the age groups adopted for this exercise and therefore represents only a broad comparison.*

**In any event it seems to us that questions should be sourced from a broader age range than is currently the case.**

**Recommendation #12**

**Consistent with the requirement to present a diversity of perspectives, more questions should be selected from the over-35 age group.**

## **Location Constraints**

Most of the programs we reviewed originated from the ABC studios in Ultimo, Sydney. Only two of the 23 were broadcast from outside Sydney<sup>51</sup> with one further program broadcast not from the ABC studios in Ultimo but from the Sydney Showground.<sup>52</sup>

The manner in which this dictates the make-up of the studio audiences is addressed in the next section on Audiences. We conclude in that analysis that not only were 90% of studio audiences residents of Sydney but that 86% of those Sydney audiences were drawn from the central and inner suburbs.

It follows that as the questioners are largely drawn from the studio audience a similar geographical profile is likely to exist<sup>53</sup>. The ABC provided the following data analysis of those members of the live studio audience who were selected to ask questions.

<b>State/Territory</b>	<b>Proportion of Questioners</b>
<b>NSW</b>	86%
<b>Victoria</b>	6%
<b>Queensland</b>	2%
<b>South Australia</b>	1%
<b>Western Australia</b>	1%
<b>Tasmania</b>	0%
<b>ACT</b>	5%
<b>Northern Territory</b>	0%

<sup>51</sup> *Melbourne April 20 and Canberra June 15.*

<sup>52</sup> *March 23*

<sup>53</sup> *We calculate that in excess of 200 questions were asked during the sample programs and less than 10% were delivered by video, twitter or Facebook. The remainder originated from the live studio audience.*

Of the questioners from NSW, 83% were residents of Sydney. We analysed the postcode data for the Sydney resident questioners grouping them into four regions.

1. **Central** comprising the Central and Inner Metropolitan postcodes.
2. **Inner Suburbs** comprising the North Shore, Northern Beaches, Gladesville-Ryde-Eastwood, South Western Suburbs and St George & Sutherland Shire.
3. **Mid Suburbs** comprising Western Suburbs and Parramatta Hills District.
4. **Outer Suburbs** comprising Macarthur Region and Outer Western Suburbs.

The following is the distribution of the Sydney based questioners across those four regions.

#### **Q&A Sydney Questioners by Metropolitan Region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Percentage of Sydney Questioners</b>
<b>Central</b>	46%
<b>Inner Suburbs</b>	39%
<b>Mid Suburbs</b>	10%
<b>Outer Suburbs</b>	5%

This correlates almost exactly with the configuration of the live audiences (see Question #5: Audience). In that section we comment on the practical reasons that contribute to the lack of attendees from the mid and outer suburbs.

We also acknowledge that the program's decision to operate from the Sydney studios is driven by budgetary and logistical constraints and not by the preference of the Q&A team.

One of the consequences of this practice is that the studio audience is drawn from a comparatively small pool of residents of central and inner Sydney suburbs. This, in turn, leads to a high level of “repeat” attendees.

We believe the Sydney audience composition may also contribute to the large number of repeat questioners appearing on Q&A.

On 14 occasions during the review period a Q&A questioner had already asked a question in a previous program. In two instances the questioner was asking a question for the sixth time.

We do not hold the view that under no circumstances should anyone be allowed to appear as a questioner more than once but we were surprised at the frequency of repeat questioners<sup>54</sup> and at the extreme examples of multiple questions referred to above.

With two exceptions there was no evidence of the repeat questioners having a specific agenda.

The exceptions were Nell Schofield whose two questions reflected environmental concerns and Andrew Wilson whose three questions reflected a consistent conservative viewpoint. But generally the questions appear to have been selected because they were interesting and original.

In Question #5: Audiences we conclude that the high number of repeat attendees in the studio audience is due substantially to the program being broadcast predominantly from a single location. In our view the fixed location also contributes to the number of repeat questioners.

We have reached the following conclusions:

- 1. The lack of questioners from areas outside of Sydney is not consistent with the program’s claim to represent “democracy in action” or with the ABC Editorial Standards 4.2 and 4.5. The questioners play a central role in the broadcast and that contribution should not be confined largely to residents of one city.**

---

<sup>54</sup> In 2014 Q&A adopted a new policy restricting questioners to asking only one question per calendar year.

- 2. Broadcasting predominantly from a single location greatly increases the likelihood that the questions are sourced from a small and insufficiently representative pool. The frequency of repeat questioners testifies to this. If the program were broadcast from more locations the need for repeat questioners would be largely eliminated resulting in a greater diversity of perspectives being represented in the questions.**

Our recommendations are similar to those in Question #5: Audiences.

#### **Recommendation #13**

**The ABC should commit to broadcasting Q&A from the fullest possible range of locations across Australia.**

#### **Recommendation #14**

**Repeat questioners should be allowed only on an exceptional basis.**

#### **Recommendation #15**

**A set of Q&A Program Principles should be agreed between the program and ABC editorial management that, among other matters, details how the program intends to select its questioners and what protocols it will adopt in this regard to ensure the standards set by the ABC Editorial Policies are met. The Program Principles should be a public document, displayed on the Q&A website.**

## **Individual Program**

The above findings and recommendations are based on our analysis of the 23 programs taken together.

When assessing the programs individually we found few issues with the questions selected.

But there was one occasion where we believe questions asked failed a basic test of fairness.

In the program of May 25 where the Treasurer, Joe Hockey appeared on his own he was asked the following question by a member of the studio audience:

*“Mr Hockey, analysis from the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling identifies how heavily the burden of budget consolidation falls on those less well off, highlighting the huge inequity in your Government's four-year blueprint for fiscal repair. How does this independent analysis fit with the budget which you described as responsible, measured and fair?”*

The Treasurer replied that he hadn't seen the modeling commissioned by the Labor Party, as it hadn't been made public. The moderator, Tony Jones, advised him that he understood it was being released the following morning but that Q&A had already seen a copy.

Mr Hockey protested that he hadn't seen the report.

*“Firstly, it hasn't been publicly released, right? So we haven't seen it. You're asking me about something I haven't seen, the Government hasn't seen and most of the media haven't seen. So you've obviously got an exclusive in getting this information.”*

The moderator persisted in putting questions to the Treasurer that were based on the NATSEM report.

We believe the following issues are raised by this exchange:

- 1. The audience was not informed of the circumstances by which Q&A had been provided with an advance copy of the NATSEM report. As this was allegedly a document under the control of the Opposition the question arises whether it was deliberately provided to Q&A for the purposes of wrong-footing the Treasurer. Whatever the circumstances we believe Q&A should have declared how it came to be in possession of the report.**
- 2. The initial question using the NATSEM data came from a member of the audience. The Q&A team selected the questions to be posed by audience members earlier in the day. It can be assumed from the preparedness of the moderator to ask a series of follow up questions also based on the NATSEM report that the totality of the questioning on this matter, involving both audience member and moderator, was orchestrated. We question whether this is consistent with the normal practices of Q&A and whether it is fair to the interviewee.**
- 3. In any event we believe it is not fair to the interviewee to be questioned on a detailed economic report that he was not able to access. Fair treatment requires that he be given the facts in advance so that he can respond to the resulting questions.**

We make no recommendations on these conclusions as we regard this particular event as an isolated lapse in judgement and not symptomatic of any systemic issue.

## Question #5: Studio Audiences

**In your opinion, did the behaviour and responses of audiences influence your perception of the program's impartiality? Did the composition of the audience seem predictable from week to week (if not, were there any obvious factors involved, perhaps including broadcast location)? In your view, does the method currently used to identify audience members work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?**

It is not surprising that the behaviour of the Q&A audience is the subject of scrutiny and criticism. The selection of a live television audience is not a scientific procedure. Yet its role in the program's production is far more active than is the case with other programs. Many of the audience members have already submitted questions; others have come prepared to add their opinions to the discussion if they get the chance. In other words a significant proportion of the audience is seeking active involvement in the program.

In a live program such as Q&A this can provide volatility, unpredictability, even an element of risk. But this unscripted conduct is part of the appeal of the program. The panelists may be directing their comments mainly to the viewing audience but it is the reaction of the studio audience to those comments that has the most impact. Primarily through sound but sometimes visually as well, there is an instant, direct and on occasions confronting response.

While that response can be provocative it can also oblige panelists to be more direct and unequivocal in their answers. It provides a formidable reminder to politicians not to waffle, avoid answering the question or stick to a pre-scripted "message".

Sometimes viewers (and certainly some panelists) may feel the response is unfair, perhaps even that the behaviour of audience members is questionable.

Some criticism of audience behaviour is linked to the manner in which the audience is selected, alleging that the composition of the audience pre-determines how it will respond to the debate. That view was put strongly by the Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton:

*“the audience is stacked, the panel is stacked...”<sup>55</sup>*

Much of our response to this term of reference focuses on the composition of the studio audience, how it is selected and whether it is consistent with the obligations of impartiality contained in the ABC Editorial Policies.

Applications for places in the Q&A audience are made on-line. The application form states that the questions asked of each applicant are:

*“to assist us in selecting a diverse and balanced audience.”*

As well as personal information such as age, gender and postcode the applicants are also asked which party they would vote for if a federal election for the House of Representatives was held today, whether the applicant is a member of a political party and whether, if successful, they would wish to ask a question of the panels.

Q&A retains this information in its own database.

---

<sup>55</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald, June 24 2015.*

## Political Affiliation

Among questions asked of potential audience members on their on-line application form is their likely voting intention or, if uncertain, what party they are “leaning” towards. This information is then used to structure the audience so that composition by voting intention broadly conforms to current opinion polls<sup>56</sup>.

To test whether this occurs we compared the average composition of the Q&A audience to average voting intentions as measured by Newspoll during the first six months of 2015. To test consistency we carried out the same exercise using 2012 data.

### **Q&A Audience Voting Intentions v Opinion Polls 2015 & 2012**

	Coalition	ALP	Greens	Others <sup>57</sup>
<b>2015 Newspoll</b>	39.2%	37.1%	12.1%	11.6%
<b>2015 Q&amp;A Audience<sup>58</sup></b>	38.5%	36.1%	13.6%	11.8%
<b>2012 Newspoll</b>	46.2%	30.4%	11.6%	11.8%
<b>2012 Q&amp;A Audience</b>	45.8%	32.1%	14.2%	7.8%

<sup>56</sup> “The voting proportions are based on a rough approximation of the current opinion polls - by which we mean polls over the rolling last 3 months. The intention is not to have a precise match to any number but to have an audience where the significant voting groups in the population are represented by significant groups in the audience”, Peter McEvoy, Q&A Executive Producer, August 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Q&A does not consistently report the proportion of its audiences registered as Others. For this exercise we have assumed those not reported as Coalition, ALP or Greens are Others.

<sup>58</sup> The composition is calculated from the figures published by Q&A. We have assumed they are accurately presented.

During the 2015 review period the Q&A team achieved their objective with a remarkable level of accuracy. There was only a slight over-representation of Greens potential voters at the expense of the Coalition and ALP. But given that the difference of 1.5% equated to only 3 or 4 audience members (out of 250) it's hard to regard this as having any significance.

It's also apparent that the production team adopted a broadly consistent approach in 2012, although representatives of "Others" were certainly below the level the opinion polls would have indicated.

What is apparent from these figures, and what may not be fully appreciated by critics of Q&A, is that the program's apportionment policy inevitably means the audience will comprise more opponents of the Government than supporters.

Assuming that ALP, Greens and Others form an unofficial opposition the following simplified portrayal of the audience composition occurs. Again, we have added 2012 data as a point of comparison.

### **Q&A Audience Voting Intentions Government v "Opposition"**

	<b>Government</b>	<b>"Opposition"</b>
<b>2015 (Coalition Government)</b>	39.2%	60.8%
<b>2012 (ALP Government)</b>	32.1%	67.2%

The 2012 figures are less valid given that the Greens provided critical support for the ALP Government and therefore can't be regarded as a true opposition.

But it is clear that during the sample period in 2015 Government supporters in the Q&A audiences were outnumbered 3 to 2. And, notwithstanding the qualifications attached to the 2012 results, it is reasonable to assume that this is a fairly standard pattern regardless of who is in Government.

It is a reality of our democratic system that those who support other parties often eclipse Government support in opinion polls. It might be possible for Q&A to adopt a different approach for apportioning the audience by voter intention by using a model whereby Government supporters occupy 50 percent of places and Opposition parties the other 50 percent. But that would involve imposing an artificial balance and one that Opposition parties might legitimately complain does not properly reflect their overall and individual party standing in the community.

**We have concluded that Q&A audiences are, in terms of voter intention, an accurate and appropriate reflection of the prevailing sentiment of the population. Any expectation that a Government should automatically be entitled to majority or even equal support from the Q&A audience is misplaced and, in our view, would contravene the ABC Editorial Policies by unduly favouring one perspective over another.**

We acknowledge that the process relies on audience members truthfully declaring their voting intention. It seems to us that abuse of this system would have an impact only if it was known that Q&A audience producers were struggling to source people of one particular voting intention and members of another voting intention group falsified their allegiance in order to take up the available places. We are unaware of any evidence to suggest that has or could occur.

Members of all voting groups are able to falsely represent their voting intention and unless there was an orchestrated campaign by just one group it is reasonable to assume the effects would largely be cancelled out.

The BBC goes to some considerable lengths to try and eliminate the risk of false declarations by audience members on *Question Time*. It outsources the audience selection and requires that individual audience members be spoken to prior to attending the studio<sup>59</sup>. This is an easier task for the BBC as *Question Time* audiences are generally much smaller than Q&A's – around 140 members compared to 250 for Q&A.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ric Bailey, Chief Advisor, Politics, BBC

Ric Bailey, who was responsible for more than 200 *Question Time* programs and is now the Corporation's Chief Advisor on Politics, told us politicians in the UK are obsessed with the make-up of QT audiences with accusations of imbalance and stacking. He suggested politicians disliked the live audience because they can't control the audience and its reaction.

*"There is no perfect mathematical way to assemble an audience for QT. You need to find a way to be as fair as possible under all circumstances."*

Given that all the effort and resources expended by the BBC in vetting audiences has failed to eliminate criticism, we are not suggesting the ABC adopt this level of audience scrutiny.

But we do believe one aspect of the BBC's production of QT provides significant protection against audience manipulation. QT travels the country drawing its audience from a constantly varying pool of applicants. Two-thirds of its programs are broadcast from outside London and even those from the capital are produced in the suburbs and not in a single central studio.

As we have identified earlier, Q&A during the sample period was broadcast from Sydney for 21 of the 23 episodes.

Later in this section we deal more fully with this issue.

## Age/Gender

The audience for the sample programs composed slightly more females than males (53% female, 47% male)<sup>60</sup>.

More significant though was the surprisingly youthful profile of the studio audience particularly when compared with the Q&A viewing audience and the age profile of the ABC TV audience as a whole.

### **Q&A Studio Audience Age Profile v TV Audiences and Panel Profiles**

Age Group	Q&A Studio Audience	Q&A Viewing Audience	ABC TV Average Audience	Q&A Panels <sup>61</sup>
<b>0-34</b>	60%	16%	10%	9%
<b>35-64</b>	32%	42%	41%	61%
<b>65+</b>	8%	42%	49%	30%

Three out of five members of the average Q&A studio audience were below the age of 35 (in fact one third of the audience was under the age of 25). This is the inverse of the ABC TV viewing audience generally and significantly out of kilter with the specific Q&A viewing audience.

It sets up an interesting dynamic. The home viewing audience of which 84% are over the age of 34 were observing (and presumably judging) the behaviour of a studio audience that had a markedly different age profile (only 40% were over the age of 34).

It's possible that this disconnect between audiences contributed to some of the criticism of the studio audience behaviour. The timing, frequency and tone of applause and laughter from a young studio audience may appear to the older viewing audience as inappropriate and even disrespectful.

---

<sup>60</sup> ABC Data

<sup>61</sup> The age segmentation for panels does not perfectly match the age groups adopted for this exercise and therefore represents only a broad comparison.

This could create a perception of a lack of impartiality among older viewers. But to sustain an argument that it amounts to an actual lack of impartiality requires evidence that a younger studio audience is collectively biased in its views on political and social issues.

While convention suggests younger people are more inclined to hold progressive views we have no evidence that that would apply to Q&A audiences which have been selected to achieve a balance of political perspectives. Our analysis of the actual behaviour of the studio audiences (see Audience Behaviour below) is a more reliable measure.

**But we do hold the view that it would be preferable if the age profile of the studio audience could be adjusted by encouraging more attendees from the over-35 age group. Given the active role of the studio audience this would contribute to a greater diversity of perspectives on the program.**

#### **Recommendation #16**

**The age profile of the studio audience should be adjusted by including more attendees from the over-35 age group.**

It might be assumed that the youthful age profile of the audience was a consequence of the program being broadcast from a studio in central Sydney where the immediate population is probably younger. That might be the case, but it is worth noting that the studio audiences for the two programs broadcast from outside Sydney, in Melbourne and Canberra<sup>62</sup>, had an even more youthful profile.

#### **Q&A Studio Audience Profile by location**

<b>Age Groups</b>	<b>Sydney</b>	<b>Melbourne</b>	<b>Canberra</b>
<b>0-34</b>	60%	65%	72%
<b>35-64</b>	32%	31%	25%
<b>65+</b>	8%	4%	3%

<sup>62</sup> *Melbourne April 20 and Canberra June 15.*

But there is a significant difference in the opportunities presented to the Q&A producers when the program is broadcast outside of Sydney.

In Sydney it was sometimes difficult to attract an appropriate audience of 250 (see below) while in other centres there were more applicants than places in the audience, even though the size of audiences in Melbourne and Canberra was much greater than in Sydney (see below).

Later in this section we discuss the need for Q&A to be broadcast from a wider range of locations. If that were to happen it would enable the producers to have more control over the age profile of the studio audiences, particularly if the size of the audiences selected outside of Sydney was smaller.

It is worth noting that the BBC's *Question Time* operates with an audience of 140 regardless of location.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Ric Bailey, *Chief Advisor, Politics, BBC*

## Audience Behaviour

When Ric Bailey was responsible for the BBC's flagship program, *Question Time*, he posted on the program's website the following response to the FAQ: "Why are Question Time audiences always biased in favour of left wing policies?"

*"They are not. As indicated above, they are selected to reflect a broad range of views right across the political spectrum.*

*It is, however, notoriously impossible to make a judgment about the overall views of an audience based on the noise they make or the levels of applause.*

*It is also impossible to force people to speak in favour of a particular view, even if you know they are in the audience and hold that view. In fact, there has been more criticism recently that the audiences "sound" anti-government.*

*That is not because there are not people in the audience who support the government, but, in my view, because those people are less willing to air their views in public than those who attack the government. Five years ago, the opposite was true. This says more about the climate of British politics, than it does about the balance of the Question Time audience - these are perceptions which tend to ebb and flow."*

He holds that view today, and told us: "*People and politicians think they can judge an audience by what it sounds like. That is not always true.*"

Nevertheless we have attempted to analyse the behavior of the Q&A studio audiences across 18<sup>64</sup> of the programs under review to determine whether any patterns exist that may challenge requirements of the ABC Editorial Policies.

We have also carried out a similar exercise with the 13 programs in 2012 that we have previously identified as a suitable for comparison purposes.

---

<sup>64</sup> *Special programs were excluded.*

We stress that our assessment is limited to expressions of a political viewpoint. We found that while it was possible to assign some audience behavior either in support of or opposition to a particular party we could not identify a simple and effective methodology to measure patterns of support and opposition to broader social issues.

We viewed each program and noted the number of audience “events”, usually comprising applause or laughter. We then counted the events where it was readily apparent that this either supported or opposed the position or statement of a political party.

In both the 2015 and 2012 programs only about 25-30% of audience events qualified for assigning in the above manner. Other events were either unrelated to a political position, neutral in response or not sufficiently clear-cut to justify inclusion (mixed responses from different parts of the audience).

Consistent with our findings in previous sections it is immediately apparent that the Government of the day is the lightning rod that attracts most audience response.

### **2015: Audience Behaviour**

<b>Indicates:</b>	<b>Coalition</b>	<b>ALP</b>	<b>Greens/Others</b>
<b>Support Of</b>	20.7%	8%	0%
<b>Opposition To</b>	51.8%	18.4%	1.1%

More than 70% of audience qualifying events could be measured as a response to a Government policy, position or statement. More than half of the events indicated opposition to the Government position, whether it was by laughter, or applause for a critical or alternate viewpoint.

On the other hand the Government also received the most support.

At first glance some may consider these findings as indicative of an anti-Coalition bias. Yet the results from our 2012 analysis demonstrate that the critical focus of the studio audience was on the Government of the day rather than any particular party.

## 2012: Audience Behaviour

Indicates:	Coalition	ALP	Greens/Others
<b>Support Of</b>	2.7%	9.6%	4.8%
<b>Opposition To</b>	19.2%	58.9%	5.5%

If anything, the results show the ALP in Government in 2012 received a more hostile response from the studio audience than the Coalition Government of 2015.

It should be emphasised that most audience responses are neutral, laughing at a witty riposte or applauding a passionate and articulate answer.

Our viewing of the programs and attendance in the studio also established that even when a response favours one political party over another it could be in response to hearing a well-argued position rather than just reflecting party allegiance.

In other words it cannot be assumed that the conduct of the audience will strictly accord to the voting intention profile.

Furthermore we saw little if any evidence that the audience response exceeded acceptable boundaries. Some may wish that the scrutiny of any Government by Australian society and media were done more gently but that is outside the control of the producers of Q&A.

**We conclude that the critical and, on occasions, even hostile response from the studio audience to the Government of the day does not fail the standard of impartiality contained in the ABC Editorial Policies. Audience behavior has been consistent whether in response to a Government of the Coalition or of the ALP.**

**Conversely any intervention to adjust the audience composition with a greater number of vocal Government supporters so as to balance out the critical response would, in our view, contravene standard 4.5 and be an inaccurate representation of prevailing community opinion. The Government of the day is the centre point of discussion and its actions and intentions are legitimate targets for audience reaction.**

## Location Constraints

As has already been pointed out elsewhere the vast majority of Q&A programs originated from the ABC studios in Ultimo, an inner city locale in Sydney. Only two of the 23 programs sampled were broadcast from outside Sydney<sup>65</sup> with one further program broadcast not from the ABC studios in Ultimo but from the Sydney Showground.<sup>66</sup>

Inevitably the composition of the studio audience reflected the production location.

### Q&A Studio Audience Composition by State & Territory

States/Territories	Studio Audience <sup>67</sup>	Percentage
NSW	5276	76.9%
Victoria	832	15.8%
ACT	644	9.4%
Queensland	57	.8%
WA	27	.4%
SA	18	.3%
Tasmania	6	.1%
NT	1	0%

Nearly all of the NSW audience actually came from Sydney. The ABC supplied us with postcode data analysis for six of the programs broadcast from Ultimo. We believe the sample is sufficient to identify patterns in the geographical origins of the Sydney studio audience.

In the six sample programs 96% of the audience came from NSW and 92% of the NSW component came from Sydney. We took the postcode data provided to us and grouped it into four regions.

1. **Central** comprising the Central and Inner Metropolitan postcodes.
2. **Inner Suburbs** comprising the North Shore, Northern Beaches, Gladesville-Ryde-Eastwood, South Western Suburbs and St George & Sutherland Shire.

---

<sup>65</sup> Melbourne April 20 and Canberra June 15.

<sup>66</sup> March 23

<sup>67</sup> ABC data

3. **Mid Suburbs** comprising Western Suburbs and Parramatta Hills District.

4. **Outer Suburbs** comprising Macarthur Region and Outer Western Suburbs.

The following is the distribution of the Sydney based audience across those four regions.

### Q&A Sydney Audience by Metropolitan Region

Region	Percentage of Sydney Audience
Central	47%
Inner Suburbs	39%
Mid Suburbs	8%
Outer Suburbs	7%

We are not surprised at these findings. The distribution aligns strongly with the degree of proximity to the studio from which the program is broadcast.

The closer you live to Ultimo the more likely you are to attend a production. Conversely the further away you live the greater the inconvenience and cost of attending. Given that the program comes off air at around 10.30 pm it is not surprising that only the most motivated (and probably of a younger age) will consider travelling in from the mid and outer suburbs particularly in the winter months.

While we are not recommending that Q&A adopt the BBC's approach, it is worth noting that the main reason why *Question Time* is pre-recorded in the early evening is to facilitate audience attendance<sup>68</sup>.

We are aware that the producers of Q&A try hard to attract audience members from further afield in Sydney, including providing special buses to facilitate attendance of groups from the outer regions of the city. But in our view, however commendable the intention, such efforts cannot overcome the inconvenience factor to any significant degree.

---

<sup>68</sup> *Question Time* is broadcast at the later time of 10.30 pm.

We are also aware that the Q&A team struggles at times to attract sufficient audience members to the Sydney studios. As a consequence, we are told, around 20% of a typical Sydney audience comprises members who have previously attended Q&A broadcasts.

This difficulty is in marked contrast to the situation that exists when the program is broadcast from outside Sydney. We understand around 3000 people applied to attend the Canberra production that had seating for 650.

It is obvious to us that the Sydney dominance is not by choice of the Q&A team or ABC management. It is a consequence of budgetary and logistical constraints.

Notwithstanding that difficulty, we have reached the following conclusions:

- 1. The lack of audience participation from areas outside of Sydney is not consistent with the program's claim to represent "democracy in action" or with the ABC Editorial Standards 4.2 and 4.5. The audience is not a passive presence but an active contributor to the program and that contribution should not be confined largely to residents of the inner suburbs of one city.**
- 2. Broadcasting predominantly from a single location greatly increases the likelihood that the studio audience is sourced from a small and insufficiently representative pool. That in turn creates the risk that the audience becomes predictable in its responses and behaviour. That tendency is further aggravated by the need to permit a number of "repeat" attendances in order to fill the studio seats.**
- 3. Although we have no evidence of any audience manipulation or false declarations of voting intention, limiting audience selection to a small and predictable pool facilitates the opportunity for such abuse.**

These deficiencies can only be remedied if the ABC makes a fundamental change to its existing practice. We acknowledge the cost implications but can see no alternative to the following.

**Recommendation #17**

**The ABC should commit to broadcasting Q&A from the fullest possible range of locations across Australia.**

**Recommendation #18**

**A set of Q&A Program Principles should be agreed between the program and ABC editorial management that, among other matters, details how the program intends to select its audiences and what protocols it will adopt in this regard to ensure the standards set by the ABC Editorial Policies are met. The Program Principles should be a public document, displayed on the Q&A website.**

## Question #6: Twitter Stream

**In your opinion did the Twitter stream which runs across the screen throughout the program either augment or detract from the overall performance of the program (with particular reference to standard 4.1)?<sup>69</sup> Can you see ways in which social media could be better used to increase audience engagement with this program?**

Q&A's Twitter handle @qanda now lists 275,000(+) followers, while the program has put out almost 20,000 tweets. That is a strong performance for any social media presence in Australia, let alone a late-night current affairs political discussion program on the ABC.

Clearly, the Twitter stream is now an integral and highly successful part of Q&A – increasing audience engagement in the weekly discussions, lifting the television ratings amongst a younger demographic while adding spark and energy to the program.

We believe the 120 tweets broadcast each week clearly engage a younger audience, adding another valuable dimension to the program.

We have looked at the Twitter stream across all 23 episodes of the review period. We then examined more closely the Twitter conversation of the first 10 programs, plus another five chosen at random. In addition, we also took a close look at Q&A Twitter streams in 2012 and 2013 episodes under the Gillard and Rudd Labor governments - again making a random choice of a further 10 programs.

But even that extensive and comprehensive scrutiny does not permit us to answer the question as written. The question refers us specifically to standard 4.1. That standard requires programs to gather and present news with due impartiality.

---

<sup>69</sup> Editorial Policy 4.1 requires ABC programs to gather and present news with due impartiality.

To reach a conclusion on whether the program has operated with due impartiality in selecting which of the submitted comments are published on-screen we would have had to review all of those submitted comments. The producers estimate that between 20 and 50-thousand tweets are received for each program.

An examination of such magnitude is beyond the capacity of this review. But we do believe our significant evaluation, involving some 2000 tweets, enables us to answer the ABC Board's questions in more general terms, commenting on the processes involved and analysing the output in terms of delivering the required diversity of perspectives.

From anecdotal evidence it is apparent to us that the on-line interaction adds to the program's entertainment value. A program like Q&A must entertain, as well as inform and connect with viewers and voters.

Occasionally, the Twitter conversation's attempt at wit and wisdom, humour and irreverence (in the permitted 140 characters) misses the mark. That is hardly surprising given the program handles between 20 and 50-thousand tweets in the space of an hour.

Even more remarkable is the rapid turn-around time, between viewers sending their message and that message being posted on air, which is usually less than a minute's duration. By our calculations Q&A currently selects about 120 tweets per show, on average. That is considerably more than in the past.

Having been a Q&A panelist on several occasions one of the reviewers, Ray Martin, emphasises that neither the panel nor the studio audience has any knowledge of the twitter conversation being seen by television viewers. If a panellist is being attacked or praised he/she is never aware of what is being said on the screen below their heads. Indeed the moderator is not aware either and is only ever informed of the Twitter comments by the show's Executive Producer via his earpiece.

## **Time Zone Constraints**

In other sections of this report we have concluded that Q&A falls well short of providing a genuinely national platform for discussion. A similar conclusion can also be reached regarding the Twitter stream.

Because the program is broadcast live only in the eastern states, viewers outside the Eastern Australia Time Zone are watching Q&A on delay and therefore cannot take part in the live Twitter or Facebook discussions unless they are watching the program on I-view or listening to the broadcast on ABC News Radio.

We understand that for the first years of the program, Q&A was broadcast on ABC News 24 - concurrent with it going to air on ABC One - allowing viewers everywhere to participate in the discussion as part of the Twitter stream.

A later decision to broadcast Lateline on ABC News 24 meant that the live telecast of Q&A was dropped.

We believe it should be restored if the program is to have full access to the diverse range of perspectives from across Australia.

### **Recommendation #19**

**Q&A should be simulcast on ABC News 24 to ensure national participation on the program's social media platforms.**

## **Questions**

*“And if you’ve got a live question, join the Twitter conversation. Add @qanda to help us find it.”*

Despite this generous opening offer each week at the start of Q&A, our research could find only two occasions – including the first Q&A program of 2015 – where the moderator actually asked a question based on a viewer’s tweet.

Facebook questions were similarly conspicuous by their absence in the program. Whilst Facebook is also regularly touted through in-show promotions we could again find only two occasions when a Facebook question was actually asked.

Social media – in particular the Twitter conversation and Facebook – is a significant component of the Q&A production, in terms of the production resources dedicated to it (see below), the levels of participation and the contribution it makes to the program’s success. We believe it deserves greater recognition particularly in providing spontaneous questions.

### **Recommendation #20**

**More of the questions asked on Q&A should be sourced from Twitter and Facebook.**

## **Twitter Selection**

The cost of the Q&A Twitter conversation is high both in terms of staff time and occasional controversy. It is our understanding that complaints about so-called ‘Twitter bias’ on Q&A are common and sometimes loud - especially from Federal politicians.

The former Executive Editor of *Question Time*<sup>70</sup> told us that the BBC program also encountered a hostile reaction from British politicians, with regular public attacks on the so-called “*lack of balance*” as a result of that program’s Twitter stream.

Politicians everywhere these days it seems have an antipathy towards audiences - and audience reactions - which are not tightly controlled.

What is interesting – and different to Q&A – is that *Question Time* does not stream viewers’ tweets live on their 10.30 Tuesday night show but prefers to feature them on a separate twitter platform operated in parallel with the television broadcast. This decision was made for two reasons; first, because unlike Q&A, the British program is pre-recorded at 8.30 on the night of the broadcast and secondly, because the tweet ticker along the bottom of the screen was deemed to be “screen clutter” and a distraction to the on-air discussion itself.<sup>71</sup>

Because the program is not live, the BBC is able to operate a team of Twitter scrutineers, separate from the live production unit, dedicated to ensuring the Twitter stream is as diverse and impartial as possible.<sup>72</sup>

We recognise from our research that many Australian viewers also find Q&A’s constant Twitter feed a distraction, although for others it is an essential ingredient to be enjoyed simultaneously with the broadcast discussion.

---

<sup>70</sup> Ric Bailey, Chief Advisor, Politics, BBC

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*

On balance, we prefer the ABC's approach to the presentation of the Twitter stream to the BBC's. Multiple on-screen images carrying different information are an established and growing feature of television broadcasts, particularly in news and current affairs. Furthermore it is not particularly difficult for viewers to ignore the Twitter stream if they find it distracting.

We mentioned earlier that Q&A's selection in 2015 of about 120 tweets per program is "labour intensive". Indeed it is. Two members of the production team have the sole responsibility of scrutinising the tens of thousands of tweets, as they come into the Sydney studio control room. Their initial selections are then forwarded on-line to two similarly dedicated Senior Producers, who together decide what comments are finally posted on Q&A.

It's a high-wire act with no real safety net. The potential for inappropriate tweets to find their way on-air is significant, particularly in the context of extraordinary time pressure or the accidental touch of a computer mouse. It is a credit to Q&A that, apart from one recent, highly publicised tweet that made reference to former PM Tony Abbott, the program's tweet slate over the past five years has been, for the most part, remarkably clean of embarrassing mistakes.

We accept that the Q&A producers can only work with the social media comments they are fed by the ABC audience. We suspect the bulk, but not all of the tweets submitted to Q&A comes from the more youthful, brash twitterati and probably lean to a more progressive outlook.

We also recognise that the Twitter conversation demands instant comments, with little time for considered opinion. The tweets that were chosen for broadcast were occasionally clever or amusing, sometimes banal and predictable.

From our observations of the process in action and from our review of the tweets broadcast during the review period we found that across the extensive range of political topics the producers erred on the side of caution in their twitter selection.

But sometimes the comments can be highly personal. Certainly that was the case early in 2015 when in the first handful of Q&A programs the tone of the twitter conversation was negative towards Australian politicians in general, but in particular to the then Prime Minister, Tony Abbott.

In the first program of the review period,<sup>73</sup> for example, out of a total of approximately 100 tweets around half of them might be labelled either anti-Government in tone or critical of the then Prime Minister:

*“Abbott is incapable of admitting he is wrong”*

*“Abbott shouldn’t be booted out by his Party. We the Australian people want that privilege”*

*“Reality is that there was always speculation with Abbott as leader from the beginning”*

In the two weeks that immediately followed that opening salvo, there were more twitter cracks at Prime Minister Abbott:

*“If Tony’s rich mining mates want it, it will go ahead”*

*“Noddy no friends? What about big ears?”*

*“If voters weren’t lied to before elections they wouldn’t have unrealistic expectations.”*

*“Maybe the issue with the PMO is the PM”*

*“Abbott lost the fight at the pub and went home and kicked the dog”  
(Whatever that meant.)*

---

<sup>73</sup> February 2

In contrast with this number of negative tweets we found just a handful of counter comments such as:

*“If the knighthood is the worst you can pin on Abbott we better keep him”*

*“Can we talk about policies instead of personalities?”*

*“The way we treat our politicians in this country is disgusting.”*

*“Tony Abbott is doing a great job and everyone needs to give him another chance.”*

We should emphasise that while the Labor Opposition was the subject of far fewer tweets on Q&A, the program’s twitter conversation about its leaders and policies seemed just as negative as those directed at the Government.

*“Chris Bowen knows all about knifing PMs”*

*“Still feel as though Bill’s odds shorten by the day”*

*“Good govt starts today, bad govt started in 2007”*

Across those early weeks the prevailing Twitter sentiment on Q&A may best be summed up in any number of tweets:

*“We voters aren’t stupid. We’re sick of being lied to and patronized by politicians of every persuasion.”<sup>74</sup>*

*“Is it time yet to remove the title ‘Honourable’ from politicians’ name tags?”<sup>75</sup>*

*“Faith in politics is long gone in this country. Lies and elitism.”<sup>76</sup>*

*“Every year we say that political discourse is degrading but nothing changes.”<sup>77</sup>*

---

<sup>74</sup> February 2

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> February 16

We have stated previously in this section that we are not in a position to judge whether the above selection of tweets was a fair and appropriate representation of those thousands submitted for each program.

But we do know that during February and March 2015 the Australian media seemed obsessed with questions and rumours about Tony Abbott's future as Prime Minister, along with the plummeting and oft-quoted opinion polls predicting his downfall at the hands of his own Liberal Party. It is quite likely that the twitter selection on Q&A was reflecting the general mood of the Australian media and public at that time.

We detected, in the weeks after those early episodes, that the twitter conversation on Q&A seemed to pull back perceptibly from its negativity towards Mr Abbott and politicians in general, moving on to other issues like the budget, the Bali executions, education and gay marriage.

We do not know whether the program's production team consciously decided that the negative tone was becoming excessive and moderated the twitter stream accordingly. Alternatively perhaps the news caravan had simply moved on and the submitted tweets reflected that. We suspect it was the latter.

As we have done elsewhere in this report, for comparison purposes we also reviewed the Q&A Twitter stream in 2012 and 2013 under the Gillard and Rudd governments.

We chose 10 Q&A programs at random, five from 2012 and the same number from 2013. We observed that the total number of tweets was considerably below today's average - about 80 per show as against 120 in 2015. While that clearly adds to the overall sense of pace and urgency of programs in 2015 it does mean the producers have less time to make their selection of tweets to put to air.

---

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*

Overall the twitter conversation in 2012 and 2013 served as a reminder of how bitterly divided Australians were – and especially Labor voters – between Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. By contrast with 2015 and the early program negativity towards Tony Abbott the twitter conversation in 2012 and 2013 was a lively mix of bouquets and brickbats for both Labor leaders. The barrage of tweets simply added to the public image of a government in disarray.

*“Gillard won the battle & lost the war”*

*“Not sure whether Rudd is the most popular or least unpopular”*

*“Who would want to be treated like Julia”*

*“Labor needs to be voted out for own stupidity”*

*“Labor. United we campaign. Divided we govern.”*

Interestingly in these episodes the Opposition leader, Tony Abbott, had few twitter friends on Q&A much like Opposition leader, Bill Shorten, today. And, the twitter stream also reflected a similar distaste of all politicians.

*“Why are we all shocked about their lack of trust. When did we ever trust politicians?”*

*“Politicians were once considered noble.”*

In our opinion there was no discernible bias in the twitter conversation along purely party lines. The dominant attitude towards politicians of every persuasion was at best sceptical and often downright cynical.

The prevailing negative sentiment towards politicians in general expressed in the Q&A twitter stream is of potential concern. Q&A is a program driven by politics and we believe the twitter stream should not become an easy platform for the disaffected and cynical. We acknowledge that those opinions are part of the diversity of perspectives but we would caution the producers to ensure they are included as only one part of the mix of opinions.

## **Recommendation #21**

**Q&A should exercise care in the selection of comments for the twitter stream to ensure negativity towards politics in general and in particular to the government of the day are not disproportionately represented.**

It was noteworthy that when positive tweets were posted on Q&A they were almost exclusively aimed at non-politicians on the panel; especially visiting overseas celebrity guests such as Cornel West, Ruby Wax, Miriam Margolyes, Nana Mouskouri and Adrienne Truscott. The underlying twitter conversation seemed to suggest that these foreign actors, singers and academics had a better perspective on life than our political leaders.

Finally, in common with our conclusions in earlier sections, we believe it would be beneficial if the process and protocols governing the selection of the Q&A twitter stream were to be made public.

## **Recommendation #22**

**A set of Q&A Program Principles should be agreed between the program and ABC editorial management that, among other matters, details how the program intends to select comments to be included in its twitter stream and what protocols it will adopt in this regard to ensure the standards set by the ABC Editorial Policies are met. The Program Principles should be a public document, displayed on the Q&A website.**

## List of Recommendations

### Panel Composition

1. A greater level of representation of politicians from the Greens and Independent/Others parties should be present on panels.
2. Q&A should achieve a greater diversity of perspectives among its overseas guests by inviting on to panels a greater number of Conservative leaning visitors.
3. The program should achieve higher levels of female representation among political panelists and in particular among those representing the Government.
4. The composition of Q&A panels should not routinely feature more men than women.
5. Consideration should be given to a modest increase in the number of panelists aged 35 and under.
6. Regardless of the practical difficulties involved Q&A can only satisfy Editorial Policy 4.2 by sourcing panelists from across Australia. Elsewhere we recommend that more episodes of Q&A be broadcast from locations outside of Sydney. If adopted, that will facilitate the selection of a broader range of panelists.

### Moderation of Discussions

7. A set of Program Principles should be agreed between Q&A and ABC editorial management that, among other matters, define the role of the moderator. It should be a public document, displayed on the Q&A website.
8. The focus on Government should be moderated so as to permit other issues and non-Government panelists to receive a greater share of questions and speaking time.
9. The moderator should ensure women are equally involved in the Secondary phase of questions and answers.
10. ABC Editorial Policies should be amended to include a specific requirement that women are properly represented in discussion and, particularly, political discourse on all ABC information programs.

## Questions

11. That, where appropriate, the questioner be introduced (or he/she introduces themselves) so as to provide relevant background on the questioner's affiliation, qualifications and such other matters that might contribute to audience understanding.
12. Consistent with the requirement to present a diversity of perspectives, more questions should be selected from the over-35 age group.
13. The ABC should commit to broadcasting Q&A from the fullest possible range of locations across Australia.
14. Repeat questioners should be allowed only on an exceptional basis.
15. A set of Q&A Program Principles should be agreed between the program and ABC editorial management that, among other matters, details how the program intends to select its questioners and what protocols it will adopt in this regard to ensure the standards set by the ABC Editorial Policies are met. The Program Principles should be a public document, displayed on the Q&A website.

## Studio Audiences

16. The age profile of the studio audience should be adjusted by including more attendees from the over-35 age group.
17. The ABC should commit to broadcasting Q&A from the fullest possible range of locations across Australia.
18. A set of Q&A Program Principles should be agreed between the program and ABC editorial management that, among other matters, details how the program intends to select its audiences and what protocols it will adopt in this regard to ensure the standards set by the ABC Editorial Policies are met. The Program Principles should be a public document, displayed on the Q&A website.

## **Twitter Stream**

**19.Q&A should be simulcast on ABC News 24 to ensure national participation on the program's social media platforms.**

**20.More of the questions asked on Q&A should be sourced from Twitter and Facebook.**

**21.Q&A should exercise care in the selection of comments for the twitter stream to ensure negativity towards politics in general and in particular to the government of the day are not disproportionately represented.**

**22.A set of Q&A Program Principles should be agreed between the program and ABC editorial management that, among other matters, details how the program intends to select comments to be included in its twitter stream and what protocols it will adopt in this regard to ensure the standards set by the ABC Editorial Policies are met. The Program Principles should be a public document, displayed on the Q&A website.**

# ABC Editorial Review no.6: Content, conduct and panel composition of the Q&A program (February – June 2015)

## Background

The ABC Board has a statutory duty under section 8(1)(c), *Australian Broadcasting Act 1983 (Cth)* to ensure that the gathering and presentation of news and information is accurate and impartial.

The ABC Editorial Policies set out the editorial and ethical principles and standards fundamental to the ABC's gathering and presentation of content. The five standards pertaining to Principle 4 (Impartiality and Diversity of Perspectives) are:

4.1 Gather and present news and information with due impartiality

4.2 Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.

4.3 Do not state or imply that any perspective is the editorial opinion of the ABC. The ABC takes no editorial stance others its commitment to fundamental democratic principles including the rule of law, freedom of speech and religion, parliamentary democracy and equality of opportunity.

4.4 Do not misrepresent any perspective. 4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.

As explained in the principles underpinning the standards in section 4, in applying the impartiality standard, ABC content-makers are guided by a number of hallmarks including fair treatment, open-mindedness and balance following the weight of evidence. These, and other key concepts are explained and illustrated in the Impartiality Guidance Note accompanying this brief. The Guidance Note may also be found here: <http://about.abc.net.au/reports-publications/impartiality-guidance-note/>.

## Scope and Subject

This Editorial Review will focus primarily on the performance of the ABC program Q&A against the impartiality standards.

- Time span of sample: 2 February 2015 – 29 June 2015.
- Number of programs in sample: 23 (This list includes a special program on the history of gay rights in Australia, broadcast 18 June 2015). All programs can be downloaded from the program home page at: <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/> (although files of each can be provided if requested by the reviewers). Full transcripts, biographies of all panelists and other information is also available on the website.
- Time span of review: The stages of the review process are described in detail on page 3. The ABC expects to receive an initial report from the reviewers, outlining their assessment of the 23 programs and any recommendations, within 12 weeks of the commencement of the review.

## Reviewers

**Shaun Brown** commenced his long career in broadcasting with the ABC in Perth in 1970, and subsequently worked as a news and current affairs reporter, producer and presenter with the BBC and Television New Zealand. In 1994, he was appointed as Managing Editor, News and Current Affairs for TVNZ, later becoming the Head of Television. He joined SBS in 2003, and served as Managing Director from 2006-2011.

**Ray Martin** worked for the ABC from 1965-1978, including 10 years as a news correspondent in North America. He was a founding presenter with Channel 9's 60 Minutes in 1978, and was later the host of The Midday Show, A Current Affair and The Ray Martin Show. He was awarded an Order of Australia in 2011 for his illustrious career in journalism, his commitment to Aboriginal Reconciliation and extensive charity work.

## Research Questions

The research questions to be answered are:

1. Featured topics for discussion. Over the relevant time period, were a suitably broad range of subjects canvassed on the program, such as would encourage a desirable diversity of perspectives and reflect the varied interests and experiences of the Australian community?
2. Was the composition of the panels such that over the course of the period assessed, Q&A met its obligations under Section 4 (particularly including the obligation to present a diversity of perspectives over time as outlined in standard 4.2, and to not unduly favour one perspective over another as outlined in standard 4.5)? In your view, does the method currently used to identify panellists work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?
3. Were panel discussions moderated in a way that ensured fair treatment was achieved, both in relation to the panellists present and the topic under discussion (with particular reference to standard 4.1)?
4. Did the questions from the public featured in each program provide an appropriate diversity of topics and perspectives (with particular reference to standard 4.5)? In your view, does the method currently used to solicit and choose questions from the audience work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?
5. In your opinion, did the behaviour and responses of audiences influence your perception of the program's impartiality? Did the composition of the audience seem predictable from week to week (if not, were there any obvious factors involved, perhaps including broadcast location)? In your view, does the method currently used to identify audience members work well, or do you believe there might be ways to improve selection processes?

6. In your opinion, did the Twitter stream which runs across the screen throughout the program either augment or detract from the overall performance of the program (with particular reference to standard 4.1)? Can you see ways in which social media could be better used to increase audience engagement with this program?

Reviewers will be provided with a copy of the ABC Editorial Policies, with their attention specifically drawn to section 4 (Impartiality and Diversity of Perspectives). They will also receive a copy of the Impartiality Guidance Note and production notes from Q&A on protocols for panel, audience and question selection.

Reviewers will be asked to assess the first 23 programs of 2015 Q&A. In addition to their considerations against the official research questions, reviewers are also invited to make whatever additional comments they regard as relevant in relation to the programs, the audit methodology, or the Editorial Policies and Guidance Note.

The reviewers are requested to provide their assessment to the ABC in the form of a draft report to be provided to the Acting Head, Editorial Policies by the agreed date.

The draft findings will then be forwarded to the Director, ABCTV who will be given a reasonable period in which to prepare and submit an official response. This will involve a draft copy of the report being shown to affected staff on a confidential basis. The divisional response will then be forwarded to the reviewers, who will have the option of revising their report in light of any issues raised. At the conclusion of this process, the final review and the divisional responses will be forwarded to the Board for approval, prior to external publication on the ABC website.

A draft standard independent contractor agreement will be sent to each reviewer by the ABC prior to the commencement of the review, covering all other general terms and conditions including agreed remuneration.