

Part Transcript of Senate Estimates held on the 25th May 2010

At the estimates hearings, which occur twice a year usually in May and November, Senators may directly question Ministers and public officials not only about the details of proposed expenditure but also about the objectives, operations and efficiency of the programs for which they are responsible.

Senator LUDLAM—Thank you. My last question relates to a documentary called *Hope in a Slingshot* which was accepted by the ABC for broadcast some time ago now. Then a couple of months later, a decision was taken not to put it to air. What is the process for reviewing ABC content against your editorial policies? What happened in the instance of this particular documentary?

Mr Scott—I am not aware of the specifics of that, Senator. Let me take that on notice. The last documentary that was raised at these hearings, with a suggestion that we were not going to show it, did in fact go to air last month.

Senator LUDLAM—Okay. I remember some discussion about that. *Hope in a Slingshot*, just so you know, is a documentary that was prepared taking testimony from Israelis and Palestinians, essentially with their hopes and aspirations for peace in the region. The reason that the producers were given that the ABC would not broadcast it was that they needed to provide content of a similar type and weight. The producers and I are wondering whether that means you would need to screen a pro-war documentary before you would be able to screen something that was advocating for peace because that is the message that seems to have been sent.

Mr Scott—Let me take that on notice and let me find out more details on that.

Senator LUDLAM—You are not aware at all of the background to this?

Mr Scott—I have no details on it. I am not really across the details of it at all. The only thing I would say is that we talk with a lot of people about making and purchasing television programs and I would draw a distinction between when we are having preliminary discussions and when a decision has been made to purchase that documentary and to put it to air. I am not aware in that circumstance whether in fact a documentary had been purchased and then we decided subsequently, taking your advice on it, not to air it, or whether in fact when we had reviewed the documentary there was simply a feeling that we would not go ahead with the acquisition of it. I just draw that distinction, which I think is an important distinction.

Senator LUDLAM—That may be the case in this instance, but you have told the producers—I have got a letter here signed by Kim Dalton, your director of television—that because it expressed a certain point of view you needed to seek an alternate point of view. To me that sets an uncomfortable precedent: that you will not be able to screen a piece that was not taking one particular side in that conflict apart from people's—

Mr Scott—Have you seen the documentary, Senator?

Senator LUDLAM—No, I have not; you have not broadcast it yet.

Mr Scott—Our platforms talk about over time covering principal relevant viewpoints. Without having seen the documentary, I would not want to narrowly judge what viewpoints the ABC felt that it may have been expressing. You have depicted it as being pro-peace and so therefore the alternative side is war. In my experience around covering issues on the Middle East, it is often more complex than that, and the perspectives that people draw from it are sometimes distinct from that. We will find out more details on that specific one.

Senator LUDLAM—I would appreciate that. I have no other questions.

This all happened rather quickly and Senator Ludlum is looking forward to seeing the documentary within a week of this going to print.