

Senator SANTORO—Mr Chairman, before I ask some questions this morning I want to make a brief statement that I think is appropriately made here. At the Senate estimates hearings in February, I asked the ABC a question on notice relating to reported antisemitic remarks on radio Triple J. Having reviewed the ABC's answer to that question on notice and the material on which I based my question, it is clear to me that I was misinformed. I acknowledged this publicly in a media statement last week after the ABC provided the committee with an answer to my question. I also apologised today to Triple J *Hack* presenter, Steve Cannane, for the error in my question, as I did in my media statement last week. I think it is appropriate that I put that on the record here today.

There is a particular line of questioning that I want to pursue this morning but, before I do so, I want to ask a question about the ABC's captioning service. As you will remember, Mr Balding, we had a discussion about that at the February estimates hearings. The new commercial service contractor commenced operations in March. Is the service delivered by the Captioning and Subtitling International meeting your expectations?

How are they contractually secured, and what mechanisms do you have in place to monitor and benchmark captioning output?

Mr Balding—I believe there have been some bedding down issues in that new contract, but I am now advised that it is running at about 99½ per cent accuracy. I will ask Mr Pendleton to provide the committee with more detail in respect of that answer.

Mr Pendleton—The service has been running since 6 March. As was to be expected, there were a number of issues in bedding down a new service provider with new software and hardware. As Mr Balding pointed out, the service is now running at 99½ per cent accuracy. We are receiving a far greater level of performance data than we have ever experienced under our previous service provider, which allows us to closely monitor their performance. The savings anticipated within the original proposal are well on track to being received.

Senator SANTORO—Your figure was 99½ per cent accuracy?

Mr Pendleton—Yes.

Senator SANTORO—Are you basing that on surveys or on feedback?

Mr Pendleton—It is on reported errors within the captioning and not necessarily on no captioning going to air.

Senator SANTORO—Mr Balding, I want to ask a series of questions on the control and monitoring mechanisms within the ABC. As well as being managing director of the ABC, you are editor in chief. You have a news director and so on, but you make the final decisions. Are you ultimately responsible for what is broadcast on the ABC?

Mr Balding—Ultimately, yes.

Senator SANTORO—As editor in chief you are supported by your various directors, like John Cameron, the director of news and current affairs, and you are supported by a document called ‘ABC editorial policies’ and the news division style guide.

Mr Balding—Correct.

Senator SANTORO—They lay down various rules and principles governing how the ABC operates. The news style guide specifically applies to people working in news and current affairs, while the editorial policy booklet applies to all staff. That is right, isn’t it?

Mr Balding—That is correct.

Senator SANTORO—And your broadcasters are expected to operate according to those rules and principles.

Mr Balding—Correct.

Senator SANTORO—Most staff, especially senior political staff, actually have compliance with these policies and documents written into their performance agreements and annual assessments?

Mr Balding—This is written into the ABC’s code of conduct.

Senator SANTORO—So effectively it is written into their contracts?

Mr Balding—Yes. It is expected that all editorial employees—and, in fact, all employees—will adhere to the ABC’s editorial policies.

Senator SANTORO—You have senior staff in supervisory roles to help you make sure standards are maintained. In Sydney you have a supervising producer on the 7 pm TV news. *Lateline* has a supervising producer. *AM* has an associate producer to help the executive producer. On *The 7.30 Report* you have Kerry O’Brien who, as well as being the presenter, is the editor. Presumably he checks the material that he broadcasts.

Mr Balding—There is also an executive producer.

Senator SANTORO—You have a head of international operations, an operational head of international operations, a foreign affairs editor and an international editor. You have three network editors, a head of national coverage and a head of local coverage. Before John Cameron was promoted last year he was also the national editor.

Mr Balding—That is correct.

Senator SANTORO—You have an editorial supervisor as well. You have a line-up of producers and associate producers and each of your program hosts is a very experienced senior ABC journalist. Would I be correct in assuming that?

Mr Balding—Correct.

Senator SANTORO—I mean people like Mark Colvin, Tony Jones and Tony Eastley, for example. Stories from overseas are filed by very experienced ABC journalists who have risen through the ranks to become foreign correspondents. You also have Bob Johnston, the head of ABC News Online, a very experienced and capable journalist—and a Queenslander, may I add, who was working in Brisbane in my own home state—who also picks up

mistakes, does a great job and reports back to headquarters in Sydney. There is a very wide array of checks and balances to make sure that the ABC gets it right. You would agree with me?

Mr Balding— Yes, I do.

Senator SANTORO— And you would expect your staff, especially those senior staff I mentioned, to be across the editorial policies and style guide, wouldn't you?

Mr Balding— Yes.

Senator SANTORO— They would keep these documents close at hand and consult them regularly and would be guided by them as to how a professional newsroom operates. Those rules are regularly reinforced by memos from Mr Cameron and, before he retired, Mr John Tulloh, the head of international operations, in a memo sent through the ABC internal email system to all editorial staff.

Mr Balding— That is correct.

Senator SANTORO— There is a lot of prompting and reminding, isn't there?

Mr Balding— There is, yes.

Senator SANTORO— The reason for this, I imagine—and I think you would have to agree—is to maintain your standards and to stick to the rules. For instance, on page 18 of the editorial policy, there is a whole section, section 6.3, about accuracy, impartiality and objectivity. On page 9 part 5.1, the charter of editorial practice, states:

The ABC takes no editorial stand in its programming

You would expect staff to know this and observe it. They would presumably have to read the memos and obey the instructions in them.

Mr Balding— Yes.

Senator SANTORO— Especially senior staff such as Mark Colvin, Tony Jones, Tony Eastley and Geraldine Doogue—although she is not in news, and editorial policies do not apply if they are not in news, do they?

Mr Balding— No.

Senator SANTORO— Mark Willessee; Hamish Robertson; Maxine McKew; Fran Kelly, when she was in news; Kerry O'Brien; Phillip Williams; Peter Cave; Eleanor Hall; Rafael Epstein; Nick Grimm; Michael Vincent; Emma Griffith, foreign correspondent for *Four Corners*; Linda Mottram and John Highfield when they worked at the ABC; David Burgess, the executive producer of *AM*; Steven Sailah, the executive producer of *The World Today*; Michael Carey, who is the EP of *PM*; Peter Charley and John Bruce, who are in charge of *Lateline*—I do not think any of those people would be exempt.

Mr Balding— No, I do not believe so.

Senator SANTORO—The news division style guide lists rules alphabetically. For instance, on page 49, Mr Balding, under 'F' there is an entry called 'First names', on page 82 under 'Q' there is another entry 'Quotes' and on page 97 under 'T' there is an entry 'Terrorists/extremists' and so on. At least two of those rules—the one on first names and the one on terrorists—are reinforced by memos from Mr Cameron and Mr Tulloh?

Mr Balding—Yes.

Senator SANTORO—The memos were sent to all editorial staff in news and current affairs. The style guide rules on first names states:

The familiarity bred by the use of first names when addressing or referring to certain people in stories often sounds patronising or evokes a sense of ABC sympathy for the person or issue. We should remain even-handed and unaligned whatever the subject matter.

That rule was reinforced in a memo from Mr Cameron in March this year, which said: There is still some disregard for the style relating to the use of first names only. ABC News is not on first name terms with some people and not others.

On page 82 of this new style guide under 'Quotes' it states:

Take care not to run accusations or opinions as matters of fact.

It also states:

There is usually a better way of presenting a direct quote than using the words 'quote' and 'unquote'.

On page 97 under 'Terrorists' the new style guide says: Remember, one person's 'terrorist' is usually someone else's freedom fighter. 'Terrorism', 'terrorists', 'militant', 'gunmen' et cetera are all labels.

Further instructions were given to editorial staff by Mr Tulloh early last year not to refer to Middle East groups Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad as terrorist groups. In correspondence to ministers you stated:

The ABC is conscious that in some communities the use of the word 'terrorist' to describe a particular group can appear less than impartial when there is no clear consensus about the legitimacy of that particular group.

Do you recall giving that advice?

Mr Balding—Yes.

Senator SANTORO—And that some of those communities might include Basques, Chechens, Colombians, Filipinos, Greeks, Indonesians, Iraqis, Irish, Israelis, Japanese, Kurds, Lebanese, Palestinians and Turks?

Isn't it true, Mr Balding, as you explained before to this committee and to government ministers, that the ABC will call a group of individuals 'terrorists' if they are listed as such by the United Nations?

Mr Balding—That was previously the position.

Senator SANTORO—Otherwise that was not the case—you would not label them as terrorists?

Mr Balding—That was the previous position, yes.

Senator SANTORO—Let us talk about the previous position. Is it true that the following organisations were listed by the United Nations and are still listed: Abu Sayyaf, al-Qaeda, Taliban, Asbat al-Ansar, al-Tawhid, JI and Lashkar-e-Taiba and some Chechen groups?

Are they all on that list?

Mr Balding—I presume so.

Senator SANTORO—So any group not listed by the UN, such as Hamas, cannot be described as a terrorist organisation according to your policies as explained to various ministers and in Mr Tulloh's memo. Is that true?

Mr Balding—You are talking about a position that was some time ago. Things have changed since then in respect of labelling. I think I have advised this committee previously about that. Our editorial policies have changed in respect of labelling. The editorial policies now make it quite clear that the ABC does not label as a general rule, but where in a news story a label has been ascribed to a group and the ABC uses that they will attribute the origin of that label; in other words, who labelled that group—they will ascribe that.

Senator SANTORO—I want you to go through what was the case and what is the case now to question you within a historical perspective. When we come to more recent examples of what I am getting at—and I think you probably understand what I am getting at—you might be able to further elaborate as to how those particular provisions within the style guide have changed.

Mr Balding—The editorial policies have been amended by the board.

Senator SANTORO—Has the style guide been changed?

Mr Balding—It would have needed to have been changed, yes.

Senator SANTORO—Would you be able to get a copy for the purposes of enlightening this committee?

Mr Balding—Yes.

Senator SANTORO—Would it be wrong for editorial staff to take these matters into their own hands?

I am talking of the style guide and the editorial policy in the past, before you recently changed it. Would it be wrong for editorial staff to take these matters into their own hands and describe as 'terror groups' organisations such as Hamas, Hezbollah and any others that some people might regard as terrorists but which are not listed by the UN?

Mr Balding—I don't know about it being wrong, but—

Senator SANTORO—Would it be contrary to what the style dictated to them they should be doing?

Mr Balding—It would be contrary to the spirit of what was expected.

Senator SANTORO—What about the very specific provision within the style guide that I quoted at the beginning of my remarks?

Mr Balding—Yes, at that particular time.

Senator SANTORO—If a group were accused of a terrorist attack it would, according to your rules, be wrong for editorial staff to start calling them terrorist organisations until they had been listed as such by the UN?

I am talking from a historical perspective.

Mr Balding—It could have been, at that point in time.

Senator SANTORO—And editorial staff would be expected to obey these rules, wouldn't they?

Mr Balding—Yes.

Senator SANTORO—I presume the ABC, and you as editor-in-chief, take the issue of terrorism very seriously, like we all do, and would take extra care over this matter?

Mr Balding—Yes, we do.

Senator SANTORO—Senior editorial staff in particular would be expected to know the ABC policy and adhere to it, wouldn't they?

Mr Balding—Correct.

Senator SANTORO—Presumably, editorial staff who breached this policy would be spoken to and staff, especially senior staff, who repeatedly—and I repeat: repeatedly—breach this policy would be disciplined, would they not, or perhaps even counselled?

Mr Balding—They would be, if they were in breach of policy at that time.

Senator SANTORO—And staff who deliberately and repeatedly disobeyed this rule, perhaps because they disagreed with it, would be subject to disciplinary action?

Mr Balding—They would be subject to formal counselling.

Senator SANTORO—Maybe warnings and counselling?

Mr Balding—Formal counselling, yes.

Senator SANTORO—Would you envisage a time when they would be taken off air if they repeatedly breached—

Mr Balding—If there were deliberate breaches, yes.

Senator SANTORO—Obviously, the ABC has standards and a reputation to protect, and ultimately that is your job and responsibility as editor-in-chief?

Mr Balding—Correct.

Senator SANTORO—Mr Balding, can you then explain the following for me. Why did *Four Corners*, in a broadcast on 8 July 2002 state:

Innocent Catholics were murdered as well as IRA terrorists.

Four Corners is investigative TV at its best, according to your web site. Is the IRA on the United Nations terrorist list?

Mr Balding, was it on the United Nations terrorist list at that time?

Mr Balding—I don't know. I would have to have a look at that.

Senator SANTORO—Is it contentious in the Irish republican community to label the IRA as terrorists?

Mr Balding—These are hypothetical questions to me about an event that happened three years ago. We have had a significant look at our editorial policies, particularly with respect to labelling. You are taking me back into an area three years ago.

Senator SANTORO—I am leading up to May this year in my questions. I am just asking you what your view is about what was happening then.

Mr Balding—And I have said, with due respect, that editorial staff are expected to follow editorial policies and guidelines in our style guide at any particular point in time.

Senator SANTORO—I would just like you to answer questions as they related to what was in existence at that time.

Mr Balding—I will try.

Senator SANTORO—We will come to more contemporary examples very soon. Why did you online service publish the following on 3 February 2003:

Two members of Northern Ireland's outlaw protestant terrorist group, the Ulster Defence Association, have been killed.

Is the UDA on that list?

Was it on that list?

Mr Balding—I don't know. I do not have that list in front of me from that point in time. I am not in a position to say whether or not a particular group was on a list two or three years ago.

Senator SANTORO—Can I suggest to you that it was not on the list and ask whether naming it as a terrorist organisation be contentious in that community?

Mr Balding—As we said, the labelling of any terrorist organisation is contentious in various communities.

Senator SANTORO—Contentious to everybody in that community?

Mr Balding—In the particular community, yes.

Senator SANTORO—For example, in Ireland?

Mr Balding—It could be.

Senator SANTORO—To everybody in the community?

Mr Balding—I am not in a position to answer that. I do not know the community in Ireland—I do not know the people who comprise the community.

Senator SANTORO—On *Lateline* on 4 July 2002, well after Mr Tulloh's memo, Tony Jones broadcast the following:

The Prime Minister has cancelled one of his stops in Greece, because of fears of a terrorist attack.

... .. Officials blame the terrorist group known as "November 17".

Was that organisation on the UN list at that time?

Mr Balding—I do not know whether it was or was not. If you just go back, someone else has ascribed that label. From what you just quoted, it was not the ABC ascribing that label. It was officials ascribing that label, if I heard you correctly.

Senator SANTORO—The quote that I have here is from Tony Jones, *Lateline*, 4 July 2004, well after that memo by Mr Tulloh. He made the statement that I have just given.

Mr Balding—Could you repeat the quote?

Senator SANTORO—Yes. The quote reads:

The Prime Minister has cancelled one of his stops in Greece, because of fears of a terrorist attack

... .. Officials blame the terrorist group known as "November 17".

Mr Balding—That is officials; it is not the ABC ascribing that label.

Senator SANTORO—I think Mr Jones in his remarks described that organisation. He did not attribute it to officials. He actually described 'November 17' as a terrorist organisation. He said that officials described it as such, but he also described it in that way

Mr Balding—That was not in the quote that you just gave.

Senator SANTORO—Why did Peter Cave, on the *World Today* on 3 September 2003, broadcast the following:

... having the bomb attached with a sophisticated neck cuff, only previously seen used by Columbian terrorists.

Were there any Columbian terrorist groups on the UN list at that time?

Mr Balding—I do not know. I would have to have a look.

Senator SANTORO—Does anybody at the ABC know who is on the UN terrorist list?

Mr Balding—Yes, they would; in the editorial staff and in ABC news and current affairs—the list at a particular point in time,

Senator SANTORO—Obviously at that particular point in time that I have been referring to, from 2002 through to 2004, you would have to agree that there did not seem to be very much awareness of who was on that list.

Mr Balding—I am not in a position to agree or disagree. Again, you are putting things to me that occurred two or three years ago.

Senator SANTORO—I have just given you three examples, and I will continue to give you further examples.

Mr Balding—And I am quite happy to have a look at these, but I am not in a position to answer now whether a particular group was or was not on a list.

Senator SANTORO—Going back a little further, why did Linda Mottram, on *AM* on 22 January 2000, broadcast the following:

The Basque terrorist group, ETA ..

Was ETA also on the list in January 2000?

Would some Basques, for example, dispute the label of ‘terrorist’?

Mr Balding—I would have to have a look at that.

Senator SANTORO—The reason why I mentioned all the names of your very senior journalists and correspondents is that most of them, if not all of them, have broken that very basic rule within your guidelines.

Mr Balding—I do not just accept that. I need to go back and look at the circumstances and context.

Senator SANTORO—I would like very detailed replies to the very specific—

Mr Balding—We are more than happy to provide that detail.

Senator SANTORO—On 18 April 2001, on *Foreign Correspondent* it was said:

For decades now, the Basque terrorist group, ETA, has waged a murderous campaign for independence

Hamish Robertson, on the *World Today* on 12 March 2004, after the memo from Mr Tulloh, said:

... explosives used in the past by ETA terrorists.

Norman Hermant, on *Lateline* on 12 March 2004, said:

The Basque terrorist group, ETA ...

Fran Kelly, on *Saturday AM* on 13 March 2004, said:

The homegrown Spanish terrorist group, ETA ...

Mr Balding, I think there is a lot there for you to check. Can you let the committee know whether you think that all of those journos—who, as I acknowledged, are highly experienced and capable—broke those pretty explicit rules which they had been reminded of and about which you had also written to ministers.

Mr Balding—I am more than happy to have a look at that.

Senator SANTORO—Let us turn to Japan. Mark Colvin, on *PM* on 17 July 2003, said:

The Japanese Red Army is a longstanding terrorist group with strong Palestinian links

Was it on the UN list?

Mr Balding—I would have to have a look.

Senator SANTORO—What about the Japanese sarin gas gang?

Is that on the UN list?

Mark Simkin called them terrorists on *PM* on 27 February 2004—not that far back. What about the radical Palestinian faction, 15 May?

Is that on the list, Mr Balding?

Mr Balding—I would have to have a look.

Senator SANTORO—Because Mark Willacy, on 18 December 2004, months after Mr Tulloh's memo, broadcast the following on *Saturday AM*:

A radical Palestinian terrorist group called the 15 May faction ...

When did the new editorial guidelines come into existence?

Mr Balding—In terms of the labelling, two months ago.

Senator SANTORO—After your letters to Minister Downer and Minister Coonan, Eleanor Hall on the *World Today* on 14 September 2004 referred to 'a terrorist group calling itself the horror brigade of the Secret Islamic Army'. Was that on the list at that time?

Mr Balding—I will have to have a look.

Senator SANTORO—Is Carlos the Jackal on the list?

Mr Balding—I do not know.

Senator SANTORO—Rafael Epstein, your European correspondent, on *AM* on 27 October 2003 referred to:

'international terrorist Carlos the Jackal'.

Nick Grimm on *PM* on 27 July 2004 talked about terrorist groups like Islamic Jihad in the Philippines, but they were not listed on the UN list until 18 October 2004, three months later. Hamish Robertson on the *World Today* on 2 April 2004, after Mr Tulloh's memo, talked about supporters of terrorism who belonged to:

'an extreme left-wing Turkish group called the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party Front'.

Now we come to the Chechens. Some Chechen organisations were listed by the UN in March 2003, but one Chechen group not on the list is the Mosvar Barayev Commando. Yet Michael Vincent on the *World Today* on 17 March 2004 referred to a new terrorist threat,

'a group calling itself the Mosvar Barayev Commando'.

Mr Balding, no doubt you will remember the Beslan massacre?

Mr Balding—I do.

Senator SANTORO—Hundreds of little children were murdered in a school in southern Russia. Your ABC reports at the time made lots of references to terrorists, terrorism and terror groups, but your journalists did not know whether or not the perpetrators of that vile deed were the same groups on the list. Was the group that carried out the attack the Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs, which is on the US list, or was it the Mosvar Barayev Commando, which is not?

Mr Balding—I will have to have a look at that; I do not know.

Senator SANTORO—Maybe what was done in Beslan was so bad that you were clearly within your rights calling those people terrorists, and I want to make that absolutely clear. Maybe you were within your rights to call those people terrorists. I certainly think that every one of your reporters who called them terrorists—Emma Griffith, Tony Jones and Eleanor Hall—did the right thing, and I want to be very clear on the record in relation to that so that nobody could accuse me of going soft on terrorists. Mr Balding, could you describe the difference between killing children in cold blood in a school in southern Russia and killing children in cold blood on a school bus in Jerusalem?

Mr Balding—I am not in a position to describe the difference between those horrific, tragic circumstances.

Senator SANTORO—But some of your journalists do pick and choose, and that is one of the underlying points that I am making.

Mr Balding—Again, that is why we do have the editorial policy in the style guide and that is why the ABC board chose earlier this year to change the editorial policies in respect of ascribing labels.

Senator SANTORO—Would you agree that the ABC selectively chose to label one as terrorists and not the other?

Mr Balding—No, I disagree that the ABC selectively chose to do that. Whether or not a particular journalist took that upon themselves is a separate issue from whether or not the ABC as a corporate entity took a decision.

Senator SANTORO—Would you agree with the proposition that many of your ABC journalists, including very senior journalists, in fact did that?

Mr Balding—No, I disagree. I am quite happy to look at the individual circumstances, but it is inappropriate for me to make a general statement to agree or to disagree with what you are proposing.

Senator SANTORO—At this stage I have given you at least a dozen and a half, perhaps two dozen, names of journalists, senior journalists and correspondents who have breached the guidelines.

Mr Balding—You have given me the names of journalists, and you are asserting that they have breached the guidelines. I am not in a position to answer that here today. I am more than happy to go back and have a look at what was actually said and the context of what was said and to bring it back to this committee. I am accepting at face value what you are saying, but it is very difficult for me to agree or disagree just on that reading of what you have there.

Senator SANTORO—Do you think that those journalists I have mentioned who are still working for the ABC as well as others I will mention will be more capable of following your editorial policies and guidelines than they have demonstrated to date?

Senator CONROY—That is a bit of a big call.

Mr Balding—Again, I need to have a look at each of those circumstances. But let me say that I have a very high regard for all of the ABC journalists.

Senator SANTORO—There is no doubt as to the technical talents of ABC journalists. I have been on the record on several occasions stating that they are, indeed, technically some of the best journalists in the world.

What we are talking about here is inherent bias.

Mr Balding—I reject the issue of inherent bias. I must reject that.

Senator SANTORO—If you go back, have a look at your transcripts and ascertain that what I have quoted is incorrect, obviously I will do what I did earlier this morning—that is, I will tender apologies to anybody that I have misquoted. I will always go on the record to fix up mistakes. It has always been my practice to do so on the few occasions in public life that I have had to. But if you are able to ascertain that those breaches of your guidelines and editorial policies occurred, would you agree with me—and it is a hypothetical question at this stage, because you are unable to give me the answers—that you had a problem in the ABC at that point in time if as many journalists as I have asserted were in breach of the guidelines?

That is on the basis that you are able to ascertain that what I have quoted is correct.

Mr Balding—I will acknowledge that there was an issue with the ascribing of labels. That is why the board chose to change its editorial policies and make it quite clear to our editorial staff that, as a general rule, the ABC will not label groups.

Senator SANTORO—What do you mean by ‘as a general rule’? You either have specific rules or you do not. You either label organisations as terrorist organisations and people as terrorists if they are listed on the UN list—

Mr Balding—I am sorry; we have moved away from what is listed on a UN list or who describes a particular group as a terrorist group. We have moved away from that, as I said.

Senator SANTORO—Would you like to tell the committee briefly who, in addition to those on the UN terrorist list, is labelled as the terrorist?

Mr Balding—As I said, the editorial policy is not to label groups. But where a group has been described as a terrorist group, for instance, we seek the origin of that—in other words, where a label is ascribed, we find out who has put that label out and who has called that particular group a terrorist group.

Senator SANTORO—Is there a specific provision within the guidelines?

Mr Balding—There is; it is in the editorial policies.

Senator SANTORO—Would you be able to produce that editorial policy for the committee before the conclusion of today’s sittings?

Mr Balding—Yes.

Senator SANTORO—I keep going back to examples because obviously you are going to be looking at them. Why did David Hardaker, on *PM* on 26 October 2004—that is, after your letters to the ministers and after Mr Tulloh’s memo—broadcast the following:

... the Government has played down reports on the ABC that the Iranian-backed Hezbollah terrorist group may be specifically targeting Australian troops.

Was this policy changed because Australians were being targeted instead of Israeli children?

Mr Balding—I will have to have a look at that.

Senator SANTORO—Would you be able to provide me with an opinion as to why that change of approach occurred?

Mr Balding—Yes.

Senator SANTORO—Geraldine Doogue, on *Saturday Breakfast* on 12 March this year—again, after your letters and memo—said:

... Hezbollah was one of the few terrorist groups President Bush mentioned by name ...

Mark Colvin, on *PM* on 16 April 2004—again, some weeks after Mr Tulloh’s memo and a couple of months after your new editorial policy—said:

... Hamas also, as well as doing the things that you mentioned, sends out suicide bombers. It’s also, in other words, a terrorist organisation.

Is anybody reading those memos at the ABC?

Mr Balding—I am quite confident that the memos are read—they are looked at and adhered to. You have examples that you are citing. As I said, I am more than happy to go back and have a look at each one of those examples and come back to this committee.

Senator SANTORO—Mark Willacy, also on *PM*, on 7 December 2004—that is, after your letters to the ministers and after Mr Tulloh’s memo—said:

... the Americans had been calling on the Saudi’s to do more to shut down Al Qaeda, to stop their own funding of terrorist groups—groups like Hamas that operate in the Palestinian territories and inside Israel.

Again, that is a very direct quote, which will be available to you. I suggest that Labor’s defence spokesman, Robert McClelland, just to give the Labor Party a bit of credit, knows what he is talking about in a way that your ABC does not. On *Lateline* of 22 September 2003 he referred to:

‘the Hezbollah external terrorist organisation’.

Michael Vincent on *Lateline* of 5 December 2003 said:

The Lebanese based Hezbollah is usually linked to terror attacks in the Middle East.

Senator CONROY—Senator Santoro, I think you have made your point. You do not need to read each individual one out. You are using up your very short time left.

Senator SANTORO—What I am doing, Senator Conroy—

CHAIR—I must say, on that point, Senator, that your time is really close to expiring.

Senator CONROY—I think everybody in the country has got a flavour for what you are doing.

Senator SANTORO—What I would like to do is just finish on this particular section, Mr Chairman, if the committee will grant me the—

Senator GEORGE CAMPBELL—I will answer the *Age* questions for you afterwards.

Senator SANTORO—You would be very capable of answering Irish questions, Senator. ABC Online of 14 August 2003:

'the Palestinian terrorist organisation Hezbollah'.

CHAIR—We will give you until quarter to, Senator

Senator SANTORO—Tony Jones on *Lateline* of 4 November 2003:

'the Palestinian terrorist organisation Hamas'.

Hamish Robertson on the *World Today* on 10 September 2003:

'the terrorist group Hamas'.

Mark Colvin on *PM* of 25 August 2003:

'Israel has hit again at the terrorist organisation Hamas.'

Tony Jones recognised the issue on *Lateline* on 22 September 2003:

'We've seen night after night suicide bombs going off in Israel linked to Hamas.'

Were they terrorists, Mr Balding, or were they freedom fighters?

Mr Balding—Again, Senator, let me have a look at it.

Senator SANTORO—Jill Colgan on *Saturday AM* on 21 August 2004:

'The men are accused of financing Hamas attacking Israel sponsoring drive-by murders, and car and suicide bombings.'

That sounds like terrorism. Mark Willacy again, this time on *PM* on 21 August last year:

'But, if we take Hamas, for example, it kills women, children and civilians in its so-called war of resistance, doesn't it?'

Jane Hutcheon on *Lateline* of 20 August 2003:

'Bus No. 2, blown into scrap metal ... at least 40 children among the casualties.'

Four hundred children in Beslan and it is terrorism; 40 in Jerusalem and the killers are freedom-fighters! What we are seeing here, I suggest to you, Mr Balding, as well as a breakdown of editorial policy and order in the ABC, is the beginning of a breakdown of the convenient 'not a terrorist offence' that the ABC has always advanced up to now when challenged over partiality to the Palestinian cause when it takes sides in that conflict. Would you agree that that is what was happening at that time?

Mr Balding—No, I disagree, Senator.

Senator SANTORO—Tony Jones sees a terrorist when he sees one. Speaking to Hamas representative Abou Shanab on 9 June 2003, he said:

'It's because Hamas kill civilians that you are likely to be branded as a terrorist organisation throughout the world.'

Even the Palestinians themselves admitted it, Mr Balding. Here is a Palestinian authority, the minister for Israeli negotiations, Yasser Abed Rabbo, speaking on *Lateline* on 28 August 2003:

We have decided to boycott Hamas and Jihad and take all necessary measures in order to preserve the Palestinian national interests against all these adventures, acts and terrorist attacks

Mr Balding, I could go on and on, but I am very conscious of the fact that even my own side here at this estimates hearing are trying to shut me down. But let me say—

CHAIR—I must object to that comment, Senator. We have arranged for you to have time to make your points.

Senator SANTORO—But, Mr Chairman, what I am trying to prove you can only prove by repeating the many examples, because the ABC has always said to this committee, 'Sure, there are lapses and, sure, we admit some errors sometimes, but it's not a frequent occurrence.' What I am saying is that at that point in time the rules that Mr Balding and his senior executives were meant to be supervising were being constantly breached week after week, month after month, and practically on a daily basis. I have many other examples in relation to other issues.

I am asking who is really in control at the ABC, Mr Balding. Is it you, is it your executive directors or is it your journalists, who will do whatever they want to do?

Do you really have confidence that these new editorial guidelines that came into place a couple of months ago are going to be in any way adhered to after what I would suggest was a disgraceful display of inherent bias within the reporting of certain matters by your ABC journalists?

Do you have confidence that the performance under the new guidelines is going to be better than we have seen to date?

Mr Balding—Let me just put on the record now that I have confidence in our editorial staff. They are very professional, hardworking staff. You have mentioned a number of instances in a period when hundreds of thousands of stories went to air. I think we need to look at it in the context of what you are talking about and what the ABC delivers and broadcasts, but I am more than happy—as part of this public accountability process—to take those questions on notice and come back to this committee with full and detailed answers.

There is no question on my part about my confidence in my editorial staff at the ABC; they are second to none.

Senator SANTORO—Would you provide detailed answers?

Mr Balding—I will provide detailed answers.

Senator SANTORO—In view of the limitations placed on me, I will conclude my questioning for the time being.

[Recommencing later in the ABC hearing]

Senator SANTORO—I would be grateful if my 20 minutes start in 10 minutes. I would like to thank the chair and the committee, including members of the other side, for their generous agreement that I continue with my line of questioning. I will spare the SBS. I will put my questions to SBS on notice so as not to take up more time of the committee. Mr Balding, you say that the new code of practice applies. I think I asked you this question before I finished earlier, but I will ask it again. What confidence can we have in how that is applied, given the issues that I raised with you earlier this morning?

Do you think that the new provisions in that code of practice will be adhered to?

Mr Balding—We are talking about the editorial policies. The governing document is the ABC's editorial policies and it is mandatory that they are applied and I am confident that they are applied and adhered to.

There will always be breaches. People do make mistakes.

Senator SANTORO—As many breaches as I mentioned this morning?

Mr Balding—Let us have a look at those to see whether they actually constitute a breach or not. As I said, I am more than happy to go through the details of them.

Senator SANTORO—If it was able to be proven by your meticulous investigation of the issues that I have raised, would you agree that there were a number of them?

Mr Balding—Again, you are putting a hypothetical situation to me.

Senator SANTORO—The reason I put that hypothetical is that we do not have estimates often enough, from my point of view. I would hate to have to refer these matters to the independent review mechanism that you have set up.

Mr Balding—Which is a very robust system.

Senator SANTORO—Which will undoubtedly be tested many times in the future. Between 12 October and 25 October, just to give you a little more material to look at over the next little while, Jemaah Islamiah was not on any UN list, was it?

Mr Balding—I do not know.

Senator SANTORO—In fact, they only got on that list because the Australian government asked the UN to list them. The Australian government can list terrorist organisations itself and I suggest that that is not good enough for the ABC but that if the Australian government asked the UN to list them and they do so that is okay. Is that the correct position of the ABC as I have just described it?

Mr Balding—Are you talking about the current situation?

Senator SANTORO—I am talking about what applied previously.

Mr Balding—No. Previously the ABC used the UN list as a guideline.

Senator SANTORO—So, if that was not the position, why was it that for more than two weeks from the time of the bombings until 25 October JI was not on any UN list and your broadcast journalists were calling them terrorists?

Mr Balding—Again, I will have to have a look at that.

Senator SANTORO—You would want to look into the fact that the Australian government did not reveal its intention to ask the UN to list JI until 15 October and there was no way that the ABC could assume that the UN would comply. Is that a reasonable assumption for me to make?

Mr Balding—I really do not think I am in a position to say whether you are making a reasonable assumption or an unreasonable assumption. You are obviously putting a lot of questions on notice to us. As I said earlier, I will look at them in detail and respond back to this committee.

Senator SANTORO—Let me quote the ABC. Here is Tony Jones on *Lateline* on 14 October 2002, the day before the UN listing:

...this man Hambali who is meant to be the operational leader, a genuinely worrisome terrorist figure inside Indonesia.

That is what Mr Jones said. Even after the Prime Minister announced that Australia would ask JI to be listed, I assume that under your strict rules—and they are strict rules, despite the fact, Mr Balding, that you just tried to insinuate that they are just guidelines —

Mr Balding—What guidelines?

Senator SANTORO—You just mentioned to me that they were operating under guidelines, not rules that are contained—

Mr Balding—No, I said that they used the UN list as a guideline.

Senator SANTORO—Despite the fact that they had been instructed to use the UN list as the definitive way of determining—

Mr Balding—I will look into that, but I do not think there was an instruction to use it as a definitive list.

Senator SANTORO—Even after the Prime Minister announced that Australia would ask JI to be listed, I assume that under your strict rules a terrorist organisation can only be called that once the UN says it is okay—I repeat that I am of the belief that there were strict rules—and you would have to wait until the UN complied. That surely was your policy. Are you saying now that that was not your policy?

Mr Balding—As I said previously, they were only using it as a guideline.

Senator SANTORO—Let us assume the weaker interpretation and it was a guideline. If they are not on the list under those guidelines, you are not a terrorist organisation?

Mr Balding—I think in those days they were looking at each case on its merits and that is why there was an issue there and we clarified it with regard to our editorial policies.

Senator SANTORO—Many years later. I am talking about 2002 now.

Mr Balding— Yes.

Senator SANTORO— Nick Grimm on *PM* on 6 October 2002, nine days before the listing, said:

Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual leader of the Indonesian-based terrorist organisation Jemaah Islamiah

But Reuters reported four days after the Bali bombings:

Abu Bakar Bashir is free to walk the streets of Jakarta. Indonesian authorities say there is now no evidence to link Bashir to terrorist activity.

No evidence, not on any list but the ABC still called him a terrorist leader.

Mike Colvin, who seems to just keep popping up, on the same program, said:

You're listening there to a translation of the words of the Indonesian Muslim cleric, Abu Bakar Bashir, the man purported to be the spiritual leader of the terrorist organisation, Jemaah Islamiah.

That was in October 2002, nine days before it was listed by the UN. Then there were four similar references on *ABC Newsline*, all before 25 October when JI was listed. Is this a rule change when Australians become the victims, Mr Balding?

Mr Balding— Again, I will need to have a look at that.

Senator SANTORO— Do you see what I am trying to say to you— that one week you have one type of reference and the following week you have another reference under whatever rules at the time are operating?

I think that you announced that the new rules were to apply on 1 March. When did those new rules become fully operational?

Mr Balding— The board approved the changes to that around about early March.

Senator SANTORO— Was that when the rules came into—

Mr Balding— That is when the change to the editorial policies came into effect. I would have to give you the exact date of when they came into effect.

Senator SANTORO— I thought that there was an announcement by you that they were going to be reviewed on 1 March.

Mr Balding— No. I might have said they were probably effective from the beginning of March. The board approved it during February.

Senator SANTORO— I am suggesting to you that in those instances the United Nations was not really a good judge of what was terrorism or not but you still adhered to what they said, whether it constituted a terrorist or a terrorist organisation. Aside from the groups that I have mentioned, there is one other organisation that they listed as a terror group, the East Turkestan Islamic Party. Are they a major problem?

Did the ABC consider them at that time to be a major problem?

Mr Balding— Again, I would have to look at the context of how it was labelled and how it was described.

Senator SANTORO—When you look into that would you be able to tell me why they were listed?

Mr Balding—Yes, we will.

Senator SANTORO—I suggest to you that one of the major reasons would have been heavy pressure from China.

Mr Balding—I reject that. I totally reject it.

Senator SANTORO—I mean heavy pressure from China—

Mr Balding—To the ABC?

Senator SANTORO—No, I was not saying that.

Mr Balding—I reject that.

Senator SANTORO—No, I was not saying that. Let me clarify. I am talking about the UN. I would not suggest that a sovereign country other than Australia would in some way seek to put pressure on the ABC.

There was one other group that was called a terrorist organisation by the UN, and that is the Basque group ETA. Let me quote you from the United Nations web site, and it is on the web site to this very day. It says:

The United Nations Security Council today strongly condemned the bomb attacks in Madrid.

Just hours after a series of bomb attacks rocked three main stations of the Spanish capital, the council unanimously adopted a resolution condemning the attacks perpetrated by the terrorist group ETA.

Do you know or did you know at that time who carried out the Madrid attacks?

Mr Balding—I personally did not know at that time, no.

Senator SANTORO—Was it ETA, as the UN asserts, or was it al-Qaeda, do you think?

Mr Balding—I do not know.

Senator SANTORO—Do you think that anybody in the ABC knew at that time?

Mr Balding—I doubt it very much.

Senator SANTORO—And you still think that the UN is a reliable guide?

Mr Balding—Did I say it is a reliable guide?

Senator SANTORO—I am asking the question. Do you think it is a reliable guide?

If the guidelines say to look at what is listed by the UN, presumably you would think that it is a reliable guide. I have to put all of these questions in the past tense because you obviously have a new set of editorial guidelines, as you keep reminding us.

Mr Balding—At that point in time the ABC did rely upon that list as a reliable guide.

Senator SANTORO—Thank you for that. I suggest there was a lot of pressure from China for that to happen. They were dead wrong about Madrid and are still blaming ETA to this very day on their web site. That is the fount of all wisdom for the ABC.

Mr Balding—In what regard?

Senator SANTORO—It certainly was at that stage a fount of wisdom for the ABC

Mr Balding—As a guide, yes

Senator SANTORO—What I am trying to say is that there are a lot of people who are very forensically listening to what the ABC is saying and doing and we are very, very keen to monitor performance. I am greatly encouraged by this new editorial policy that you are referring to, which I would love to see.

Mr Balding—I have it here to table.

Senator SANTORO—I would be grateful after my 20 minutes are up if you are able to do that. Before I make any further comments outside of this committee, I would like to better inform myself. I am greatly encouraged by your optimism about it. I will let you know whether I share that optimism after I look at it. It just seems to me, again talking in the past tense, that these journalists who work for the ABC had very little care for the guidelines and the editorial policies as they existed at that point in time.

Mr Balding—That can be your view. It is definitely not my view.

Senator SANTORO—I would like you to tell me why I am wrong in relation to each of those examples.

For the committee, of course, I would like you to prove to me that I am wrong and we will let reasonable people, I suppose, make the judgment. Some reasonable people may wish to test your answers against your newly established independent complaints tribunal.

Mr Balding—I am more than happy to do that.

Senator SANTORO—The ABC on at least six occasions since it had been known that the Madrid bombing was not carried out by ETA still called ETA a terrorist group. That is up to the introduction of your new editorial guidelines. Was this because, as per ABC rules, they had been relying on the United Nations?

For example, are Hamish Robertson, Nick Grimm, Maxine McKew, Norman Herbert, Fran Kelly and Phil Williams all wrong?

Do you want to have a look at that?

Mr Balding—I will, yes.

Senator SANTORO—If they are all wrong, again I would suggest that there is an endemic problem there.

We are not just talking about one journalist failing the test on multiple occasions. I am talking about many journalists failing on a multiple number of occasions.

Mr Balding—As I said, I am more than happy to have a look at it and come back to this committee.

Senator SANTORO—I have been hearing you today justifying what I consider to be fairly serious lapses in adherence to editorial policies. Before you try a new justification for

that policy on terrorism—that may be that Hamas or Hezbollah have also operated as political parties and they run some other things in society like schools and welfare—I should remind you and some of the other journalists who work for the ABC who may have used that justification that so did the Taliban and so does JI. I ask your journalists again through the proceedings of this committee: since when does gaining a foothold in society by running schools or becoming a political party suddenly give you immunity from charges of terrorism?

I am talking about any group, not just the ABC. Is that since you became editor-in-chief?

Mr Balding—No.

Senator SANTORO—It is not much of an excuse to say that the ABC is following the same rules as Reuters applies because Reuters seems to have similar rules. Does the same Reuters after the September 11 attacks send out a memo to editorial staff telling them not to call the evil perpetrators terrorists because ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter’?

I would hope that Reuters is not used as a prop and as an excuse. As you know, I obviously take an interest in the ABC because it does many fine things and many people in Queensland that I represent rely on the ABC. I have stated that previously, and I go on the record as saying that the vast majority says that what the ABC does is very good. You know that I support it and will continue to support it. Unfortunately, I do not get to watch the ABC or listen to it as often as I would like but when I can I do. I have seen and heard a few things lately that I want to ask you about, things that I believe have been broadcast since your new code of practice or your editorial policy came into existence, which would tend to indicate that the editorial policies or code of practice are still being consistently or repeatedly breached.

If I run out of time, I suppose I will have to place them on the record, unless the committee agrees to let me go for a little while longer. Going back to your News and Current Affairs divisional style guide, the rule covering the issue of broadcasting accusations or opinions as a matter of fact says:

Take care not to run accusations or opinions as matters of fact.

Is that still the rule, according to the editorial policy?

Mr Balding—Yes.

Senator SANTORO—The style guide gives an example of this issue as follows:

‘North Korea has blamed the US for escalating tensions because of its bullying tactics. It contains an accusation that must be qualified along the lines of what it—North Korea—says are American bullying tactics.’

I just throw out the net very widely and all sorts of things come within it. I may be dragging the net, but it is a very fruitful catch. The rule further states:

We don’t advance our personal views or opinions. News copy must always make the source of an opinion perfectly clear so that it cannot be perceived as coming from the ABC.

Is that still the rule?

Mr Balding—Are you quoting from the style guide?

Senator SANTORO—Yes.

Mr Balding—That is still the position.

Senator SANTORO—Can you explain why on *AM* on 9 May this year, a week or so ago, presenter Tony Eastley read the following:

A former translator for one of Australia's Muslim leaders has criticised the choice of words used by the cleric in his appeal for the release of Australian hostage, Douglas Wood.

In his appeal Sheik Taj El-Din al-Hilaly told the hostage takers "we value your jihad and your efforts".

But the President of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, who was present during the appeal, dismisses the former translator's criticism, saying Sheik Hilaly simply wanted to express sympathy with those trying to liberate Iraq, not their tactics

According to page 82 of your own style guide that you tell me still applies, that should have really read: 'wanted to express sympathy with those he claims says believes are trying to liberate Iraq'. Should that have not been the case?

Mr Balding—It could have been. Let me have a look at it.

Senator SANTORO—That is 9 May 2005. Yet we have Kerry O'Brien on *The 7.30 Report* on the very same day, 9 May 2005, saying:

... Douglas Wood's family offered to donate a sizeable sum of money to "help the people of Iraq"...

There is a quote on page 82 of the ABC divisional style guide about quotes:

There is usually a better way of presenting a direct quote than using the words "quote unquote."

Does it state that?

Mr Balding—It could do.

Senator SANTORO—I suggest that it does—or it did. Probably if it does not, it should be reinserted again.

I have taken on board you telling me that yes, you have changed your editorial policy and some aspects of your style guide, but it is happening on 9 May 2005, less than two weeks ago.

Mr Balding—The example you just gave then is a pretty pedantic issue.

Senator SANTORO—Give it time. After the performance by the ABC, including from your very senior journalists that I have been outlining here today, my answer to your suggestion that it is pedantic—by the way, I am going to go on—is to give it time. Based on the record so far, according to me—and you are going to have a look at the record according to me—I say give it time, give it another month or two, and when we come back for the next round of estimates I will probably have even more substantial examples, although I regard that as a fairly substantial breach of the style manual.

Why do two very senior staff at the ABC presenting your two flagship programs ignore these two basic rules in a way which creates the clear impression that the ABC agrees with the claim that the insurgents and terrorists in Iraq who are threatening to murder Douglas Wood are trying to liberate Iraq while also creating a doubt about whether the money being offered by Mr Wood's family would really go to help the people of Iraq?

That is the clear implication.

Mr Balding—Is that an implication or a quote?

Senator SANTORO—That is me asking you the question. Why would the ABC leave itself open to that reasonable interpretation, and I would regard that interpretation by me as a reasonable one.

Mr Balding—That is your interpretation and you are entitled to that. Let me go back and look at it in the context of the report itself.

Senator SANTORO—Returning to the rule about first names, can you explain how the following occurred and what checks were made in advance and by whom?

On *The World Today*, ABC radio, 1 February this year, reporter Nancy Haxton was interviewing David Hicks's father, Terry Hicks, and asked him,

'What does this mean for David?'

On *The 7.30 Report* on 12 April this year, reporter Jonathan Harley was interviewing Mr Bob Symons from the National Measurement Institute about the alleged dangers from chemicals in breast milk. He said,

'So, Bob, what have we got here?'

Talk about first names. On ABC TV news on 3 March this year, Sydney based reporter Deborah Rice was doing a story about Cornelia Rau and referred to her as Cornelia. On Radio National *AM* on 12 May this year, reporter Nick Grimm referred to Vivian Alvarez Solon as Vivian. That is about the fourth time his name comes up. Does Nick Grimm read these rule books and memos at all?

Mr Balding—He should do

Senator SANTORO—Again, we have many senior journalists and multiple breaches of the rule books. On *Lateline* on the same day, reporter Margot O'Neill referred to her as Vivian no fewer than five times in her report. On *Lateline* on 30 May foreign affairs editor Peter Cave tries to refer to Ms Solon as Vivian. Peter Cave again. After the first breach by Nancy Haxton, what action was taken involving her and the program's executive producer, Steve Taylor, to counsel them and reinforce the rules and the need to observe them, especially in sensitive and political stories?

Are you aware of any counselling?

Mr Balding—No, but that is one of the issues I will be following up, to see what action has been taken. If they are clear breaches of the style guide and repeated breaches of the style

guide, I will be very interested to see what follow-up action has been taken by the producer and the executive producer of those programs.

Senator SANTORO—I will be grateful for that. Thank you for that. After the breach by Deborah Rice on 3 March this year, what action was taken involving Ms Rice, the 7pm line-up producer, the supervising producer and network editor, especially given the sensitivity of that story?

Mr Balding—I will follow through on that.

Senator SANTORO—What action was taken involving Jonathan Harley and the editor and the executive producer of *The 7.30 Report* on 12 April this year, especially given that it breached a rule that had been specifically reinforced in a memo to Mr Cameron just three weeks beforehand?

Mr Balding—I will be asking Mr Cameron that question.

Senator SANTORO—What action was taken involving Nick Grimm and executive producer David Burgess after the breach on *AM* on 12 May this year?

Mr Balding—Again, I will be asking a similar question.

Senator SANTORO—What action was taken involving Margot O'Neill's breach on *Lateline* the same day, especially given the sensitivity of that story?

Mr Balding—I will be following up on that.

Senator SANTORO—Why is it that this mistake was constantly repeated without, it would seem, any editorial management of the issue, despite a memo about this from Mr Cameron just two months previously?

Mr Balding—That is something I will be looking into.

Senator SANTORO—Were any of these reports checked by supervisors or producers before they went to air?

Mr Balding—They would have been.

Senator SANTORO—If they were, why were these errors not picked up?

Mr Balding—Again, that is a question I will be asking as well.

Senator SANTORO—What action was taken involving Tony Eastley, David Burgess and reporter Michael Vincent in respect of the breach of the rule on quotes on *AM* on 9 May this year?

Mr Balding—Again, let me have a look at that.

Senator SANTORO—What action was taken against Kerry O'Brien over the breach of the ABC rules on quotes?

I could keep on going. I will be guided by the chair and by the committee. I have another five or six pages of examples that stretch past 1 March when your new editorial guidelines came into existence.

Mr Balding—The editorial guidelines were in respect of labelling groups.

Senator SANTORO—So we are now talking about the style guide.

Mr Balding—Senator, you were talking about the style guide.

Senator SANTORO—I am talking about the style guide. I am talking about first names—which is your style guide.

Mr Balding—That is correct.

Senator CONROY—I think your 20 minutes are up. I thought you had another appointment to go to.

Senator SANTORO—This is my most important appointment today. Can I conclude, Mr Chairman, by thanking you and senators from the Labor Party for their consideration and their assistance. I just conclude by saying that I will put the rest of my questions to you on notice, Mr Balding. I would hope that you consider them in the same spirit that you have indicated in making commitments to answer the questions that I have asked you orally.

Mr Balding—I will do so.

Senator SANTORO—Again, the major point that I have tried to prove today is that I need to be convinced—and there are other senators and members in this parliament who need to be convinced—that your most senior journalists reporting news take your editorial policy or style guides, other instructions and advice, formal or otherwise, seriously.

Mr Balding—I am quite happy to reiterate what I said earlier. They do take them seriously. They are very, very professional journalists. I stand by those journalists. ABC news and current affairs is second to none. If these are breaches that you have tabled here today, I will have a look at them and see what action can be taken.

You are talking about a number of cases or instances in the context of hundreds of thousands of stories going to air 24 hours a day.

Senator SANTORO—What I have been talking about here are breaches in relation to very sensitive political issues of the day. I know that the ABC publishes hundreds of thousands of stories a year in one way or another, but most of them are non-controversial. Most of them are stories that do matter so much to so many people but in a political context perhaps not as much as some of the stories that I have been referring to here

That is the key point. We are talking about political, sensitive, topical issues being debated and discussed and questions asked in the Senate and the House of Representatives. That is the big difference. I respectfully suggest you consider that when looking into the issues that I have raised with you.

Mr Balding—I definitely will.