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SARAH HENDERSON
SHADOW MINISTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS
SENATOR FOR VICTORIA

Mr David Anderson
Managing Director
Australian Broadcasting Corporation
700 Harris St
Ultimo NSW 2007
via email

Dear Mr Anderson

Complaint about ABC's reporting of Alice Springs town meeting

I refer to the ABC's reporting of the Alice Springs town meeting held on Monday 30 January 2023 and, in particular, a report broadcast on the AM Program on 31 January 2023 (**Report**) by Ms Carly Williams which was subsequently re-broadcast on ABC NewsRadio.

As I have stated publicly, the Report was shockingly biased, inaccurate and offensive. It did not constitute independent reporting of the Alice Springs town meeting attended by more than 3,000 people, falsely depicting it as a gathering of "white supremacists", a view held by only a very small number of protestors.

The Report did not include any details of the escalating violence in Alice Springs which was the basis for the meeting being called, the profound safety concerns of thousands of local residents, the support which many Traditional Owners gave the meeting organisers or the impact of and solutions to the violence and anti-social behaviour which were discussed at the meeting before a protest effectively shut it down.

The mayor of Alice Springs, Matt Paterson, reacted angrily to the Report, asserting this was the "ABC lighting the fuse to have a race war." He demanded the ABC apologise and retract the Report. He reiterated that the Report was not the work of local ABC journalists for whom he held in high regard.

As set out in the ABC's Code of Practice 2023 (**Code**), the Code's "*principles and standards ... uphold the fundamental journalistic principles of accuracy and impartiality, to protect the ABC's independence and integrity.*" The Code recognises that the ABC also has a statutory duty under the *Australian Broadcasting Act 1983* to ensure that the gathering and presentation of news and information is accurate and impartial, according to the recognised standards of objective journalism.

The ABC's first response to the Report was to defend its broadcast, arguing: "*Many strong and conflicting views and opinions are expressed within the community, including some confronting views, and the news coverage reflects that and doesn't shy away from it.*" Incredulously, the ABC failed to acknowledge there were any issues with the Report at all.

As I stated publicly, the ABC's first response was irresponsible, deeply flawed, arrogant and reflected very poorly on you as editor in chief. It showed that the ABC either did not understand or was not prepared to acknowledge its fundamental obligation to all Australians to report the news accurately and impartially. This also served to undermine the ABC's promotion of itself as a trusted and credible news organisation. I called for an apology, a retraction of the Report, an investigation into how this story got to air and a review of journalistic training.

After the publicly outcry continued, the ABC issued a second response late in the day on 3 February 2023 on its 'Corrections and Clarifications' website page, conceding the *"report should have included a broader range of perspectives expressed at the meeting and further information about what was discussed"*, and apologising to audiences for providing an *"incomplete picture of the event."*

I note that that the ABC did not reference an ABC TV news report filed by Ms Williams or the inflammatory, inaccurate and deeply offensive comments by a guest on *The Drum* who compared the Alice Springs town meeting to the film 'Mississippi Burning' which concerns institutional racism by a town's residents including members of the Ku Klux Klan.

I believe it is incumbent on the ABC to investigate and explain the editorial failures which allowed the Report to go to air, the deficiencies in the support or supervision provided to the journalist, and how the ABC's procedures and policies which resulted in the Report being broadcast can be improved.

The ABC must also explain the basis for its first response and why the Report inexplicably remains online, albeit with a clarifying note, which is tone deaf to the ABC's failings and completely unacceptable.

Given the ABC has not *"taken steps which were adequate and appropriate in all the circumstances to redress the cause of the complaint"* as is required, I believe it is arguable that the ABC has not complied with the Code.

Accordingly, due to the seriousness of the matters I raise, I will be asking the Australian Communications and Media Authority (**ACMA**), which has a discretionary power to investigate a complaint, to investigate whether the ABC has breached its Code. Upon the finding of a breach, ACMA has the power to recommend that the ABC takes certain actions such as implementing improved journalistic training and removing the Report from its website.

As the Code states: *"The ABC belongs to the Australian people. Earning and retaining their trust is essential to fulfilling the ABC's charter and its responsibilities under the ABC Act to provide innovative and comprehensive services of a high standard to Australian and international audiences."*

I welcome your consideration of these matters and any response you may wish to provide.

Yours sincerely



Sarah Henderson

5 February 2023