

Government sends explosive ‘please explain’ letter to Ita Buttrose over Four Corners expose

By SHARRI MARKSON, INVESTIGATIONS EDITOR

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The Morrison Government has fired off a missive to ABC Chair Ita Buttrose with a litany of complaints about the [Four Corners program](#) that delved into the private lives of Cabinet ministers Christian Porter and Alan Tudge.

The letter from Communications Minister Paul Fletcher explosively accuses the ABC Board of failing to meet its duty to ensure the broadcast of “accurate and impartial” news and information according to “recognised standards of objective journalism.”

The program by the public broadcaster’s flagship current affairs program in early November [exposed a consensual affair between Mr Tudge, then human services minister, and his former media adviser, Rachelle Miller](#), and broadcast unfounded allegations that Mr Porter is sexist and had kissed a woman in a Canberra bar. Mr Porter has strongly denied the allegations.

Mr Fletcher’s letter to Ms Buttrose questions how the ABC complied with its duty of impartiality by only investigating the private lives of Liberal Party politicians and not delving into relationships involving Labor, Green or independent politicians.

The letter formally demands the ABC Board answer why it felt it was newsworthy to broadcast a story on the “personal lives of politicians” at all.

In doing so, Mr Fletcher accuses the ABC of compromising the privacy of the Attorney-General and Minister Tudge and asks how this is consistent with the respect for privacy outlined in the ABC Code of Practice.

Pre-empting a response from the ABC, Mr Fletcher writes that if the Board claims the Ministerial Code means the topic is in the public interest, then he asks which of the conduct outlined in the program is in breach of the code?

He adds: “What is the relevance to the Ministerial Code of the allegations extensively made in the Program concerning conduct by the Attorney-General at several stages of his life before he became a Minister?”

Mr Fletcher demands a response from Ms Buttrose and the Board to 15 questions including why it was fair to accuse Mr Porter of sexism based on content when he was at school and university.

“How is it consistent with the Code of Practice’s reference to fair treatment and impartiality for the ABC to include in the Program extensive materials regarding conduct over a quarter of a century ago by someone who was then a university student and even a school student?” the letter asks.

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It also accuses the ABC of failing to follow its Code of Practice by not correcting errors, by presenting misleading information and by failing its statutory duty of impartiality.

The letter also claims that some of those interviewed for the program, who made allegations against the ministers, were “politically hostile towards the Liberal Party or personally hostile towards or motivated by animus against the Ministers.”

The letter follows strong comments by Prime Minister Scott Morrison at the time the program aired that the ABC should uphold its charter and act in an unbiased way.

“If they are going to make inquiries I would think they would want to do them across the political spectrum,” he said.

“It’s always important that the ABC remains true to their charter and I would expect them to

do that.”

On the weekend, Mr Fletcher’s spokesman had denied any letter was being sent from Mr Fletcher to Ms Buttrose.

But multiple senior government sources confirmed to The Australian that a letter had been prepared over the past few weeks.

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said he raised the general allegations with Mr Porter that he had been seen in bars socialising with women two weeks before promoting him to Attorney-General in December 2017.

Mr Turnbull and Mr Porter had a falling out during the week of the August 2018 leadership spill, with a bitter fight over leadership rival, Peter Dutton’s eligibility to run for the top job.

Mr Tudge also became an enemy of Mr Turnbull after he supported Mr Dutton’s bid to overthrow him as prime minister.

Mr Turnbull, who was interviewed for the Four Corners program, said of his meeting with Mr Porter: “I noted that I had heard reports of him. being out in public having had too much to drink in the company of young women. I reminded him that Canberra was full of spies, not all of them worked for us.”

Mr Porter disputed Mr Turnbull’s recall of that conversation, saying he had been called in to the Prime Minister’s office to answer to accusations he had leaked a story to The Daily Telegraph.

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