

COMPLAINT NUMBER	20/229
ADVERTISER	Maureen Pugh MP
ADVERTISEMENT	Maureen Pugh Facebook & Twitter
DATE OF MEETING	10 June 2020
OUTCOME	Decline to Adjudicate

Summary of the Chair's Decision

The Chair declined to adjudicate the complaints.

Description of Advertisement: The advertisement on MP Maureen Pugh's Facebook Page and Twitter feed showed an infographic with images of New Zealand and Greece with wording underneath each map with the country's population and forecast debt per person in 2024 figures.

The text in the post from Maureen Pugh said "New Zealand has a massive economic challenge ahead of it to rebound from Covid-19. This graphic shows how New Zealand's current forecast debt per person in 2024 compares to where Greece's forecast debt per person in 2024 was in November 2019, prior to the pandemic. While New Zealand is fortunate to have a much greater capacity to pay back that money, it gives some scale of the amount of debt our country is taking on and why we desperately need sound and responsible economic management to save jobs and restore our country's finances". The post contained a source for the data and an authorisation statement.

Complaints

There were five complaints about this advertisement:

Complaint 1:

Breaches rules 2(b), (c) and (d). Most viewers will not appreciate either (a) that the Greece figure quoted is a forecast from before Covid-19, whereas the NZ figure quoted takes into account Covid-19 spending and economic outlook; or (b) the significant difference between the debt to GDP ratios in each country, which makes a direct comparison of debt per person meaningless.

Complaint 2:

Maureen Pugh using stats from different time periods to compare Greece and NZ. The National propaganda machine.

Complaint 3:

This appeared on National MPs Facebook page and also on her Twitter. It is not a true representation. Greece's figures are pre Covid. You can read that on the almost unreadable print below it. This is false.

Complaint 4:

As a concerned citizen I cannot stand by while Minister of Parliament Maureen Pugh blatantly and without shame tries to mislead citizens.

I have attached screenshots from Maureen Pugh's Facebook page where she has used pre Covid-19 estimations of Greece's debt forecast per person vs New Zealand's post Covid-19 estimations. The minister should be transparent and not blatantly try mislead the public. It is reprehensible.

Complaint 5:

Im writing to complain about an advertisement posted by National Party MP Maureen Pugh on Facebook.

The ad, linked at the bottom of this message, has an infographic comparing New Zealand and Greece's forecast debt. The ad says the population of New Zealand's forecast debt per person in 2024 is \$37,811 (USD), it also says Greece's forecast debt per person is \$36,925 (USD).

In extremely small print, the ad says "(estimated pre COVID-19)" underneath the forecast debt for Greece. It makes no clear statement about when New Zealand's debt was forecasted, which was in fact from a Treasury document in mid-May 2020, well after the onset of COVID-19.

Rule 2(b) of the Advertising Standards Authority's Advertising Standards Code states that "Advertisements must not mislead or be likely to mislead, deceive or confuse consumers, abuse their trust or exploit their lack of knowledge. This includes by implication, inaccuracy, ambiguity, exaggeration, unrealistic claim, omission, false representation or otherwise."

This ad is clearly designed to mislead New Zealanders into thinking New Zealand's government debt is worse than Greece's. That wasn't true either pre-COVID or post-COVID.

Before COVID, Greece's national debt for 2024 was forecast to be 154% of their GDP, which Pugh says is around USD37,000 debt per person. Using the same data source as Pugh, New Zealand's national debt was forecast to be only 29% of our GDP in 2024, which I calculate is around USD12,00 debt per person.

Post-COVID, the European Commission published economic forecasts showing Greece's debt exploding by 20% of their GDP this year alone, while the Treasury document Pugh refers to shows New Zealand's debt only rising by 6.1% of our GDP in the same period.

These fair comparisons show the likely consumer takeaway from this ad is grossly untrue. The ad misleads people into this false belief in two distinct ways:

First, it is dishonest in that it's not comparing apples with apples. It is extremely deceptive for Maureen Pugh to compare debt estimated pre COVID-19 with debt estimated post COVID-19. They're not an appropriate comparison because it's widely accepted – including by the National Party itself - that COVID-19 had a significant impact on government debt for countries right across the world. This goes well beyond the practice of putting a political spin on a comparison that's subject to differing views. In this case, no responsible economic commentator anywhere is arguing pre-COVID debt projections and post-COVID debt projections are a fair comparison. And yet that's what Maureen Pugh chose to present to people on Facebook, with the type of comparison she's using hidden in the fine print. In my view this is deliberately dishonest.

Second, the advertisement fails to clearly indicate that it's not comparing apples with apples. It deliberately excludes any acknowledgement that New Zealand's estimate was made after the onset of COVID-19, even as it does note the timing of the Greek data. Again, the only reason to exclude that information is to try and mislead people.

I request that you rule this ad misleading and require Maureen Pugh to remove it immediately.

Information from the Advertiser

When I designed the graphic it had the funding statement on it but there has been no boosting or any money spent on the Facebook post... Definitely no money paid on either platform for that graphic, therefore organic.

Relevant Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) Guidelines

The Chair referred to the [ASA Guide on Election and Referenda Advertising](#) (the Guide) which states the ASA deals with “complaints about paid election advertising in media not covered by the [Broadcasting Standards Authority Election Programmes Code](#) ... The ASA will decline to adjudicate on complaints about posts on branded social media pages (referred to as organic posts) or websites from political parties, candidates, and election-related advocacy groups.” This includes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok etc).

Chair’s Ruling

The Chair declined to adjudicate the complaints.

The Chair noted the post was confirmed as unpaid content on a branded Facebook page for Maureen Pugh, MP and on the candidate’s Twitter feed.

Chair’s Ruling: Decline to Adjudicate

APPEAL INFORMATION

According to the procedures of the Advertising Standards Complaints Board, all decisions are able to be appealed by any party to the complaint. Information on our Appeal process is on our website www.asa.co.nz. Appeals must be made in writing via email or letter within 14 calendar days of receipt of this decision.