

Federal police used to intimidate Australian Broadcasting Corporation staff

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1 March 2001

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) management took the unprecedented step last month of calling in the Australian Federal Police to question staff members over the purported leak of an internal memo on executive salaries to a Sydney newspaper.

Eleven employees from the ABC's human resources division, the first of 50 workers named for questioning, were each interrogated on February 16 for over an hour by two AFP officers, who video- and audio-taped their answers. A third officer transcribed the proceedings. Employees were asked whether they had disclosed the memo to the press and to name anyone they thought might have done so. Several of those questioned were traumatised and have undergone special counselling since their ordeal.

ABC managing director Jonathon Shier has denied initiating the police action but Russell Balding, his finance director, told the Senate Estimates Committee last week that he [Balding] called a special meeting on January 31 to discuss the leaked paper with David Hodgkinson, the ABC's auditor, and Michael Brooks, the ABC's security chief. Hodgkinson then contacted the police, alleging that the leak could constitute a breach of the Commonwealth Crimes Act.

The memo, which was published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* on January 19, revealed that in one year, since Shier began his term of office, management had grown by 55 new positions to 304, at an increased cost of \$7.4 million annually. Its publication came one month after 24-hour national strike action by 4,200 ABC workers over the axing of staff, programs and a \$3.4 million cut to news and current affairs.

Widespread opposition to the management's police tactics produced a spontaneous walkout by over 300 ABC workers in Sydney on February 16 and forced the network's chairman Donald McDonald and other senior

board members to intervene. The police investigation was closed down a day later, and no charges were laid—but the witch-hunt atmosphere inside the ABC remains.

The Howard government, which has intensified the commercialisation of the ABC begun under the previous Hawke and Keating Labor governments, has made clear that it wants more job cuts and initiatives to rein in the network's limited editorial independence. As Communications Minister Richard Alston declared in 1996: "I have previously indicated my support for an approach where resources are targeted to fit a redefined role for the ABC and also wish for the ability to influence future ABC functions and activities more directly."

Shier has longstanding links with Howard's ruling Liberal-National Party coalition. He is a former vice-president of the Young Liberals and was a member of the Liberal Party's federal executive in the mid-1970s. In line with government demands, Shier has eliminated more than 100 TV production jobs, mostly in Sydney and Melbourne, and late last year foreshadowed the destruction of another 200 jobs throughout the network.

Quantum, Australia's only science television program, will be axed in May and its 15-member research team dispersed throughout the ABC; the radio arts budget has been slashed by 32 percent, forcing the cancellation of all arts programs planned for Classic FM and Radio National; and *Media Watch*, a weekly program analysing the Australian media, has been shut down, with Paul Barry, its presenter, sacked.

Barry was dismissed last December after broadcasting an interview with McDonald in which he accused the ABC chairman of inadequate responses to the growing disaffection within the ABC and defended media criticism of Shier. *Media Watch* has now been

replaced with *Littlemore*, a show headed by former *Media Watch* host Stuart Littlemore. David Salter, the show's producer, told the press that the program would not make “any gratuitous criticism” of ABC management.

Last week Shier announced plans to hire extreme right-wing academic and journalist Imre Salusinszky as an ABC commentator, claiming it was necessary to balance what he alleged was a “left wing bias” on the network.

On February 17, a day after the police interrogations, Rupert Murdoch's newspaper, the *Australian*, praised Shier for taking on what it described as “an entrenched, inward looking and insufferable oligarchy”. In an editorial entitled “Shier and the ABC: a clash of cultures,” the newspaper declared that the “ABC still has the feel of a workers' collective rather than an efficiently run modern corporation”. Communications Minister Alston echoed these comments, telling the newspaper that Shier was showing “commendable determination”.

Turning the ABC into an “efficiently run modern corporation” means transforming the government-owned media service—which provides a wide range of news, current affairs, cultural, scientific and education programming—into an organisation driven by ratings and other commercial considerations. This will necessarily involve the destruction of hundreds of more jobs and further attempts to restrict the ABC's journalistic independence.

Over the past year Shier has axed 41 senior managers, programmers, commissioning editors and department heads. They include the heads of news and current affairs, Classic FM and new media publishing. In the past, ABC staff were employed on a permanent basis. Today only 69.7 percent have ongoing employment, and 214 journalists/reporters—26.5 percent of the total—are on short-term employment contracts.

Shier has announced plans to benchmark the ABC's production costs against overseas public broadcasters and introduce a ratings system to determine all future programming. This threatens the remaining arts, science and cultural programs, which may sometimes have relatively small audiences, but which provide access to important material and discussion that is not available elsewhere in the media.

After the Howard government cut the ABC budget by

\$66 million in 1996, the ABC raised its retail income from \$3.3 million that year to \$14.3 million in 2000. Insisting that this be boosted further, Shier plans to develop network programming around marketing opportunities. Merchandising ventures will be established, tying snack food, clothing and other retail products to children's television characters and shows. Shier also wants to introduce an ABC credit card and to link the network's websites to commercial Internet retailers.

Shier has encountered growing resistance within the ABC and from the national network's substantial audience. A recent Newspoll survey reported that 80 percent of respondents believed the ABC was doing a good job and 60 percent suggested that the broadcaster should receive increased government funding. On January 11, 10,000 people demonstrated outside federal parliament against the attacks on the ABC. Management's resort to police to interrogate staff is a crude attempt to silence or intimidate further internal opposition.



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