

Thousands rally against cutbacks at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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Over 11,000 people, mainly family groups and retirees, rallied outside the Sydney Opera House on April 29 to oppose the destruction of programs and services at the government-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Called by the Friends of the ABC under the banner "Save Our ABC," the protest followed a similar size demonstration in Canberra in February.

Jane Connor, an executive producer from ABC Radio National's social history and features department, explained how hundreds of jobs had been slashed, television production cut by 20 percent and 30 percent of television producers made redundant in NSW since the appointment of managing director Jonathan Shier last year. She said there were only 10 researchers left at Sydney's Gore Hill television studios, the scenic workshops had been shut down, one third of archive and library staff will be cut, and documentary and features departments "shredded" with virtually no new television programs scheduled for the next 18 months.

ABC journalist Quentin Dempster said that the network's editorial independence had been compromised by commercial deals with vested interests and that the broadcaster was "being destroyed with the compliance of stacked boards of party political hacks." He was given thunderous applause after he denounced former Labor prime ministers Hawke and Keating, and current Liberal prime minister Howard for "cuddling up to the big media tycoons". "All these prime ministers," he said, "think that by looking after the ascendant media tycoons first they have a better chance of staying in power."

While rally speakers described the parlous state of the ABC, none were able to explain the overall political and social context of the government assault. Moreover, rally organisers ignored the obvious hostility in the crowd to the Liberal and Labor governments and invited Barry Jones, a minister in the former Labor government, to address the demonstration. Jones said nothing about Labor's record but claimed that an incoming Labor government would "defend the ABC." He told the rally, however, that Labor could not make any promises on funding until the election campaign began later in the year. None of the speakers challenged him.

In fact the Hawke Labor government initiated funding cutbacks to the ABC's operating budget in the mid-1980s. Since then, it has been cut by 34 percent in real terms, 3,500 jobs eliminated and in-house production facilities and programming decimated. Under the Howard Liberal government, following the appointment of Shier as managing director 15 months ago, more than 300 jobs, mainly of production workers in Sydney and Melbourne, have been axed. This includes the recent decision to eliminate 60 jobs from technical services and 36 jobs or one-third of staff from the sound and videotape libraries and archive document departments.

Every year the ABC commissions approximately 2,000 hours of programming, but in-house production and program planning has been

so depleted in the last year that only 500 hours have been organised up until June this year. And to overcome the increasing shortfall, ABC television has doubled the number of repeats it will show, from three times per program to six.

News services budgets have been cut drastically and programs such as *Media Watch* axed because it challenged ABC management. *Quantum*, Australia's only television science program, has ceased and funding slashed to arts, music and other vital services while an estimated \$15 million spent on salary increases, redundancy packages and other payouts to senior executives.

Behind this assault lies the drive by successive Australian governments, like their counterparts around the world, to lower tax rates for high-income earners and corporations in a never-ending struggle to attract foreign investment. These tax concessions and other corporate enticements are paid for by savage budget cuts and the rundown or privatisation of public health, education, welfare, transport and public broadcasting facilities.

The decimation of the ABC is also driven by the demands of media corporations controlled by Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer and Kerry Stokes who dominate broadcasting and newspaper publishing in Australia. Murdoch, who owns the *Australian*, the country's only daily national newspaper, and a string of local newspapers, is in partnership with Kerry Packer in Foxtel pay-TV, the dominant cable network. Packer and Stokes own national television networks Nine and Seven respectively and Murdoch has major film production facilities in Sydney.

The government-owned ABC is the largest single radio and television production house in Australia. As well as broadcasting news and current affairs, it produces music, drama, history, science and education. It also broadcasts to some of the most geographically isolated communities and since its foundation has provided basic training to thousands of radio, film and television workers.

Murdoch's editorial and feature writers sneeringly refer to these accumulated public resources and the expertise which has developed out of them as "middle-class welfare" run by a "workers' collective" and demand privatisation of the network. If ABC facilities can be run down or viable sections of the network sold off, Murdoch and other media corporations will increase market share and boost their income because all local production will have to be sourced from profit-making enterprises, in most cases owned by them.

In addition to these economic factors are political considerations. While the government is constrained by a broadcasting charter that restricts it from directly controlling news and program content decisions, consecutive Labor and Liberal governments have accused the broadcaster of bias and then stacked the Board of Management with their own political appointees to try and reshape the network according to their needs.

Howard government ministers, including Communications Minister Richard Alston, and Liberal Party federal director Lynton Crosby regularly denounce ABC news and current affairs programs. In the last three years, Crosby has written scores of letters to the broadcaster—an average of one per month—accusing it of bias and distortions. In fact, 76 percent of all complaints received by the ABC during this time have been from the Liberal Party claiming bias over Aboriginal issues, the Republic referendum and the trade unions.

In March Stephen Claypole, an applicant for the ABC managing director's position in 1999, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that board members wanted a political purge at the broadcaster. Claypole said that several board members told him during interviews in Sydney that the ABC had a number of Labor-leaning “on-screen personalities and senior executives” who should be removed. “The views I heard expressed were like something from a Third World broadcaster,” he said.

While ABC chairman Donald McDonald denied Claypole's allegations, the majority of ABC board members are appointees of the Howard government and several have close personal links to Prime Minister Howard. Jonathon Shier, who became managing director early last year, is a former vice-president of the Young Liberals and was a member of the Liberal Party's federal executive in the mid-1970s.

Shier, who has been widely promoted in the Murdoch press, has created a witch-hunt atmosphere inside the broadcaster. In February members of the Human Resources Division were ordered by management to report for questioning at Australian Federal Police headquarters over a leaked document on senior executive salaries. Individual employees were interrogated by Federal police who video- and audio-taped their replies. This crude intimidation followed the sacking of journalist Paul Barry and the axing of his *Media Watch* program after he challenged ABC chairman Donald McDonald on air. ABC management is clearly attempting to prevent journalists and producers from presenting any criticism, no matter how tame, of government policy, in what amounts to a serious attack on democratic rights, in line with increasing censorship of the arts and other measures to restrict freedom of speech.

Prosecuting a struggle against the Howard government's attacks is absolutely necessary. Not one of the speakers at the “Save Our ABC” rally, however, proposed any measures for defending jobs, services or production facilities at the ABC. Indeed, throughout the past decade and a half, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has collaborated with the government's agenda of creeping privatisation and the destruction of jobs.

Moreover, it is necessary to differentiate sharply from the political outlook dominating the rally. Actor John Howard from the popular television series *Seachange* and CPSU head Wendy Caird spelled it out most clearly when they declared that in attacking the ABC the conservative Liberal government was attacking the “national interest”. Caird told the rally that the ABC was an “integral part of what it is to be Australian” while actor Howard said an under-funded ABC “compromised our culture” and that “small nations like ours need strong and inspired leadership to ensure that our cultures never come second.” Quentin Dempster cited a survey that pointed to the fact that the ABC was one of the country's “most trusted institutions.”

But what is the “national interest” and what purpose does the call to defend it serve?

Publications owned by media boss Rupert Murdoch regularly equate the “national interest” with the expansion of his media monopoly and

profits. The extreme rightwing One Nation party demands an end to immigration and the cutting of welfare to Aborigines and single parents in the name of the same “national interest”, as does the Howard government whenever it slashes public education, healthcare and other basic social services.

Nations are not collections of people sharing equal rights and opportunities but are divided into classes—a tiny wealthy elite who own the means of production at one pole and the majority of working people who produce all the wealth, but have no control over the most important decisions of economic and social life, at the other. The existence of some unified “national interest” is a fiction, because the objective interests of these two major social classes are irreconcilably opposed to each other. The use of the term “national interest” always signifies an attempt to cover over the real class interests at stake.

The rally speakers' underlying perspective is an appeal for a return to some entirely idealised past in which the ABC produced high quality, genuinely independent news and programming. In reality that has never been its role. Since its founding some 70 years ago the ABC has functioned as pillar of the existing social order—manufacturing, moulding and mobilising public opinion within the confines of the existing status quo. Whatever criticisms have been made by ABC journalists of government policy from time to time, they have never challenged the framework of Australian capitalism and no genuinely dissenting voices are ever aired.

The attack on the ABC raises the broader question of what role the mass media will play in the 21st century. Will the extraordinary advances in technology be utilised in the interests of private profit to suppress any expression of critical thought, or will they become the basis of a flowering of culture, collaboration and critical inquiry throughout the world? The answer depends upon the development of an independent movement of the international working class aimed at reorganising society and establishing a genuine publicly-owned media under the democratic control of ordinary working people.



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