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In the wake of its participation in the US-led invasion of Iraq, the Howard government has stepped up its political attack on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), accusing the state-owned national network of anti-American bias in its coverage of the war, and forcing a new round of budget cuts. The two-pronged offensive forms part of the government's ongoing attempts to transform the network into a direct mouthpiece for government policy.

The new assault began in late May when Communications Minister Richard Alston wrote to ABC managing director Russell Balding demanding that the *AM* radio program be investigated. Alston's letter included a 13-page dossier citing 68 examples of what the minister claimed was anti-American bias by the morning news show. Reports by *AM* journalists were variously described as "dripping with sarcasm" and "negative".

Alston later told the press that the ABC was "accountable to the government" and if "parliament thinks they [the ABC] have lost the plot they could be defunded". He threatened to establish a "content-monitoring authority" or external censor of the broadcaster and accused ABC news chief Max Uechtritz of allowing his personal views to "infect" ABC coverage in Iraq.

Various government ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson, backed Alston. Ross Cameron, parliamentary secretary for Family and Community Services, declared that the network should be privatised because it only catered to an "educated elite" and should not be financed by the rest of the population. "Australia doesn't really need a national broadcaster," he said.

Alston's claims that the ABC is anti-American and opposed to the war against Iraq are absurd. Much of the network's reportage of the war was drawn from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and major US networks. According to an ABC spokesperson, the majority of public complaints received by the broadcaster during the war accused it of supporting the US-led invasion.

While *AM* raised a few questions about the war--and of US military media briefings--it never challenged Washington's underlying agenda. To the extent that ABC programs were critical of the official government line, it was only to carry limited reports on the disaster facing the Iraqi people and some acknowledgement of local resistance to the occupying troops.

One of the examples of "bias" cited in Alston's dossier was an *AM* story from Linda Mottram warning of a humanitarian catastrophe. Mottram, one of the network's most experienced journalists, quoted statements from international aid organisations. According to Alston, her report was a "beat up". There was "no

catastrophe, not even a crisis" in Iraq, the minister claimed.

Mottram also came under fire because she questioned repeated denials by the US military that it had deliberately bombed markets in Baghdad and because she reported that Baghdad's hospitals were overwhelmed with dead and wounded during the military onslaught. There was no such evidence, Alston insisted.

Alston's dossier also denounced an *AM* report about the US tank attack in April on the Palestine Hotel, home to "non-embedded" reporters. Three newsmen were killed when US tanks opened fire on the building. This event was falsely reported, the minister claimed, because of Mottram's scepticism about US "explanations".

Mottram's "scepticism", however, was entirely justified. The attack on the Palestine Hotel was part of attempts by the US military to stop independent journalists reporting the war crimes being perpetrated against the Iraqi population. It occurred on April 8, the same day American missiles destroyed the Al-Jazeera and Abu Dhabi TV offices in Baghdad. The US military also arrested "non-embedded" journalists in southern Iraq and killed a British ITV reporter. Two members of the same ITV team are still missing after they witnessed US soldiers open fire on surrendering Iraqi troops.

ABC management referred Alston's allegations to the network's Complaints Review Executive, which issued a detailed 130-page reply on July 31. The report refuted all but two of the minister's 68 allegations and denied any evidence of bias in *AM*'s war coverage. It accused Alston of "extravagant misrepresentation", double standards, ignoring the necessity for journalists to be sceptical and "selectively applying the ABC Charter of Editorial Practice".

In measured but blunt language the report declared that Alston's criticisms suggested the minister wanted a "form of reporting that is more passive and deferential"—i.e. to stamp out any semblance of independent reportage. It continued: "Sometimes the assumptions of the [Alston] critique appeared to be that the coverage would be remedied if it were supportive of a Coalition position in the war."

Alston immediately denounced the complaints review body and the ABC, and threatened another inquiry. Without even reading the report, Prime Minister Howard backed Alston, declaring that the findings were "inevitable" because "there's always a tendency to declare yourself not guilty". In fact, the complaints procedure, which is modelled on a BBC body, was established after an intervention by Alston in May 1998.

Today the ABC is one of the most tightly regulated state-owned bodies in Australia, subjected to constant review. The Senate

Estimates Committee and the Australian National Audit Office (ANO) regularly investigate ABC operations and no less than three bodies--the Complaints Review Executive, Independent Complaints Review Panel and the Australian Broadcasting Authority--can hear complaints against the network.

In tandem with its attempts to politically muzzle the ABC, the government is continuing what has been a protracted financial war of attrition against the statutory body. While the costs of maintaining the broadcaster have escalated, it has been starved of adequate resources by both Howard's administration and the former Labor government. Current funding is 34 percent less in real terms than it was in 1985-86. More than 3,500 jobs have been eliminated and production facilities and programming decimated during the same period.

In the course of the 1996 election campaign, Howard denounced cuts by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments and pledged that if elected he would uphold the network's funding. The first Howard budget, however, cut over \$55 million from the ABC.

In late 1999, the government appointed Jonathon Shier as ABC managing director. Shier, a former vice-president of the Young Liberals and a member of the Liberal Party's federal executive in the mid-1970s, unleashed a wrecking operation against the broadcaster, eliminating more than 300 jobs, including vital television production and technical service positions in Sydney and Melbourne. One third of the ABC's sound and videotape libraries and archive document department staff were eliminated, decimating these departments. Shier was eventually removed as managing director after a series of staff walkouts and national protests.

Last week, ABC management, in response to the government's refusal to increase funding, slashed \$26 million from programs and services, including \$5.4 million from news and current affairs. The measures will cost more than 100 jobs, with baseline training for journalists wiped out and Internet programming and development reduced.

Behind the News, a popular news and education program for high school and senior primary students, and one of ABC-TV's longest running shows, will be axed, along with *Schools TV*.

Four Corners, ABC-TV's flagship weekly current affairs program, will lose three episodes a year and be forced to reduce its international coverage. Similar measures are soon to be announced for the *7.30 Report* and *Australian Story*.

Funding for ABC overseas news bureaus will be cut by \$4 million per year; there will be a 30 percent reduction in the annual budget of ABC-TV's *Foreign Correspondent*, and two weekday shows, *Business Breakfast* and the *World At Noon*, will be merged into one midday television news program.

The network's cadet journalism training program will be wiped out, ABC radio funding reduced by \$200,000 and Internet programming by \$1.7 million. There will be cuts to arts on the ABC website and the closure of the *Learn Online* and *Public Record* web sites.

Alston's claims of "anti-American" bias at the ABC line up directly with US foreign policy requirements. While the US Embassy has made no public criticism of the ABC's war coverage, the Howard government's attack follows a series of

extraordinary interventions by US ambassador Tom Schieffer into Australian political affairs during the past 12 months.

Last October, the embassy stepped into a federal by-election in the industrial city of Wollongong, south of Sydney, holding meetings with individual candidates to discuss their attitude to a war against Iraq. In February this year, Schieffer denounced Australian Labor Party leader Simon Crean over criticisms made in parliament by a few Labor MPs of President Bush and the Howard government's participation in the war. Schieffer claimed some of the comments were "anti-American" and met with Crean to secure guarantees that Labor would support the war.

Another factor in Alston's attempt to muzzle the ABC is the widening distrust felt by broad sections of the population toward the Howard government. According to a recent opinion poll, 67 percent of Australians believe the government misled them over claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Media ratings also indicate a substantial increase in the audience for ABC radio news and current affairs programs because listeners do not trust the commercial media outlets.

Although the ABC is state-funded and all but two of the corporation's managing board members are government appointed, legislation prevents the government from directly intervening in day-to-day broadcasting policy and programming decisions. Howard and Alston regard this as an unacceptable state of affairs.

A leaked cabinet-in-confidence document from Alston in 1996 clearly outlined the government's agenda: "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."

Alston's actions demonstrate that the Howard government is determined to stifle any reportage by ABC journalists that even remotely challenges the government's line.



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