

Australia: The Howard-Jones-Flint affair

Rick Kelly
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Recent revelations about the conduct of the head of the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) and a prominent radio presenter provide further evidence of the sleazy operations of the Howard government.

In early April, the ABA, the official media regulatory body, concluded an 18-month investigation into a \$1.2 million sponsorship deal between Telstra, Australia's largest telecommunications company, and Alan Jones, a right-wing radio talkback host.

Contrary to the regulations under the Broadcasting Services Act, Jones provided positive editorial comment for Telstra following the signing of the contract in July 2002. Despite evidence indicting Jones, the ABA's final report on the issue amounted to a whitewash, with the broadcaster cleared of any misconduct.

The ABA endorsed Jones's circumvention of the various regulations that proscribe commercial contracts that interfere with a broadcaster's editorial line. The regulatory authority rubberstamped the Telstra deal on the basis that the sponsorship contract was signed between the company and Jones's employer, Macquarie Radio—not directly with Jones. The ABA issued this judgment despite Jones's 20 percent stake in Macquarie.

The extraordinary verdict demonstrated, once again, the blatantly political role played by the regulatory authority under the chairmanship of Professor David Flint. Jones and Flint share Liberal Party membership, and both men are strong supporters of the Howard government. Howard has known Flint since 1961, when they graduated together from the University of Sydney's law school.

Like Jones, Flint is a prominent and outspoken right-wing political figure, known particularly for his devotion to the monarchy. In his book *Twilight of the Elites*, published last year, he attacked alleged left-wing and liberal domination of the media and Australia's

universities. Flint was a strong supporter of the invasion of Iraq, and has called for the restoration of the monarchy in that country.

Alan Jones shares many of these political ideas, and has proven to be an important ally of Howard. The prime minister is regularly afforded a platform on Jones's show, on which he is guaranteed a fawning reception.

Over the past weeks, the ABC's *Media Watch* program has revealed that Flint and Jones developed a personal relationship that was concealed by Flint during the ABA's investigations. It turns out that, in the middle of 1999, just four months prior to the first "cash for comment" inquiry, Flint exchanged what he has recently admitted was a "stream" of letters with Jones. In one of these letters, written on ABA letterhead, Flint wrote to Jones: "you have an extraordinary ability of capturing and enunciating the opinions of the majority on so many different issues. This of course annoys those who have a different agenda. I suspect it is extremely irritating to them that you do it so well.... Keep up your considerable contribution to the widening of our national debates."

Immediately prior to the inquiry, Flint claimed to have briefly talked with Jones on only two occasions, and he failed to disclose any of his correspondence.

The *Australian* has reported that another series of letters was exchanged between Flint and Jones last year, while the ABA investigation into the Telstra deal was being conducted. Flint has dismissed suggestions that his relationship with Jones created a serious conflict of interest. "My role as chairman requires that I get to know as many people as possible in the broadcasting industry and that is exactly what I do, and no amount of wailing from the elites will change that," he told the *Age*.

Prime Minister Howard was dropped into the middle of this controversy on April 28, when John Laws,

another well-known talkback radio presenter, made the sensational allegation that Jones had blackmailed the prime minister into reappointing Flint as chairman of the ABA in August 2000. Laws claimed that his radio rival had boasted of his threat at a dinner party held three months after the reappointment.

Jones allegedly said “[i]f it weren’t for David Flint, God knows where we would be.... In fact, I was so determined to have David Flint re-elected that I personally went to Kirribilli House [home of the Australian prime minister] and instructed John Howard to reappoint David Flint or he would not have the support of Alan Jones in the forthcoming election.” Laws claimed that several witnesses at the party could support his claim.

Howard denied the allegation, but was forced to admit that he had spoken with Jones soon after Laws had aired his claim. The prime minister refused to disclose what was discussed or who initiated the conversation. “It’s a private conversation ... there’s no law against that, is there?” he said, before expressing his support for Jones, who has similarly denied threatening Howard.

The government’s strident support of Jones descended to the level of farce on April 29, when Danna Vale, the minister for veterans’ affairs, accidentally sent a message of support for Jones to Laws’ radio station. Laws promptly beamed it over the airwaves. “Thinking of you Alan, and write to assure you of our warm support; and to add our names to the long list of all your friends,” Vale and one of her staffers wrote. “Stay brave and true.”

Howard went on to express his confidence in Flint, despite the evidence of improper conduct during the Jones investigation. “I know David Flint, I have known him for quite a while,” he said. “I’m satisfied he’s an independent person and a person of integrity.” Howard rejected a chorus of calls demanding Flint’s removal, insisting that he would finish his term as chairman, which expires in October.

The prime minister has in fact been the main beneficiary of Flint’s appointment to chair the ABA—one of a series of moves by the government to politicise the public service and the various regulatory bodies. During the past eight years, Howard has openly promoted pro-government figures to sensitive positions, attacking any critical voices within the public

service as well as in the military and intelligence establishment.

Flint’s endorsement of the Telstra-Jones deal, for example, dovetailed neatly with the government’s agenda of fully privatising the 50.1 percent publicly-owned company. Significant sections of the ruling elite have been deeply critical of Howard’s inability to push it through. Telstra’s arrangement with Jones was aimed at neutralising popular hostility towards the measure.

Most notably, Flint was due to preside over an investigation into the ABC’s coverage of the US-led invasion of Iraq, after Howard’s communications minister Senator Richard Alston made a formal complaint to the ABA against the public broadcaster’s alleged antiwar bias. Only in the wake of Laws’ allegations was Flint obliged to stand aside from the inquiry.

While it would certainly be characteristic of Jones to make a self-important boast in front of friends at a party, Howard would have needed no particular incentive to reappoint Flint, given the valuable political services rendered by the ABA chairman. Laws also has own his vested interests in the issue, not least of which is the desire for public attention to counter his flagging ratings.

Nevertheless, the timing of Laws’ claim is highly significant, irrespective of its veracity. That Laws—another well-known right wing figure usually supportive of the government—has come out with such a potentially damaging claim, is yet another indication of the fragility of the Howard government.



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