

Australian government appoints Murdoch hack to ABC board

Richard Phillips
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The Howard government's appointment of Janet Albrechtsen to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's board of directors on February 24 is another demonstration of Canberra's efforts to transform the network into a mouth-piece for pro-government propaganda. Albrechtsen, a corporate lawyer and columnist for Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper, is infamous for her right-wing views and hostility towards the ABC.

While the ABC is state-funded, the government is legally prevented from directly interfering into the network's day-to-day broadcasting and programming decisions. This is regarded as a serious political impediment by the Howard government, which, like its Labor predecessors, has attempted to assert its control through the appointment of its own political cronies to the ABC board.

Those chosen by the present government include former Liberal Party president Michael Kroger, Dr Ron Brunton, a senior member of the right-wing Institute of Public Affairs and a columnist for Murdoch's *Courier Mail*, Professor Judith Sloan, a highly conservative economist, Maurice Newman, the Australian Stock Exchange chairman, Ross McLean, a former Liberal politician and current ABC chairman Donald McDonald, who is a close personal friend of Prime Minister Howard.

After her appointment, Albrechtsen declared that she would use her new position to examine the "problems of bias and how facts are presented". The hypocrisy of this claim is nothing short of breathtaking.

In the first place, Albrechtsen's weekly column in Murdoch's *Australian* is notorious, not just for its pro-government bias, but its persistent attacks on Muslims, small "l" liberals, the so-called "left" or anyone defending basic democratic rights.

Secondly, ABC-TV's "Media Watch", which exposes unethical journalism, put the spotlight on Albrechtsen's reporting "standards" more than two and half years ago, when it examined one of her articles, "Talking race not racism", published in the *Australian* on July 17, 2002.

Albrechtsen's column dealt with the sentencing of two Lebanese-Australian brothers for a series of gang rapes in 2000 in the working class Bankstown area. Designed to whip up animosity against Muslims and Middle Eastern immigrants in the lead-up to the war in Iraq, it claimed that the gang rape of white girls was a "rite of passage" for some Muslim youth. This crime, she continued, was connected to the cultural and ethnic background of the perpetrators and "society's more liberal democratic values".

In a subsequent piece, Albrechtsen quoted Keysar Trad, vice-president of the Lebanese Muslim Association in New South Wales, and suggested that he was an apologist for the gang rapists.

As "Media Watch" revealed, Albrechtsen's article was not only plagiarised from a December 2000 comment in the London-based *Times*, but it falsified statements from a French sociologist and a Danish academic that were used in the *Times*' story.

The sociologist and academic told "Media Watch" that Albrechtsen had completely distorted the meaning of their comments. Moreover, the quotes from Trad were lifted from an article published a year earlier. They referred, not to gang rapes, but to drug abuse problems amongst Lebanese-Australian youth.

The Murdoch journalist, however, continued to defend her article, reacting to a series of questions from "Media Watch" with a threatening legal letter to the program.

Albrechtsen later claimed she was the victim of a smear campaign by "Media Watch", which, she said, had become a "publicly-funded vehicle for [David] Marr [the show's presenter] to pursue his well-known private vendettas".

After more denunciations of Marr, she lambasted the ABC board for failing to uphold its charter that "news and information is accurate and impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism" and declared that the network had been "hijacked".

Management of the *Australian*, which failed to reprimand Albrechtsen or even issue an apology to its readers over the journalist's blatant falsifications, has, naturally enough, celebrated her five-year appointment to the ABC board. It declared that she would retain her job at the newspaper and that there would be no "conflict of interest", because she would not write about the national network.

The newspaper has also published congratulatory op-ed comments from Santo Santoro, a Liberal Party senator from Queensland, and Neil Brown, former communications minister in the Fraser Liberal government. Santoro praised the decision, declaring that it was necessary to take on the ABC, which had become "hostage to a fundamentally Leftist elite".

Brown advised Albrechtsen to ignore any criticism of her appointment and focus her attention on ABC news coverage. The ABC, he proclaimed, was anti-American and "anything that looks like freedom". "Little surprise, then," Brown continued, "that the ABC has opposed the war in Iraq at every step, gloated over every setback and magnified every criticism from any malcontent and misfit it can find."

Brown's comments are absurd and indicative of the hysterical opposition to the national network within the government and like-minded circles. Last year, for example, right-wing commentator Gerard Henderson devoted an entire article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* to denouncing ABC-TV's "At the Movies" because its journalists praised Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

While no ABC journalist has publicly opposed the invasion and occupation of Iraq, some of its news and current affairs staff have attempted, on occasion, to provide at least a measure of objective reportage. To the extent that this has occurred, it has been regarded by Canberra as a serious political threat—especially under conditions where the government’s lies to justify its participation in the war have been so completely exposed.

The right-wing fulminations against the ABC by Santoro, Brown, Albrechtsen and the government itself have nothing to do with establishing so-called “balanced news”. Rather, they are designed to intimidate ABC journalists and ensure that what is produced is little more than sycophantic pro-government propaganda.

This was clearly indicated in July 2003, just after the US-led occupation of Iraq, when former Communications Minister Alston demanded an investigation into “AM”, one of ABC radio’s highest-rating news shows, and its award-winning reporter, Linda Mottram.

Alston presented a 13-page dossier claiming that he had received numerous complaints that the program’s coverage of the invasion was “negative” and “anti-American”. He declared that the ABC was “accountable to government in the same way any other organisation is, but if they choose to ignore it then it is a matter for the parliament. If the parliament thinks they have lost the plot they could be defunded,” he threatened.

According to Alston’s logic, ABC reporters should have uncritically accepted every government and military press release on the war. Anything else was considered nothing but “bias”. Alston also demanded that Max Uechtritz, director of ABC news and current events, supply a list of staff directives before and during the war.

In the event, Alston could only detail one complaint about the program, and it was from Liberal Party federal director Brian Loughnane. When the network’s Complaints Review Executive rejected all but two of Alston’s 68 allegations, the minister demanded two further investigations, determined to secure a verdict vindicating his claims and to further bully “AM” journalists and the rest of the ABC’s news reporters. Since then two more investigations have been held—the last one by the Australian Broadcasting Authority, which upheld a number of Alston’s witch-hunting complaints.

In response to the tightening government noose around the ABC’s neck, network management has buckled under and accommodated itself to each demand. Eighteen months after Alston’s attack, Mottram and Uechtritz have quit the broadcaster and the political intimidation has intensified.

Early last year, ABC management hired Rehome, a private media company, to monitor so-called reporter “bias” in the lead-up to, and during, the 2004 federal election campaign. This was designed to pressure reporters, many of whom are employed on short-term contracts, and ensure that no embarrassing exposures of the government were made. This was followed in October by an instruction that all ABC Radio staff had to complete a “disclosure statement” revealing any personal political affiliations or membership—a direct attack on democratic rights.

ABC management also denied filmmaker Judy Rymer the use of ABC news on the grounds that it would be used for an “advocacy or cause”. Rymer’s school education film, *Punished not Protected*, examined the Howard government’s refugee and asylum seeker policies.

Rymer tried to purchase news clips of Prime Minister Howard declaring, “We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come”, as well as comments from other

senior ministers directed against refugees. In a clear act of political censorship, ABC management blocked Rymer’s request, declaring that the footage could not be used unless she had written permission from the politicians concerned.

The appointment of Albrechtsen and other right-wing ideologues to the ABC board is only one component of the government’s assault on the state-funded network. Another key aspect has been drastic reductions to the ABC’s operating budget, aimed at running down and marginalising the broadcaster.

The ABC is the largest single radio and television production house in Australia, with extensive coverage across the country, including some of the most isolated parts. If it can be run down, or parts of its operations privatised, as suggested by Alston, the market share of media bosses Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer and other Australian media corporations will soar.

Following cuts instituted by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments between 1983 and 1996, the Howard government slashed \$55 million from the ABC’s annual budget in mid-1996, destroying hundreds of jobs and axing vital programs and services.

In 1999 Jonathan Shier, a former Liberal Party bureaucrat, was appointed ABC managing director. Before he was forced to resign in 2002, Shier unleashed a major wrecking operation against the network, eliminating more than 300 jobs in television production and technical services, sound and videotape libraries, the archives and other vital departments. Since 1985-86, ABC funding has fallen by over 34 percent, or \$200 million, in real terms and more than 3,500 jobs have been eliminated.

Even as the Howard government announced Albrechtsen’s appointment, it was discussing a new round of attacks for this year’s May budget. Even worse is expected after July, when the Howard government will secure an outright majority in the Senate, with Radio National, the producer of “AM” and other news programs such as “PM” and “The World Today,” expected to be a key target.

According to recent reports, funding cuts at the radio station—which produces over 60 distinct programs each week in the arts, science, media, law, religion and current affairs—have been so severe that it is no longer able to replace staff members who resign. This is having a direct impact on quality, with some staff forced to work two jobs at once and some programs going to air without adequate checking.



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