

Australian Broadcasting Corporation adopts new “bias” rules

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Just weeks after Prime Minister John Howard announced a major military expansion and launched an accompanying “Australian values” campaign, his government’s handpicked Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) board adopted new editorial guidelines designed to ensure the national broadcaster serves as an official mouthpiece.

The ABC is already increasingly promoting the government’s foreign agenda. In recent months, its broadcasts have helped engineer the removal of Mari Alkatiri as prime minister of East Timor and uncritically reported Canberra’s quest for similar “regime change” in Solomon Islands.

Nevertheless, in the guise of combating alleged bias at the ABC—invariably “left wing”—recently-appointed ABC managing director Mark Scott last month announced new editorial rules that will require “impartiality” throughout the ABC television, radio and Internet network.

According to Scott, the new rules are the “most significant statement of values the ABC has made in over 20 years”. No details of these “values” have yet been released publicly, but judging from Scott’s remarks they will mirror Howard’s “Australian values”: nationalism, jingoism, xenophobia and anti-Muslim racism.

Over the past two decades, both Liberal-National and Labor governments have foisted ever-more sweeping policy regulations on ABC news and current affairs. The current 50-page editorial guidelines were published in 2002, and updated three times since the invasion of Iraq—in July 2004, February 2005 and June 2005.

Now, for the first time, political monitoring will extend beyond news and current affairs to all ABC programs, including comedy, entertainment, performance and local radio. The first target has been “The Glass House”, a popular satirical show that occasionally ridicules Australian and US politicians, the “war on terror” and the occupation of Iraq. Next will be “The Chaser” for the same reasons.

A content category called “Opinion” will be created, requiring presentations of points of view about any “matter of public contention” to be “balanced” by opposing

opinions. Presumably, exposures of government lies will have to be balanced by more government fabrications, and equal time be given to religious creationists to denounce evolution, or to corporate spin doctors to counter medical, scientific or environmental research that threatens profit-making.

A new internal censorship supremo—the Director of ABC Editorial Policies—will be appointed to monitor and vet all ABC output. He or she will report directly to managing director Scott, who has assumed the mantle of ABC “Editor-in-Chief”.

Scott declared there would be a “review” of ABC-TV’s “Media Watch”—the only television program in Australia monitoring the mass media. The brief weekly segment (usually just 15 minutes) has often come under fire by media pundits for exposing fabrications, plagiarism and conflicts of interest.

Scott gave no credible explanation for the new regime. A recent Newspann (conducted by the Murdoch media) indicated 90 percent of the public believed the ABC provided a valuable or very valuable service. Another survey by Young and Rubicam found that the only brand more popular in Australia than the ABC is Vegemite. By contrast, two-thirds of Australians think Australian troops should leave Iraq, rejecting the government’s lies about WMD, “democracy” and now “stability” in Iraq.

Scott reported that more than a million people a day watch ABC TV news and the “7.30 Report” current affairs program, about two million listen to AM, the morning radio current affairs segment, and more than half a million pages of ABC News Online are read every day. Yet, of the 170,000 contacts the ABC receives from the public every year, just 0.5 percent are complaints about political bias—that is, a grand total of some 850.

Scott’s speech featured innocuous-sounding buzz words such as “balance” and “key values of honesty, fairness, independence and respect”. But the political thrust of the new rules can be gauged from the fact that Scott delivered his remarks—“very deliberately” he emphasised—at the

Sydney Institute, a right-wing thinktank run by former Howard adviser and vocal government supporter Gerard Henderson.

Henderson has repeatedly accused the ABC of left-wing bias. In 2004, he devoted a *Sydney Morning Herald* column to denouncing ABC-TV's "At the Movies" because its presenters praised Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Not surprisingly, Henderson hailed Scott's speech. Asked by ABC's "Lateline" whether this was "the sort of thing you've been looking for to root out the Marxists," Henderson replied: "Well, I thought it was a very positive analysis by Mr Scott today."

Prominent in the audience was ABC board member Janet Albrechtsen, a right-wing Murdoch columnist who reportedly initiated the policy shift. "An awful lot of work has gone into drawing up these guidelines," she proudly told reporters. Another extreme right-wing Howard appointee to the board, Keith Windschuttle, also praised the guidelines. "This document is a model of its kind," he said.

Albrechtsen's idea of "bias" can be seen in her *Australian* column, where she frequently attacks Muslims, the so-called "left" and anyone defending civil liberties. "Media Watch" exposed her journalistic standards in 2002, when it showed she had misquoted a Muslim spokesman and plagiarised overseas reports to claim that raping white girls was a "rite of passage" for some Muslim youth in Australia.

Windschuttle is a champion of Howard's "history wars", which seek to whitewash the Australian ruling elite's record of substantially wiping out the Aboriginal population, cultivating "White Australia" racism and using militarism—from the Boer War to Iraq and East Timor—to pursue its strategic and economic interests. In 2003, Windschuttle published a book that blames the Tasmanian Aboriginal people for their own destruction at the hands of British colonialism in the first half of the 19th century.

Albrechtsen and Windschuttle typify the government's stacking of the ABC board. Other current members include Ron Brunton, a senior member of the "free market" Institute of Public Affairs; Steven Skala, a corporate lawyer and banker; Peter Hurley, a hotel industry businessman; and John Gallagher, a barrister. ABC chairman Donald McDonald is a personal friend of Howard, and Scott is a former Liberal adviser and Fairfax media executive.

Scott pledged the ABC would provide a "plurality of opinion and perspective". But he added that this would be confined to "relevant" views that "matter for all Australians". Together with the privately-owned corporate media, the ABC has long dismissed as "irrelevant" views that fundamentally challenge the political and corporate establishment. Not surprisingly, the broadcaster has maintained a virtual blackout on the Socialist Equality Party

and its election candidates.

Successive Labor and Coalition governments have already turned the ABC into one of the most heavily regulated state-owned institutions in Australia, subjected to constant investigations by parliamentary committees, the national audit office and three complaints bodies—the Complaints Review Executive, an Independent Complaints Review Panel and the Australian Broadcasting Authority.

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have seen a renewed drive to intimidate ABC staff and prevent any critical coverage of US-led aggression. In July 2003, communications minister Richard Alston presented a 13-page dossier of complaints about "negative" and "anti-American" coverage of the Iraq occupation. His charges were absurd—the ABC's coverage was mostly uncritical, despite the massive opposition to the Iraq war. Alston even denounced as a "beat up" a factual report that international aid groups were warning of a humanitarian catastrophe.

This week, government senators have accused journalists working for another state-owned network, Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), of expressing "pro-Arab" sentiments, "siding with" David Hicks, the Australian citizen who has been detained at Guantánamo Bay for five years without trial, and failing to label Hezbollah, the Lebanese resistance movement, as "terrorist".

The campaign against "bias" is already producing results. On October 16, the same night that Scott addressed the Sydney Institute, the ABC's flagship TV current affairs "Four Corners" program did its best to boost sagging army recruitment. It reported that with "entry standards relaxed and training drills made gentler" army life had become "better attuned to the Y-Generation".

At the same time, however, the program revealed that the military was suffering an enlistment crisis due to "an unpopular war in Iraq, its own unfashionable image, low unemployment and general unwillingness by young Australians to fight a war".



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