Australian public broadcaster threatened over Indonesia spying revelations

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A week after the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) published revelations of Australian spying on the Indonesian president, his wife and high-level government officials, the public broadcaster faces the threat of a witch-hunt similar to that waged in Britain against the *Guardian*. The newspaper's offices were subjected to a police raid and its journalists threatened with arrest, after the British government denounced the publication of material leaked by former US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden.

Last Tuesday, the ABC's managing director Mark Scott made a previously scheduled appearance before a Senate estimates hearing.

On behalf of Prime Minister Tony Abbott's government, South Australian Liberal Senator Anne Ruston used the opportunity to challenge the broadcaster's revelations that in 2009, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), the equivalent of the NSA, illegally tapped the phones of several figures in Jakarta, including President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Ruston challenged Scott as to whether it was "a reasonable thing" to publish the story, given that the documents were labelled "top secret."

Scott was also told to explain exactly when the ABC received the documents from the *Guardian*, which decided to jointly publish the ASD spying documents. This followed allegations issued by several right-wing media commentators that the ABC waited until the former Labor government lost office in the September 7 election before releasing the material. Scott denied this, stating that the NSA leaks were published within days of the ABC receiving them.

The next day, former Liberal Foreign Minister Alexander Downer furiously denounced the ABC and the *Guardian* in an op-ed in the Murdoch-owned *Australian*. He approvingly quoted the head of Britain's MI6 spy agency saying that Al Qaeda was "lapping up" the Snowden revelations.

The British intelligence chief's comments were particularly ominous given that the accusations fell under the extremely broad category of "assisting terrorism," which the Obama administration claims provides it with the authority to illegally detain and assassinate any person. In an attempt to intimidate and criminalise all forms of political dissent, the White House orchestrated the sentencing of whistleblower Chelsea (Bradley) Manning to 35 years in jail for the release of WikiLeaks cables and Iraq and Afghanistan war logs, and is seeking similar or worse sentences for Snowden and WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange.

Abbott has pointedly refused to issue a public apology or explanation for the spying operations on the Indonesian president. In a carefully-worded statement to parliament last Tuesday, Abbott made it clear that he regarded the ABC- *Guardian* publications as the problem, not the spying itself. He declared that he "sincerely regret[s] any embarrassment that recent media reports have caused him [Yudhoyono]."

Right-wing media figures in the Murdoch press and other corporate stables have backed the government and urged it to go further. In the Fairfax-owned *Australian Financial Review* last Friday, Chris Joye denounced the leaking of "lawful communications intercepts programs, which we've been undertaking for 70 years" and suggested that the ABC violated Section 79 of the anti-democratic Australian Crimes Act, under which individuals face up to seven years' imprisonment for publishing official secrets.

Andrew Bolt, radio "shock jock" and blogger with the Murdoch *Herald Sun*, responded to Joye's article with the question: "Should Mark Scott and the

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Guardian Australia's Katherine Viner not then be charged?… The media, not Abbott, have now damaged our relationship with Indonesia by revealing news against the national interest about activities that were in the national interest."

The *Australian's* Chris Kenny argued the ABC and the *Guardian* "breached national security for no good end," while Rita Panahi for the *Herald Sun* declared that the public broadcaster was "unnecessarily antagonising the Indonesians" and demonstrated a "callous disregard" for the effect of its stories. Fairfax Media's Miranda Devine declared that "the ABC recklessly provided cover for the *Guardian* on a story that has damaged Australia," adding: "If the Abbott government can't see that the ABC needs reining in now, it never will."

West Australian Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi called for the ABC to be stripped of a government contract for the Australian Network international television broadcasting service. This demand was enthusiastically welcomed by the Murdoch press, which previously denounced the former Labor government for denying the contract to the part-Murdoch owned Sky News. Bernardi told the *Australian*: "Given the ABC's preparedness to publish stolen top-secret documents that impact upon our national security, one needs to question whether they are a suitable organisation to be operating an important diplomatic outreach."

The ABC responded to the government-media campaign with craven pleas that it had taken into account considerations of the "national interest" and "national security." Head of policy Alan Sunderland insisted in comments to *Crikey* that the ABC "always needs to balance the need to publish and broadcast in the public interest with a range of other considerations, including national security." Managing director Scott told the Senate committee that he had cleared the documents with "appropriate authorities" and redacted some of them in accordance with these authorities' demands.

The threats against the ABC are intended to intimidate editors and publishers from releasing further documents detailing the criminal operations of the Australian state internationally. The furore over the Indonesian spying affair expresses the Australian ruling elite's acute concern over the implications of the Snowden leaks for Australian imperialism, both domestically and internationally.

Indonesian President Yudhoyono recalled the country's ambassador to Australia and formally suspended military and intelligence cooperation between the two countries. The diplomatic tensions have damaged the strategy of US and Australian imperialism to encircle China militarily as part of the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia. Indonesia is vital to these plans due to its possession of key naval shipping lanes that the Obama administration has identified as "choke points" for cutting off Chinese access to raw materials in the event of a war.

At the same time, the Australian ruling elite is acutely aware of the hostility within the Australian population to the electronic surveillance revelations and the widespread support for Snowden and other whistleblowers. Snowden revealed that Australia, as part of the "Five Eyes" alliance with the US, plays an integral role in the Washington-led illegal spying on ordinary people around the world.

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