

Witch-hunt against Australian ABC escalates over refugee torture allegations

Mike Head
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As evidence continues to emerge indicating that the Australian navy may have assaulted refugees, deliberately causing burns, during operations to force them back to Indonesia, the government is intensifying its witch-hunt of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) for reporting the accusations.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull on Wednesday demanded that the ABC apologise for broadcasting video footage of the refugees' badly burned hands and for suggesting that the injuries supported the allegations initially made by asylum seekers to Indonesian police last month. Abbott accused the ABC for its reporting "in ways that were extremely damaging to the professionalism of our military personnel."

Defence Minister David Johnston went further yesterday, saying he was "absolutely sick to the stomach that this iconic Australian news agency would attack the navy in the way that it has." Describing naval personnel as "heroes," he called for an inquiry into the ABC. At the same time he reiterated the government's refusal to investigate the mounting evidence. In an extraordinary outburst pointing to the xenophobic nature of the government's campaign, Johnston told the *Australian* newspaper that the refugees making the complaints were not "even Australian" and were "desperate people."

The government's campaign is aimed at defending its "Operation Sovereign Borders" policy, which is in blatant violation of refugees' right under international law to flee persecution and oppression. More broadly, Abbott and his colleagues are attempting to bully and threaten anyone who dares call into question the use of the military to trample over fundamental legal and democratic rights.

According to the editor Sheridan, the Abbott government has "internalised several lessons" from the October 2001 "children overboard" scandal, in which the previous Liberal-National government of John Howard was exposed, by leaks from sailors themselves, after it falsely claimed that refugees had thrown children into the ocean to force the navy to rescue them. The truth was that the navy, under the government's order, had fired shots toward their boat, which sank the following day, throwing its passengers into the water (see: "Australian navy opens fire on refugee boat").

The "children overboard" accusations, which were fully backed by the Labor Party, became a turning point in the demonisation of refugees in the lead-up to the 2001 federal election. However the lies unravelled after the election, severely discrediting Howard's government. Sheridan said the main political lesson drawn by the Liberal Party was that "everybody started leaking" to the media—a practice that had to stop.

Backed by the corporate media, the government is creating an atmosphere of wartime-like censorship in which any criticism of the military is to be forbidden.

The government's threats to the ABC have been directly facilitated by figures within the broadcaster itself, most notably Paul Barry, the presenter of ABC TV's "Media Watch" program. On Monday night, Barry proclaimed that the ABC had "got it wrong" and "over-reached" by "essentially endorsing the allegations of Navy mistreatment."

Barry's pronouncement reflects the rightward evolution of a layer of erstwhile liberals, who previously opposed the harsh treatment of refugees. They fell into line with the previous former Gillard Labor government which cynically justified its ramped-up "border protection" regime as a humanitarian policy

to prevent people dying while trying to reach Australia's shores. Now these elements are lurching further to the right.

Barry previously acquired something of a reputation for exposing the machinations of the corporate media, writing books on former media proprietors, Alan Bond and James Packer. Now he has aligned himself with a witch-hunt orchestrated by the same forces.

Fairfax Media, a traditional small "l" liberal platform, also weighed in. A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial on January 30 declared that "the ABC's handling of the 'burnt hands' claims was at times boosterish" and "damaged Australia's reputation in the region."

Likewise, opposition leader Bill Shorten rushed to declare that the Labor Party supports the military, while criticising the government for making the navy's job "tougher" by keeping its operations secret. Greens spokesperson, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young took a similar line, complaining that the government's secrecy was "tarnishing the navy's reputation."

The ABC already functions as a reliable conduit for the Australian corporate and political establishment. It initially declined to report the complaints of burns and torture, which first surfaced on Indonesian news sites on January 7, and were published by Agence France Presse the next day. It was only then that the ABC felt compelled to report them—accompanied by vehement denials by Immigration Minister Scott Morrison of any wrongdoing.

The ABC's supposed "overreach" occurred on January 22, when it published video footage that it noted "appears to back asylum seekers' claims of mistreatment by the Australian Navy."

Following Barry's "Media Watch" verdict, ABC managing director Mark Scott issued a grovelling statement, saying: "We regret if our reporting led anyone to mistakenly assume that the ABC supported the asylum seekers' claims." Head of ABC news content Gaven Morris issued an edict to staff, warning them not to "embellish" or add "any flourish" to claims of mistreatment by "Australian border protection forces."

None of this satisfied the government or the Murdoch press, which want nothing less than the reduction of the ABC to a pure propaganda outfit, giving unquestioned backing to the military. When Abbott was asked whether the controversy had been ended with the

ABC's statement, he replied: "I wonder why sorry seems to be the hardest word for them."

The government's opposition to any investigation of the alleged crimes carried out by the Australian military underscores its readiness to abrogate the most basic democratic and legal rights. Behind a blanket of secrecy, what is happening in the waters off the Australian coast is that some of the most vulnerable members of the international working class are being subjected to military detention, physically abused and dumped at sea in flimsy craft.

This is a warning of the kind of reactionary political atmosphere and methods that the government and the entire media and political establishment are preparing against the working class as a whole. There is not one rule for asylum seekers and another for working people at home.

It is no accident that the other supposed "crime" committed by the ABC was to publish former US intelligence contractor Edward Snowden's documents. They reveal not just US-backed spying on the people and governments throughout the Asia-Pacific region, but also the police-state surveillance being carried out domestically, with the US and Australian intelligence networks monitoring the phones and social media activity of millions of people.

The Abbott government is drawing up far-reaching budget cuts to social spending and supporting sweeping attacks on jobs, wages and conditions. The brutal treatment of refugees is a warning of the methods that will be used in the future against the resistance of workers and youth to these attacks on living standards.

The author also recommends:

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