

Australian government outlines major cuts to public broadcasters

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The federal government announced cuts of over \$300 million to Australia's two public broadcasters on Wednesday. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) budget has been slashed by \$254 million over five years, 4.6 percent of its total funding. The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) faces \$53.7 million in cuts over the same period.

Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull attempted to down play the impact of the reductions, describing them as "modest" and "not of a scale that requires any particular change to programming." In reality, the cutbacks are expected to see more than 400 jobs axed at the ABC by Christmas and a major restructuring of its programs and operations.

ABC managing director Mark Scott said the actual funding reduction was 8 percent when cuts in May's budget, and the termination of the Network Australia contract earlier this year, were included. The loss of that contract was followed by 80 redundancies in July. Scott also said the government made no provision for redundancy payments, which would further eat into the ABC's finances.

Scott is expected to make an announcement on Monday on the measures to be taken. These are likely to include reducing ABC bureaus in Tokyo, Bangkok, New Delhi and New Zealand, axing state-based editions of the current affairs program "7.30," and ending television production in South Australia. ABC Radio will lose \$6 million.

More cutbacks are being prepared. Earlier in the year, the government commissioned a review of ABC funding headed by Peter Lewis, the former chief financial officer of the private Seven West Media group. The Lewis review's executive summary was released on Wednesday, but not its recommendations. According to the *Australian*, they include combined

cuts of \$100 million a year to the ABC and SBS.

These regressive measures are of a piece with the assault on social spending contained in the government's May budget. They repudiate a pledge by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, during last year's federal election, not to cut funding to the ABC or SBS. Communications Minister Turnbull dismissed criticism of the broken promise, saying it was a "one liner" that should have been taken in the context of overall policy.

While it criticised Abbott's broken pledge, the Labor Party opposition is just as committed to austerity as the Liberal-National government. Shadow communications spokesman Jason Clare declared on Wednesday that "any organisation can be more efficient," adding that when "Labor was in government, we found efficiencies in the ABC."

The spending cuts go hand-in-hand with the government's efforts to discipline the ABC, to ensure that it functions more closely as an official propaganda arm. The government, along with the Murdoch media, has repeatedly accused the ABC of a "leftist" bias.

In February, for instance, the government launched a witch-hunt against the broadcaster for reporting allegations by asylum seekers that navy personnel physically assaulted them. As part of the government's brutal policies, the navy forces refugee boats back to Indonesia. Abbott and other senior ministers castigated the ABC for "attacking our navy" and demanded that it issue an apology.

While claiming that he respected the ABC's independence, Turnbull took a direct shot at the ABC and SBS boards, insisting that they had to be responsible for "objectivity and accuracy." If board members did not want to "get involved," he said, "they should resign."

In what amounted to criticism of Scott, Turnbull said

the managing director's role should be separated from that of editor-in-chief. Turnbull added that an independent chief financial officer should be appointed, reporting to the ABC board.

Turnbull's comments indicate that the campaign to bring the ABC fully into line with government policy will be ramped up.

Last weekend, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop attacked the ABC over a satirical sketch in the "7.30" program, mocking Abbott's threat to "shirtfront," i.e., physically attack, Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit in Brisbane. She claimed that the piece could "devastate" the relatives of those who died in the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17 over Ukraine.

Bishop called on the ABC to "toe the line" and linked the upcoming budget cutbacks to the ABC's editorial line. "To think that taxpayers' funds went towards making it," she said. "I really think the ABC should have a long, hard think about what is appropriate in these circumstances when you're talking about the deaths of so many Australians."

Notwithstanding the absurd claims of the Murdoch press that the ABC is a hotbed of leftists, the broadcaster has always functioned as a loyal arm of the state. In the past, however, the ABC was allowed a degree of latitude, always limited, in programming, in the name of promoting public debate. Now, under conditions of an escalating drive to war and attacks on living standards, pressure is mounting to transform the ABC into a straight public relations tool for the agenda of the ruling elites.

ABC management and key staff have already demonstrated their willingness to "toe the line" on a broad range of issues, in line with Australia's entire political and media establishment. This is especially the case on the renewed war in the Middle East by the US and its allies including Australia, the US-led confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, and the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot to Asia" against China.

The ABC and SBS are also fully integrated into the massive government-funded campaign to promote militarism by "celebrating" Australian involvement in World War I.

The ABC's lightweight skit on Abbott's "shirtfront" threat did not in any way contradict its coverage of the

Ukraine crisis, which has been fully in keeping with government propaganda about "Russian aggression" and support for February's fascist-led coup in Kiev. ABC programs, including an in-house "Four Corners" documentary, have repeated the government's entirely unsubstantiated claims that Russia was responsible for the downing of MH-17.

Likewise, the ABC has uncritically reported the US-led war in the Middle East and echoed the government's "war on terror" propaganda, which has been used to justify the escalating assault on basic legal and democratic rights at home.

Increasingly, the ABC acts as an arm of government. One glaring example was the interview on the ABC's "Lateline" program in October of a representative of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an Islamist organisation. It followed growing public questioning of the government's massive anti-terror raids in September, which resulted in just one individual being charged on the basis of dubious evidence.

"Lateline" host Emma Alberici clearly had a mission: to hype up the terrorist threat by showing that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had sympathisers in Australia. She aggressively pursued the Hizb-ut-Tahrir representative to try to force him to say that he supported ISIS—a claim that he repeatedly denied. The following day, Abbott heaped praise on the confrontational interview, declaring: "Good on Emma Alberici."



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