

More details emerge over sacking of Australian journalist for challenging Anzac myth

Mike Head
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Further evidence has emerged as to the role played by Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull in the chain of events leading to Sunday's sacking of Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) sport commentator Scott McIntyre for posting tweets critical of the glorification of the April 25 Anzac Day centenary.

SBS has refused to reinstate McIntyre, who is considering legal action, despite a growing volume of letters and petitions condemning its decision.

McIntyre, who has worked for SBS for 10 years, was dismissed without notice, supposedly for compromising "the integrity of the network" by making five twitter comments on Anzac Day. His tweets, sent at around 5.40 p.m., came amid blanket media coverage to support the official "celebration" of the centenary of the 1915 attack on Turkey's Gallipoli peninsula by Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) troops as part of an Anglo-French invasion.

The journalist condemned "the cultification of an imperialist invasion of a foreign country." He also recalled the documented war crimes and other abuses committed by Anzac soldiers during World War I, and denounced the World War II mass murder of Japanese people by the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by "this nation and their allies."

Turnbull swiftly intervened. On his blog, he has revealed that he contacted SBS managing director Michael Ebeid "as soon as I was made aware of the tweets by Mr McIntyre."

Barely three hours after McIntyre's posts, Ebeid publicly denounced them as "disrespectful." Four minutes later, Turnbull himself tweeted that the journalist's remarks were "offensive," "inappropriate" and "despicable."

Ebeid later confirmed that he spoke to Turnbull in the

hours leading up to McIntyre's dismissal on Sunday morning. "There was some contact" between the minister and the SBS boss, a network spokeswoman told the *Guardian Australia*.

While denying that he had any influence in SBS's decision to sack the journalist, Turnbull unilaterally declared on his blog that McIntyre "breached" a number of provisions in "the SBS social media protocol" with his "offensive tweets."

Turnbull insisted that McIntyre's free speech rights remained intact because he was still entitled to express his political views "as a private citizen."

The Abbott government's Human Rights Commissioner Tim Wilson quickly chimed in, via a column published in the *Australian* yesterday. As public criticism of SBS's decision grew, Wilson claimed it was "absurd" to decry McIntyre's dismissal as censorship. That was because, Wilson claimed, McIntyre was still free to "tweet his bile" and "no one is guaranteed a job."

This renders free speech meaningless. In effect, you can express your political opinions only if your employer approves. You can speak your mind, but you will find yourself out of work, and potentially blacklisted. The same logic can be applied to silence anyone, including teachers, public servants and corporate sector workers.

On the government's behalf, Wilson is seeking to redefine freedom of expression precisely along these lines. Last year, in another newspaper column, he wrote: "Voluntary codes associated with employment are one of the most important ways that we regulate the conduct of the individual without laws, and they are fundamentally a good thing." Supposedly, you "voluntarily" surrender your free speech by undertaking employment.

Other government supporters soon went further, accusing the SBS journalist of aiding terrorism. News

Corp commentator Andrew Bolt said McIntyre’s “hate speech” against Australia was “becoming the most dangerous” and “he had to go.”

Appearing on the Australian Broadcasting Corporations “Q & A” television show on Monday night, Monash University historian Carolyn Holbrook, a former policy adviser in the prime minister’s department, declared that McIntyre’s comments would “give fuel to young people who are confused and thinking about becoming jihadists.”

In other words, any criticism of the Australian ruling elite’s involvement in imperialist wars, past or present, cannot be tolerated, and will be demonised as supporting or inciting terrorism.

Monday’s Q & A program underlined the unanimous line-up in the political establishment behind McIntyre’s victimisation. Alongside Abbott government member Arthur Sinodinos, deputy Labor Party leader Tanya Plibersek pointblank refused to oppose his sacking. “I think it is for the SBS management to decide whether he has breached any workplace policies,” she said.

The real concern in ruling circles is the broad anti-war and democratic sentiment that exists, despite all the efforts to drown it out through the government’s half billion dollar campaign to legitimise and glorify World War I.

Protests against McIntyre’s dismissal and demands for his reinstatement have begun to circulate widely on social media. One on-line petition, signed by nearly 2,500 people by this morning, condemns SBS’s actions as a “reprehensible” attack on free speech and commends McIntyre’s “criticism of hyper-nationalism associated with Anzac Day.”

The comments made by petition signers give some indication of the widely felt outrage and concern. One wrote: “Scott’s opinions weren’t offensive. The level of sickening propaganda saturating the media around Anzac Day is what is offensive—and you sacking him is even more offensive.” Another stated: “Debate should be encouraged, especially about war and politicians stirring up nationalism for their own purposes!” One commented: “Scott McIntyre was expressing a view that is well-known and agreed with in the Australian community who are not caught up on the Anzac Juggernaut jingoism.”

In response to the Socialist Equality Party’s April 27 statement calling for the defence of McIntyre and free speech, a barrister sent the SEP a link to her blog comment, in which she explained that McIntyre’s sacking violated the implied freedom of political communication in the Australian Constitution. She wrote: “There is no

foreseeable end to the classes of persons who may, at the stroke of a pen or at the stroke of someone’s whim, be deprived of the freedom of political communication, begging the question ‘Which other class of persons is to be deprived next? Soldiers? Teachers? Nurses? Builders? Shopkeepers? Political advisers?’”

In a letter to SBS management, a daughter of a World War II war veteran wrote: “Shame on you that our young people, your employees, are not given the right to express their views and to protest in the way they know best, through social media, the disgusting displays of militarism that have become the ‘ANZAC’ celebrations in Australia.”

Some journalists have voiced support for McIntyre, including Glenn Greenwald, who helped publish the revelations by US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden of the mass surveillance conducted by Washington and its allies. “Australian TV journalist criticizes violence celebrated by national holiday. Govt minister complains. Journalist is fired,” Greenwald posted on Twitter.

Australian Financial Review journalist Geoff Winestock tweeted: “Ridiculous. Frightening. I also think Anzacs were racist jobs and Anzac Day is a death cult. Sack me, Fairfax.”

McIntyre’s sacking, at the government’s behest, underscores the connection between the drive to war by the US and its partners, including Australia, and the assault on basic democratic rights, designed to silence dissent and working-class opposition.

The journalist’s dismissal comes on top of a similar attack on the democratic rights of the Socialist Equality Party to hold public anti-war meetings on April 26, entitled “Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism and the drive to World War III.” In Sydney, the Labor Party-controlled Burwood Council cancelled the initial booking for the meeting, and the University of Sydney refused to permit the meeting because it would “disrupt” Anzac events taking place on its campus.

The SEP’s meetings only went ahead as a result of an intense struggle to clarify the political issues at stake in the face of the pro-war propaganda barrage unleashed by the government and media establishment.



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