

Australian government deepens attack on free speech and democratic rights

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24 June 2015

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott and the leading, supposedly small “l” liberal in his government, Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull, have launched a sweeping attack on democratic rights and free speech following the screening of a controversial edition of the “Q&A” panel program on ABC television on Monday night.

The attack was sparked by a comment from Zaky Mallah, a young man acquitted of terrorist charges by a Supreme Court jury in 2005. Towards the conclusion of the program Mallah stated that earlier remarks by panellist Steve Ciobo, a junior government minister, pointed to why young Australian men were joining Islamist extremists to fight in Syria.

“The Liberals have now justified to many Australian Muslims in the community tonight to leave and go to Syria to join ISIL because of ministers like him,” he said.

Mallah was responding to a series of attacks by Ciobo, who had falsely claimed that he had only been acquitted on a technicality and because anti-terror laws had not operated retrospectively. Ciobo had gone on to declare that he would be “pleased to be a part of a government that would say you’re out of the country.”

Tony Jones, the panel show host, immediately ruled Mallah’s comment “out of order” and apologised. The following morning ABC management issued a statement apologising for its “error of judgement” in allowing Mallah to join the audience and ask a question.

This was the signal for a full-scale onslaught by the government, backed to the hilt by the Labor Party opposition, throughout yesterday. Right-wing Liberal backbencher Alex Hawke led off with a statement that it was “almost as if the ABC is engaged in some form of sedition.” Another backbench Liberal MP Craig Kelly said the ABC had allowed itself to become a “mouthpiece” for “terrorist recruitment.”

Abbott and Turnbull then intervened. The prime minister declared that the ABC had given a platform to a convicted criminal and terrorist sympathiser. Evoking the war-time rhetoric, which has characterised several government

pronouncements, employing words such as “sedition” and “modern form of treason” in the recent period, he claimed “millions of Australians” would have felt “betrayed” by the national broadcaster.

Describing “Q&A” as a “lefty lynch mob,” he insisted that the ABC had to answer the question: “Whose side are you on here?”

Given that he has ministerial responsibility for the running of the ABC, the intervention by Malcolm Turnbull was even more significant. He said that to have Mallah in a live audience was a “very grave error” of judgement, “both from the point of view of what he might say but also in terms of physical security.”

Turnbull reported that an external review of the program was underway and that in “conducting this review I would encourage the ABC board to contact and consult with the Australian Federal Police.”

The review, which had previously been initiated to examine the “balance” of the program, will also include an examination of the make-up of the audience.

In other words, the government is orchestrating a situation where not only will questions be vetted by those in charge of the program, as they generally are already, but the political affiliations of audience members will also be subjected to police checks.

The government is particularly concerned about the reaction of the audience to Mallah’s question and to the applause that greeted his comment that “as an Australian citizen” he would like to see Ciobo out of the country.

The audience response punctured the claims of Prime Minister Abbott that, in his escalating attacks on democratic rights, he is acting on the wishes of “the nation” and that he knows and can interpret what the “Australian people” are thinking.

Stung by the hostility shown towards him during the program, Ciobo claimed that the audience did not represent Australian mainstream views.

“It was certainly surprising that there appeared to be such a large number of people who would applaud an individual

who confessed he had aspired to murder an Australian official and espoused views that run so contrary to mainstream Australian values. To get that number of people enthusiastically clapping was quite a surprise,” he said.

ACT Liberal Senator Zed Seselja commented that “Q&A” was being “stacked with a left wing audience.”

Turnbull’s intervention over Mallah’s remarks is the second major initiative by the communications minister in less than two months. In April, he held discussions with the management of the other government-owned television outlet, SBS, over Twitter comments posted by football commentator Scott McIntyre, denouncing the militarist celebrations of the centenary of Anzac Day. McIntyre was subsequently summarily sacked by SBS management.

The manufactured furor and attacks against the “Q&A” program expose the complete hypocrisy of the entire political establishment, including Labor and the Greens. Last January, all the major political parties and media outlets joined together to defend the right of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* to vilify poor and immigrant Muslim communities in the name of free speech.

But when a single individual dares to draw a connection between the actions of the Australian government and support for Islamic fundamentalist groups among alienated sections of the Muslim community, their response is to immediately clamp down on open discussion and organise state repression.

In launching his attack, Abbott claimed that “we all believe in free speech” but, in the end, “we have to make judgements” and the ABC had made a “very, very serious misjudgement.” In other words, free speech can only be exercised within the parameters determined by the “will of the nation” as interpreted by the government and its leader.

This new doctrine is bound up with the increasing lawlessness characterising the actions of the Abbott government. It has openly flouted both international and Australian laws in its treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, and has tactfully admitted to paying people smugglers in potentially criminal operations. At the same time, its new laws, which revoke the citizenship of dual nationals accused of involvement in terrorism, have been framed on the basis that the guilt or innocence of the accused should be determined on the sole discretion of a government minister, not in a court of law. And with the introduction of this new legislation into the parliament today, the government is already signalling that it intends to make the laws retrospective, thereby violating legal protections.

What is the source and driving force of these measures? An indication is to be found in the increasingly militaristic language that has accompanied them. In addition to its deep involvement in the bogus “war on terror,” the Australian

political and military establishment is deeply committed to the war drive of US imperialism, above all in its anti-China “pivot to Asia.”

Tensions in the South Sea China have been elevated to such a point where, either by accident or design, an incident could take place at any time, involving a military confrontation. By virtue of its full integration into the US war machine, Australia would be immediately and automatically involved.

The deepening attack on democratic rights has been accompanied by the rising drumbeat of militarism and the relentless promotion of nationalism and patriotism, most graphically expressed in the multi-million dollar “celebrations” of the centenary of World War I. The campaign reached a fever pitch this year in the lead-up to Anzac Day on April 25, which marked one hundred years since Australian troops landed at Gallipoli and entered their first battle of the war.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned at the time that the actions of Burwood Council and the University of Sydney, which both banned the party from hiring halls in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to prevent it holding public anti-war meetings on April 26, entitled “Anzac Day, militarism and the drive to World War III,” was the sharpest point of an accelerating campaign to suppress democratic rights in preparation for war. The attempted political censorship of the SEP, the only political party that opposes war and the capitalist system that produces it, expressed the determination of the entire political establishment, including the media, to intimidate and suppress any challenge to the militarist agenda of the Australian ruling elite. That warning has been underscored by the “Q&A” uproar.



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