

Australia: The live exchange on ABC television's "Q&A"

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The circumstances surrounding the extraordinary attack by the Abbott Liberal government, supported by the Labor Party opposition, on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Monday-night panel-discussion program, "Q&A," demonstrate that there is no support within the political establishment for democratic rights and freedom of speech.

The live program, in which members of the audience are invited to question a panel on various political and social issues, was held on the eve of the government's introduction of legislation to strip dual citizens of their Australian citizenship if they are deemed to be collaborating with terrorist organisations.

The government had signalled that it wanted this unprecedented measure to be implemented at the sole discretion of the minister for immigration, without conviction by a court, and this had been set down as one of the topics to be discussed during the "Q&A" program. Accordingly, the ABC had decided to invite Zaky Mallah, who had been acquitted of terrorism charges in a 2005 trial, to ask a question of the panel.

Some 45 minutes into the program, compere Tony Jones called on Mallah to pose his question, which had been prepared in advance and vetted by the program's management.

Mallah began by briefly outlining his history: "As the first man in Australia to be charged with terrorism under the harsh Liberal Howard government in 2003, I was subject to solitary confinement, a 22-hour lockdown, dressed in most times in an orange overall and treated like a convicted terrorist while under the presumption of innocence."

He continued: "I had done and said some stupid things, including threatening to kidnap and kill, but in 2005 I was acquitted of those terrorism charges. What would have happened if my case had been decided by the minister himself and not the courts?"

The question went to the very heart of the political issues at stake in the government's planned legislation. Mallah issued no denunciations, let alone any appeals in support of terrorist activity, but simply drew out what had taken place and the implications of the government's legislation.

Panel member Steven Ciobo, a parliamentary secretary in the Abbott government, responded to Mallah's question with a strident attack on him. After admitting he was not familiar with the circumstances of the case, Ciobo declared: "Well, I got to

tell you ... my understanding of your case was that you were acquitted because, at that point in time, the laws weren't retrospective. But I'm happy to look you straight in the eye and say that I would be pleased to be part of a government that would say that you're out of the country as far as I'm concerned."

Ciobo's provocative comment gave vent to the deeply reactionary outlook motivating the government's assault on the democratic right of citizenship and on the right of accused "terrorists" to a fair trial. It recalled Prime Minister Tony Abbott's comments last Friday attacking the suggestion that conviction by a court would be required before an accused's citizenship were revoked. "What happens if they get off? That's the problem," Abbott said.

In response to Ciobo, Mallah called out from the audience: "Rubbish, rubbish."

Angered by this act of defiance, Ciobo declared: "I'm telling you, I would sleep very soundly at night with that point of view."

Mallah loudly replied, to applause from significant sections of the audience: "As an Australian, I would be happy to see you out of this country."

ABC researchers would have been well aware of the facts of Mallah's trial prior to inviting him on the show. Held in 2005, it was a major case, the first to be held under the Howard government's draconian anti-terrorism legislation, brought down in 2002.

It involved, as became clear in the course of the court proceedings, a classic entrapment. Mallah had issued a denunciation of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), and the department of foreign affairs, after his passport had been seized in 2002. A detective, posing as a journalist, lured him into making violent threats by offering him \$3,000 for his story. The jury acquitted him of the terrorism charge, on the basis that his threats of violence had not been serious, and had been aimed at getting publicity, but he was sentenced to 30 months' imprisonment after pleading guilty to making a threat against a Commonwealth officer. Before his trial, he had spent two years, mostly in isolation, in a maximum security prison.

It would have been a simple matter for Jones to publicly

correct Ciobo's false claims, but he chose not to—a significant decision given what subsequently occurred.

After further statements from Ciobo in support of the government's draft legislation, and comments from other members of the panel, including Labor MP and former cabinet minister Joel Fitzgibbon, who declared that he was "more open to pushing back the envelope on civil liberties than many others in the room would be," Jones returned to Mallah.

He noted that Mallah had travelled to Syria to be "with the Free Syrian Army, who, of course, are backed by the United States." Mallah replied that he had not fought for the Free Syrian Army, but had gone to Syria, to the frontline, "to experience the situation for myself and why the uprising had begun."

Jones made no further comment, but his reference to the US exposed the total hypocrisy of the "war on terror." The implication was that involvement with the Free Syrian Army was in order, because it was backed by the Americans. In fact, the Free Syrian Army is largely a fiction. The main fighting against the Assad regime is being conducted by ISIS and other Sunni militias, who have been financed and armed by US allies in the region.

In concluding the event, Jones gave Mallah permission to make a final, quick, comment. Responding again to Ciobo's attacks on him, Mallah declared: "The Liberals now have just justified to many Australian Muslims in the community tonight to leave and go to Syria and join ISIL because of ministers like him."

Jones, clearly stunned, abruptly replied: "I think that's a comment that we are just going to rule totally out of order. I am sorry about that." He closed the show.

By the following morning, ABC management had put out a formal statement declaring that it had made an "error of judgment in allowing Zaky Mallah to join the audience and ask a question." It said the environment of a live television broadcast "meant that it would not be possible for editorial review of the comments he might make prior to the broadcast, particularly if he engaged in debate beyond his prepared question."

In other words, had the program management known Mallah was going to draw a connection between government actions and support, in sections of the Muslim community, for ISIS, he would have been totally censored.

Both Jones' and the ABC's rapid responses were an attempt to distance themselves as quickly as possible from Mallah's remarks, because they had touched on a raw nerve in the official Australian body politic.

Central to the mythology surrounding the "war on terror" is that those who have been drawn to the reactionary politics of Islamic fundamentalism are hostile to "our way of life." Any attempt to establish a link between current social and political conditions and the emergence of such politics is immediately denounced as providing an "excuse" or "justification" for

terrorism.

There is no question that the politics of ISIS and other terrorist organisations are deeply reactionary. But they are rooted, not in the psyche of "evil" and "unAustralian" individuals, but in the brutal realities of daily life. The official portrayal of the idyllic "Australian way of life," bears no relationship to the experiences of an entire generation of young workers and youth, particularly those of a Middle Eastern and/or Muslim background.

Every day, these young people are confronted with the reactionary outpourings of politicians such as Ciobo, the diatribes spewed from Murdoch-owned newspapers such as Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* and Melbourne's *Herald-Sun*, and the provocative comments of shock jocks on radio or television.

In working class suburbs, where youth unemployment stands at 20 percent and more, where opportunities for decent paying jobs are no longer available, young working class men, in particular, are confronted with daily police harassment simply for being of "Middle Eastern appearance." And when they turn on the television news at night, as likely as not, they are forced to witness yet another atrocity committed by US military forces and its allies, including Australia, against Muslim populations, from the Indian sub-continent to the Middle East and North Africa.

There is also another factor at work. The bipartisan character of support for the fraudulent "war on terror"—exemplified graphically by Labor's Fitzgibbon during the "Q&A" program—underscores the fact that ever-deepening social and political alienation can find no outlet within the official political establishment. Thus, it is able to be directed into extreme right-wing and reactionary directions. That situation will only change when the working class begins to re-emerge as an independent social force, fighting in defence of its democratic and social rights, on the basis of a revolutionary socialist perspective.



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