

Behind the political furore over the Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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The extraordinary government-led campaign unfolding in Australia against the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is indicative of the climate of censorship, political intimidation and outright suppression of oppositional views that is being created around the world. Democratic rights and freedom of speech are being repudiated by the ruling elites everywhere.

The “crime” committed by the ABC last Monday night, during its weekly “Q&A” current affairs program, was that it allowed Zaky Mallah, a young Australian Muslim, to ask a vetted question and make a brief statement. The following day, the government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott was due to table sweeping legislation in parliament, giving the immigration minister the power to strip people with dual citizenship of their Australian citizenship if they are accused, by the intelligence agencies, of involvement with terrorism.

Mallah’s presence in the “Q&A” audience was entirely appropriate. He had been the victim of a police provocation and charged with terrorism offences, was forced to spend two years in solitary confinement awaiting trial, and was then subsequently acquitted by a Supreme Court jury.

Mallah is representative of those who will fall foul of the new draconian laws and have their lives destroyed. Without any court hearing, they will, in the words of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, be “banished” by ministerial decree. If another country refuses to accept them, they will be imprisoned indefinitely, most likely in detention centres in far-flung Pacific islands, as “illegal immigrants.”

The Abbott government is still searching for a way to circumvent the flagrant illegality of stripping sole Australian nationals of their citizenship as well, in contravention of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, “no-one shall be arbitrarily

deprived of his nationality.”

Mallah did no more on “Q&A” than point out that the state persecution of Muslims within Australia was one of the factors driving small numbers of Muslim youth to travel to the Middle East and join Islamic fundamentalist organisations.

For this, the ABC has been accused by government ministers and the media of a “form of sedition” and being a “mouthpiece” for “terrorist recruitment.” Prime Minister Abbott declared yesterday: “The ABC has once again given a platform to someone who hates us, who hates our way of life, who supports terrorists and I again ask the national broadcaster, whose side are you on?”

For its part, the ABC has done everything it can to accommodate to the government’s manufactured hysteria. The show’s compere immediately apologised, and by 9 a.m. the following morning ABC senior management had issued a formal statement, declaring that allowing Mallah to appear on the program was a “serious error of judgement.” The network’s abject subservience has only encouraged Abbott and his ministers to demand more. What they want is that the so-called “public broadcaster” be converted into nothing but a propaganda arm for the government itself. That is the significance of Abbott’s repeated declarations that the broadcaster has to determine “whose side are you on?”

Internal and external reviews are already underway, tasked with determining how Mallah came to be invited onto “Q&A.” These will reportedly involve the federal police and, more than likely, the intelligence agencies. The program may be suspended and its producers could lose their jobs.

The witch-hunt against “Q&A” is part of a pattern of persecution, which has accelerated over recent months, with the aim of enforcing the reactionary militarist, nationalist and austerity agenda of the entire official Australian establishment. Above all, no voice of

opposition can be allowed to openly challenge the official pretexts for Australia's military alignment with the United States, its participation in US-led wars in the Middle East and, most importantly, the US pivot to Asia and its war preparations against China. As far as the ruling elite is concerned, any expression of the widespread and rapidly escalating popular opposition to war, social inequality and attacks on democratic rights must be immediately stamped out.

This has been the central purpose of the on-going "celebrations" of the centenary of World War I, and their shameless glorification of Australia's role as a beacon of "freedom" and "democracy." This campaign has been more about the present than the past. It is aimed at buttressing the constant government and media propaganda that Australia's foreign policy is, in fact, part of a new struggle for "freedom" and "human rights" against "tyranny," "terrorism" and other purported threats to the mythical "Australian way of life." More and more insidiously, China is being portrayed as the modern-day Germany, against which Australians were sent to fight and die in 1914.

In the lead-up to the centenary of Anzac Day, marking the landing of Australian troops in Gallipoli on April 25, 1915, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) came under unprecedented attack for announcing meetings that directly challenged the glorification of WWI and denounced it as part of the drive to World War III. Venues were cancelled by Burwood Council, then denied by the University of Sydney, on the explicit grounds that they both opposed the content of the meeting. Only an international campaign through the *World Socialist Web Site*, exposing the attempted censorship and appealing to the international working class, ensured that a venue was eventually secured.

Apart from a handful of reports, however, the Australian political and media establishment maintained a blanket silence on this attack on the democratic rights of the SEP. It could not allow the SEP's condemnations of imperialist war to become known to a mass audience, because they articulated the sentiments of millions of workers and youth.

This was underscored by the ruthless treatment of Special Broadcasting Corporation (SBS) journalist, Scott McIntyre. Repulsed by the outpouring, on Anzac Day, of patriotic and militarist propaganda—above all on the state-owned ABC and SBS networks—McIntyre sent five critical tweets that evening. Within 24 hours, he had been vilified across the entire media and sacked from his job as

a sports reporter. His crime was that he spoke the truth, giving voice to the disgust felt by large numbers of ordinary people at the day's events.

The same process is unfolding in different forms around the world. In Germany, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) has been denounced throughout the media for exposing the role of Humboldt University academics in providing ideological justification for the past crimes of German imperialism and its current rapid turn towards war and dictatorship. The opposition of Humboldt University students to the revival of militarism and attacks on freedom of speech, expressed in a historic vote of the student parliament, has, however, been subjected to total media censorship.

This lurch toward authoritarian forms of rule was underscored on June 20 by a top-level decision of the German state to arrest the internationally known journalist Ahmed Mansour at the request of the Egyptian dictatorship. While Mansour has been released, his detention was intended as a warning to all journalists and dissidents that democratic norms no longer apply.

The resort to censorship and repression testifies to the profound crisis wracking capitalist society and its defenders. Under conditions of global economic breakdown, the only answer of the ruling class in every country is to impose ever deeper attacks on the living standards of the working class, while preparing for war against their rivals. Conscious of how little support they have, they are imposing police-state laws and methods in a desperate attempt to prevent the real views of the working class from being articulated and, above all, from finding independent political expression through the struggle for international socialism.



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