

Abbott government calls for sackings at Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Nick Beams**26 June 2015**

Prime Minister Tony Abbott has declared that, “heads should roll” at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, following an unedited re-screening, in conformity with normal practice, of last Monday night’s controversial “Q&A” panel discussion program. He also announced that the government was setting up an inquiry into the program, which will report its findings next Tuesday.

During the course of Monday night’s edition, acquitted terrorist suspect Zaky Mallah was permitted to ask a prepared and vetted question. Later, he was given the call to make a live comment, in which he referred to inflammatory remarks by junior government minister Steve Ciobo, a panellist on the program, as a reason why some young Muslim men might look to joining ISIS.

Since then, the government and its supporters in the media, especially the Murdoch press, have maintained an unending barrage, falsely claiming that the program and the ABC provided a platform for terrorism.

Such is the witch-hunt atmosphere being created, that the ABC has increased security measures at its offices after receiving threatening phone calls.

On Wednesday, four Murdoch press tabloids, including the *Courier Mail* in Brisbane and the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, carried front-page coverage, which included a black flag with an ABC logo, imposed over a picture of a masked jihadist fighter. The *Courier Mail* headline read, “It’s Your ABC”, the slogan of the network.

This hysterical campaign against the ABC has been accompanied by a series of lies and falsifications, centred on the claim that Mallah’s question and comment were aimed at promoting ISIS. Liberal frontbencher, Education minister Christopher Pyne, has described Mallah as a “convicted terrorist,” when, in

fact, he was acquitted by a Supreme Court jury in 2005 of a terrorism charge.

While he apparently supports other Islamic groups, Mallah is a public opponent of ISIS. He has been interviewed by several media outlets, including the Murdoch-owned *Australian* and *Courier Mail* newspapers, where he has made this clear. As far as the government and its supporters are concerned, however, these facts are irrelevant.

Right-wing political commentator Gerard Henderson appeared on the ABC “Lateline” program last night, and openly claimed that Mallah had said, during the “Q&A” program, that young Muslim Sunnis *should* join ISIS. In reality, Mallah was condemning the remarks of Ciobo for creating the conditions where young Muslims would *want* to join ISIS.

After condemning Mallah for “violence,” Henderson gave clear expression to the incendiary character of the government’s campaign. Asked to comment on the front-page spreads in the News Limited tabloids, which identified the ABC with ISIS, Henderson replied that, while he would not have done it himself, “I thought it was quite—it was fun.”

On Tuesday, Abbott denounced the “Q&A” program, and by implication the ABC, as a “lefty lynch mob.” Yesterday, announcing the government-organised inquiry, he insisted that, “We are not satisfied with an internal ABC inquiry because so often we’ve seen virtual whitewashes when that sort of thing happens.”

In a speech delivered last night, ABC managing director Mark Scott sought to defend the organisation, insisting that its independence from the government of the day was what “shapes the ABC as a public broadcaster, not a state broadcaster,” such as in Russia, China or North Korea.

Scott emphasised that defending free speech

principles meant, at times, providing a platform to those with whom you fundamentally disagreed, and citing the maxim of Voltaire, “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

However, Scott’s address was a defence of free speech mounted on its knees. Far from defending this right “to the death,” the ABC was in retreat from the moment “Q&A” compere Tony Jones declared that Mallah’s legitimate observations about the significance of Ciobo’s remarks were “out of order.”

This retreat had already taken full flight by 9 a.m. the morning after Monday’s program, when ABC management issued a statement declaring it had made an “error in judgement” in allowing Mallah to appear and ask a question, noting that in the environment of a live audience, there was no possibility for “editorial review”—that is, for prior censorship of his comments.

The ideological underpinning of ABC management’s response, and the reason they are incapable of, and unwilling, to mount a genuine fight against the Abbott government’s attacks, was revealed in Scott’s address when he came to answer Abbott’s challenge: “Whose side are you on?”

Invoking, but not acknowledging, Abbott’s reactionary concept of “Team Australia,” Scott said that in any team, you could be playing on the same side, but with a different job, doing your bit to “work together to make the team successful. The ABC is clearly Australian, it’s on the side of Australia.”

Had Scott actually been preoccupied with defending free speech, he would have totally rejected the reactionary nostrums of Abbott, including the latter’s fraudulent claim to speak for “the nation,” and declared that his organisation, in its news and current affairs reporting, was on the side of objective truth, that is, of truthful reporting.

Scott did refer to the ABC’s responsibility to deliver journalism that accords with recognised standards, and even to engage in journalism that “means speaking truth to power.”

But these sentiments count for nothing once it is accepted that the ABC is “on the side of Australia.” In his efforts to demonstrate the vital role played by the ABC in “our culture and our democracy,” Scott cited the blanket coverage given to the coverage of Anzac Day, the commemoration of the April 25, 1915 landing at Gallipoli in World War I.

The ABC’s blanket coverage of the centenary, which extended for days, was characterised by the lack of any critical comment about the glorification of militarism that it embodied. The ideological and political pressures to which it willingly complied were revealed when Scott McIntyre from the other government-owned broadcaster, SBS, was sacked for tweeting his opposition to the Anzac commemorations.

Because it fundamentally accepts the premise that “defence of the nation” takes precedence over free speech and the pursuit of truth, the ABC has accommodated itself to the government and media onslaught, placing the jobs of its staff, and the future of the organisation itself, in the firing line.

These political issues raise urgent questions for the working class as a whole. Increasingly, the government is seeking to create a war-time political atmosphere, as it moves to remove citizenship rights, denounces “modern forms of treason” and portrays criticism as some form of sedition—the word used by Abbott’s cabal of reactionary backbench supporters to denounce the ABC.

If the nationalist, patriotic precepts now being developed by Abbott, and echoed by ABC management, had been imposed in the past, then all opposition to the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq would have been characterised as “seditious,” “treasonous,” and forcibly suppressed.

Today, under conditions of mounting global tensions—the escalating military pressure of the US and its NATO allies against Russia, constant imperialist orchestrated violence in the Middle East and the mounting encirclement of China under the US-led pivot to Asia—the Abbott government is trying to create, through bullying, intimidation and provocation, the political conditions where opposition to militarism and war can be illegalised. The extraordinary attack on the ABC is just part of those preparations.



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