

Backlash mounts against government attack on Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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Today's *Australian* editorial consists of a furious and largely incoherent defence of the extraordinary campaign conducted by the Abbott government and the entire stable of Murdoch-owned newspapers against the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). It conveys frustration about the fact that the ABC is being widely defended on the grounds of freedom of speech and fundamental democratic rights.

The editorial echoes the positions put by the *Australian's* editor-at-large Paul Kelly during last Monday night's "Q&A" current affairs program. Compere Tony Jones turned the show over to a discussion about the government's virulent condemnations of the appearance, during the previous week's edition, of Zaky Mallah, a Muslim Australian who had been charged with terrorist offences in 2003 and found not guilty by a jury in 2005. Mallah had spent two years in a high-security prison, awaiting trial. He was found guilty of a minor charge of making threats.

In this week's show, Kelly attempted to deny the undeniable: that the issue at stake was freedom of speech. And he won, from the sizeable studio audience, next to no support. Along with Abbott-appointed human rights commissioner Tim Wilson, Kelly came over as a reactionary right-wing ideologue, seeking to justify the government's assault on democratic rights and its efforts to suppress any public criticism of its agenda.

Today's *Australian* editorial asserts that the issue is "why the ABC's premier national forum worked with a known extremist, who has supported jihadist movements and been convicted of threatening to kill government officials."

In fact, Mallah, who was sitting in the audience, had asked a question that addressed the immense dangers contained in the government plans to strip those alleged of involvement with terrorism of their citizenship, without a prior criminal conviction by a court. As one of the show's

panellists, Abbott's parliamentary secretary Steve Ciobo contemptuously—and falsely—asserted that Mallah had been found not guilty on a technicality and then declared, in the most provocative manner, that he would be "happy" to see Mallah expelled from the country. Toward the end of the program, the clearly angered young man asserted that attitudes such as Ciobo's were factors in why young Muslims were attracted to travelling to the Middle East to join Islamic State (ISIS).

Mallah's remark has stoked a furore because it cut across the entire official propaganda of the "war on terror." It pointed to the manner in which Australia's involvement in successive US-led wars in the Middle East has been justified by lies, manufactured hysteria over terrorism and unprecedented attacks on democratic rights—including the victimisation of Australian Muslims.

ABC management's initial reaction was cowardly. Jones immediately declared Mallah's statement "out of order," and the next morning, an official ABC statement declared his presence on the program was an "error of judgement."

Such efforts to appease the government only fuelled its denunciations. The ABC was accused of "sedition" and "terrorist recruitment." News Limited newspapers published inflammatory articles depicting the ABC as supporters of ISIS. Last Thursday, after the ABC had re-broadcast "Q&A" as usual, unedited, Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared it a "betrayal" and that "heads should roll." A government inquiry was announced into the circumstances surrounding the decision to invite Mallah on the program.

The vendetta against "Q&A" has generated deeply-felt opposition among ABC staff, who are already embittered over massive budget cuts, job destruction and attacks on their working conditions. This was reflected last Thursday evening, when ABC managing director Mark Scott felt compelled to invoke freedom of speech and defend the

organisation as a “public broadcaster,” not a “state broadcaster” that simply echoed the government line.

On the ABC’s Sunday morning “Insiders” program, journalist Barrie Cassidy confronted Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull over his claims that Mallah should not have been allowed to appear on “Q&A” on purported “security grounds.” If he were a terrorist danger, Cassidy asked, why was he walking the streets?

Mallah, in fact, works closely with Australian intelligence agencies and was allowed to travel to Syria in 2012 to blog propaganda for the pro-US Free Syrian Army. Turnbull’s allegation that he could have carried out a terrorist attack in the ABC’s studio was nothing more than an attempt to deflect away from the fundamental issue at stake: the government’s unconstitutional assault on the democratic right of citizenship.

The tide is now turning against the Abbott government. A backlash is developing across the non-Murdoch media, in response to public disquiet over its hysterical attack on the ABC and endless rhetoric about terrorism.

On Monday night, ABC’s “MediaWatch” made a well-researched defence of “Q&A” against the accusations that it had supported terrorism. It drew out that Mallah had made two dozen appearances in media studios over the past three years, because of his support for the pro-US Free Syrian Army and condemnations of ISIS.

Presenter Paul Barry stated: “He’s [Abbott] told his party room that ‘Q&A’ is a ‘lefty lynch mob.’ But if anyone is acting like a lynch mob it’s certain sections of the government and News Corp...”

On “Q&A,” which followed “MediaWatch,” compere Tony Jones asserted that all the staff of the show shared responsibility for programming decisions, answering Abbott’s “heads should roll” with a signal that any victimisations would meet resistance within the ABC.

Jones questioned Paul Kelly about a 2012 article in the *Australian*, which had described Mallah as a man who had renounced violence and publicised his visit to Syria and support for the pro-US forces. Kelly, who was visibly stunned by the question, could only reply that Mallah’s presence on “Q&A” was different because he “was picked out to embarrass the government on this issue”—i.e., the anti-democratic citizenship laws.

Another panellist, American theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss, received applause when he said the Australian government’s hysteria over terrorism recalled Nazi Hermann Goering’s statement that “if you want to make people do what you want them to do, make them

afraid.”

In today’s *Sydney Morning Herald*, economics editor Ross Gittins wrote: “Am I the only person who isn’t cringing in fear, looking for a rock to hide under and hoping Tony Abbott and [Immigration minister] Peter Dutton will save us from the tide of terrorism surging towards our shores?... [H]e wants to divert our attention from the hash he’s making of managing the economy.”

In today’s *Melbourne Age*, former ABC presenter Jonathan Holmes authored another scathing exposure of Turnbull’s claims that Mallah was a security threat. He drew attention, not only to the fact that the government had granted him a passport to travel to Syria in 2012, but to his appearances, on two previous occasions, on “Q&A,” twice on Channel 10’s “The Project” and once on SBS’s “Insight.”

Holmes, in reference to the Abbott government’s planned citizenship laws, concluded: “If the courts won’t do what it wants, it legislates them out of the game. Now we’ll see what it does to the ABC.”

The real motive of the government’s anti-ABC crusade is to intimidate and silence even the most limited opposition to its agenda of support for US militarism around the world and its austerity assault on jobs, social services and welfare.

As for News Limited, it has major commercial interests in reducing the ABC to an underfunded shell that is excluded from the growing digital media market. Leading Murdoch columnist Miranda Devine, speaking on Sky News, blurted out: “What should happen is that if Mark Scott wants the ABC to be a public broadcaster, let it be funded by the public by donations... taxpayer money should not be paid to a company that ends up being a competitor to commercial companies that are doing it tough.”



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