

Australian Broadcasting Corporation censures “Q&A” producer

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) board responded to the Abbott government’s extraordinary witch-hunt of the public broadcaster by issuing a formal warning to the producer of the “Q&A” program, Peter McEvoy, and launching a “review” of the program last Wednesday.

The ABC has come under a sustained attack, since an exchange on the June 22 edition of “Q&A” in which Zaky Mallah, who was acquitted by a jury of terrorism charges in 2005, asked a question on the program challenging the Abbott government’s moves to revoke citizenship rights. The proposed legislation would give a minister the power to strip dual citizens of citizenship, without any criminal conviction.

Replying to Mallah, “Q&A” panellist Steve Ciobo, a government parliamentary secretary, declared that he would be “pleased” to see the young man deported, despite Mallah’s acquittal. In response, Mallah said Ciobo’s remarks would encourage some young Muslims to fight for ISIS.

Government ministers immediately issued strident denunciations of the program, with Prime Minister Tony Abbott calling for “heads to roll at the ABC.”

McEvoy, a multiple winner of Walkley awards for excellence in journalism, has been the executive producer of “Q&A” since 2008. His punishment is a signal that the board will accede to the dictates of the government, and the Murdoch media, which has been in the forefront of the campaign against the ABC. This represents a fundamental attack on the democratic rights of the ABC’s staff and the public.

A summary of an unprecedented government investigation of the program, released the same day as the warning against McEvoy was announced, noted that: “The ABC has subsequently acknowledged an error of judgement in allowing Mr Mallah to join the audience and ask a question.”

The statement issued by the ABC board on July 1 declared that “the decision to allow Zaky Mallah to appear live on the program was wrong.” It stated: “Given his criminal

background and past public statements, the live broadcast meant that the ABC was not in a position to manage unpredictable or inappropriate actions or responses.” In other words, only statements deemed “predictable” and “appropriate” are permissible.

One aspect of the government campaign has been absurd claims by leading politicians, including Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull, that Mallah’s presence in the studio audience posed a threat to the physical safety of other participants.

Mallah has never been convicted of a terrorism offence, had appeared previously in “Q&A” audiences, given multiple media interviews and is free to walk around crowded public places on a daily basis.

Lining up with the government’s manufactured hysteria, however, the board stated: “The ABC Board was updated today on the most recent security briefing from the AFP [Australian Federal Police], which it found to be very valuable. The ABC treats security of staff and studio audiences as a top priority and will continue to consult with the appropriate agencies.”

Under the ominous heading, “The future of Q&A,” the board statement outlined an “independent review” into the past 22 episodes of the program, focusing on “audience selection, panel selection and make-up, subject selection,” and “social media strategy, including on air tweets.” This sends a message that the show, which is already heavily vetted, will be subjected to even stricter controls.

The review will be headed by Ray Martin, who for many years fronted Channel Nine’s sensationalist, tabloid style “A Current Affair” program, and Shaun Brown, a former managing director of the state-funded Special Broadcasting Corporation (SBS) who introduced paid advertisements to the SBS. Their appointment is an attempt to appease those leading the campaign against the ABC, including the Murdoch media, which has called for the privatisation of the ABC.

An article on July 2 in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper, featuring comments by Jonathan Shier, former

managing director of the ABC, outlined some of the political motives underlying the attack on the ABC. Appointed by the Howard Liberal government to run the ABC in 2001, Shier immediately set about implementing “reforms,” cutting some 300 jobs.

Shier reportedly told the *Australian* that claims that the Mallah affair raised the issue of freedom of speech were “sadly simplistic.”

“For heaven’s sake, there has always been limits,” Shier said. “To somehow suggest there’s a blanket right of free speech and that’s the end of the matter is ridiculous. References to North Korea and other totalitarian regimes are just so off the mark.”

The *Australian* article said: “Q&A has been criticised for focusing on left-wing agendas, including climate change, gay marriage and asylum-seekers.”

Shier said that “there are a number of issues that get flogged to death and their constant selection shows a lack of vision ... We’re not trying to inflame the situation ... We’re looking for intelligent debate and that should also be factor when people are selected for the panel and when people are asked to put questions that have already been submitted.”

To the extent that there is any, albeit highly curtailed and vetted, discussion on “Q&A” of issues that may “inflame” opposition to government policy, Shier and the *Australian* want it abolished. Under conditions of escalating hostility to social inequality, war, austerity and moves against democratic rights, such as the government’s citizenship laws, they view any forum, however limited, in which opinions can be aired, as a threat to the status quo.

The board decision has not resulted in any let-up of the government witch-hunt. On Sunday night, the government’s agricultural minister and deputy leader of the National Party, Barnaby Joyce, pulled out of a scheduled appearance on tonight’s episode of “Q&A.” According to a spokesman for Joyce, Prime Minister Abbott instructed front bench members of the government not to appear on the program.

While there is widespread hostility to the witch-hunt against the public broadcaster, including among its staff, there has been no organised opposition to the government campaign. A number of staff were hesitant to give comments to the WSWS, for fear of victimisation.

One ABC worker told the WSWS: “It’s a pretty intimidating atmosphere to work in at the moment. With management having decided to appease the government by disciplining rather than defending program makers, if we were to produce content critical of the government, we could well be next.”

“Firstly Peter [McEvoy] wasn’t warned about having Zaky Mallah on the show previously, so this warning is a direct result of what happened on June 22—that is, a public

challenge was made to the government’s attack on democratic rights.

“The implication is that if Peter McEvoy had followed the correct ‘editorial policy’ and referred Zaky Mallah’s potential appearance upward, Mr Mallah would not have been allowed to appear on ‘Q&A.’ Moreover, were Peter McEvoy to dare to allow a similar situation to arise, even on such a carefully controlled and vetted program as ‘Q&A,’ he’d be fired for it. In other words, the ABC management has told the government, it shouldn’t have happened and it won’t happen again.”

The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the trade union that covers media staff, has done nothing to mobilise its membership to fight the hysterical campaign against the ABC, instead issuing pathetic appeals to the Abbott government and the ABC Board.

The MEAA has played a central role in facilitating sweeping cuts to the public broadcaster. It demobilised widespread opposition to measures announced last year, which eliminated over 400 jobs, including 100 journalists and news production staff, closed the ABC’s TV production facilities in Adelaide and scaled back regional broadcasting and a host of programs. Over the next five years, \$250 million will be slashed from the network’s budget.

The union has made no public reference to the warning issued against McEvoy. In fact, MEAA communications manager Mike Dobbie told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Friday it was “unlikely” the union would issue any statement opposing the attack on McEvoy.

The warning, Dobbie stated, was a “private matter” between the ABC, the union and McEvoy. Dobbie’s response makes clear that the MEAA is working hand in glove with ABC management to prevent the development of any broader movement among staff and others against the disciplining of McEvoy and the government onslaught on the ABC.



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