

Senior management implodes after exposure of government interference at Australia's state-funded media

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Last week, two senior Australian Broadcasting Corporation executives—managing director Michelle Guthrie and board chairman Justin Milne—were forced out amid a crisis over revelations that leading journalists had been targeted for dismissal for criticising government policies.

The assault on ABC journalists is the most blatant example of direct government interference in the almost nine-decade history of the state-funded media outlet.

Under the ABC's charter, federal governments cannot directly intervene in editorial policy, programming decisions, or day-to-day management. While ABC Board members are largely appointed by federal governments, they are supposed to defend the political independence of the state-funded network.

On Monday, Guthrie was sacked by Milne, who claimed that the ABC “needed a different leadership style” and that her managerial skills were inadequate.

The “problem” with Guthrie had nothing to do with her so-called “style.” In line with her managerial brief, the highly paid former corporate lawyer and Google executive has ruthlessly imposed government budget cuts and destroyed hundreds of jobs in the past two and a half years of her five-year contract.

The real reason for her removal was revealed two days later in a leaked document. Guthrie was dismissed because she refused to obey orders from Milne to sack high-profile journalists Emma Alberici and Andrew Probyn.

Milne is a close friend and former business partner of the multi-millionaire former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Turnbull, federal communications minister Mitch Fifield, and the rest of the Liberal-National Coalition government, are openly hostile to the two journalists and anyone else at the network who dares criticise the government.

In May, Alberici, the network's chief economics correspondent, published an article exposing the Liberal-National government's planned tax cuts for big business as a massive handout to the wealthy. She revealed that at least

400 Australian businesses paid little or no tax. Turnbull was furious, denouncing her report in parliament and in the media.

Days later Milne emailed Guthrie declaring: “They [the government] fricken hate her. She keeps sticking it to them with a clear bias against them. We clear her as OK. We r tarred with her brush. I just think it's simple. Get rid of her. My view is we need to save the corporation not Emma. There is no g'tee [guarantee] they will lose the next election.”

Andrew Probyn recently reported on alleged discussions between News Corp chair Rupert Murdoch and Seven West chief Kerry Stokes. Murdoch is alleged to have said, “We have got to get rid of Malcolm,” in other words, Turnbull had to be removed as prime minister.

In October last year, Probyn described former Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott as “the most destructive politician of his generation.” According to a leaked document published by the *Daily Telegraph*, Guthrie alleged that Milne ordered her to sack Probyn. When she refused, Milne accused her of “putting the future of the ABC at risk.”

The document alleges that Milne made his demand after he had met with Turnbull and Fifield. “Milne berated me about Andrew Probyn, saying that the then-prime minister hates him and ‘You have to shoot him.’”

“I reiterated the need to maintain our public trust and the ABC couldn't be responding, or be seen to be responding, to pressure from the government of the day. In response, Mr Milne continued to yell at me and berate me and wouldn't let me finish the call,” Guthrie's document states.

These revelations amounted to a veritable bombshell, forcing Milne to resign last Thursday.

Attempting to contain the political crisis, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, recently installed after the ousting of Turnbull, and heading a fragile and deeply divided government, quickly endorsed the appointment of Dr Kirstin Ferguson as interim ABC board chair. She is a big business

executive, corporate lawyer and former Royal Australian Air Force officer. Yesterday, Morrison told the media that the ABC should “stop talking about itself and get back to work.”

Turnbull, of course, now travelling overseas, immediately denied any government interference in the ABC, declaring that he never issued instructions for any journalist to be sacked. These claims are laughable. When your close friend and former business partner is the ABC chairman, explicit instructions are unnecessary—“a wink is as good as a nod.”

As communications minister in former Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s government, and then prime minister, Turnbull regularly denounced journalists at the ABC and the partially state-funded Special Broadcasting Services (SBS).

Last week, ex-ABC technology writer, Nick Ross, told 2GB radio that an article he wrote in 2013 on the National Broadband Network was pulled so as not to upset Turnbull. Ross gave the article to the ABC’s head of current affairs, but was told “we’re not going to publish it because it’ll upset Malcolm Turnbull, and management don’t want to do that because they’re expecting the Liberals to win the 2013 election.”

In April 2015, popular SBS sports commentator Scott McIntyre tweeted his opposition to the government’s multi-million-dollar jingoistic promotion of the centenary of World War I, and Anzac Day commemorations in particular.

Turnbull was outraged. In less than 24 hours, he released a joint statement with SBS managing director Michael Ebeid and SBS director of sport Ken Shipp, which stated that McIntyre had been “terminated” with “immediate effect” (see: “More details emerge over sacking of Australian journalist for challenging Anzac myth”).

In June that year, then Prime Minister Abbott demanded that “heads should roll” at the ABC after its “Q&A” panel discussion program allowed Zakky Mallah, an acquitted terrorist suspect, to ask a prepared and vetted question of a government minister participating in the show.

The government and the rest of the corporate media unleashed hysterical denunciations of the network, accusing it of providing a platform for terrorism. The ABC board responded by issuing a formal warning to “Q&A” executive producer Peter McEvoy, an award winning journalist.

In June this year, the New South Wales branch of the Young Liberals, in line with calls by the Murdoch media empire and other corporate outlets, passed a resolution demanding that the government privatise the ABC.

Ongoing government interference in the ABC, threatened sackings of ABC journalists and never-ending budget cuts, outsourcing and job destruction, are in line with efforts to restructure the state-funded network in preparation for a US-led war against China and other perceived international

rivals. This agenda requires the silencing of politically honest journalists, along with others at the network and their transformation into slavish propagandists for the government.

These efforts run parallel with Australia’s new “foreign interference laws,” where opposition to militarism, war and government policy can be defined as “seditious” or “treasonous” and punishable with long jail terms.

Last week’s revelations provoked angry mass meetings of ABC journalists and staff in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane on Wednesday. ABC workers vigorously denounced the overt government interference and resolutions were passed demanding the sacking of Milne, condemning the board and calling for its replacement.

It is necessary, however, for those determined to fight this anti-democratic assault to seriously examine how and why such a situation has arisen. The endorsement of the ongoing persecution of WikiLeaks editor, Julian Assange, by the Australian government, some senior reporters at the ABC and their counterparts in the rest of media, has opened the way for such attacks. The media unions maintain a deafening silence on his plight.

An essential first step in the fight against the ongoing and escalating campaign against Australia’s state-funded media is for ABC journalists and staff to declare their full support for Julian Assange and demand that the federal government utilise its diplomatic power and legal discretion to return Assange to Australia, if he so chooses, and that WikiLeaks be able to exercise its democratic right to continue its exposures, unhindered by state persecution.

ABC workers must understand that the slanderous attacks on Assange and WikiLeaks are inseparable from the Australian government’s attempts to censor and silence every journalist with whom it disagrees.



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