

Student ejected from audience of Australian current affairs program for asking critical question on Ukraine

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In an unprecedented act of political censorship, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalist Stan Grant ordered a young Russian-Australian student to leave the network's weekly "Q+A" television show on Thursday for criticising media coverage of the war in Ukraine.

Billed as the program where "You get to ask the questions," the nationally broadcast live show is promoted as a forum for democratic discussion on various political and social issues.

Grant's removal of Sasha Gillies-Lekakis, a 22-year-old post-graduate student from the University of Melbourne, exposed these increasingly threadbare pretensions.

The censorship occurred as the entire political and media establishment is whipping up a wartime atmosphere. Two days earlier, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, with Labor's backing, announced that Australia would provide \$105 million to Ukraine, including \$70 million in military equipment.

Supermarket chains are imposing bans on Russian products, sporting bodies are announcing boycotts of events in that country and a wall-to-wall media barrage is promoting the government line on the conflict.

Gillies-Lekakis, who was in the audience, was invited by Grant, the "Q+A" presenter, to ask a question. He told the program he was "outraged" by media reportage that simplistically depicted "Ukraine as the 'good guy' and Russia as the 'bad guy.'" "A lot of Russians here and around the world support what Putin's doing in Ukraine," he said.

Gillies-Lekakis then attempted to explain the death toll from bloody attacks by Ukrainian government backed fascist forces, such as the Azov Battalion, on the Russian populations in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions since 2014 amid the long running civil war in that region.

He was jeered by someone in the audience and then stopped by Grant who claimed the death toll figures were incorrect.

Neither Grant nor anyone else dealt with the substance of the student's challenge. Thursday's panel was composed of Dennis Richardson, former Director-General of the domestic spy agency ASIO, Deborah Snow, a *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist, Liberal government MP Jason Falinski, Labor's shadow minister for defence Brendan O'Connor and University

of Sydney lecturer Olga Boichak.

No mention was made in subsequent discussion of the Azov Battalion or other neo-Nazis backing Ukrainian President Zelensky's pro-US regime.

Twenty minutes after Gillies-Lekakis's question, Grant, who was no doubt contacted by ABC chiefs via his studio earpiece, intervened and suddenly ordered the young man out of the studio. This was necessary, Grant declared, "because people here have been talking about family who are suffering and people who are dying."

Grant falsely told the audience, "We can't have anyone who is sanctioning, supporting violence and killing of people." His anti-democratic attack on freedom of speech was applauded by Ukrainian nationalists in the audience and silently endorsed by the panel.

While scores of viewers protested Gillies-Lekakis's ejection on the "Q+A" Twitter account, the only tweet referring to the incident that was published on the screen during the broadcast hailed Grant's repressive actions.

Grant gave free rein to the panellists to repeat pro-NATO talking points without offering a single critical question.

Boichak, a Ukrainian-Australian, was given the last word, declaring that some of her friends and family had joined local "territorial defence units" and were "willing to do what it takes to not allow Ukraine to be occupied." She quoted a section of Ukraine's national anthem—"We will lay down our body and our soul for our freedom"—and declared this "is actually what is being asked of them right now."

The entire discussion centred around how far NATO and its allies should escalate the conflict, with audience members and some panellists advocating the imposition of a no-fly zone that would likely result in a direct war between the US and Russia.

Grant's allegations that Gillies-Lekakis was "sanctioning, supporting violence and killing of people," was a lie, as was the journalist's claim at the end of the broadcast that the student had asked a "rogue [unvetted] question".

Gillies-Lekakis later explained on his Facebook page that his question had been submitted to the show's producers, was approved and delivered with minimal changes.

Referring to Grant's accusation that he supported violence, Gillies-Lekakis wrote: "I am unequivocally against war and the loss of any lives, be they Ukrainian, Russian, or any other, and want to be clear that I made no statements indicating anything to the contrary—I made no direct statement sanctioning violence or conflict."

The post-graduate student said that he planned to explain that he supported "Putin's grievances regarding the breaking of the Minsk Peace Agreement by Ukraine and the ensuing loss of life, particularly in the Russian-populated areas of the Donbas... [and ask] why these Russian deaths were seemingly less important compared to Ukrainian casualties in our media coverage, and whether the panellists thought there was any hypocrisy in their positions as a result..."

"Unfortunately, I was unable to fully finish asking my question nor clarify myself despite trying, and so believe that my words were misrepresented and incomplete," he wrote.

The WSWs opposes the Putin regime, which represents a Russian capitalist oligarchy, and its reactionary invasion of Ukraine. It is nevertheless the case that the US and NATO bear principal responsibility for the conflict, which they have provoked as part of longstanding preparations for war against Russia and China, to ensure American imperialism's global hegemony.

The response to Gillies-Lekakis's entirely legitimate question was intended to signal that no discussion of this broader context, or any opposition to the official line will be tolerated.

Since its founding 90 years ago, the ABC has functioned as a pillar of Australia's ruling elite, manufacturing, moulding and mobilising public opinion in line with its national requirements.

At certain periods during the post-WWII period, individual ABC journalists and some programs have made limited criticisms of Australian foreign and domestic policy and differed from the politics espoused by the Murdoch media and other corporate outlets. These exceptions were used to promote the illusion that the state-funded network had some political "independence."

Honest and critical journalists, particularly in the two decades since the US-led invasion of the Iraq War in 2003, have been marginalised or driven out. Restrictive editorial policies have been imposed following numerous government denunciations, threats, high-level "investigations" and budget cuts.

Among the most notorious of these was a special inquiry into "Q+A" after it permitted Zaky Mallah, a young Islamic man who was acquitted by a jury of terrorism charges in 2005, to ask a prepared and vetted question on its show on June 22, 2015. Mallah's question challenged new laws that gave the immigration minister the right to cancel the citizenship of anyone convicted of terrorism.

Numerous angry comments have been posted on social media denouncing Grant's censorship. Some speculated that he decided to remove Gillies-Lekakis only after receiving orders from government officials via the program's producer.

Whatever the reason for Grant's 20-minute delay before he booted the post-graduate student out of the ABC studios, the well-paid journalist is no accidental figure in the network's stable.

Grant has not only worked for a range of commercial and studio-funded media outlets in Australia and international networks, including CNN, over his 30-year global career. He also has intimate connections with Australia's foreign policy and military elite.

In July 2020, Grant became a Senior Fellow at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a right-wing think tank funded by the defence department and giant military hardware manufacturers, including Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Thales Group and Raytheon Technologies. ASPI also receives government funding from the US, the UK, Israel, Canada and the Netherlands.

ASPI continuously promotes the US-led confrontation with China and advocates for its escalation.

Grant's ejection of Gillies-Lekakis from "Q+A" serves these interests and is a clear message to all journalists and the rest of the country, that no diversion from the official government line will be permitted. The censorship should be roundly condemned.

That Grant could falsely accuse someone of promoting "violence" on national television and in front of a former head of Australia's main spy agency—and not be challenged—establishes an ominous and dangerous precedent.

How long will it be before Gillies-Lekakis or any other individual that dares to challenge Canberra's war-drive is visited and interrogated by police and spy agency officers?

Last Thursday's "Q+A" program is a forewarning of how the official media as a whole will attempt to intimidate and silence widespread anti-war opposition and those who seek to give voice to it. This includes the Socialist Equality Party, the only party that fights to mobilise workers and youth internationally on a socialist program against the US-led war drive and the source of conflict, the capitalist profit system.



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