



Aunty out of control

The ABC is a billion dollar culture war high ground, writes **James Paterson**. It's time it was privatised.

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There's only one way to fix the ABC, and that is by privatising it. Everything else is window dressing.

If the ABC wants to be reformed, they are doing everything in their power to make it happen.

Since the election of the Abbott government, it is almost as if the ABC has gone out of its way to provoke the government into action. First, the ABC partnered with the left-wing

British newspaper *The Guardian* to report allegations based on leaks by Edward Snowden, the former US NSA employee, that Australia spied on the Indonesian government.

Second, the ABC chose to broadcast a distasteful photoshopped image of ABC critic and journalist at *The Australian*, Chris Kenny, appearing to have sex with a dog. The attack came in response to Kenny's persistent criticism of the ABC. Instead of simply apologising, as Kenny requested, the ABC initially refused and instead spent taxpayers' money defending costly defamation proceedings. Finally, in

April, ABC managing director Mark Scott was forced to acknowledge the appalling taste of the Chaser skit and relented, granting the apology Kenny had been seeking.

Third, the ABC chose to air thinly-sourced allegations that Australian Navy personnel had deliberately burned asylum seekers' hands in a confrontation at sea. Even the ABC's own Media Watch, normally focused on the evils of talk back radio and commercial current affairs shows, was forced to admit the reporting was sloppy and questionable.

At the very least, this reporting was hardly consistent with its contract

to run the Australia Network, which the ABC was awarded in perpetuity in controversial circumstances in 2011 by then communications minister Stephen Conroy. The ABC had been competing against Sky News in a tender process to run the network, which an independent panel had twice found had entered a superior bid. Unhappy with the outcome, the Gillard government overruled the process and gave the \$223 million contract to the ABC.

The ABC's conduct during the tender process was called in to question even by Gillard government ministers. Resources minister Martin Ferguson took the unusual step of publicly lambasting ABC managing director Mark Scott for making what he regarded as an inappropriate phone call to lobby for the contract. In 2010, the ABC took the unusual step of paying think tank the Lowy Institute to produce a report on the Australia Network. The report lauded the network, and argued that it was underfunded. The tender process was so botched that Sky News was awarded an undisclosed amount of compensation.

The purpose of the Australia Network, actually a project of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, is to be a part of Australia's foreign policy tool kit. A 'soft diplomacy' measure, it broadcasts a range of Australian news, current affairs and drama to our immediate region, under the theory that this promotes Australia's interests.

The existence of the Australia Network places the ABC in a conflicted position. Is it a news organisation dedicated to the pursuit of truth? Or is it an arm of the Australian government designed to promote our national interest abroad? It's hard to be both. Broadcasting poorly supported accusations of barbarity on the part of Australia's navy into the Asia Pacific region

➤ RESOURCES MINISTER MARTIN FERGUSON TOOK THE UNUSUAL STEP OF PUBLICLY LAMBASTING ABC MANAGING DIRECTOR MARK SCOTT FOR MAKING WHAT HE REGARDED AS AN INAPPROPRIATE PHONE CALL TO LOBBY FOR THE CONTRACT

hardly helps Australia's image among our neighbours.

It's important to recognise that this situation would barely be improved if a private operator like Sky News was operating the Australia Network. They too would become conflicted between their obligation to report the news whilst at the same time accepting money from the government to sell Australia to Asia.

It's been publicly speculated that the Abbott government plans to scrap the Australia Network. If they proceed, it will be among the easiest cuts made in the May budget. It's impossible to quantify the alleged benefits of the network, and as even Malcolm Turnbull—an avowed fan of the ABC—has admitted, in the 21st Century there are much more effective ways of promoting Australia's interests abroad than with a television network.

This will certainly be a blow to the ABC. It might even be accompanied by a freeze in the ABC's funding, or an across the board reduction in funding, as part of a government-wide drive to reduce spending and the federal budget deficit.

But what exactly does the government imagine that would change?

It certainly won't make any difference to the problems of bias that have plagued the public broadcaster for decades.

Although its defenders are loath to admit it, it's untenable to argue that the ABC is rigorously fair, balanced and evenhanded. While the ABC is rarely crudely biased in a partisan sense, it is clear that it approaches news from a left of centre perspective. It's no coincidence that so many conservatives and liberals are so often incensed by the broadcaster, and that the left rallies unanimously to defend it whenever it comes under criticism.

The ABC has happily employed many journalists who have transparent political allegiances to the left—for example, Barrie Cassidy, a former staffer to Bob Hawke, Phillip Adams, a life-long ALP member, David Marr, who once said being left-wing was a prerequisite to being a journalist, and Fran Kelly, a self-described 'activist'. There are countless other ABC presenters and personalities whose allegiances are less overt, but whose views are nonetheless unmistakable, like Melbourne ABC Radio host Jon Faine, former Sydney radio host Deborah Cameron, and every member of the Chaser Team (almost all of whom seem to have found a well-remunerated sinecure somewhere in the ABC since their show ended).

Against this monolithic world view, the ABC employs only one identifiable conservative or liberal, former Howard government minister Amanda Vanstone, the host of the once a week, self-consciously named *Counterpoint* on ABC Radio National.

But the bias of the ABC is not just evident in its choice of personnel. The way it presents news stories, whom it selects to interview in them and what it chooses not to cover can be equally revealing.

Unremarkably, ABC news stories tend to reflect the world view of its staff. This phenomenon is not isolated to public broadcasters, but it



ONLY WHOLESALE REFORM OF THE ABC WILL PRODUCE MEANINGFUL CHANGE. THE LESSON FROM THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT'S INABILITY TO REFORM THE ABC IS THAT IT CANNOT BE FIXED FROM THE BOARD DOWN.

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is a particular problem for them.

Staff at Fairfax or News Corporation are free to share a similar outlook of the world, and allow it to affect their journalism, because no one is forced to read them or fund them. If consumers are unhappy with their editorial line, there are plenty of other outlets for their eyeballs and their wallets. But a taxpayer funded broadcaster must represent all points of view, and eschew bias. Consumers (and taxpayers) can certainly tune out, but they are still forced to fund the broadcaster that doesn't represent or even respect their world view.

The only major survey of ABC staff political views, conducted by a University of Sunshine Coast academic and released in May 2013, found that 41.2 per cent said they vote Green, 32.4 per cent Labor and just 14.7 per cent for the Coalition—starkly out of step with the broader population, and much more tilted to the left than both Fairfax and News Limited. Defenders of the ABC have said these figures can't be relied upon, given they were based on only a small sample of journalists. But even if we accept that this research exaggerates the extent of ABC employees' left wing tendencies, it is untenable to suggest that the ABC is even close to reflecting the population as a whole. Even News Corporation, derided by many for a supposed conservative bias, recorded

voting preference of 46.5 per cent for the ALP, 26.7 per cent for the Coalition and 19.8 per cent for the Greens.

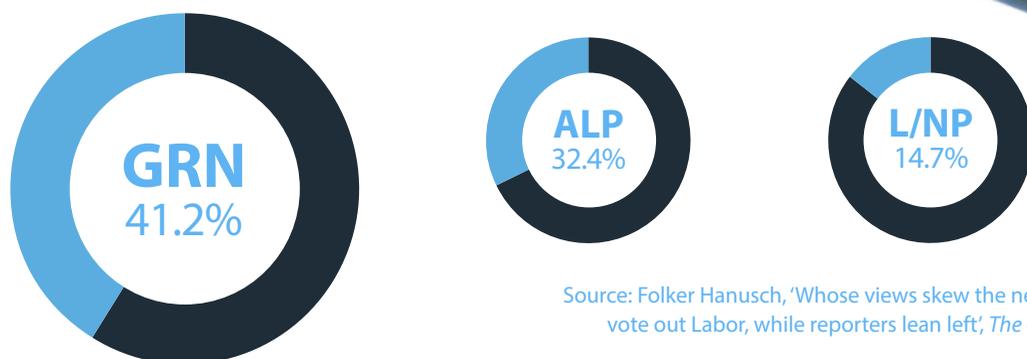
Of course, this would matter less if it didn't affect the way that the ABC covers news. But it clearly does. In a powerful example cited by *Spectator Australia* Editor Tom Switzer, in the week former US President Ronald Reagan died in June 2004, the ABC's *Lateline* did not run a single story on the life or presidency of one of the 20th century's most significant figures. This is the same program that regularly runs stories marking the anniversaries of the death of John F. Kennedy, and who in August 2012 not only covered the death of left wing intellectual Gore Vidal in much detail, but arranged a live-cross to then foreign minister Bob Carr from Abu Dhabi to rhapsodise Gore's legacy.

In a more recent example, when the ABC's 7.30 covered the Abbott government's decision to refuse to bail out SPC Ardmona, they interviewed no less than three people in favour of a taxpayer subsidy, but not a single opponent. For 'balance' they simply screened a few sentences of file footage from government ministers defending the decision.

Dozens of other examples of ABC bias are well documented by the Sydney Institute's Gerard Henderson, such as the broadcaster's

\$1.25 billion
ABC budget
appropriations,
2012-13

ABC staff political views



Source: Folker Hanusch, 'Whose views skew the news? Media chiefs ready to vote out Labor, while reporters lean left', *The Conversation*, 20 May 2013

disproportionate focus on issues like gay marriage, asylum seekers and climate change. Former ABC chairman Maurice Newman has blasted the broadcaster for its groupthink on climate change.

While there's no doubt that ABC management deserves much of the blame for this situation, we should not be at all surprised that the ABC is home to a left of centre world view. By its very nature as a taxpayer funded broadcaster, it is insulated from its audience. Unlike commercial media outlets, who must strive to please their consumers or die, the ABC faces no penalty for failing to cater to their viewers. The absence of this market pressure means that the driving force behind editorial decisions are the staff. Former ABC board member Janet Albrechtsen has written about how little influence the board has on the output of the ABC, and Chris Kenny, who was once employed at the ABC, has dubbed it a 'staff-run collective'.

As the University of Southern Queensland research demonstrates, journalists already lean to the left—51 per cent describe themselves as left of

centre, with only 12.9 per cent self-identifying as centre right. Journalists who consciously choose to work for a public broadcaster as opposed to a commercial media outlet would only exacerbate that tendency. The idea that such a skewed and staff-centric organisation could ever deliver news and current affairs in an impartial way is laughable.

That's why only wholesale reform of the ABC will produce meaningful change. A small budget cut will result in no cultural change, and the lesson from the Howard government's inability to reform the ABC is that it cannot be fixed from the board down.

Privatisation is the only remedy likely to solve the persistent issues with the ABC, even if it is regarded by many in the political class as unthinkable. Even if we concede the political obstacles to this radical option are too great, there are some steps towards this goal that could be more politically palatable.

Corporatisation, including allowing advertising as has been done at SBS, is a reasonable first step towards privatisation. Whilst privatisation of the SBS may have

once been regarded as extreme, it is now much less controversial after two decades of advertising.

A proper review of the ABC's size and role is long overdue, even if ABC employees hysterically resist it. When former *Sunday Age* editor Gay Alcorn gently suggested in a recent column that the ABC's move into online journalism was hastening the demise of Fairfax, ABC Breakfast TV's Virginia Trioli slammed Alcorn on Twitter and accused her of writing 'rubbish'. But as private media operators wrestle with profitability and shrink in size, the ABC's ever-growing budgets will make it easily the most powerful player in the Australian media. And why should the ABC be allowed such reach when a private competitor of the same size would violate cross-media ownership laws?

It's deeply troubling that a democracy like Australia has allowed a state-broadcaster to become so powerful, and so obviously biased. If the Abbott government is serious about tackling this issue, it will need to do much more than trim the ABC's budget. **R**