

Australian government intensifies political assault on the ABC

By Richard Phillips
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Abbott government ministers and ruling Liberal Party MPs have stepped up the witch-hunt against the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), threatening more budget cuts and demanding the state-funded network toe the government line.

The ABC has been under sustained attack since Zaky Mallah appeared on last Monday's "Q&A" program and made comments opposing the Abbott government's anti-democratic citizenship laws. Mallah was falsely charged with terrorism following a police entrapment operation. He was acquitted by a jury in 2005, after spending over two years in a high-security prison.

On "Q&A" Steve Ciobo, a government parliamentary secretary, responded to a question from Mallah about the new citizenship laws, provocatively declaring that Mallah should be stripped of his citizenship. Mallah reacted by declaring that the minister's response demonstrated why some Australian Muslims were leaving Australian to join ISIS (see: "The live exchange on ABC television's Q&A").

The government and Murdoch-owned media immediately reacted with a barrage of denunciations. Prime Minister Tony Abbott accused the network of being unpatriotic and declared on Thursday that "heads should roll." Abbott reportedly told a Liberal Party caucus that the network was a "lefty-lynch mob."

The past four days have seen a further intensification of this unprecedented campaign. On Friday, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said Mallah's appearance on the ABC "runs counter to all that we are seeking to do to protect Australians from terrorism." Liberal Party MP Sarah Henderson called for the sacking of "Q&A" executive producer Peter McEvoy. Various government MPs, including Defence Minister Kevin Andrews, announced plans to boycott the program.

Appearing on the ABC-TV's "Insiders" program yesterday, Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull said the network was like an "undergraduate playing at tabloid journalism."

Turnbull, who last week launched an investigation into the

network—the first by any Australian communications minister—insisted that the inquiry was not interfering with the ABC's "editorial judgment" and had nothing to do with "free speech issues."

But that is precisely what the government investigation and the ongoing witch-hunt is all about—to intimidate ABC journalists and producers and transform the nominally independent network into a direct political mouthpiece for the government.

Turnbull ludicrously claimed that Mallah's presence in the ABC studios constituted a major security breach and referred to last December's Sydney Lindt Café siege by the mentally-unstable Man Haron Monis. When "Insiders" compère Barrie Cassidy rejected this hysterical claim, Turnbull denounced him as having "lost the plot."

Appearing on Network Ten's "The Bolt Report," Steve Ciobo declared that the ABC was an "unaccountable island"—i.e., not under direct government control. "There is no pressure from sponsors, there is no pressure from ratings, there is no external pressure in terms of the government being able to say we've got a problem with management and that a person needs to go," he said. Asked if the ABC was too big, Ciobo foreshadowed further budget cuts and said there would be "structural change."

The Abbott government and Murdoch media assault has emboldened extreme-right elements. The public broadcaster reportedly received a number of threatening phone calls last week and stepped up security at its major offices.

On Friday, ABC news reporter Lucy Carter said on Twitter that she was called "lefty scum" by a member of the public at Sydney's Central Station, echoing what Abbott reportedly said earlier in the week. The next day about a dozen members of the extreme-right, anti-Islamic United Patriot Group demonstrated outside the ABC's Southbank studios in Melbourne. They waved Australian flags and carried a pig on a spit. A member of the group told the media: "In here [the ABC] public opinion is shaped artificially. It's not democratic. It's not Australian."

There is growing popular opposition to the campaign

against the network from journalists and ABC employees. Hundreds of online letters have been sent to media outlets defending “Q&A” and the ABC.

Responding to journalists’ concerns, the trade union that covers them, the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA), condemned the government’s inquiry. It pointed out that the government’s amendments to national security laws had undermined press freedom, with journalists facing 10-year jail terms for simply doing their job.

The government was “at it again,” the MEAA said, and clearly “seeking to directly influence editorial decisions” at the national broadcaster. “The prime minister has even pre-empted the outcome of the inquiry by distastefully insisting: ‘Heads should roll over this.’ He should withdraw this threat and the proposed inquiry.”

MEAA house committee members at the ABC issued an open letter to the network’s board of management on Friday denouncing the government’s investigation. The letter, which is being circulated for all ABC workers to sign, also criticised network management for apologising over the “Q&A” program before any consultation with the show’s staff. The letter called on ABC managing director Mark Scott to support the “Q&A” staff.

As with previous attacks on freedom of the press, the MEAA has made no attempt to mobilise its membership against the witch-hunt. Instead, it has issued impotent appeals to the government and the ABC management, underscoring its hostility to any genuine political struggle in defence of democratic rights.

Former Al Jazeera journalist Peter Grete, who recently returned to Australia after being convicted and jailed on bogus terrorism offences by the US-backed military dictatorship in Egypt, has also spoken out. He told Fairfax Media that the government’s response was to “shoot the messenger” and compared its treatment of Mallah and the ABC with the government campaign against Human Rights Commission chief Gillian Triggs.

“As journalists we’re supposed to be the awkward squad, and the implication that we should be friends of anybody, that we should be on one side or the other is, by definition, anathema to what we do,” he said.

Abbott’s comments, he said, “suggest if you challenge some of these issues, if you raise questions about government policy, particularly on national security, that you somehow become unpatriotic.”

Michael, an ABC worker in Sydney, voiced his concerns to the WSWS: “Firstly I’m disappointed that ABC management apologised in a knee-jerk way. ‘Q&A’ was not wrong to get Zaky Mallah to ask a question. He’s exactly the right person to be asking a question about giving ministers the right to strip citizenship on the basis of mere

accusations of ‘terrorism.’

“[Director of ABC Television] Richard Finlayson’s apology says it was an ‘error of judgment’ to have him on the show implying that what Mallah said was wrong or even beyond the pale. So much for freedom of speech!

“Apologising for what Zaky Mallah said also implies support for the government’s attack on fundamental democratic rights and aligns the ABC with the Islamophobia being whipped up to divert attention from the collapse of the Australian economy and to provide a pretext for the ‘war on terror.’

“The ABC has caved in to pressure from the government and the Murdoch media and this creates a dangerous precedent. It follows the sacking of SBS sports journalist Scott McIntyre because he dared to criticise the government and media glorification of Anzac Day.

“I think the government responded in this way because it wants to suppress any critical voices, particularly the ABC, which is trusted more than any other TV media organisation. The call for ‘heads to roll’ is designed to threaten and intimidate. At the very least, it will encourage the ABC to censor itself and to think twice about running pieces critical of the government.

“This bipartisan campaign against the ABC on the issue of citizenship—a fundamental democratic right—and management’s capitulation implies that there is no section of the political or media establishment prepared to defend freedom of speech, basic rights or the rule of law. It’s heading toward a dictatorial situation, where the ABC would be a government mouthpiece and people imprisoned for so-called treason.”

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