

Australian media vendetta against worker who questioned tax breaks for wealthy

By Patrick Kelly
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The beginning of the Australian election campaign this month coincided with a vicious media attack on a vulnerable minimum-wage worker who dared challenge the government's tax breaks for the wealthy on ABC television's "Q&A" current affairs program.

Duncan Storrar was one of the selected audience members on the May 9 program who asked a question to the panel, which included the Liberal-National government's Assistant Treasurer Kelly O'Dwyer.

Storrar, it later emerged, is a 45-year-old living in public housing with his partner in Geelong, a Victorian regional city that has been hard hit by several decades of deindustrialisation. He works part-time as a truck driver, earning \$16 an hour, while also receiving a \$520-a-fortnight Austudy allowance.

"I've got a disability and a low education, that means I've spent my whole life working for minimum wage," Storrar began. Referring to changes to the tax structure in the government's budget to benefit a wealthier layer, he continued: "You're going to lift the tax-free threshold for rich people. If you lift my tax-free threshold, that changes my life. That means that I get to say to my little girls, 'Daddy's not broke this weekend. We can go to the pictures.' ... Rich people don't even notice their tax-free threshold lift. Why don't I get it? Why do they get it?"

O'Dwyer replied with barely concealed contempt. "The critical thing here is that we actually need to grow the pie," she declared, deriding any suggestion of moving to redistribute the pie to benefit the less well off. She went on to boast of the government's pro-business measures and cited the example of a café owner being given a tax break that allowed the purchase of a "\$6,000 toaster" to boost profits.

The assistant treasurer was backed by another "Q&A" panellist, Innes Willox, head of the big

business lobby the Australian Industry Group. Willox declared, "Duncan, I'll be harsh in my message. If you're on the minimum wage and with a family, you would not pay much tax, if any at all. Would you? You would not pay much tax."

Storrar stood his ground, answering that he paid tax every time he drove his car and shopped for groceries at the supermarket—a reference to the 10 percent goods and services tax (GST) and other indirect taxes.

Storrar's questions immediately resonated among ordinary people. His remarks received loud applause from the "Q&A" audience, while social media responded with a popular #IStandWithDuncan hashtag. Deriding O'Dwyer's defence of government policy, one person set up a crowdfunding website page to buy Duncan a \$6,000 toaster. In just over two weeks, ten times that amount was collected, with \$60,051 raised from donations from nearly 2,500 people.

Storrar's intervention on "Q&A" made a significant impact because it provided a rare glimpse, albeit limited and brief, into the harsh reality of everyday life for millions of people in Australian society today. Numerous statements on social media, in letters to newspapers, and on radio call-in shows were made by people explaining their own struggles with raising a family on low incomes.

The major parties have no real policy differences on such matters, with Labor and Liberal both representing the interests of finance capital and the ultra-wealthy. The Greens occasionally posture as opponents of the banks and big business, while representing an affluent upper-middle class constituency and manoeuvring for a ruling coalition with either of the major parties.

The working class is effectively disenfranchised and excluded from any involvement in parliamentary politics. Just as a federal election campaign began,

Storarr's question on "Q&A" threatened to provide an opening for a broader discussion of poverty and social inequality—unmentionable issues as far as the political and media establishment are concerned.

As a result, Storarr was made the target of an extraordinary media campaign, aimed at discrediting if not outright destroying the individual.

The Murdoch press was at the forefront. Both the *Australian* and the *Herald Sun* devoted substantial resources to probing Storarr's employment and taxation situation. After dredging through his private life, both newspapers ran front-page stories on Storarr's past criminal record. The *Herald Sun*'s headline was, "ABC Hero a Villain: Q&A sob story star exposed as a thug as public donate \$60,000". The *Australian* ran another front-page story featuring an interview with Storarr's estranged son, who denounced his father as a drug user. Yet more stories accused him of being a "deadbeat dad."

This media filth continued even after Storarr fled his home, pleading for his family to be left alone, and explaining that he suffers post-traumatic stress disorder from childhood sexual abuse.

In what amounted to a thinly-veiled threat to any other working class people thinking about challenging the government, the *Herald Sun's* editor Damon Johnston declared: "If you put yourself on the public stage, and in, particularly in the middle of an election campaign, questioning government policy, questioning this, I think that you're entitled to be subjected to a bit of scrutiny. It was all part of legitimate public debate in my view."

Storarr responded with dignity, issuing a public statement via the ABC's "Media Watch." He began by explaining that he saw the main "lesson for Australia in this episode" to be that if anyone shows that "the powers-that-be [are the] out of touch people that they are, they will be dropped, probed and attacked in any way with no thought to the mental wellbeing of their children."

He added: "My ['Q&A'] question is still valid and hasn't been answered, but more to the point there are a whole class of people out there, yes we might have records, yes we might not be perfect but society has forgotten us, the politicians and the media use us whenever they want to show why they need to be elected, but never do anything to help our plight. We

are breaking down here and life hasn't been this hard since before Whitlam for the underclass."

The Storarr episode is a warning to workers. The savage media treatment of an individual who dared to ask a question about government policy is nothing but a reflection of the ruling elite's ruthless determination to prevent any challenge to the status quo. There is no longer any constituency for democratic rights within the political establishment—when the capitalist class is confronted with a threat to its property and wealth, it will use every means at its disposal, including outright repression, to try to silence and suppress the working class.

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