

It's **still** their ABC



Tom Switzer

If you listen to a growing chorus of friends of the ABC, you might think that conservatives have hijacked the public broadcaster. Mungo MacCallum warns that the 'new AWB scandal' (read: board appointments Janet **A**lbrechtsen, Keith **W**indschuttle, Ron **B**runton) is part of 'John Howard's eternal campaign to pack-rape Aunty'. *The Age* laments: 'The ABC is too important to be anyone's plaything'. And according to Robert Manne, the Prime Minister's efforts to bring the ABC to heel mark 'a major victory in the culture war'. Memo to the ABC: we're all right-wingers now.

Well, that's certainly news to conservatives. True, the new anti-bias guidelines are a good step forward in lifting editorial standards; the staff-elected director position has been removed from the ABC board; and the journalist Chris

Masters's controversial manuscript on Sydney radio identity Alan Jones was axed. But does any of this fix the very problem that keeps so many taxpayers up late at night, hot and bothered, long after the conclusion of *Late Night Live* with Phillip Adams?

There is a certain bias that shapes news and current affairs coverage and that dictates, all too frequently, what can and can't be said on air at the ABC. The bias, to be sure, is not deliberate; it's not as though Aunty's journalists sit around in dark corners and plan how they will slant their programmes in favour of their friends and causes. But there is little doubt that, notwithstanding their denials, most reporters and producers naturally dress a little to the Left. And there is little doubt that, however interventionist the board, an internal and

incestuous culture, with its deeply entrenched set of received opinions, will continue to dominate at the ABC and colour much of its output well into the post-Howard era.

It's true that there is a lot to like about the ABC. Its Websites and the service provided by regional radio and News Radio are outstanding. Many journalists there—especially those who have no time for the union's 'Vietcong-style' industrial tactics—are intelligent, extremely well-informed individuals who are almost always on the pace with breaking news. At a time when political and current affairs programmes are being dumbed down on commercial television, it is heartening to know that at least one network takes ideas and public affairs seriously. On balance, the taxpayer is better off with the ABC than

without it. But when it comes to the quality of the news and current affairs programmes, our public broadcaster could be so much better if a left-liberal bias did not cloud so many stories.

Such accusations, of course, continue to provoke hot denials and even rage at the Ultimo/Southbank staff cafeterias. We television and radio journalists, the argument goes, keep our political opinions to ourselves and are mere ciphers for a glistening stream of objective and truthful inquiry.

But like everyone else involved in the political process, surely Aunty's workers also have strong views about pretty much everything, no matter how neatly they put such baggage aside on air. (Just ask Sydney and Canberra news readers Juanita Phillips and Virginia Haussegger, both of whom pen opinion columns for *The Bulletin* and *The Canberra Times* respectively.) When recently challenged about the corporation's Left flavour by a listener, ABC Radio's Virginia Trioli told her Sydney audience that she no longer votes at elections; that's how she maintains her objectivity. It is a nice idea, but personal opinions don't start and finish at the ballot box.

'Objective journalists'—a misnomer, given that every day and every story involves subjective judgements—may say that they never allow their opinions to shape their reporting. They may even see themselves as perfect arbiters of ultimate truth. But this is a pretension beyond human capacity. Sometimes, a journalist's personal views cloud their news reports, their choice of topics and their analysis. Again, it's not deliberate; it just happens.

But surely a left-liberal bias means going hard on Liberals and going easy on Labor? And yet, as Bob Hawke and Paul Keating will attest, ABC journalists often offend Labor as well as Coalition governments.

This is true, although that robust criticism has never stopped the constant

to-ing and fro-ing between ABC staff rooms and employment in the ALP over the years (think of Barrie Cassidy, Kerry O'Brien, Mark Bannerman, Alan Carpenter, Claire Martin, Mary Delahunty,

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Bob Carr). That aside, isn't it possible to annoy everybody and still be doing something wrong? For real media bias comes not so much from what party the journalists attack. Bias comes from how they see the world.

This is the heart of the matter in any discussion about ABC bias. A left-wing conspiracy is not necessary at the taxpayer-funded behemoth, because (most) ABC journalists quite spontaneously think alike. They just can't imagine that someone could possibly oppose the Kyoto Protocol or an Aboriginal apology or a labour monopoly on the waterfront because, to them and their friends, these are self-evident truths. Nor can they imagine that someone could possibly support a monarchy or Tasmanian timber workers or close Australian-US relations because, to them and their friends, these are unfashionable views to be ridiculed. It simply doesn't occur to them that sane or civilised people could disagree with them.

Indeed, what is most depressing about exchanges with many ABC journalists is not that there are disagreements, but that many believe their own narrow frame of reference for debate is the only legitimate one. A classic case in point was the debate over the federal government's anti-terrorism laws put in

place in late 2005. The civil libertarians and the legal academics opposed the legislation and they enjoyed favourable air time, but the pundits or professors who thought the laws were a limited defence against a specific and very real threat were often either ruled out of the debate entirely or, at best, were treated like extremists outside the boundaries of serious (and morally respectable) consideration.

Go back to the week of the parliamentary debate about the legislation in late October and early November 2005. *Lateline*, for example, lined up a succession of like-minded critics of the Government's anti-terror laws over three nights without putting up a single acknowledgment—let alone a guest—supporting the fact that most Australians (including the federal Opposition and all State Labor premiers) demonstrably back these laws. That week, an AC Nielsen poll showed that while most voters opposed the shoot-to-kill element of the laws, a clear 74 per cent were in favour of the laws themselves. And yet *Lateline* nowhere acknowledged this overall public support for the laws, but merely reported the poll's shoot-to-kill finding.

Again, it's hard to believe that host Tony Jones and his producers orchestrate such agendas, but these types of one-sided incidents nevertheless take place all too frequently at the public broadcaster.

If someone in the audience does disagree and complains to the ABC, and if the ABC journalist is found to have produced something lacking in balance, they are 'informally counselled' by someone up the chain. It sounds like a group hugging session where a gentle managerial 'there, there' is directed at the offender. Until the next counselling session. And the next.

Former BBC staffer Robin Aitken once said he could not raise a cricket team of conservatives among staff at the British public broadcaster. Could an indoor cricket team be raised at the ABC? Aunty's workers are, in short, creatures of a culture that is divorced from the

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thoughts and attitudes of mainstream Australia.

How else to account for the all-consuming focus on gender issues, 'civil liberties', the environment, the rights of minorities, especially asylum seekers? Meanwhile, the issues that matter to the vast majority of voters—health, education, employment, and tax—are played down. Why?

How else to account for the fact that ABC presenters often identify conservatives as such but not those on the other side of the political spectrum? Thus, according to Tony Jones, the right-wing Mark Steyn is a 'conservative polemicist', whereas the far Left journalist Robert Fisk is 'one of the most experienced observers of the Middle East'. No left-wing labels are necessary. Perhaps conservatives require identification because—in the worldview that prevails at the ABC—they are outside the mainstream.

How else to account for the fact that the one ABC programme that challenges the prevailing orthodoxy is called *Counterpoint*, Michael Duffy's Radio National programme that airs conservative voices and ideas? And then there's the ABC's *Insiders*. Although a conservative commentator is accommodated on the programme every Sunday morning, he (Andrew Bolt, Piers Akerman or Gerard Henderson) is always outnumbered—surprise, surprise—by two other more liberal counterparts and sometimes host Barrie Cassidy. The token conservative's input, moreover, is often regarded by the panellists not as a contentious contribution to the debate, but as a flat earther's fit of extremist nonsense. Incidentally, during its 15 years of existence, *Media Watch* has never been hosted by anyone right-of-centre. Why?

All of this might also explain why certain stories that would appeal to a conservative audience are played down. For instance, during the week of Ronald Reagan's death in June 2004, *Lateline* virtually ignored covering the Republican president's life and times. No stories, no features, no debate. Nothing. Yet several months earlier, Tony Jones went weak at

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the knees remembering Camelot—40 years after the Democrat president's death. It was wonderful to hear a long and wistful exchange between the ABC host and sympathetic JFK biographer Robert Dallek lamenting the loss of a liberal icon, but why not apply the same treatment to a conservative icon—or, at least, have a debate about his place in history? Instead, Jones focused on tributes flooding in for another American legend who died that week (musician Ray Charles) and he browbeat Alexander Downer for Australia's (as it turns out) non-role in the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal in Iraq.

Now, more honest friends of the ABC insist that we need Aunty to 'balance' the so-called shock jocks on commercial radio and the right-wing columnists at News Ltd newspapers. But those who hate talk-back programmes or *The Australian's* opinion pages can take solace in the fact that they aren't subsidising Alan Jones or Janet Albrechtsen; we taxpayers who subsidise the ABC to the extent of more than \$800 million a year don't enjoy that peace of mind. Besides, the need for balance is there in the ABC Charter; it is the legislative quid pro quo for public funding.

Of course, there is nothing wrong that left-liberal voices are heard on the ABC. It's just that there should also be a place for conservative, more contrarian, voices—and these should not be put on air with some health warning that they are right-wing. At the very least, there should also be a place for the silent majority—that is, a good percentage of the population to whom the ABC purportedly answers.

Which brings us back to the charge that conservatives have somehow pack-raped Aunty.

According to Robert Manne:

As a result of financial retrenchment, the policy of permeation from the top and outright persistent political attack, the Government has succeeded in its long-term aim [of destroying] as much as possible of whatever remains of the cultural influence [Howard] labels the 'soft Left'... There is not much more work to be done.

If only this were true.

Sadly, it's rubbish. The board can radically change *Media Watch's* ideologically skewed format, get rid of the staff-elected member, and create a new set of editorial guidelines requiring that news stories be impartial and fair—all of which are welcome—and still not make a dent in the culture. Indeed, short of privatising the ABC or implementing a policy of affirmative action—whereby journalists are hired on the basis of their (conservative) opinions—it is difficult to see how the board can really change the culture. As board member Keith Windschuttle himself once argued, the ABC has 'built a house culture that even the appointment of a board now dominated by conservatives has been unable to displace'.

Put another way, as an organisation, the ABC resembles the late Ching Dynasty China: The Emperor at headquarters (the board) may give an order, but the warlords who run the programmes may very well not follow it. No, Robert Manne, there is plenty more work left to do.

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