

ABC Journalism ... One Huge Humanitarian Crisis

TIM BLAIR

IDENTIFYING one's sources is an elemental part of journalism. It's a measure either of the ABC's incompetence or evasiveness that during the war in Iraq, the ABC often smothered the leftist credentials of many of its sources with general terms such as 'distinguished' and 'renowned'. Listeners or viewers unaware of the backgrounds of those interviewed may be excused for thinking these sources were neutral experts whose commentary bore no political slant.

The ABC's habit of non-revelation also serves to conceal the broadcaster's tendency to draw its commentators from the Left. Tellingly, conservative sources cited during the war were identified as such; although, even more tellingly, they were rarely actually interviewed. Let's look at some examples:

George Monbiot, the anti-capitalist activist, was presented as an 'author and columnist with the *Guardian* newspaper in the United Kingdom' when he appeared on *Lateline* on February 5.

On February 14 *Lateline* introduced socialist Phillip Knightley as a 'distinguished journalist' and an 'investigative reporter'.

Similarly, no ideological identification was applied in *Lateline*'s February 19 description of socialist Labour MP Glenda Jackson, who was introduced as 'the former minister for transport' and a 'distinguished ... actress'.

Socialist Tariq Ali was merely a 'Pakistan-born author and *Guardian* newspaper columnist' during his appearance on *Lateline* on March 3. When he appeared on *Lateline* on March 28, Ali was an 'author and historian'.

On March 7 *The World Today* tagged leftist Tony Judt as 'an expert in US-European relations'.

Marxist Scott Burchill became a mild 'lecturer in International Relations at Melbourne's Deakin University' when he appeared on *PM* on March 13.

American leftist Max Sawicky was described only as 'a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute in Washington' during a March 27 appearance on *The World Today*. Drop by his website (<http://maxspeak.org/gm/>), however, and you'll get a better idea of his politics than that provided by the ABC. It features an image of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney as, respectively, the Straw Man and the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz.

All recited anti-war views. Why were none presented with any brief description of their political allegiances, which would have given ABC consumers a better idea of their general perspectives? It's not as though the ABC is opposed to such a practice; when conservatives were mentioned, it was with that label, or a variation of same.

On March 7, *The World Today*'s John Highfield labelled pro-war Fox News presenter Neil Cavuto as 'the conservative business show host'.

Pat Buchanan was dubbed a 'renowned right-wing commentator' by Highfield during *The World Today*'s February 24 edition. Incidentally, neither was interviewed. Then again, neither was leftist filmmaker Michael Moore, whose error-filled anti-US film *Bowling For Columbine* Highfield referred to in passing on March 25 as 'Michael Moore's Academy Award winning documentary [about] how

Lockheed Martin was moving into more civil areas.' No 'left-wing commentator' tag for him.

That the ABC draws so many of its commentators from the Left may demonstrate how the oft-referred to 'ABC culture' functions. It is entirely possible that producers, researchers, and presenters are simply unaware of commentators from the Right who may have offered informed conservative (or centrist) perspectives on the war in Iraq.

It isn't difficult to compile a substantial list:

Canada's Mark Steyn, who writes for *The Spectator* and *The Daily Telegraph* [UK] among other journals, wrote some of the most compelling (and entertaining) pieces to be published during the conflict. Andrew Sullivan, a former editor of *The New Republic* and a contributor to *The Sunday Times*, published daily war commentary on his (enormously popular) website. Any of the *The Weekly Standard*'s array of columnists would have been useful. Syndicated US columnist Charles Krauthammer may have declined interviews following his treatment at the hands of ABC *Late Night Live* host Phillip Adams in 2002, in which Adams produced a follow-up newspaper column to his interview with the Washington-based conservative that completely distorted his views. *Guardian* columnists David Aaronovitch and Julie Burchill offered distinctive and challenging (too challenging, apparently) takes on the anti-war movement and celebrity peace activists; either may have provided something of a counterpoint for the ABC's extensive interviews with human shields and other partisan voices.

The ABC sought out many Leftist commentators in the UK and US during the war; why so very few from the Right, or even from the pro-war centre? The list continues: David Frum, Mickey Kaus, Michael Kelly (killed in Iraq while covering the war), Jonah Goldberg ...

In Australia, *The Age's* Pamela Bone wrote a series of columns in which she wrestled with her decision to support the war. Given that her stance probably reflected a wider debate among people inclined to agree with the broad aims of the war on terrorism, a series of interviews would have been valuable.

It's excruciating to note that the ABC, with all its resources, did a poorer job of covering the ethical and philosophical debate over the war than did, for example, many one-man Websites (which, in several cases, argued ably against positions expressed on the ABC). Pro-war commentary on the ABC was left mostly to government and military officials.

Instead of covering an actual debate, the ABC obsessed over a phantom: the ever-elusive 'humanitarian crisis' the broadcaster expected to arise in Iraq. *The World Today's* Eleanor Hall didn't merely expect it; to her, the crisis was inevitable, as she revealed on a February 14 broadcast:

ELEANOR HALL: Well, as the divisions continue, the United Nations is warning it's not even close to being prepared for the humanitarian crisis that will inevitably follow war in Iraq.

Inevitably, as with most ABC predictions about the war in Iraq, a humanitarian crisis did not follow the conflict. By February 21, *Lateline's* Norman Hermant had Iraq 'on the verge':

NORMAN HERMANT: Iraq could also be a country on the verge of a humanitarian nightmare. There are reports an estimated 5 million people will need immediate food aid if a war involves widespread bombing. It's an indication the task of rebuilding Iraq could be as difficult as destroying the regime.

It's an indication of the ABC's anti-war agenda. John Highfield, on a February 25 edition of *The World Today*, at least noted that a humanitarian crisis was only a possibility:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: And on the other side of the world as the international powers play out the saga of Iraq, in our part of the world it is the potential for humanitarian disaster which is occupying international aid agencies like the Red Cross.

The resignation in March of Senior Analyst with the Office of National Assessments Andrew Wilkie allowed

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the ABC to return to its 'humanitarian crisis' concerns. *PM* reporter Louise Yaxley was among then first on the ABC to cover the story, on March 11:

LOUISE YAXLEY: I can quote to you some of the things that he's told the *Bulletin's* Laurie Oakes. He says his main concern is that Saddam Hussein could engineer a humanitarian disaster. It says: 'We know of his programme to collocate his sensitive assets in civilian areas next to schools and so on. He's also got a number of options up his sleeve. He could create a humanitarian disaster to overwhelm coalition forces. He might create a humanitarian disaster to

cause such outrage in the international community as to force the US to stop.'

Host John Highfield described Wilkie's prediction—which, of course, never eventuated—as 'another brick in the wall of criticism' against the war. Yaxley agreed: 'Here he is going public with his concerns about a potential humanitarian disaster being created because of any war against Iraq. So it will give further strength to those who argue that there shouldn't be a war against Iraq ... this will, if anything, give heart to those who are organizing protests around the country, those who say the Prime Minister and the line the Government has taken, are wrong.'

The ABC, in other words. *The 7.30 Report* on the evening of the 11th gave Wilkie another platform for his inaccurate theories:

KERRY O'BRIEN: Were you disturbed yourself by what you found by the assessments you made?

ANDREW WILKIE: Yes. Yes. I was disturbed during my research when I came to realize what a high likelihood there is of a humanitarian disaster.

AM on March 12 continued pushing Wilkie's theme. Linda Mottram introduced Wilkie's interview with Catherine McGrath:

LINDA MOTTRAM: He says he hopes his public comments will help open debate on the proposed war, which, on the basis of his work at the Office of National Assessments, he says could end in a military or humanitarian disaster ...

CATHERINE MCGRATH: If war goes ahead, if next week Australia is at war as part of this military coalition led by the United States, how do you think at the moment things are going to play out?

ANDREW WILKIE: A war at this time is just not worth the risk. I think there is too great a risk of a military or humanitarian disaster ...

Wilkie has lately stopped talking about humanitarian disasters, because on that subject there is simply noth-

ing to talk about. Back on March 17, AM host Linda Mottram was convinced that a crisis was inevitable:

LINDA MOTTRAM: Britain is concerned to see that after a war, Iraq's oil is administered by a UN trust fund, which would finance the reconstruction and massive humanitarian effort required.

Such an effort would only be required if there was, in fact, a humanitarian crisis that needed to be addressed. Oh, but it was looming, as *Lateline's* Tony Jones promised on March 20:

TONY JONES: The United Nations is warning that up to two million people may be forced to leave their homes now that the bombing has begun. Some Iraqis have already begun crossing into Jordan, while others have been blocked at the Syrian border. At the same time, aid agencies are desperately trying to raise money to deal with a looming humanitarian crisis.

It's not enough to claim that because the UN was warning of a crisis that the ABC was correct in repeating those warnings. The scepticism that invariably met announcements from the US, UK, and Australian governments was altogether absent when dealing with UN reports. *Lateline* reporter Lisa Upton turned the UN's speculations into a solid guarantee:

LISA UPTON: It's one of the most inhospitable places on earth, and soon this Jordanian land will be a makeshift home for tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees.

We're still waiting. Kerry O'Brien on that night's *The 7.30 Report*:

KERRY O'BRIEN: ... the humanitarian problems may not be able to wait until the war is over ... Aid agencies are warning the longer supplies are delayed, the greater the scale of a potential humanitarian crisis..

AM's Linda Mottram, on March 20, remained certain of the need for humanitarian relief. Here Mottram introduces reporter Tanya Nolan's interview with retired US Air Force Colonel Sam Gardiner:

LINDA MOTTRAM: On the eve of war, there is deep concern that there is nowhere near the capacity available, either on the part of occupying forces or relief agencies, for the kind of humanitarian relief that's likely to follow.

TANYA NOLAN: The decorated veteran of three conflicts and former NATO adviser often uses the word 'painful' to describe his concern over what he says is America's lack of preparation for the impending humanitarian fallout in Iraq.

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'Painful' is a good word to describe the ABC's coverage, which remained on-message over the next few days:

AM, March 21:

LINDA MOTTRAM: International aid agencies are warning of a humanitarian catastrophe as the war unfolds.

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MARK WILLACY: Well Linda, we've got groups like the United Nations and the International Red Cross warning of a humanitarian crisis ...

The World Today, March 24:

JOHN HIGHFIELD: Well, as we focus on the military war in Bagh-

dad, the humanitarian battle that the aid agencies have been warning of has begun ... the self-professed 'liberators of Iraq' could soon be presiding over a mass disaster ...

AM, March 25:

LINDA MOTTRAM: But now, with more than half the Basra population without power and clean water for around four days, the United Nations is warning of a humanitarian crisis ...

PM, March 25:

JONATHAN HARLEY: It seems the city [Basra], well, it has been laid to siege and you've got this critical situation where the city's cut-off, it's got no water and it is brewing as a huge potential humanitarian crisis ...

Lateline, March 25:

TONY JONES: Over one million people are facing a humanitarian catastrophe in the southern city of Basra.

On May 4, on the ABC's *Correspondents Report*, the humanitarian crisis that never was finally came to an end. Host Hamish Robertson, introducing an interview with Morten Rostrup, the International President of Médecins Sans Frontières, reported that MSF 'is afraid that countries with real humanitarian crises are being ignored because the international media switched all its attention to the war in Iraq.'

MORTEN ROSTRUP: And it's pretty telling, that if we believed in the notion that there is a huge humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq, at the same time we cannot identify the needs during our rapid assessments, I think you have to stop off and ask about the notion of a huge humanitarian crisis.

Sound advice. The ABC would have done well to have stopped and asked about this notion two months earlier.

Tim Blair is a freelance writer and a columnist with The Bulletin. He also maintains a Blog at <http://timblair.spleenville.com/>

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