

A media war explodes in Australia

by Lachlan Colquhoun via jan - Asia Times Thursday, Sep 27 2018, 10:17am

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This particular war is primarily located in the offices of Australia's public broadcaster, the ABC. However, one particular 'external' player should not be ignored, media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who appears obsessed with privatising the ABC, fragmenting and selling it off as separate units, which would allow for little competition against the Murdoch media empire, and that fact should never be underestimated. Indeed it was Murdoch who made an emergency trip on his private jet to Oz to commandeer his papers with the view of ousting former PM Malcolm Turnbull. Be assured, no-one would be happier if the ABC was fragmented and privatised.



Political intrigue and controversy are never far away from Australia's national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), but by any measure it has been an extraordinary week.

On Monday, ABC managing director Michelle Guthrie was fired from her A\$900,000 (US\$653,000) a year job half way into her five year term supposedly due to her "management style" and lack of engagement with staff.

Guthrie's ousting set in train events which finally engulfed the man who engineered her sacking, ABC chairman Justin Milne, who resigned on Thursday on revelations that he had applied pressure for journalists to be fired because they had offended senior government figures in their reporting.

In just two explosive days, the situation also spawned two inquiries into the ABC's leadership crisis: one spurred by Communications Minister Mitch Fifield, and another in the Senate, where the Labor Party opposition and Greens have the numbers to outvote the government.

It also prompted a national protest from ABC staff, who armed themselves with banners crying "hands off the ABC" and then passed a vote of no confidence on their chairman which increased the pressure on Milne, ABC's board and the government.

How the dust settles remains to be seen, but the events are the culmination of rising political temperatures regarding the role and performance of the publicly owned ABC, which although it enjoys statutory independence from government has been under pressure for its perceived left-leaning political bias.

Put simply, the conservative side of politics believes that the ABC has become a haven for left wing journalists out to push their own opinions.

ABC coverage is legislatively obliged to be independent and unbiased, but – for reasons either real of imagined – it is rarely perceived this way, particularly when top investigative programs expose stories which are inconvenient and embarrassing to those in public life.

With the conservative Liberal-National coalition government in power in Canberra since 2014, many in the government and their supporters believe that the ABC's agenda is to subvert and embarrass the government and campaign for its electoral defeat.

Powerful factions in the Liberal Party, the dominant partner in the coalition government, are openly hostile to the ABC and are now actively campaigning to have it sold off on the grounds public funds should not be used to support a news organization in a free market economy.

The recent NSW Liberal Party conference passed a motion calling for the ABC to be privatized. With this ongoing enmity, the government has cut the ABC's total operating budget by A\$254 million (US\$184.3 million) since 2014, forcing around 1,000 redundancies in the process.

Another government response to the ABC's coverage has been to stack the ABC board with sympathetic appointments to try to keep a rein on the broadcaster on its behalf.

Justin Milne, for example, is a friend and former colleague of recently deposed Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and has been widely seen as the government's "man at the ABC", according to ABC insiders and the public.

Although the ABC chairman is not permitted under statutory obligation from interfering in the editorial running of the organization, Milne's resignation was prompted by the publication of emails in which he called for the sacking of two journalists who had supposedly offended the government.

Turnbull's anger at ABC economics commentator Emma Alberici, who produced a critical – and some say error-ridden – analysis of the government's taxation policy prompted Milne to demand that the journalist be sacked.

"They (the government) hate her," Milne said in an email to the known ousted Guthrie. "We are tarred with her brush. I think it is simple. Get rid of her. We need to save the ABC – not Emma. There is no guarantee they (the coalition) will lose the next election."

In another example, government complaints about Canberra political editor Andrew Probyn saw Milne tell Guthrie by email that "you have to shoot him."

Guthrie's departure will not be mourned by many ABC staff, whose disengagement was given as a reason for her sacking, but staff anger turned and mobilized quickly against Milne when his private emails were published.

Guthrie, who says she is considering her legal options, was seen by staffers who spoke to Asia Times as a weak and ineffective leader and a poor advocate for the organization in Canberra, even though this week's revelations show that she did push back against the political interference of her chairman.

As of this week, however, Australia's national broadcaster has an acting managing director and no chairman, all in a media and political environment which is heating up towards the next federal election due by May next year.

The ABC's chaos comes only weeks after the recently toppled Turnbull blamed another, even more powerful media figure, for campaigning for his removal.

Turnbull and his supporters have openly claimed that media mogul Rupert Murdoch said that "Malcolm had to go" in a comment which allegedly spurred an editorial campaign to remove him across News Corporation's mastheads.

News Corporation, unsurprisingly, is also strongly critical of the ABC and its role in public life, a view which comes not only from the perception that the ABC is the political enemy, but also because the ABC is a strong media competitor.

Changes in the media landscape and the development of online channels have seen the ABC and News Corporation increasingly go head to head for online viewers, where previously the ABC was the leader in electronic media and News Corporation dominated print with mastheads like the Australian, Daily Telegraph and Sun Herald.

While public trust in the media is at an all time low, according to a 2017 poll by Essential Research, the ABC remains far and away Australia's most trusted media brand.

This public trust gives the ABC significant power in Australia's ongoing "culture wars", which traverse issues as diverse and divisive as renewable energy, immigration and indigenous affairs.

This week's events at the ABC show that Australia is not only in the midst of a culture war, but a media war is raging too.

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Murdoch, overdue for another 'humbling' experience

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