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Wollongong the Brave

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Wollongong the Brave

Two months ago, Illawarra ABC Radio presenter Peter Hand was stood down for alleged bias after a complaint from a Liberal Senator. Anthony Ashbolt examines this extraordinary case of ABC capitulation to Government pressure

'Farewell Aunty Jack' may have been a signal of things to come. That bitter-sweet conclusion to an ABC show that placed Wollongong on the television map in the 1970s, captured a sense that the certainties of the past were fading away and a brave new world was soon to commence.

More than 30 years later, Wollongong the Brave has become a little known frontline in the battle to protect the ABC's independence. The key element here is the direct intervention of Liberal Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells.

Described by Matt Price in *The Australian* as 'the Government's unelected cultural commissar,' the Senator has been busy attempting to shatter any independence the ABC might still retain from Government. She suggested, for instance, during last week's Senate Estimates Committee hearings, that comedian Corinne Grant had a conflict of interest because she was 'the public face of the anti-Government IR campaign.'

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Actually, Grant was master of ceremonies at a union family picnic protesting against Workchoices. Only if you believe that someone on the ABC payroll cannot raise a voice against the Government does that constitute a conflict of interest. This is but one indication of the Senator's totalitarian mindset. The Government's persistent attacks on the ABC for bias are sinister and the Senator's role in this insidious.

Take the case of Wollongong ABC presenter Peter Hand. He was 'stood down' for six weeks following two interviews he conducted in August. The interviews were with Gary Hardgrave, Federal Minister for Vocational and Technical Education and Arthur Rorris, Secretary of the South Coast Labour Council. A formal complaint regarding the interviews, alleging profound bias, was sent from the Senator to Mark Scott, ABC Managing Director.

I have been teaching in the field of politics and the media for over 20 years and am familiar with what constitutes bias. Neither of these interviews reveals anything other than a journalist trying to get at the facts.

Rather, the case displays an intimidated ABC, unwilling to stand up to the threats of Government. Matt Price defends the ABC Managing Director's resistance to the Fierravanti-Wells assault at the Senate Estimates hearing. The standing down of Peter Hand, however, suggests he is less than independent.

So let us look briefly at possible offending moments in both of the interviews singled out by Fierravanti-Wells. According to the Senator, in his interview with Hardgrave, about the newly announced Australian Technical College for Illawarra, 'Mr Hand made no attempt to discuss the merits of the new technical college but instead spent the whole interview debating whether the college duplicated existing State-based TAFEs.'

This is a perfectly legitimate line of questioning for a journalist to take, as it raises issues related to duplication of existing services, attempts to undermine the status of existing institutions and the motivations behind Government decision-making.

It was not seen that way by Mark Scott: 'The ABC has found that Mr Hand's behaviour towards Mr Hardgrave lacked respect, and that Mr Hand was partial in his approach.'

A journalist being partial is almost unheard of! The charge of 'lacking respect' deserves closer scrutiny. The fact is that Hardgrave refused to answer properly a question put to him by Hand. He obfuscated deliberately and Hand noted this. Hardgrave claimed that students trained in the technical college 'will be involved in work opportunities, they will have obligations' Hand inquired what the obligations would be and the exchange continued thus:

Gary Hardgrave: They've gotta work.

Peter Hand: Yeah, okay. And what sort of rates? Will they get the same rates as any other apprentice?

Hardgrave: Oh, they'll probably get all of that and more. I mean, we're looking for excellence here.

Hand: Well talking probably, you pressed the button on the thing yesterday. Surely we need to know better than probably?

Hardgrave: Well Peter, I think you're off on a tangent here.

And so it went, with Hand pressing the Minister on detail that he just did not possess. Hardgrave was rattled:

Hardgrave: You're misleading your listeners right now with the inferences you're making.

Hand: I'm sorry, I asked the questions and we got 'probably.'

Hardgrave: You're misleading your listeners right

Hand: Well, I'm going to have to say goodbye but thank you, you've had a turn.

This Government has had more than a turn from the ABC. The Corporation has hardly been a regular thorn in its side, preferring in the main to replicate the Federal Government's own framework of thought and analysis. The major current affairs program of influence is The Insiders, if only because it is Howard's favourite ABC program. And why wouldn't it be? Every week, we have a virtual editorial by Murdoch apologist Paul Kelly.

Meanwhile, regular ABC commentators from Right-wing think tanks such as the Centre for Independent Studies and the Institute for Public affairs are treated as objective authorities. They should, arguably, not even get any air-time on the ABC because their institutions refuse to reveal sources of funding (mostly wealthy corporations).

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Thanks to Paul Batey

The same is true of American think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Hudson Institute and a few other innocuous sounding creations that are part of what David Brock calls 'The Republican Noise Machine.' On Lateline, count the representatives of this machine and its overseas links (such as Mark Regev, the ubiquitous Israeli spokesman who has turned public relations into Government itself), as against the occasional Robert Fisk or Daniel Ellsberg. The bias is consistent, if not overwhelming.

Peter Hand's interview with Arthur Rorris, Secretary of the South Coast Labour Council was highlighted by Scott as breaching ABC guidelines about promoting a political rally. For a start, the guidelines are simply wrong-headed. How can the ABC reflect a national or local political culture without, along the way, publicising events that certain people might not like?

Scott acknowledges 'it was legitimate to discuss the [union] rally' but alternative views should have been sought. Here it is: this spurious idea of balance now promised to us by the ABC.

I can give you an alternative view the South Coast Labour Council is nothing but a running dog of the bourgeoisie that lacks a suitable strategy for building a revolutionary alliance to overthrow Australian capitalism. I can give all sorts of other alternative views as well but what Scott meant, of course, was the Government view.

The union rally, to be held outside Senator Fierravanti-Wells's local office, was part of the national action campaign by workers against anti-union fines and the imposition of possible jail terms over recent disputes. Given the massive misuse of taxpayers' money to advertise Workchoices and the more than ample coverage of Government views on ABC news and current affairs, why did this story need a Government perspective?

Because the fragility of the Government is such that any real criticism or questioning is outside the bounds of inquiry.

With regard to Senator Fierravanti-Wells, however, something more cynical and mischievous is at work. Arthur Rorris, points out that the Senator has refused time and again to debate anyone from the union movement.

Moreover, her views have been sought by the ABC on many occasions for the balance she claims is lacking but she has declined the offer of an interview. It's a neat tactic you refuse to debate or be interviewed and this then highlights the lack of genuine balance.

The Howard Government, in part through its attack dog Senator Fierravanti-Wells, is seeking to silence dissent. That Wollongong should be in the frontline of such struggles is not without precedence. We will shortly be commemorating the anniversary of the Dalfram dispute of 1938-9, when Port Kembla maritime workers refused to load pig iron that would be deployed in the Japanese war effort against China. Menzies and his then United Australia Party Government attempted to wreck the resistance but unions and the Wollongong community held firm. History proved their actions both brave and noble.

This, of course, is the origin of the nickname 'Pig Iron Bob' for Menzies. Over 60 years later and 'Oil Slick Johnnie' is repeating history even to the point of ensuring the voices of protest are locked up, marginalised or 'stood down.' We can only hope that Wollongong holds firm yet again because the forces of fascism are gathering rapidly.

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[3] <http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/oh-the-pane-the-pane/2006/11/03/1162340050944.html?page=2>

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