

Profile

Wendy Bacon

Wendy Bacon jokes that it will probably take an investigative journalist to uncover the real reasons behind her departure from ABC television before she ever really got there. But she believes there is no doubt that political interference came from the "very top of the ABC" to stop her joining *The World Tonight*, the ABC's new TV current affairs show. "David Hill was overheard saying he did not want me at the ABC at any price, so whatever my qualifications as a journalist I would not have been appropriate for David Hill."

Bacon is philosophical about the failure of her attempts to have the Arbitration Commission confirm a verbal job offer for her to join the ABC. "It's always better to have a victory," she said, "but it's important for me not to be politically driven out of the media by those who don't want me there." And she adds that "it's interesting that the three journalists who've been under attack lately, John Pilger, Brian Toohey and myself, all relate issues like corruption to issues like the distribution of wealth and powerful people. I don't think it's any accident that of the investigative reporters, we are the ones who are perceived to be the most threatening."

But concern that Bacon's reporting on Labor corruption might have had something to do with her being dropped from the ABC was "manifestly looney" according to Senator Gareth Evans, the Federal Minister for Communications and Transport.

For someone who believes

journalists should not become features of their own stories, Wendy Bacon has generated a fair amount of column space over the years. In 1974 one Liberal MP said she was a "foul mouthed pornographer" in reference to her days as a student activist and member of the Sydney anarchist and libertarian movements. In the early '70s she was instrumental in putting out *Thorunka*, a newspaper mainly devoted to exposing the archaic censorship laws by publishing pornography. As a libertarian she said she was interested in giving exposure to the view that sexuality, censorship and political power are intimately bound together.

In 1981 Wendy Bacon, the prize winning law student, finished her degree and applied for admission to the NSW Bar, but was refused on the grounds that with ten previous convictions ranging from obscene behaviour to writing slogans on walls, she was not a "fit and proper person". She went on to work as a researcher for the Nine Network's *60 Minutes* and later joined *The National Times*, where as a journalist she was to have her most spectacular impact. In 1984 Bacon won a Walkely Award for an article on former NSW premier, Neville Wran, and the growing crisis over the Briese affair.

In 1986 after a series of articles by Bacon on the NSW Government and the judiciary, Judge Williams quit the NSW District Court with a string of well publicised parting shots at her. "She's the queen of trial by media and part of the front row of the Fairfax scam," said the judge.

Bacon's stories in the now defunct *National Times* more often than not explored the relationship between big business, the ALP, the NSW Government and corruption in the judiciary and the police. Stories under headings like "Detective Roger Rogerson and the Police Barbeque Set" earned her a contempt of court charge courtesy of the NSW Government in 1985. In this instance Bacon became the first



Photo: Tribune

print journalist ever charged for contempt of court over an article published by her employer (who would normally have expected to have been charged).

Another story in 1985 which reported in-camera evidence given before a secret Senate committee by the former Chief Magistrate Clarrie Briese, incurred the wrath of the Senate Privileges Committee, and she was charged with contempt of parliament. "In this case," said Bacon, "leading members of the ALP wanted me to bury the truth about Murphy." The contempt of court charge was dismissed and the contempt of parliament was eventually left in limbo.

Given this background it's not surprising she is annoyed at the Australian Journalists' Association for running a story in the union's newspaper, *The Journalist* which accused the *Age* and the *National Times* of "slipshod journalism" for reporting a "string of whoppers" about the late Lionel Murphy. It stung Bacon particularly because it failed to give any examples of the reporters' alleged inaccuracies.

And the future for Wendy Bacon? She's now teaching journalism at the University of Technology in Sydney, and recently spent a week training Aboriginal journalists with the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association in Alice Springs. She is also pursuing a job offer with the *Sun Herald*, and is talking about writing a book on ... property corruption and the police force:

Wendy Carlisle