

INSIDIOUS AND INTENTIONAL:

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE AND
HARASSMENT OF THE ABC



A record of how the Coalition Government has systematically and relentlessly attacked the ABC, and the risks this creates for the ABC's independence and our communities

FEBRUARY 2022

GetUp!

Acknowledgements

We, the authors, respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and recognise their sovereignty was never ceded.

We also recognise those whose ongoing effort to protect and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures will leave a lasting legacy for future Elders and leaders.

This report was researched and written on the lands of the Bunurong Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nation in Victoria, and the Bidjigal, Gadigal, and Wangal peoples of the Eora Nation in New South Wales.

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1. FOREWORD

This report looks at the contemporary history of political interference and harassment of the ABC.

The ABC is well supported and loved by communities across Australia - for its news, services and story-telling, and above all, it's trustworthiness. However, it is painfully apparent that, when in power, governments resent what it is at the core of this trustworthiness - the ABC's independence, legislated in its charter and the ABC Act 1983.

Parties in government have tried stacking the ABC board with partisan, even hostile directors. They have ignored the ABC Act's more recent requirement to advertise board vacancies and for a merit-based process for qualified applicants. Most hurtfully, budget after budget, they have defunded the ABC, ignoring performance and audience benchmarks that show the ABC is an Australian industry leader in the contemporary, digital media landscape. Not to mention the critical role played by the ABC in crisis after crisis faced by the country. Still, local content creation outside Sydney and Melbourne, as well as international services, have been systematically decimated.

This hostility from government is now a long-term problem for the ABC. While current hostilities involve the Liberal-National Coalition Government, it is by no means certain that the ALP in government would accept the ABC's fundamental role of holding power to account.

The ABC has its flaws and it will make mistakes – an inevitability accentuated when an institution is so starved of funding and faces unprecedented scrutiny. But through the ABC's persistent improvement, innovation, and core values dedicated to building the public record based on trust and transparency, Australians clearly see the ABC's commitment to the public interest.

Support for the ABC is more important now than ever.

We need only look to the United States of America to see what is at stake when accuracy in our media is undermined. That is, if the forces out to destroy the ABC win - now including formidable vested interests in the private sector and the halls of parliament - what hope is there for our democracy?

This report, with the grassroots support of thousands of GetUp! members, makes an appropriate and justified point: **intimidation and harassment of the ABC must stop**. Australia needs the ABC. So too does the ABC need Australians – to help it survive and contribute to a functional democracy well into the uncertain future.

Quentin Dempster AM, former ABC current affairs broadcaster, director, and author.



“

Once again, an elected representative has chosen to threaten the ABC's independence at the expense of the integrity of this irreplaceable public service [...] This is an act of political interference designed to intimidate the ABC and mute its role as this country's most trusted source of public interest journalism.”

- ABC Chair Ita Buttrose, November 2021.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current Coalition Government has enacted a sustained and intentional campaign of political interference, pressure, and harassment of the ABC, aimed to harm and impede this vital civic institution. This report investigates the broad range of new and historical tactics and mechanisms used by the Coalition – to interfere, harass, and pressure the ABC – that only when presented together reveal a systematic campaign across multiple fronts and upheld for many years.

The Coalition Government's strategy is not to land a singular fatal blow, but to administer a death by a thousand cuts – many financial, but others legal, editorial, or aimed at the boardroom. This steady and pernicious build-up of pressure and withdrawal of support is as, if not more, dangerous to the ABC as an open and public attempt at its sudden destruction.

Former ABC staff have provided testimonies throughout this report detailing their experience of this campaign. This further illustrates the Coalition Government's overt and covert hostility towards the ABC and how it risks harming the ABC beyond repair.

The current government's anti-ABC sentiment, as shown in this report, is entirely at odds with the clear democratic imperative upon our elected representatives to instead support, promote, and enhance an institution that is vital to communities across Australia.

Just as this report was going to print the Coalition announced that they would lift the indexation freeze introduced by the Turnbull Government in 2018. This point scoring, political spin does not restore any of the funding that's been slashed, with the ABC still \$783 million worse off since the Coalition was elected.

This report methodically examines the key tactics and mechanisms used to fuel the anti-ABC campaign, and details the necessary actions required to counter them.



Funding

The ABC has been starved of funding, a deliberate form of pressure intending to impede its ability to fulfil its charter obligations. This strategy is consistent with a long-term, self-reinforcing campaign to weaken the ABC, such that it loses support and is more easily marginalised and potentially privatised. Funding is the most direct form of political interference from the government and when governments freeze, reduce or impose regulations on funding to public broadcasters, it affects their output and support as well as gives undue power and control to governments. Weaponising funding to encroach on the independence of public broadcasters is not unique to Australia – we need only look to the freezes and intended abolition of the BBC’s funding model in the UK. The practice of restricting funding for the ABC to specific content and operational initiatives has become common practice, further corroding the broadcaster’s ability to be independent from political motives. Successive governments have drastically wound back funding for the ABC despite the growing reliance of AUstralian communities in times of crisis. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ABC was left out of the Coalition Government’s legislated funding response to the pandemic in June 2020 - that saw ample funding awarded to the private sector - despite the ABC’s comprehensive pandemic response, expanding services, and devoted resources, which resulted in huge growth in audience dependence and consumption.

Reviews, Inquiries, and Proposed Legislation

Hostile reviews, partisan inquiries, and aggressive legislation have become mechanisms for pressure, harassment, and damage to the ABC. The unusually high number of reviews and inquiries soak up resources and executive attention. They also effectively stoke and frame a public debate about the ABC that is based on misinformation and intent to undermine the ABC’s ability to fulfil its charter. The terms of reference of the reviews and the intents of the proposed legislation are invariably focused on restricting, cutting, or curtailing the ABC’s independence and operation, rather than considering constructive ideas to protect and enhance the ABC for our communities in the coming era.

Politicised Board Appointments

The structure, composition, and appointments of the ABC Board in terms of government interference have been the subject of much scrutiny, including in a Senate inquiry in 2018. The majority of non-executive/staff director appointments to the ABC Board have not adhered to best international practice requiring an “arm’s-length, merit-based approach. While current ABC Board Chair Ita Buttrose was appointed outside the arms-length process by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, she has been an advocate for the ABC’s independence. However, the outrage from the Coalition party room in response to Ita Buttrose’s strong defense of the public broadcaster’s independence, reveals the party’s expectation that political appointments would be more malleable.

One of the most recent appointments to the ABC Board, Fiona Balfour, raises particular questions given her longstanding close relationship with current Communications Minister Paul Fletcher, combined with the fact she was selected over two other eminently qualified women recommended by the panel. They included a candidate who would have been the ABC’s only non-white director.

Direct Editorial and Operational Interference and Pressure

The Coalition Government makes direct attempts at political interference in the ABC's editorial and operational processes, with this direct pressure producing a strong chilling effect. The ABC has a journalistic culture and processes that largely resist pressure and interference. Senior experienced executives and editors have the confidence and expertise to absorb that pressure without editorial effects. However, that resistance may not be an absolute protection. Less experienced editors, managers, and journalists are vulnerable to self-censorship. Meanwhile, the ABC's credibility is at risk from a perception from peers and audiences that fear ABC staff allow self-censorship and pre-emptive buckling to distort the corporation's journalism. Therefore, in an era when accusations of 'fake news' and bad-faith contests of facts harm crucial parts of Australian life – from public health to the democratic process – the government's attempts at intervention in the ABC's editorial and operational independence remain a grave concern.

Attacks in the Public Sphere

Government MPs and senators use many of their available public platforms to harass, disparage, and attempt to discredit the ABC and its staff. This goes far beyond reasonable debate in the public sphere or justified examination via the formal systems of public-sector accountability. Senate estimates transcripts show senators hectoring, gaming the questions-on-notice process, and invoking hot-button, sensationalist topics that drag the ABC into a culture wars debate. The legitimate channels for Federal Government communication with the ABC – letters from the Communications Minister to the ABC Board chair – have also been publicly weaponised, with the Coalition leaking correspondence to journalists in allied Murdoch-owned media. Although the ABC remains one of Australia's most trusted organisations, the attacks appear to be having an effect, with the ABC's trust rating slipping while it was under attack, and trust in the ABC becoming more polarised.

Prosecutions and Legal Action

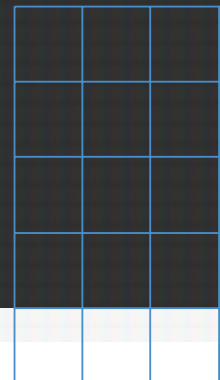
Defamation actions have been brought against ABC journalists by Christian Porter and Andrew Laming, and although both undertook their respective actions as private citizens, they are largely defined by their political positions, with the lines commensurately blurred between their private and public roles. In the case of Porter's action, his public statement and legal representative repeatedly referred to Porter as "the Attorney-General," invoking the weight and credibility of that government position in the matter. In the AFP raids of the ABC's Sydney headquarters, and subsequent threat of prosecution against an ABC journalist in relation to the Afghan Files, the government's hostility towards the ABC is evident in its inaction to protect the news media from police overreach. It may also have been convenient for the government to have a potent risk hanging over one part of the ABC while other units were continuing their role as crucial organs of accountability.

Selective Access

Senior government officials appear to have reduced the amount of access they provide to ABC programs and through those programs, to the ABC's audiences. An initial analysis of exclusive media appearances by the three most senior cabinet members – the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and Treasurer – shows a considerable skew towards appearing on the ABC's commercial competitors. For some periods, the skew was as unbalanced as six commercial media appearances to one ABC appearance. Indeed, ABC audiences have grown familiar with presenters telling them the relevant government minister did not make themselves available for interview. Even as this report was being written in the midst of a pandemic and as the nation's healthcare system buckles, the Minister for Health refused to be interviewed by the ABC's 7.30 nine times in a two week period.¹ This has two significant costs: Government officials are sidestepping examination and accountability, and the ABC's many and large audiences are deprived of crucial perspective.

The key recommendations of this report are:

1. A fully-funded ABC with restored and additional funding adhering to a stable five-year funding cycle, where funding is not tied to particular uses.
2. An end to hostile, partisan political reviews and inquiries.
3. A proper, merit-based board appointment process is adhered to, with an end to 'Minister's' and 'Prime Minister's pick'
4. Editorial and operational pressure and interference is abolished with governments required to comply with all appropriate channels for correspondence.
5. A government and opposition commitment to make relevant ministers available for interviews on the ABC in the best interest of audiences across the country



¹ Justin Stevens, Twitter (19 January 2022) https://twitter.com/_justinstevens_/status/1483705016259346441?s=21



3. BACKGROUND

The ABC is valued by Australian communities across the country, and despite this widespread public support, and it's clear imperative to continue its innovation for the coming decades, political leaders appear intent on forcing the ABC into a defensive crouch. Political interference at the ABC has reached a tipping point unseen before. In November 2021, ABC Chair Ita Buttrose said of the Coalition Government's attempts to discredit the ABC's complaints process,

“Once again, an elected representative has chosen to threaten the ABC’s independence at the expense of the integrity of this irreplaceable public service [...] This is an act of political interference designed to intimidate the ABC and mute its role as this country’s most trusted source of public interest journalism.”

– Ita Buttrose

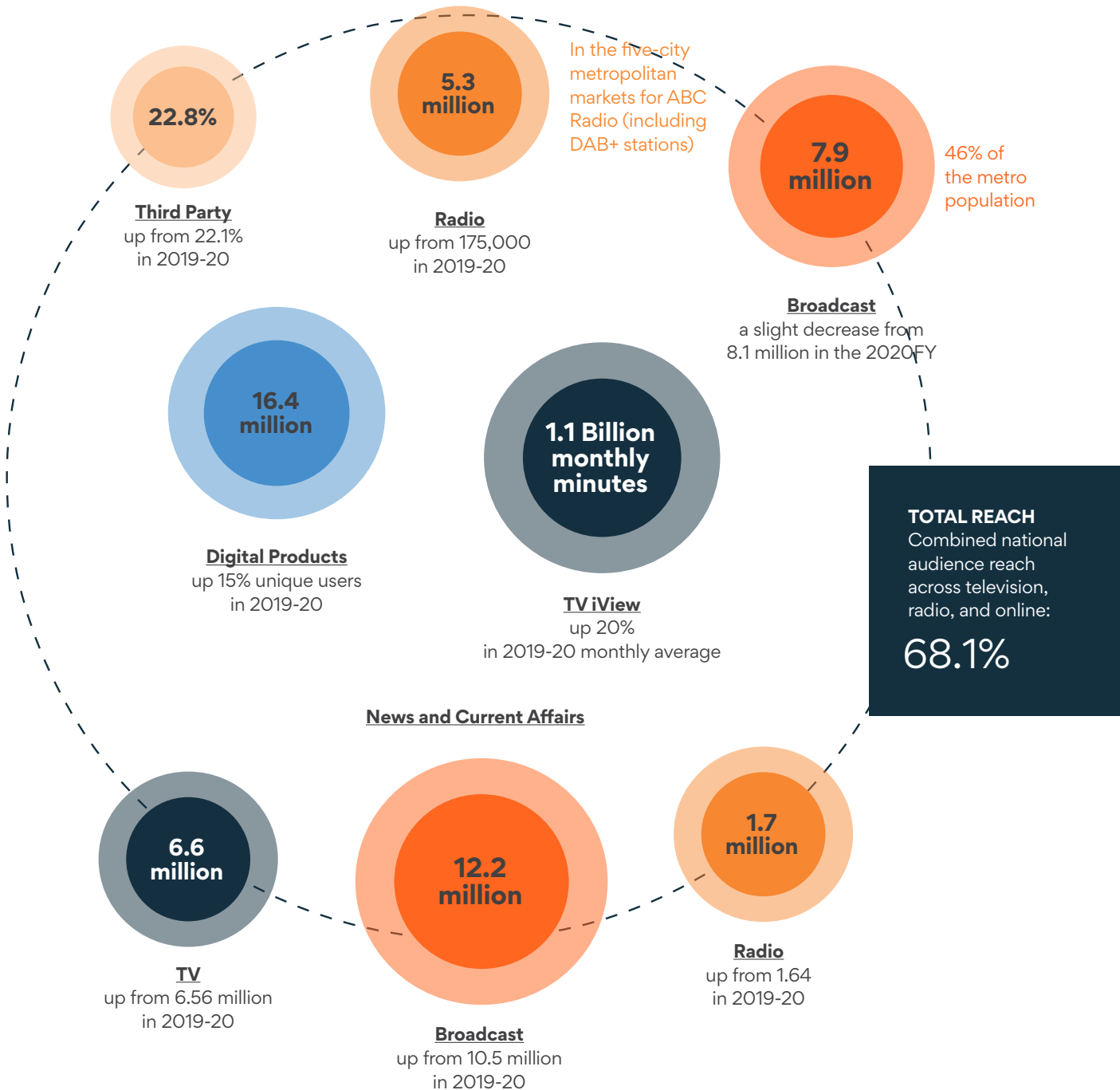
As this report documents, instead of supporting the ABC and governing in good faith to help it grow into its future, the Coalition Government of the past years is clearly, across multiple fronts, attacking, harassing, interfering, and pressuring the ABC

Paradoxically, over the last two years in particular, the ABC has demonstrated what a crucial institution it is to our communities.. Whether it's Bluey entertaining families, or ABC Radio keeping people safe in fires and floods – virtually every slice of life in Australia is touched and served by the ABC. A sizable majority of people in Australia are direct users of the ABC at least every week², and the entire country's populace benefits from the effects the ABC's ideas and information provide to communities, businesses, and parliaments in Australia. The ABC saved people's lives during the 2019-20 Australian bushfires³, and has kept communities informed with pivotal information during the COVID-19 pandemic, rolling out comprehensive resources through expanding existing programs and introducing new content, such as the dedicated Coronacast podcast which attracted 16 million downloads in the 2021FY. ABC investigations have prompted multiple recent reports, inquiries, and reforms to Australian institutions, including its Afghan Files investigation into alleged war crimes that led to the Department of Defence's Brereton Report. Four Corners' 'Inside the Canberra Bubble' investigation recently set the scene for the Jenkins Report into Federal Parliament's toxic workplace culture.

2 “The ABC's combined national audience reach across television, radio, and online was estimated to be 68.1% over a period of a week in 2021,” according to the ABC Corporate Tracking Study 2021 (n = 4,572; online methodology, people aged 18–75 years, ABC Audience Data & Insights). See ABC, ABC Annual Report 2020-2021 (September 2021), p. 58, https://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ABC10150_00_v14_FILM_WEB-a11y_FINAL2-1.pdf.

3 Amanda Meade, “Australians Say ABC Saved Lives during Summer Bushfires, Royal Commission Told,” The Guardian (2 June 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/jun/02/australians-say-abc-saved-lives-during-summer-bushfires-royal-commission-told>.

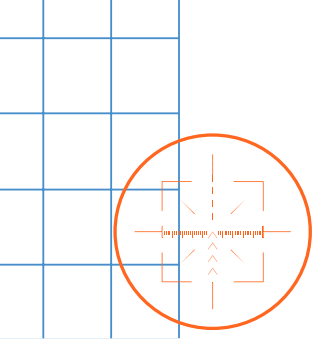
Average weekly impressions reach in 2020-21



It is no wonder the ABC is Australia's most trusted media organisation⁴ with people in Australia dedicated to protecting it. Evidence for the value and widespread use of the ABC is clear and consistent. The independent Reuters Digital News Report 2021 found the "ABC consolidating its position as the leading offline source, overtaking News.com.au in online reach, [...] while remaining the most trusted Australian news brand⁵."

4 Roy Morgan, Australian's Most Trusted & Distrusted Brands (September 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrSkkOAXzrl>; Essential Report, Trust in Institutions (16 March 2021), <https://essentialvision.com.au/trust-in-institutions-15>.

5 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2021 (10th ed.), p. 130, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>.



The widespread approval and excellent reach of the ABC are not reasons to be complacent. Like any media and digital media provider – not least a public broadcaster – we need the ABC to keep innovating, keep adapting to the evolving behaviours of its audiences, and keep up with the changing world it helps us make sense of.

The ABC is staffed with committed and talented people, has a strong culture of independence, and has policies to put that culture into practice. However, commitment, talent, culture, and policies cannot withstand harassment and interference indefinitely. Maintaining independence and fending off attacks diverts attention, energy, and budget away from the critical services required of a public broadcaster. Speaking about political pressure from the Coalition Government in November 2021, then-Director of ABC News, Gaven Morris, said, “It takes up a deep and disproportionate amount of time for the ABC.”⁶

So, two questions exist at the core of this report’s investigation:

1) What is the cost to our communities of the attacks, harassment, interference, and pressure on this crucial civic institution?

2) Are politicians betraying their democratic duty when they attack the ABC?



⁶ ABC News, “Outgoing ABC News Boss Gaven Morris Reflects on Achievements, Pressure from Powerful People and the Future of Newsgathering” (28 November 2021), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/backstory/2021-11-28/gaven-morris-reflects-on-6-years-leading-abc-news/100646856>.



Philippa McDonald was a Bushfire Recovery and Senior Reporter at ABC News. Philippa was part of the team who won a Walkley for the ABC's Bushfire Coverage, one of many awards over her 30 years at the ABC.

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During the 2019-20 bushfires, residents and holidaymakers in four states experienced the most shocking sense of fear and helplessness during a disaster which threatened and destroyed lives, homes, livelihoods, and the environment. Traditional infrastructure went into meltdown and in vast areas could not be relied upon for electricity, communications, water, and fuel.

At the height of the crisis, thousands turned to the ABC for critical and lifesaving information on where the fires were, where to go, and when to take shelter. Everywhere I went as I covered the bushfires, the huge displacement of people, the immense destruction, and then the recovery efforts, I was met with ‘thank you, we relied on the ABC’.

There is a deep gratitude and trust in the ABC, which as the around the clock emergency broadcaster, with strong local knowledge, did everything it could to keep people safe.

Inquiry after inquiry has heard that Australia needs to prepare for even worse disasters. The trauma is still real for so many Australians. It’s crucial they are reassured that their/our ABC is supported by government to be strong and resilient enough to be there for them in a time of crisis and beyond, and to reflect what’s happening in their community.”



4.

MECHANISMS OF THE ANTI-ABC CAMPAIGN

This section presents and makes sense of the strategies and tactics the Coalition Government uses in attempts to weaken the ABC, applying pressure to its operations, production, and editorial processes, and otherwise impeding its potential contribution to Australia.

Many of the strategies are well-known and widely discussed, with some becoming so commonplace they may now appear unremarkable. However, this report shows the need for them to be considered as part of a suite of attacks, which only taken together show their systematic and intentional nature, their true effectiveness in undermining the ABC as one of many attacks the Coalition Government unleashes on the organisation.

It is then only by stepping back to see the entire landscape that we can understand these strategies and tactics as part of an overall, long-running campaign. Each of these tactics reinforces the others – if the ABC is harmed by one, it becomes less able to withstand the others. These forms of interference, harassment, pressure, and deliberate neglect should be understood as the Coalition Government’s mechanisms of harm. However, they are also indicators of an overall hostility. Some are overt and dramatic, whereas some are more clandestine, indistinct, or gradual. Indeed, the gradual and surreptitious tactics may be the most important ones to understand and focus on – given the public appreciation of the ABC, overt attacks tend to galvanise support for the ABC, whereas the subtle, complex, or boring tactics can slip past protections or accumulate their harms over years. It is only by understanding this anti-ABC campaign in its totality that the

ABC’s supporters can help counter these strategies and protect the ABC.

Defence’s Brereton Report. Four Corners’ ‘Inside the Canberra Bubble’ investigation recently set the scene for the Jenkins Report into Federal Parliament’s toxic workplace culture.





1.1 Funding Cuts

The ABC has faced ongoing and relentless budget cuts from successive governments, suffering most drastically under the Coalition Government in recent years. This direct financial pressure on the ABC, when its audiences need it to do more than ever, is a harm in and of itself - doing more with less can only reduce quality. Starving the ABC of necessary funds also weakens its defences against the other tactics documented in this report. For example, when resources are scarce and an editor also has to spend hours responding to bad-faith questions in Senate estimates, or spurious complaints, the risk to content production is increased. Reduced budgets also interfere with the ABC's ability to serve changing editorial needs and audience expectations; lack of resources leads to impossible compromise on competing audience needs, for example, cutting the state-based 7.30 programs to fund online content.⁷

The cumulative funding cuts in real dollars are well-researched and publicised, and are summarised below. The ABC has endured these cuts while the population of Australia has grown and overall government expenditure has increased. If anything, the real money cuts are eclipsed by the cuts relative to the rest of the Federal Budget. That has been less well understood in the public debate.

Coalition senators and ministers commonly deploy the talking point that the ABC receives more than A\$1 billion dollars a year⁸ – an impressive-sounding number when used out of context, as it is. This cynical misdirection is a psychological anchor to an arbitrary number, without accounting for relativity or need. To put A\$1 billion in context, the latest forecast sees the Coalition Government's receipts at over A\$530 billion in the 2022FY.⁹ The Coalition Government's forecasted expenditure on various fossil fuel spending, tax concessions, and project funding for the 2021FY was more than A\$9 billion.¹⁰

In this section, we provide three alternative benchmarks against which readers can assess the government's harmful cuts: 1) using the 'share of government expenditure' benchmark, the ABC's funding would be A\$1.6-\$2.2 billion using a Howard-era baseline; 2) using the well-publicised 'real-dollar cuts' benchmark, the ABC's funding would be A\$1.3 billion; and 3) using the 'private-sector media comparisons' benchmark, it would cost each person in Australia A\$795.76 a year to buy a range of media that fails to provide a range of critical civic services than what can be accessed via the ABC for just A\$41 per year. These benchmarks are elaborated upon below.

7 Outgoing ABC Head of News Gaven Morris described this example and mechanism at his address to the Melbourne Press Club on 1 December 2021.

8 Senator Hume, Commonwealth of Australia, Senate (29 November 2021) (Official Hansard), <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=COMMIT-TEES;id=committees%2Festimate%2F25326%2F0002;query=id%3A%22committees%2Festimate%2F25326%2F0000%22>; Senator Van, Commonwealth of Australia, Senate (21 October 2020) (Official Hansard), <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query%3DId%3A%22committees%2Festimate%2Fefe5d2c5-9316-4170-adc7-f1aaf99ca9e%2F0000%22>; Katie Burgess, "Communications Minister Paul Fletcher Blames ABC Management for Job Cuts," The Canberra Times (1 July 2020), <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6814425/fletcher-blames-abc-management-for-job-cuts/>.

9 The Commonwealth of Australia, Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) 2021-22 (2021), Table 3.1: Australian Government general government sector budget aggregates, <https://budget.gov.au/2021-22/content/myefo/download/myefo-2021-22.pdf>.

10 Rod Campbell, Eliza Littleton, and Alia Armistead, Fossil Fuel Subsidies in Australia Federal and State Government Assistance to Fossil Fuel Producers and Major Users 2020-21, The Australia Institute (April 2021), <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/P1021-Fossil-fuel-subsidies-2020-21-Web.pdf>.

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Benchmark 1: The ABC's Share of Commonwealth Expenditure

- **Cuts for Each Year since the 2013FY**

In the 2013FY, the ABC's government revenue for content and operations was 0.21% of the Federal Budget. The same figure for the 2021FY was 0.13%, representing a reduction in the ABC's share of the budget by more than one-third from the 2013FY baseline. Even acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic prompted extraordinary Federal Government expenditures and, therefore using the 2019FY as a more representative year, the equivalent figure is 0.18%, which is a cut of 15% off the 2013FY baseline.¹¹

- **A Cut of Over 50% since the Howard Government**

The ABC's average share of Federal Government expenditure in the last years of the Howard Government (2002–07) was 0.33%. Most recently in the 2021FY, the ABC's share of the Federal Budget was just 0.13%. If the ABC was currently funded at the Howard-era share of government expenditure, it would have been allocated over A\$1.6 billion for the 2019FY (the last year before the Federal Budget was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic response). That is A\$569 million more than its actual funding for the 2019FY. If the same calculation is run using the extraordinary 2021FY (i.e., pandemic-affected) figures, the ABC's total allocation (including transmission) would have been almost A\$2.2 billion.¹²

Benchmark 2: Real-Dollar Cuts and Freezes

- The combined funding cuts and freezes since the 2013FY have seen the ABC A\$783 million worse off

As has been well documented, the respective Coalition governments cut the ABC's budget in the 2014 Federal Budget, 2014 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO), 2016 Federal Budget, and 2018 Federal Budget, leaving the ABC A\$783 million worse off at the end of the current triennium in 2022.¹³

On an annualised basis, as a result of the indexation freeze, by the end of the current triennium, the ABC will have had A\$83.749 million less to operate over the three-year period, with A\$41 million of that taking effect in the 2022FY.

- The ABC Annual Report 2020-2021 shows a 30.7% reduction in real terms from 1985-86 to 2020-21, with a more than 10% reduction in real terms from 2013-14 to 2020-21.

11 If the calculations are run using the ABC's government revenue including the tied transmission costs, the pattern holds true. In the 2013FY, the ABC's government revenue including transmission as a share of Federal Government expenditure was 0.27% of the Federal Budget. Compare this to 0.22% in the 2019FY, 0.18% in the 2020FY, and 0.13% in the 2021FY. Author's calculation based on: ABC Annual Reports for 2001-2021, <https://about.abc.net.au/how-the-abc-is-run/reports-and-publications/>; Australian Government, Final Budget Outcome 2019-20, p. 100, Table B6, <https://archive.budget.gov.au/2019-20/fbo/download/FBO-2019-20.pdf>; Australian Government, Budget 2021-2022: Budget Paper No. 1: Statement 6: Expenses and Net Capital Investment, https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/budget/2021_12/upload_binary/bp1_bs6.pdf.

12 If these calculations are made on ABC funding excluding the transmission allocation, the relevant figures are:

- ABC's "Howard-era" share: 0.27% of Federal Budget.
- ABC's 2019FY (pre-pandemic) share: 0.18% of Federal Budget.
- ABC's 2019FY general allocation at "Howard-era" share: A\$1.34 billion. Actual allocation: A\$0.87 billion.
- ABC's 2021FY (pandemic-affected) share: 0.13% of Federal Budget.
- ABC's 2021FY general allocation at "Howard-era" share: A\$1.80 billion. Actual allocation: A\$0.88 billion.

Author's calculation based on: ABC Annual Reports for 2001–2021, <https://about.abc.net.au/how-the-abc-is-run/reports-and-publications/>; Australian Government, Final Budget Outcome 2019–20, p. 100, Table B6, <https://archive.budget.gov.au/2019-20/fbo/download/FBO-2019-20.pdf>; Australian Government, Budget 2021–2022: Budget Paper No. 1: Statement 6: Expenses and Net Capital Investment, https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/budget/2021_12/upload_binary/bp1_bs6.pdf.

Benchmark 3: Private-Sector Media Comparisons

- **The ABC is provided with only A\$41 per capita per year to deliver more services than competitors who collectively charge A\$795.76 per year.¹⁴**

The Federal Government funds the ABC at A\$41 per capita, per year. The ABC runs a streaming video service, four broadcast television services, 11 national and digital broadcast radio services, a 53-station local radio network, national news, localised news for 53 regions, extensive podcasting, streaming audio, and specialist websites. By comparison, the cheapest Netflix subscription costs A\$131.88 per year.¹⁵ A digital-only subscription to The Australian newspaper (which still includes advertising) costs A\$520 per year.¹⁶ To get advertising-free music and podcasts, a person in Australia could subscribe to Spotify at a minimum cost of A\$143.88 per year.¹⁷ The total for just those three subscriptions would be A\$795.76 per year — almost 20 times the ABC's per capita funding.

In the Coalition Government's legislated policy and funding response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ABC (and SBS) were left out of any funding or support. In June 2020, the Coalition Government provided the commercial media sector with A\$41 million of tax relief, funded A\$13.7 million of new money to the public interest news-gathering program (for which the ABC was not eligible), and brought forward another A\$5 million for regional and small publishers.¹⁸ Communication Minister Paul Fletcher said in April 2020, "The broadcasting and production sectors will play an important role in the recovery of our nation, so we need these sectors to be in the strongest position possible."¹⁹ The ABC continues to devote considerable resources to supporting metropolitan, regional, and rural communities understand and adapt to the effects of COVID-19. That additional spending by the ABC is justified by overall audience demand – average daily audiences were up 77% across the organisation, and weekly active digital users exceeded targets by 36%.²⁰ **Despite the breadth and quality of the ABC's COVID-19 response, and the evident value placed upon it by Australian communities, the Federal Government gave the ABC no financial support to deliver it, in stark contrast to government support provided to other (i.e. private) parts of the media sector.**

13 Emma Dawson, It's Our ABC, Per Capita (May 2020), https://percapita.org.au/our_work/its-our-abc/.

14 Australian population as at March 2021: 25.7 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, National, State and Territory Population, March 2021 (16 September 2021), <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/mar-2021>). The ABC's total government revenue in the 2021FY: A\$1.065 billion.

15 See Netflix Plans. The basic plan at A\$10.99 per month was used for this calculation. The most expensive plan costs A\$19.99 per month or A\$239.88 per year.

16 See The Australian Subscriptions. Digital Only subscription: A\$40 per four weeks after an introductory period.

17 See Spotify Premium. Individual subscription: A\$11.99 per month.

18 Australian Government, Relief for Australian Media during COVID-19, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (2 June 2020), <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/television/relief-australian-media-during-covid-19>.

19 Senator Paul Fletcher, Ministerial Statement, Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (20 April 2020), <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/media-technology-communications/television/ministerial-statement>.

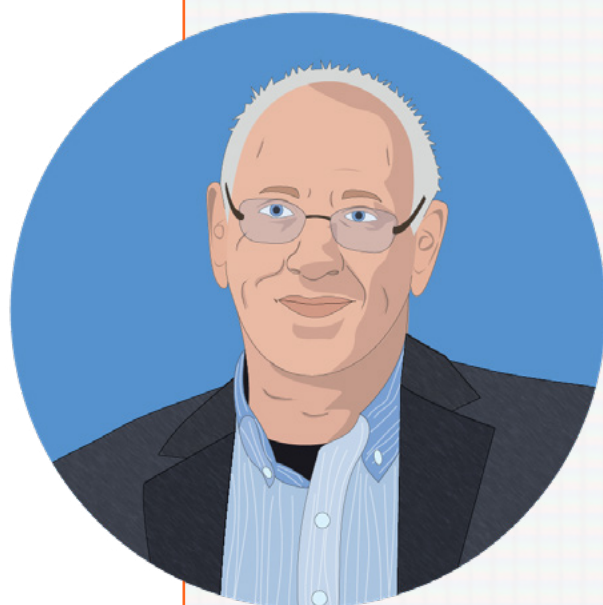
20 ABC, ABC Annual Report 2020–2021 (September 2021), pp. 20, 118, https://about.abc.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ABC10150_00_v14_FILM_WEB-a11y_FILNAL2-1.pdf.

John Cleary worked for more than 30 years at the ABC across radio and television. He is known principally for his association with Sunday Nights on ABC Local Radio and The Religion Report on ABC Radio National.

“ *For much of its 90 years, the ABC has been reflecting and fostering the life of Australia, and not just as a news organisation. The ABC was founded to reflect the broad and lively diversity of Australian culture not served by ratings-driven commercial media. The years of funding cuts so graphically outlined in this report have fallen particularly harshly on those very areas the ABC was chartered to reflect. Specialist units have been radically reduced, staff hired on increasingly short-term contracts, and vital editorial knowledge lost. Now, as cultural diversity increases, and social media creates its own sub-cultural ghettos, the role of the ABC in fostering our national self-understanding is more vital than ever.*

Your support for a fully-funded, revitalised ABC is needed in the coming Federal election.

”



By any reasonable measure, the current level of funding for the ABC can only be understood as a long-term strategy to impede the ABC from continuing to provide people in Australia with a high-quality, comprehensive, and independent range of information, entertainment, and education. This follows a strategy developed and deployed in the U.S., whereby public services are defunded in order to be so weakened they eventually lose public support. Without this public support, these services are less able to compete and withstand other attacks, including calls for wholesale privatisation. Weaponising funding also occurs in the UK where the BBC faces funding freezes and an impending overhaul of the license fee-based funding model. The recent move by the Conservative Party prompted stark criticism. As the Liberal Democrats Leader stated, “slashing the funding of a beloved national treasure just because you don’t like the headlines on the 6 o’clock news is no way for a responsible government in a democracy to behave ²¹”. Overseas campaigns against funding public transport²², public education²³, and the public postal service²⁴, are pertinent examples recognisable to those who support the ABC. Crucially, these defunding campaigns do not work by cutting an entire public service in a single action. They are well-documented as working by gradation over many decades.

“

In the past six years I worked as an on-air presenter with ABC radio and saw our technical support severely diminished.

All presenters rely upon these tech wizards to get us to air, and to you, the listeners. This is especially true in times of emergency broadcasting when ABC radio is a vital service. Staff numbers in the tech departments have been slashed. Senior expertise has left the building.

I have witnessed fewer staff asked to do more, paid less, with poor resources and forced to respond in crisis mode when something “breaks”.

In the past our excellent, dedicated tech staff installed the latest technology; could assess and anticipate problems and fix them sooner. They took radio shows out on the road with outside broadcasts and reporters to where our listeners are.

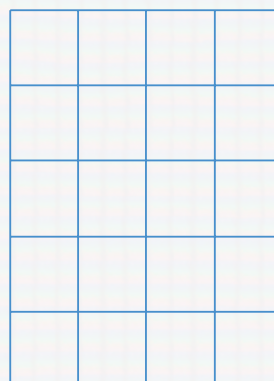
Sadly, the remaining staff have been mostly reduced to applying band-aid solutions to ageing, inadequate technology. They are stressed and morale is at an all-time low.

As one tech support told me: “We try to do what we can do to keep the show on the road.” I ask the listener who next complains of a technical problem that seems to take ages to be fixed, to think about what a lack of funding means to the service you love, and in times of emergency, rely upon.

”



Wendy Harmer presented the morning radio show on ABC Sydney from 2016-21. She is also a TV presenter, author, columnist, and playwright.



21 ABC News, ‘The BBC is facing its biggest funding threat yet — and there are parallels to the ABC’ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-18/bbc-cuts-biggest-threat-yet/100762190>

22 Hiroki Tabuchi, “How the Koch Brothers are Killing Public Transit Projects around the Country,” New York Times (19 June 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/19/climate/koch-brothers-public-transit.html>.

23 Molly Gott and Derek Seidman, “Mapping the Movement to Dismantle Public Education,” Jacobin Mag (14 May 2018), <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/06/public-education-privatization-koch-brothers-teachers>.

24 Christopher Leonard, Kochland, Simon & Schuster (2019).



af & Berry

so they launched a
vendetta against us

I'LL FIGHT FOR THE
ABC

GetUp!

DEATH BY
THOUSAND
CUTS

ABC

GetUp!

1.2 Tied-Funding

At the same time as cutting the ABC's funding, the Coalition Government has also put conditions on where the ABC can spend other portions of budget it receives. This 'tied funding' has the effect of distorting the ABC Board and management's decision-making away from purely how any dollar can be used for the greatest benefit to audiences.

The ABC, when pitching to both Labor and Liberal governments for new funding allocations, has put forth the narrative that the ABC is well placed to support various social benefits and policy priorities that governments believe are politically advantageous.

Over the last decade – a period when the ABC's total funding has reduced in real dollar terms – the ABC has had specific allocations for high-profile and easy-to-understand initiatives like Australian drama productions, children's television, and news-gathering outside metropolitan areas²⁵. However, given the ABC's budget is decreasing overall, and audiences require it to be comprehensive and available across platforms, ring-fencing a proportion of the ABC's total appropriation for given uses effectively becomes a downward force on the proportion of funding that the ABC can allocate to politically unpopular (but societally crucial) functions. These include investigative journalism, or inconspicuous needs like the publishing systems that support digital media habits, fundamental for the ABC's relevance to contemporary audiences.

The massive limitations of the ABC's main content management system (CMS), for example, was well reported in Jonathan Holmes' 2020 book *On Auntie*²⁶, and ABC staff's frustrations leaked onto social media.²⁷ The CMS is the tool ABC staff use to publish online content. Although staff suggest the only real solution is to scrap the system and start again at the cost of tens of millions of dollars, such technical infrastructure is not the kind of initiative that governments consider 'announceable'. Although the ABC has sought to protect investigative journalism and invest in digital-first investigative journalism, it still had to cut the output of its flagship cross-platform investigative unit, *Four Corners*, from 45 programs a year to 42.²⁸

The result is an imposition on the ABC's ability to provide comprehensive and high-quality services as required by the ABC Charter, even while the Coalition can push a vivid and memorable narrative of its support for the broadcaster.

The Sydney Morning Herald

May 6, 2019

ABC CUTS 'INEVITABLE' IF COALITION RETURNS TO POWER, MANAGING DIRECTOR WARNS

25 "ABC Regional Coverage Bolstered in Federal Budget," *The Australian*, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/abc-regional-coverage-bolstered-in-federal-budget/news-story/5c3998c28f7463d7814fc26344177c41>.

26 Jonathan Holmes, *On Auntie*, Hackett Books (2020, Kindle Edition), pp. 649–657.

27 See, for example, <https://twitter.com/bridgetrose97/status/1317978103826640896>;

28 Media Watch, ABC Cuts (29 June 2020), <https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/abc/12402916>.



Australian TV technicians who spent formative years at the ABC are so often multi award-winners.

This high skill level is because the ABC recruits, trains, and supports people who are passionate to pursue careers in all aspects of storytelling for TV, in news and current affairs, documentaries, magazine programmes, and drama.

Australia's whole TV and film industry benefits from this training, as the ABC churned out camera, sound, wardrobe artists, and makeup artists. ABC-trained journalists have brought breaking international events to us with local relevance.

This local relevancy can not be lost. Continuing financial support of the ABC, free of political interference, is essential to maintain a relevant, independent, and national view of the world.

– Peter Sinclair, Multi award-winning, journeyman, freelance and ABC staff cameraman (retired).



HORSE TRADING: MORE ABC REGIONAL INVESTMENT FOR REVERSED BUDGET CUTS

In January 2020, ABC Managing Director David Anderson wrote to Communications Minister Paul Fletcher “offering to open more regional Australian studios, expand its coverage of remote communities and hire more journalists in rural areas in return for the Federal Government dumping its decision to freeze annual funding indexation,” according to journalists from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* who reportedly saw the correspondence.

The letter said: “*If indexation was restored, combined with savings and efficiencies that the ABC has identified in recent months, the Corporation would be in a position to commit an additional investment of up to \$10 million per annum to employ more journalists in regional Australia and generate more content from regions for the local and national stories.*”²⁹

Although the funding cuts were not reversed (indeed there is no record of any government response at all), this episode is a remarkable indicator that a quid-pro-quo relationship between the ABC’s funding levels, funding cuts, and operational decision-making had become accepted as necessary by the ABC.

29 Rob Harris and Zoe Samios, “ABC Plan to Expand Regional Coverage was Ignored and Kept Secret,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (27 June 2020), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/abc-plan-to-expand-regio>

1.3 Reviews and Inquiries

High-profile reviews and Senate inquiries of the ABC are now entrenched as part of the Australian political landscape and lexicon. Despite their now familiarity, they should be recognised for being commonly used as tactics of pressure and harassment. They cost the ABC effort tying up time, resources, and leadership focus. Crucially, they also set terms for a public debate about the ABC and surreptitiously frame the very value of the ABC away from its contribution to life and the public good in Australia towards concepts like efficiency and commercial competition.

As this section shows, the frequency of reviews and Senate inquiries into the ABC go beyond what is necessary for legitimate scrutiny. In contrast to the number of reviews of the ABC, in the last decade there has been only one external review of CSIRO, an agency that receives a comparable amount of government funding (A\$0.9 billion). Beyond the number of reviews and inquiries that are actually commissioned are the additional calls from MPs and senators for reviews, inquiries, and even royal commissions into the ABC.³⁰

Reviews and some inquiries are conducted or led by carefully selected independent consultants working to terms of reference, normally provided by the responsible Minister. By contrast, most Senate inquiries are conducted on a bipartisan basis. The most recently started inquiry, into the ABC's complaints process, was commissioned by the Chair of the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee, Senator Andrew Bragg, but referred to the Legislative Committee, therefore avoiding the need for bipartisan support. It was aborted when the rest of the Senate voted it down.

The government's partisan reviews and Senate inquiries have focused on efficiency, effects on competition, and, most recently, an attempted review of the ABC's complaints process.

30 See, for example, Commonwealth of Australia, Senate (Tuesday, 23 November 2021) (Official Hansard), https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/25183/toc_pdf/Senate_2021_11_23.pdf; "Liberal Senator Calls for Ombudsman and a 'Proper Review' into ABC," Sky News Outsiders (30 May 2021), <https://www.skynews.com.au/opinion/outsideers/liberal-senator-calls-for-ombudsman-and-a-proper-review-into-abc/video/b39f851e0d5772d0916feb664f5adc8e>.

Government-Commissioned Reviews and Inquiries since 2013³¹

The 2014 “Lewis” Efficiency Review

Official name: “ABC and SBS Efficiency Study”

Under then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott and then-Minister for Communications Mitch Fifield, the work was led and attributed to Peter Lewis, formerly Chief Financial Officer of Seven West Media.

The report was controversially leaked, and as it said in its introduction, focused on “more tactical elements rather than a deeper structural review.” Nonetheless, it suggested the ABC should outsource more production, sell off various properties, and co-locate and cooperate with the SBS. ABC alumni Jonathan Holmes’ description of the politics read, “Lewis advised that the public broadcasters could accommodate the swinging budget cuts that had already been imposed, without cutting programs or services to the public. Convenient.”³²

The 2018 Competitive Neutrality Inquiry (ABC and SBS)

Official name: “Inquiry into the Competitive Neutrality of the National Broadcasters”

Under then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and then-Minister for Communications Mitch Fifield, the inquiry was conducted by ex-Productivity Commissioner Robert Kerr, former Free TV CEO Julie Flynn, and former ABC Head of TV Sandra Levy. Commentators suggested that the review was commissioned as part of a government deal with One Nation leader Pauline Hanson in exchange for her support of the Coalition’s bill allowing further consolidation in the media sector.³³ The report found the ABC was not causing “significant distortions to the competitive process beyond the public interest,” but did say the ABC should improve its reporting of charter performance.³⁴

The 2018–19 “Bean and Tonagh” Efficiency Review

Official name: “National Broadcasters Efficiency Review”

The then-Minister for Communications Mitch Fifield appointed former regulator Richard Bean and former Foxtel and News Corp executive Peter Tonagh to conduct the review (Tonagh was appointed Deputy Chair of the ABC in November 2021), assisted by the Department of Communications and the Arts, and advisory and investment firm KordaMentha.

31 The Senate inquiry in 2019 into political interference in the ABC is of a different type; it was bipartisan and triggered by the resignation of ABC Chair Justin Milne, the dismissal of ABC Managing Director Michelle Guthrie, government pressure regarding an Emma Alberici column about taxes, whether Triple J would play the “Hottest 100” on 26 January (Australia Day), and the work of ABC political editor Andrew Probyn.

32 Jonathan Holmes, *On Aunty* (On Series), Hachette Australia (2019).

33 Denis Muller, “The Politics Behind the Competitive Neutrality Inquiry into the ABC and SBS,” *The Conversation* (3 May 2018), <https://theconversation.com/the-politics-behind-the-competitive-neutrality-inquiry-into-abc-and-sbs-95925>.

34 Robert Kerr, Julie Flynn, and Sandra Levy, *Inquiry into the Competitive Neutrality of the National Broadcasters—Report by the Expert Panel* (September 2018), https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/inquiry-into-the-competitive-neutrality-of-the-national-broadcasters-report-by-the-expert-panel_1.pdf.

35 Richard Bean and Peter Tonagh, *National Broadcasters Efficiency Review* (December 2018), <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-national-broadcasters-efficiency-review-redacted.pdf>.

This review found “it [was] unlikely that incremental efficiency improvements will be sufficient to achieve their objectives—more profound changes are required,” and therefore adopted and emphasised the concept of “core” and “non-core” activities — the latter being content and programming that the ABC should cut to save money (despite the ABC Charter requiring the ABC to provide a “comprehensive” service³⁵). ABC executives who were involved in that review have told GetUp that the reviewers did not have the experience or understanding to make those judgements, nor did they take or seek any advice; essentially making editorial assessments despite changes to the ABC Charter and editorial quality being explicitly outside the review’s scope/terms of reference.

The Senate also holds inquiries and debates regarding the ABC when relevant Bills are introduced. These are covered in Section 1.4.

These reviews and inquiries have negative effects, ranging from simply soaking up time, attention, and budget to framing community expectations over what is valuable or important about the ABC. The former effects are obvious: a simple drain on resources. The latter effect, that of framing the public discussion about the ABC, is more subtle but more pernicious. Examining the idea of an ‘efficiency’ review provides the best illustration of that.

Reviews, in this context, are as much a government tool to set the agenda for public discussion as they are a good-faith attempt to fairly analyse and make sense of evidence. The ABC is a high profile Australian institution, governments frequently engage in conflict with the ABC (as this report demonstrates), and the media likes talking about the media. Each of those factors contributed to the heavy coverage of the 2014 and 2018–19 efficiency reviews, including by *The Australian*, *The Guardian*, the Fairfax/Nine press, and *SkyNews*. During that period, by simple repetition and editorial placement, the concepts of efficiency and the ABC were linked. If, for example, the reviews had instead been about the ABC’s contribution to disaster management, then the very terms of the public debate would have strengthened disaster management as an understood value of the ABC.

Current ABC Chair Ita Buttrose said the most recent partisan Senate inquiry into the ABC’s complaints process, “appears to be a blatant attempt to usurp the role of the ABC Board and undermine the operational independence of the ABC.”³⁶ She noted the ABC Board had recently commissioned an independently-conducted inquiry into its complaints procedures. Ita Buttrose’s official statement revealed Senator Bragg hastily pushed for the Senate Inquiry after being interviewed by the ABC’s independent reviewers - despite its findings not due to be published for several months. Bragg’s attempt to establish a parallel process was declared by Buttrose as a clear act of political interference, aimed at weakening the communities trust in the public broadcaster. Prime Minister Scott Morrison backed the inquiry, although a spokesman for Communications Minister Paul Fletcher distanced the Minister from the inquiry, saying, “This is entirely a matter for the Senate. The Minister has not been involved.”³⁷

36 Ita Buttrose, Statement from Ita Buttrose, ABC Chair, on ABC Complaints Processes (November 2021), <https://about.abc.net.au/statements/statement-from-ita-buttrose-abc-chair-on-abc-complaints-processes/>.

37 Lisa Visentin, “‘Not Above Scrutiny’: Morrison Backs Senate Inquiry Into ABC Complaints,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (16 November 2021), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/not-above-scrutiny-morrison-backs-senate-inquiry-into-abc-complaints-20211115-p598z4.html>.

“



Peter Cronau worked as a journalist and producer for the ABC's Background Briefing, Media Watch, 7.30, and Four Corners – his favourite.. He's won awards, including the Gold Walkley, Australia's most coveted journalism prize.

While covering a federal election, an adviser to the then-Communications Minister, unhappy with our questioning, told me our fate was already decided, boasting: “We are going to pull the ABC apart wire by wire, microphone by microphone.”

Since then I've seen this policy of 'death by a thousand cuts' playing out. We have had deep budget cuts lead to the axing of news and current affairs programs like Lateline, eight state-based 7.30 editions, Stateline Friday night 7.30 edition, the Radio National 7.45am news bulletin, and the online version of The Drum, as well as the slashing in half of programs like The World Today, Radio National's PM, and Foreign Correspondent. Significant cuts have also been made to Four Corners and Australian Story, and news and correspondents' budgets have been tightened.

Hundreds of ABC news staff have been made redundant, seeing experienced journalists leaving in droves; the ones remaining, often left fearful and intimidated. Determined to keep up a quality ABC output, staff take on the burden, work longer days, do overtime without payment, family life suffers, stress levels skyrocket, shortcuts are taken.

ABC staff can fall vulnerable to the pre-emptive buckle, to doing the easier story, to giving our critics a free pass, to promoting pro-establishment stories, to not challenging orthodox views, to falling into a safe groupthink, all of which is in effect self-censorship. Censorship certainly occurs, stories get spiked, angles get shifted, some stories just seem to have a much higher bar to get over. And all of this occurs before a single intimidatory criticism, or angry phone call to the executive editors, or argument with senior news management, or secret discussion with members of the board. All of which do occur; with numerous examples coming to mind.

The ABC is a leg of our democracy dog. Though not without its flaws, frustrations, and foibles, we need it to nurture our community and to snarl against damaging policies, corruption, and maladministration. Across the media landscape, the ABC almost uniquely stands in the way of letting devastating government policy, and economic and social policy, rip. It needs the funding, and non-interference, to do its job.

”

1.4 Changes to Legislation (aside from funding)

The Coalition has repeatedly introduced and advocated for legislation that would impose restrictions, additional oversight, and reporting loads on the ABC – this weaponisation of legislative changes is a direct attempt to pressure and harass the ABC. Additionally, fuelling a public debate about the ABC within a frame that implies it is not fulfilling its duty or adhering to proper conduct – a frame the incumbent government may see as advantageous (a mechanism similar to that discussed in the previous section [3.3]). In the 45th Parliament (August 2016 – April 2019), the Coalition Government introduced the three bills below, exemplifying the overt attempted control over the public broadcaster as well as this covert attempt to skew the public’s perception and support of the ABC.

National Broadcasters Legislation Amendment (Enhanced Transparency) Bill 2017

Despite its name, the aim of this bill was to require the ABC to publish the salaries and names of each staff member (including on-air presenters) earning over A\$200,000 annually. Liberal Senator McGrath said that this would help the Australian people understand how their taxes were being spent³⁸, but this was a spurious rationale. The ABC had, since 2001 at least, already been reporting the number of its officers in each A\$10,000 remuneration band over A\$100,000.³⁹ However, the bill’s added specificity of publishing individuals’ salaries would have made the ABC a less attractive place to work, and given the competition for on-air talent, it would have considerably weakened the ABC’s position in the market. The Bill lapsed at the end of the 45th Parliament in April 2019.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Fair and Balanced) Bill 2017

This bill borrowed its name from the slogan of a U.S. Fox News channel. Although the ABC Board already had the statutory duty to ensure ABC news and information was “accurate and impartial,” this bill, if passed, would have inserted “fair” and “balanced” into its mandate. Then-Communications Minister Mitch Fifield introduced the Bill, and the ensuing debate provided a platform for One Nation senators Malcolm Roberts and Pauline Hanson to appear on allied media outlets making the spurious case that the ABC published unfair and unbalanced work.

38 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate (Wednesday, 6 December 2017) (Official Hansard), <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%-22chamber%2Fhansards%2F3c0ea04b-bee9-4c09-9a7d-92d71100e212%2F0157%22>.

39 ABC, 2001-2002 Annual Report (December 2002), <https://about.abc.net.au/reports-publications/2001-2002-annual-report/>.

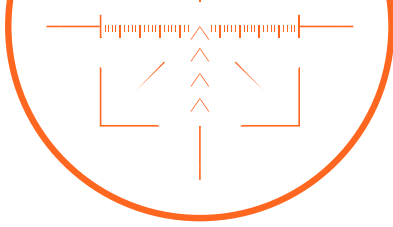
(There is an important distinction to be made here: good journalism does not need to balance every story; not every story has two sides. Some have more sides, some do not have sides, and if the weight of evidence is heavily on one side of a story, the audience is best served when that is made clear.) This Bill also lapsed at the end of the 45th Parliament in April 2019.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) Bill 2017

This Bill would have directed the ABC to contribute to a sense of ‘regional’ identity, reflect geographical diversity, ensure two directors had a substantial connection to regional areas, and establish a regional advisory council in addition to the ABC’s existing Advisory Council. At the time, the ABC had 48 regional locations and had just created 80 new rural and regional jobs as part of a reallocation of an additional A\$15 million via their “connecting communities” initiative.⁴⁰ Eight of the 12 people on the Advisory Council were from rural and regional areas (i.e., outside of capital cities). The Bill lapsed but was reintroduced in October 2019 and, as of November 2021, remained in front of the House of Representatives of the 46th Parliament.

Given the ABC was already the Australian media organisation with by far the largest regional and rural operation, had extensive advice and governance representation from the regions, and was thoroughly publishing relevant measures in its annual report, it is hard to interpret this proposed legislation as anything other than more pressure on the ABC and another attempt to prosecute a cynical argument.





1.5 Politicised Board Appointments

The ABC Board is currently comprised of nine directors: seven non-executive members, one managing director (David Anderson), and one staff-elected director (Jane Connors). It is one of the most crucial elements in the ABC's governance structure. The Board of Directors is the point of ultimate responsibility for the corporation to provide maximum benefit to people in Australia and maintain its independence and integrity. It is also responsible for ensuring the gathering and presentation of news and information is accurate and impartial. Given the centrality of the ABC in informing and educating people in Australia and influencing Australian culture, these are crucial directorships.

The current process for appointing directors was designed according to international best practice in 2013 to be arm's length from government and based on merit as assessed by an independent nomination panel. The prior decade had seen ABC directorships go to the "strident critic" of the ABC, Dr Janet Albrechtsen,⁴¹ and "culture warrior" Keith Windschuttle.⁴²

By 2016, it became apparent the appointment process had once again become deeply politicised. Basic governance standards were being breached. The panel had variously been stacked with the government's political allies⁴³, a panel lacking such allies was ignored, and the Communications Minister was making captain's picks and delaying providing his rationale to Federal Parliament as required by the legislation.⁴⁴

41 Ari Sharp, "Janet Albrechtsen to Step Down as Director on ABC Board," Sydney Morning Herald (11 November 2009), <https://www.smh.com.au/national/janet-albrechtsen-to-step-down-as-director-on-abc-board-20091110-i7lr.html>.

42 Michelle Grattan, "ABC Gets a Culture Warrior," The Age (16 June 2006), <https://www.theage.com.au/national/abc-gets-a-culture-warrior-20060616-ge2j4p.html>.

43 Matthew Knott, "Janet Albrechtsen Appointed to ABC and SBS Board Appointments Panel," The Age (2 July 2014), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/janet-albrechtsen-appointed-to-abc-and-sbs-board-appointments-panel-20140702-3b8rs.html>.

44 Fergus Pitt, No Politics at Aunty's Table - Depoliticising the Governance of the ABC, The Australia Institute (March 2016), <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/No-Politics-at-Auntys-Table.pdf>.



As of January 2022, that situation continued. Although many current board members do have media experience, the majority of the non-executive/staff directors have been appointed by the Communications Minister or Prime Minister from outside the recommendations provided by the nominations panel, which was set up to enhance the independence of the process.

The direct appointment of Fiona Balfour by Communications Minister Paul Fletcher in May 2021 has raised serious questions. Balfour was not on the nominations panel's list and, according to reporting by longtime ABC observer Margaret Simons, "is said to be [Minister Fletcher's] long-term friend and ally."⁴⁵

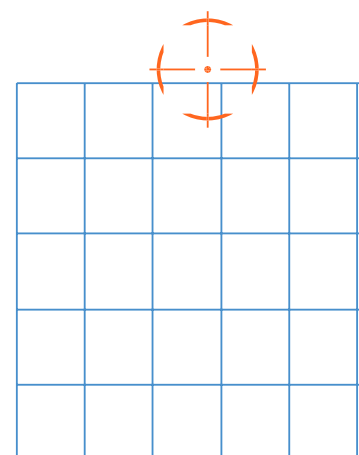
Current ABC Board Members and Appointment Process

Member	Main Industry Experience	Term	Process	Minister
Ita Buttrose	Media (Publishing)	7/3/2019-6/3/2024	Prime Ministerial Pick	
Peter Lewis	Media (Channel 7)	2/10/2014-1/10/2024	Panel Recommendation	Malcolm Turnbull, Paul Fletcher
Georgie Somerset	Agriculture (Beef)	23/2/2017-22/2/2022	Ministerial Pick	Mitch Fifield
Joseph Gersh	Law & Business	11/5/2018-10/5/2023	Ministerial Pick	Mitch Fifield
Mario D'Orazio	Media (Channel 7)	17/5/2021-16/5/2026	Panel Recommendation	Paul Fletcher
Fiona Balfour	Aviation, IT & Finance	17/5/2021-16/5/2026	Ministerial Pick	Paul Fletcher
Peter Tonagh	Media (NewsCorp & Foxtel)	17/5/2021-16/5/2026	Panel Recommendation	Paul Fletcher
David Anderson	Media (TV)	6/5/2019-5/5/2024	Managing Director	
Jane Connors	Media (Radio & Arts)	1/5/2018-30-4-2023	Staff Elected	

ABC staff feared Balfour would be Fletcher’s “eyes and ears on the board,” although there is no evidence or suggestion that Balfour has breached board confidentiality. According to documents released under freedom of information laws, Fletcher picked Balfour over career broadcast executive Anita Jacoby AM and Lisa Chung AM, who serves on several corporate and arts organisation boards. Chung would have been the only non-white ABC director.⁴⁶

There are more indications that the Coalition Government is far from supportive of a truly independent and properly functioning ABC Board; as of early May 2021, the Coalition Government had left the ABC Board with three of the seven non-executive positions vacant for months,⁴⁷ leaving it at risk of being unable to form a quorum and formally make decisions and govern.

Prime Minister Morrison’s appointment of Ita Buttrose is a notable case of a captain’s pick installing a chair whose dedication to the responsibilities of the role seemingly outweighed any allegiance to the captain. The context for that pick is revelatory. The previous ABC Chair and Managing Director had just been forced to leave under circumstances that highlighted the politicisation of the ABC’s governance. Buttrose became a staunch protector and advocate for the ABC. In mid-2021, the powerful and connected Liberal Party member Michael Kroger went on the record to report that sentiment from some in Coalition Government had turned against Buttrose, showing their annoyance that the captain’s pick had not brought the ABC’s editorial stance closer to supporting the government: “Ita has been a terrible failure [...] And I know there are many people in the Coalition, including people in the Cabinet, who regret her appointment.”⁴⁸ Why the government was surprised that an ABC Chair would defend the ABC’s independence, is not clear.



46 Cam Wilson, “On His Selection: Minister Ignored Two Prominent Women for ABC Board Spots, Picking Female Mate Instead,” Crikey (5 July 2021), <https://www.crikey.com.au/2021/07/05/minister-picked-friend-abc-board/>.

47 Lisa Visentin, “ABC Board Member’s Run-in with a Cow Exposes a Board ‘in Strife,’” Sydney Morning Herald (5 May 2021), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/abc-board-member-s-run-in-with-a-cow-exposes-a-board-in-strife-20210505-p57p4q.html>.

48 Amanda Meade, “ABC Board Defends Ita Buttrose Against ‘Disrespectful’ Spray by Liberal Powerbroker,” The Guardian (3 June 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/jun/03/abc-board-defends-ita-buttrose-against-disrespectful-spray-by-liberal-powerbroker>.

1.6 Direct Editorial and Operational Interference and Pressure

Coalition Government ministers and senior government staff lobby senior managers and content makers in attempts to make specific interventions in the ABC's editorial or operational processes. The weight of evidence indicates that those senior ABC staff resist the pressure, and there is no direct link between the pressure and any editorial changes. However, that pressure is a significant departure from the democratic norms that have upheld the crucial principles of the ABC's editorial independence and government accountability. The pressure is exerted outside the appropriate democratic mechanisms of written correspondence, calendared meetings, or noted calls between the Communications Minister and ABC Chair, Senate estimates, or the ABC's complaints process. Bernard Keane, former manager of National Broadcasting in the Department of Communications, working currently as a journalist, pointed out:

“The problem with [Government Ministers calling and texting] is that there is thus no paper trail of government attempts to influence the ABC. The Alston-McDonald [the former Communications Minister and former ABC Board chair, respectively] correspondence over the Iraq War complaint sits in the Department of Communications’ files. Both sides followed due process. That process [was] ditched by Turnbull, meaning there is now far less transparency about the Liberals’ war on the ABC.”⁴⁹

The extremely high profile events covered in the bipartisan 2019 Senate inquiry into the allegations of political interference in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), are one of the few instances where the ABC Chair and senior staff did not absorb the government pressure, with a dramatic impact on the ABC's editorial and operational processes.

In the evidence given to that inquiry, no witness said they had experienced a government minister (or their staff) directly asking ABC staff or content makers for, and achieving, a specific editorial, staffing, or operational change. However, the evidence showed that then-ABC Chair Justin Milne inappropriately told ABC staff and executives to fire Emma Alberici and Andrew Probyn, schedule the Triple J Hottest 100 on 26 January, and name the date ‘Australia Day’ instead of ‘Invasion Day’. Milne was a longtime friend and business associate of then-Prime Minister Turnbull. Although it is reasonable to believe he had an accurate insight into the Prime Minister's views of those matters, no direct evidence was presented that Turnbull asked for those interventions to be made. It is credible that Milne was acting in alignment with but not at the direction of the Prime Minister.



49 Bernard Keane, “John Howard can Teach Us a Thing or Two about Respecting the ABC's Independence,” Crikey (28 September 2018), <https://www.crikey.com.au/2018/09/28/howard-and-the-abc/>.

There are, however, indications that Ministers, Prime Ministers, and their staff have applied direct pressure to senior ABC executives outside formal and transparent channels. **Emma Alberici has told GetUp that when one of her articles about government tax policy was abruptly unpublished, edited, and republished to omit a crucial line, she confronted then-Director of News Gaven Morris, who, in Alberici's words, "shouted at me, 'What am I supposed to do when the Prime Minister calls me?!'"**

In a later interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald* then Director of ABC News Gaven Morris said,

"[there was a] period a few years ago when there was a lot more noise around government interference ... there were times when I worried about there being undue influence in the wrong areas."⁵⁰

Morris said although the pressure had subsided, it had only done so to "reasonable levels" (although still outside appropriate channels). Media commentator Margaret Simons reported that "implacable pressure was applied over many months," and quoted Morris:

"When Turnbull came out and said, 'Well, I've never phoned Gaven Morris,' he's right about that. I didn't get phone calls from Turnbull, but what I would notice is that other people would get phone calls that were very similar to the ones I was getting from other quarters... So the [Canberra] bureau would get a phone call from somebody. I would get a phone call from somebody else. Michelle [Guthrie] would get a phone call from somebody else.

We're all getting different phone calls, and the people involved would all be able to say that they never talked to so-and-so. But on a number of occasions, it was clear to me what was happening. It was quite a dangerous time in terms of the editorial independence of the ABC because of the different characters involved and the dynamic that was at hand."

[When Mr Morris was asked to do something he disagreed with during that time, he said he would] just put it in the bottom drawer and ignore it... Quite often someone would come back quite angry because I hadn't done it. And I would say, 'well, frankly, that's my choice, and that's what I've chosen to do.'"⁵¹

50 Zoe Samios, "No Issues with the Reporting": Outgoing ABC News Boss Unrepentant Over Controversial Stories," *Sydney Morning Herald* (8 October 2021), <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/no-issues-with-the-reporting-outgoing-abc-news-boss-unrepentant-over-controversial-stories-20211007-p58y6q.html>.

51 Margaret Simons, *Taking the Arrows*, Inside Story (12 November 2021), <https://insidestory.org.au/taking-the-arrows/>.

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The authors of this report have also spoken to a number of current and former ABC content makers and contractors. They asked that their names not be used because of the political sensitivity of the subject. (Some people contacted also refused to comment at all.) Overall, their testimony is that the pressure and any attempted interference (that is, government representatives asking for specific editorial or operational changes) does not directly pass through the leadership layers to result in editorial changes. The culture and policies of ABC content makers are mitigating and protective forces; ABC staff at all levels tend to be highly committed to the value of independence.

However, that is not to say the pressure is entirely absorbed by the leadership layers such that it has no effect. The authors' understanding, based on their research, is that the pressure has resulted in a heightened sense of vulnerability at the ABC, which has different effects in different units. Some areas can continue to produce robust journalism – units like *Four Corners* and *Background Briefing* are resourced with fact-checking and editorial oversight processes and attract experienced staff, executive editors, and producers. The ABC's high editorial standards combined with the uniquely high level of scrutiny and extreme effects of mistakes mean those units have very high costs, especially when reporting on complex and/or controversial topics.

A chilling effect is more likely to be felt in other areas, like the Brisbane-based online newsroom, that have more junior staff (including interns), less confident editors, and both groups are required to produce and process much more material on a daily basis.⁵² One senior and well-respected former ABC journalist said that by the time they left the ABC in mid-2020, it was becoming more common that journalists and editors would not have the confidence and experience to rely on their reporting and present facts based on the reported evidence, and would instead include an opposing view for the sake of appearing balanced.

A University of Queensland researcher, who had previously worked at the ABC Brisbane Newsroom, published a peer-reviewed article covering self-censorship and “pre-emptive buckling.” Based on interviews with nine de-identified ABC staff, that researcher reported:

“Six respondents said they had witnessed a pre-emptive buckle, with two respondents saying they believed this behaviour to be widespread. A respondent who had witnessed a pre-emptive buckle said the behaviour was endemic within the Brisbane office, with certain departments more likely to experience censorship than others. One journalist said: ‘Definitely, I’ve experienced cases where management’s been worried about a response or they have been worried about being seen to be biased even though there’s a genuine reason to be doing stories or they’re concerned about complaints. So sometimes they will change the story as they’re worried a complaint may arise or to minimise the complaints.’”⁵³

52 “On background” interviews to this effect conducted by the authors of this report are corroborated by peer-reviewed research from a University of Queensland researcher.

53 See Ana Vujanic, “The Future of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Australia’s ‘Chilling’ Mediascape,” *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1386/ajr_00060_7.

54 Amanda Meade, “ABC Flagship Current Affair Programs Didn’t Cover Climate Change Adequately, Report Finds,” *The Guardian* (28 October 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/oct/28/abc-flagship-current-affair-programs-didnt-cover-climate-change-adequately-report-finds>.

55 Michael Koziol, “ABC News Boss Warns Staff Against Focus on ‘Inner City Left-wing Elites’,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (25 October 2020), <https://www.smh.com.au/national/abc-news-boss-warns-staff-against-focus-on-inner-city-left-wing-elites-20201023-p56849.html>.

The finding, however, was not unequivocal. The researcher also wrote, “one of the [three] respondents who had not witnessed a pre-emptive buckle stated, ‘[t]here would be uproar, unending uproar, with a manager interfering in the editorial process for an organisation that holds independence as closely as it holds trust and accuracy.’” Further, the researcher was relatively junior when they had worked at the ABC, and it is possible that their sampled interviewees had simply witnessed stories that were inadequate in their unedited form and, therefore, their editors were making revisions for fear of complaints of journalistic quality rather than due to political pressure.

That said, the very act of government pressure and harassment, whether directly impactful or not, opens the door for audiences from any side of politics to distrust the ABC’s journalism, regardless of its actual accuracy and independence. An example is the public debate on whether the ABC has covered climate change with adequate rigour and in line with the weight of evidence.

Former ABC journalist, Jonathan Holmes undertook an analysis of the ABC’s climate coverage in flagship programs during late 2017-18. The report leaked to *The Guardian* journalist Amanda Meade, who quoted it as saying, “7.30’s coverage [of climate change] was inadequate, bearing in mind the program’s role as the ABC’s flagship daily television current affairs program and the crucial importance of the issue for all Australians”. AM, the report found, ‘did better, but its coverage was barely adequate.’” Crucially, Holmes said that he found no evidence that ABC reporters were under political pressure from ABC’s management.⁵⁴

However, in October 2020, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on a staff meeting in which some Ultimo staff present interpreted then-Director of News as saying they were “too focused on the interests of ‘inner city left-wing elites’ and linked his concerns about editorial coverage to the national broadcaster’s ongoing funding from taxpayers. [...] His references to issues that were pertinent to Queensland were interpreted [by ABC staff who were present] as a message the ABC was too focused on the dangers of climate change and not sufficiently interested in the loss of coal jobs, for example.”⁵⁵



Although an ABC spokesperson argued that the *The Sydney Morning Herald's* reporting was an inaccurate summary, and Mr Morris was adamant he had been mis-interpreted by a small number of staff, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* version was subsequently corroborated by Holmes, who said, "plenty of people who heard Morris's briefing reckon the [*The Sydney Morning Herald's*] story [...] was spot on." He also wrote of Morris, "I don't believe he is buckling to political pressure: the Morrison government, though undoubtedly no friend of the ABC's, is much less given to complaining about its reporting than the Turnbull government was."⁵⁶ This episode shows how the Coalition Government's long standing campaign of both public and direct pressure undermines trust within the organisation as well as from the public, regardless of political leaning.

Former ABC *Four Corners*, 7.30, and *Foreign Correspondent* journalist David Hardaker described the effects of direct and indirect government pressure as follows:

"With an election in the next six months, there's an immediate benefit for the government in putting the ABC under pressure. It will put program makers on notice and jangle the nerves of editorial decision makers who might blunt their coverage of the government, or square up the ledger with some hard reporting on Labor."⁵⁷



Nick Ross was the ABC's online technology and games editor.

“

In early March 2013 I was told by a senior ABC Manager that they expected the Liberals to win the next election and that Malcolm Turnbull would be in charge of the ABC and that they didn't want to upset him. (I documented everything right after being told that).

On one occasion, four months before the election, with regards to an article I wrote which raised huge questions about the viability of Australia's copper network being used for the Liberal Party's "Faster, Cheaper, Sooner" NBN I was told that "there was nothing wrong with the article per se" but that the NBN was dead and so there was no point in causing a fuss.

It had taken me three years to write and research that article. I published it surreptitiously right after the election and it was buried (not promoted anywhere). This critically important information was literally kept from the public by ABC management even though it's all true and has subsequently led to billions of taxpayer dollars being wasted.

You can find the article at: <https://www.abc.net.au/technology/articles/2013/09/19/3851924.htm>

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56 Jonathan Holmes, "The ABC Must be Relevant to All – but that Doesn't Mean Telling People What They Want to Hear," *The Guardian* (28 October 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/28/the-abc-must-be-relevant-to-all-but-that-doesnt-mean-telling-people-what-they-want-to-hear>.

57 David Hardaker, "Senator Bragg and the Weaponising of Coalition Grievance: Is an ABC Ombudsman Coming?," *Crikey* (19 November 2021), <https://www.crikey.com.au/2021/11/19/war-on-abc-complaints-andrew-bragg/>.



1.7 Personal and Brand Attacks

Coalition MPs and senators demonstrate their hostility to the ABC in the various fora available to them, by making attacks on the ABC and its staff in Senate estimates, Senate and parliamentary debates, media appearances, and public events. As this section illustrates, this has gone far beyond the debate and accountability that are essential elements of our democratic system.

Government MPs and senators regularly use Senate estimates as a forum for harassment and attack



A detailed analysis and systematic coding of every ABC appearance at Senate estimates since 2018 shows Coalition MPs often use that venue not as a forum for fact-finding or good-faith accountability but to prosecute anti-ABC arguments, mount attacks on individual journalists, indulge operational thought bubbles, and make bad-faith accusations of bias. The senator who has most often used Senate estimates to attack the ABC is Senator Eric Abetz (Liberal, TAS), followed by Senator Alex Antic (Liberal, SA).

A typical sequence of attacks from Senator Abetz came in the Senate Estimates session of October 2020. The senator picked out a series of separate editorial subjects, including a legal case involving Racing NSW, supposed bias against the Catholic Church, supposed anti-Semitism, and supposed insufficient coverage of the Queen's COVID-19 speech. He second-guessed the ABC's editorial judgements, made accusations of bias, and cut off ABC Managing Director David Anderson's answers after only a few words to instead speak himself for hundreds of words.⁵⁸ A very simple quantitative analysis of that sequence shows Senator Abetz talking for 1,522 of the 1,887 words in the transcript, and a fair qualitative assessment of that transcript reveals a hectoring and harassing approach.

The answers, which could therefore only be provided in the much lower profile written answers to questions on notice, showed that all of Abetz's criticisms were entirely unreasonable. The horseracing legal case was found in the ABC's favour, with costs. The ABC had, and has, robust and effective policies and processes to guard against hate speech. The ABC had extensively covered the Queen's COVID-19 speech.

Typical of Senator Antic's attacks is this example from the same session of Estimates, when the senator used his allotted time to criticise the ABC for its operational decision to provide, in their enterprise bargaining agreement with staff, a special leave category for people undergoing gender reassignment. (Senator Antic, the transcripts show, regularly accuses the ABC of being too accepting and out of step with mainstream Australian values on matters of gender and sexuality.):

Senator ANTIC: *“That is a separate category that’s been carved out, specifically, for that purpose [people undergoing gender reassignment]. I’m just interested. For example, if an employee were to injure their knee playing football on the weekend, what additional leave can that employee access over and above their sick leave so that they are also—given that 80 per cent or thereabouts of Australian adults play sport on the weekend, is there a particular category of leave where the ABC has used taxpayer funds to cater for them?”*

In the exchange that followed, the senator went on to accuse the ABC of “picking favourites” for leave allowances, then started to contest the idea of diversity and inclusion targets.

Analysis of the Hansard shows more government senators asserting, in the high-profile arena of Senate Estimates, that the ABC has made mistakes or displays bias. The ABC's accurate responses only get onto the public record in the lower profile written questions on notice process.⁵⁹



Assessed collectively, the Federal Government's tactics in the Senate can be clearly recognised as very different from legitimate fact-finding or good-faith financial accountability on behalf of taxpayers. Instead, the Government uses the venue of Senate estimates to invoke sensational hot-button topics making the ABC salient in culture wars. Other senators, from both sides of the aisle and independents, use the Senate estimates venue much more in line with the goals of accountability and fact-finding.

59 Typical examples include questions on notice numbers 23, 24, 55, and 56, and portfolio question numbers 151, 152, 153, and 154. Senate Environment and Communications Committee, Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications Portfolio. Budget Estimates,

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Osman Faruqi was formerly the Deputy Editor of ABC Life

ABC Life was set up to provide a platform for the kinds of stories that would speak to people in the communities that hadn't traditionally connected to the ABC before - this being people from migrant and culturally diverse backgrounds, young people and young parents. They wanted content that resonated with them, things like like working life, family life, relationships, home gardening, pets. ABC Life existed to create a commercial free, independent platform for lifestyle journalism, and to tell stories that mattered, but also to prove to the wider community how important the ABC is.

In my role as deputy editor, I had a particular focus on multiculturalism and making sure we told stories that mattered to those communities, around race and racism in Australia, and what white Australians can do to be better allies. I'm a young Australian from a migrant background and I know that these communities didn't feel like the ABC was a place that belonged to them, ABC Life was to fix that and create a place that told stories that mattered to them.

The context in which we launched ABC Life was a tricky situation, set against a backdrop of years of budget cuts from the federal government, and sectors of the media - particularly NewsCorp - attacking the ABC because they saw them as a threat. When we launched ABC Life, the same pattern happened. NewsCorp and the Coalition said ABC Life was outside the mission of the ABC, it was extending beyond the core responsibility. They attacked what ABC Life stood for. They attacked some of the individuals involved, including myself.

People like Senator Eric Abetz, were agitated about what ABC Life was doing. And in Senate Estimates would ask questions about how much money was being spent on it. It really felt like it was a huge assault from some of the most powerful people in the country, when we were just trying to build something new and offer communities an opportunity to engage with the ABC in a new way.

When the ABC unveiled its restructure and cuts, it was really sad to hear that ABC Life had been axed, with a third of the staff made redundant and the entire team rebranded to ABC local. The combination of pulling millions of dollars in funding every year and the relentless public attacks on ABC Life, the ABC made this decision as a result of this political pressure.



A Remarkable Statement in Parliament

On 23 November 2021, Senator James McGrath (LNP, Qld), the Deputy Government Whip in the Senate, escalated matters during a debate about the ABC's complaints process, using quite remarkable language:

"A grotesque, left-wing, back-scratching orgy of flatulent arrogance from the ABC and those on the left. [...]"

This ABC who sneers at us is led by an arrogant chair who sees the ABC as a country apart from Australia. [...]"

It is time for a royal commission into the future of public broadcasting in this country.

It is time that we stood up for the taxpayers of this country who are not getting value for money, and it is time that the board of the ABC—that most arrogant organisation—realise they are losing middle Australia because we have choice."⁶⁰

Senator McGrath's statements are at odds with the ABC's ratings increases during 2020-21 and its continuing high level of trust, according to high quality surveys.



<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-22/james-mcgrath/10153502?nw=0>

60 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate (Tuesday, 23 November 2021) (Official Hansard), https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/25183/toc.pdf/Senate_2021_11_23.pdf.

Letters to the Board

The Communications Minister’s interactions with the ABC Board provide more evidence that mechanisms intended for accountability and fact-finding are instead being used as a tactic to stoke controversy.

For example, in the wake of *Four Corners*’ ‘Inside the Canberra Bubble’ investigation, Communications Minister Paul Fletcher wrote a letter to the board that raised the possibility that there were grounds for their dismissal, including the question, “Why should an objective observer not conclude that the program demonstrates a failure by the board in its duty under Section 8 of the ABC Act to ensure that the gathering and presentation of news and information by the ABC is accurate and impartial according to the recognised standards of objective journalism?” The letter was leaked by the government to Rupert Murdoch’s NewsCorp before or at the same time as it was sent to the ABC Board⁶¹, a practice that has been repeated for other correspondence and for Senate questions on notice.⁶²

Media and Public Appearances

Senior and junior government MPs and senators continue to apply pressure to the ABC via other parts of the public sphere, often leveraging Murdoch’s NewsCorp and Sky News as particularly receptive platforms to broadcast criticisms of the ABC. In September 2021, Minister Alan Tudge was quoted in *The Australian* regarding the ABC’s complaints handling: “Don’t get me started on the ABC.... [The complaints handling was] just a farce.”⁶³ Senator Alex Antic (Liberal, SA) joined an online forum to discuss privatising the ABC hosted by FamilyVoice Australia, a Christian lobby group. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported, “he [Antic] went on to tell the forum that while he wanted to privatise the ABC, ‘sadly’ it was not government policy.” The ABC was “‘bound and gagged by left-wing ideology’ and growing ‘more recalcitrant every day’,” Mr Antic reportedly said, “If you did a snap poll in the Coalition party room, you wouldn’t find too many that would tell you that there was no cause for action at all.”⁶⁴

61 Amanda Meade, “ABC Accuses Morrison Government of Using News Corp to Attack its Journalism,” *The Guardian* (2 December 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/dec/02/abc-accuses-morrison-government-of-using-news-corp-to-attack-its-journalism>.

62 Jennifer Duke, “ABC Urged to Consider Selling Inner-city Offices,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (3 March 2020), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/abc-urged-to-consider-selling-inner-city-offices-20200302-p54635.html>; Sherri Markson, “ABC Asked: Did You have Ministers Tailed?,” *The Australian* (2 December 2020), <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/government-sends-explosive-please-explain-letter-to-ita-buttrose-over-four-corners-expose/news-story/c85f993e-b642aaa7a910dcdbd640fc550>.

63 Sophie Elsworth, “Alan Tudge Slams ABC’s Complaints Process, Calls for Overhaul,” *The Australian* (19 September 2021), <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/media/alan-tudge-slams-abc-complaints-process-calls-for-overhaul/news-story/301c361b79aa88b5e2e24ec1bbf1e01d>.

64 Michael Koziol, “One of the Government’s Most Vocal ABC Critics Admits He Doesn’t Watch It,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (8 August 2021), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/one-of-the-government-s-most-vocal-abc-critics-admits-he-doesn-t-watch-it-20210803-p58fil.html>.



Emma Alberici worked as a journalist, foreign correspondent, and chief economic correspondent at the ABC, and is well-known as the former presenter of ABC's current affairs program Lateline.

In 2018, my reporting helped educate Australians about corporate tax and how many of the biggest companies don't pay it at all. The attacks on my reporting had more to do with fury about the scuttled attempt at lowering the rate than any legitimate gripe with the substance of the articles.

Criticisms of my work printed in newspapers by government cheerleaders, casually referenced by government MPs in radio and television interviews and shouted from the floor of the parliament were an affront to independent public broadcasting. The snide remarks carried a tone of mockery; how dare I deign to pass judgement on one of the government's signature policies?

The relentless nature of the sniping ultimately took a fatal toll on my relationship with ABC management. Thorough, independent reviews of my journalism found only minor errors in one piece and none in the one that surely rankled most.

Accusations that I was unqualified, innumerate, and prone to confusing revenue with income were patently designed to divert attention from the central thesis of my work.

By discrediting me personally and besmirching a reputation built over 25 years, they successfully managed to shift the national conversation away from their flawed logic around extending corporate tax relief to Australia's biggest 2,000 businesses.

Contested was this line: "There is no compelling evidence that giving the country's biggest companies a tax cut sees that money passed on to workers in the form of higher wages. Treasury modelling relies on theories that belie the reality that's playing out around the world. Since the peak of the commodities boom in 2011-12, profit margins have risen to levels not seen since the early 2000s but wages growth has been slower than at any time since the 1960s." — deemed too opinionated for the pages of ABC online despite its evident and demonstrated truth.

An incensed Prime Minister Turnbull, had a line directly to Gaven Morris's office through two senior media advisers who were most recently on the ABC payroll. In a pre-emptive acquiescence to government, the articles were removed before a proper review of the articles had even taken place.

The ABC director of news should have a moat around his office guarding any attempts to get to him by government. The moat would preferably have sharks in it. There is a public complaints system. There is no reason why the Prime Minister should be allowed to circumvent that process.

Relations between myself and the ABC soured after I was forced to employ a solicitor to demand the republication of my entirely factually accurate analysis. I was a senior member of the ABC news team for 18 years, including as finance editor of 7.30 and Europe Correspondent during the GFC.

Until 2020, when I left the public broadcaster, the seven years of the Coalition Government were, without question, the

most corrosive on the [ABC] corporation's culture. Editorial leaders became timid and too hasty to appease their paymasters. In 2019, when the Coalition won a third term, the director of news [Gaven Morris] told me "things don't look good for you now."

This followed the public revelation in an email from Malcolm Turnbull's friend Justin Milne whom he appointed to the position of ABC chair. Writing to the ABC Managing Director Michelle Guthrie, the email said, "they (the government) hate her. We are tarred with her brush. I think it's simple. Get rid of her. We need to save the ABC, not Emma."

”

There is some evidence that this campaign of public attacks on the ABC is affecting public trust in the ABC. Although the ABC consistently ranks as Australia's most trusted media organisation and is in the top 15 trusted brands in the country⁶⁵, its trust ranking experienced a dramatic slide during the 18 months to June 2021 – a period when the ABC was under sustained attack in the public sphere. Prior to that slide, the ABC had been among the top 10 trusted brands in Australia.⁶⁶ Further, trust in the ABC is becoming somewhat polarised. The ABC's net trust rating is positive, but unlike some other net-positive organisations, there is a relatively high number of people in Australia who actively distrust the ABC.⁶⁷

65 Roy Morgan, Australia's Top 20 Most Distrusted and Trusted Government Agencies 2021 (18 November 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGAzeAkqquU>. Note, n>60,000.

66 Roy Morgan, Australian's Most Trusted & Distrusted Brands (September 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrSkkOAXzrl>. Note, n=1,024.

67 Ibid.

1.8 Prosecutions and Legal Action

In recent times the ABC has faced unprecedented prosecutions and legal actions. Most notably, the AFP raids of the ABC's Sydney headquarters in June 2019, prompted as part of an investigation into a leak to investigative reporter Dan Oakes regarding the *Afghan Files* investigation. Also significant were the high-profile defamation actions undertaken by Christian Porter and Andrew Laming against the ABC. These recent legal actions and prosecutions have attracted massive media attention, ultimately framing a public discourse around the ABC. These actions taken against the ABC and ABC journalists in particular, have raised the spectre of government pressure and interference.



The 2019 AFP raids

In 2019, the AFP raided the ABC in response to reporter Dan Oakes' *Afghan Files*, which reported allegations of unlawful killings and misconduct by Australian forces in Afghanistan. The AFP is required to act with independence from the government on decisions like those to investigate the leaks to Oakes, and a Senate inquiry into the matter did not "receive sufficient evidence to substantiate suggestions of a lack of independence" on the AFP's part.⁶⁸ An ABC insider suggested to an author of this report that the AFP is culturally suspicious of the ABC and it is likely that it did not need a government instruction to decide to raid the ABC. Oakes was never charged with a crime, and the published stories were widely accepted as being accurate and in the public interest, but for many months he lived under the threat of prosecution.

The raids and prosecution related to the *Afghan Files* demonstrate the hostility of the Coalition Government towards the ABC is evident not in its action but its inaction. Well-functioning democracies require a free press, and the Coalition Government failed to provide protection from overly aggressive policing. *The New York Times* reporter Damien Cave, based in Sydney, described the situation:

68 The Senate Environment and Communications References Committee, Freedom of the Press (May 2021), p. 86, https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/Committees/ec_ctte/PressFreedom/Report/report.pdf.

70 Jade Macmillan, "ABC Writes to Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton Asking for Action Against Journalists to Stop," ABC News (11 July 2019), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-11/abc-managing-director-david-anderson-writes-to-peter-dutton/11298802>.

71 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate (Friday, 18 October 2019), Environment and Communications References Committee - Press Freedom (Official Hansard), <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Fcommsen%2Fa5b0add0-3f41-410d-865a-ff9c22892bd8%2F0000%22>.

“Even among its peers, Australia stands out. No other developed democracy holds as tight to its secrets, experts say, and the raids are just the latest example of how far the country’s conservative government will go to scare officials and reporters into submission.”⁶⁹

The ABC was told in September 2018 that their journalists were suspects in a crime. The ABC was raided in June 2019, and the ABC Managing Director said in July 2019, “We have written to Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton, who has responsibility for the AFP, asking that any action against the pair cease. And if failing that, then the ABC be briefed on when and how the AFP action will be resolved.”⁷⁰

This correspondence had no apparent effect. Three months later, then-Attorney General Christian Porter instructed the AFP to seek his approval before charging the ABC journalist. That underlined Oakes’ precarious position. As the Senate inquiry into press freedom heard:

Senator Urquhart: *“[A decision to prosecute should not be] left up to the discretion of a Minister who may or may not like the writings of a particular journalist”.*

Ms Power (SBS): *“Also, a new Minister might come in who has a completely different attitude and withdraws the direction. There is no certainty to it and there is no guarantee.”⁷¹*

The Federal Attorney General effectively kept the ABC journalist in a vulnerable position until October 2020 – more than a year later – when the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions and the AFP told the ABC that it was not in the public interest for Oakes or his colleagues to be prosecuted. In their submission to the Senate inquiry into the matter, legal experts Professor Johan Lidberg and Dr Denis Muller said:

“The key question that needs to be posed is why Australia is the only country among the Five Eyes intelligence sharing community, and indeed among mature liberal democratic countries, that sees a need to equip its security and intelligence agencies with powers that extend to issuing and executing search warrants against individual journalists and media organisations justified by hunting down public interest whistleblowers in the name of national security?”⁷²

The pressure on the ABC, in this instance, is the result of government inaction – harm by neglect. Australia’s weak protections for whistleblowing increases the risks for the ABC’s investigative journalists. The raids were an example of journalism being directly criminalised. Despite this problem being vividly illustrated by the raids and condemned by experts, the Federal Government has failed to reform the relevant laws to rectify the problem. Further, at no point did then-Attorney General Porter make a public statement that the journalists should not be prosecuted for doing their jobs accurately and in the public interest.

72 The Senate Environment and Communications References Committee, Freedom of the Press (May 2021), p. 86, https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/Committees/ec_ctte/PressFreedom/Report/report.pdf.



Defamation Actions

It is important to note that defamation actions brought by Christian Porter and Andrew Laming on the ABC or ABC employees were not by government or government officials working in that capacity. However, they do show that people in positions of power within government hold significant animus towards the ABC, and that when they bring legal actions against the ABC, the lines are blurred between their government and private roles.

Christian Porter brought defamation proceedings against the ABC in March 2021. The case was settled, with the ABC admitting no fault and standing by its reporting. Although Porter officially brought the case as a private citizen, his defence's public statements referred to Porter as "the Attorney-General,"⁷³ thereby invoking his role in the government and making explicit the significant overlap between Porter's private and government roles.

In June 2021, Dr Andrew Laming MP (LNP, QLD) brought a defamation action against ABC journalist Louise Milligan, for her tweet regarding a photo taken by Laming of a woman bent over so that her underwear was showing.⁷⁴ Laming's explanation for taking the photo was that he was attempting to illustrate the woman's challenging working conditions. The ABC believed it was vulnerable to being joined to the action and funded Milligan's A\$79,000 payment to Laming as part of a settlement.⁷⁵ The defamation action was brought by Laming in his capacity as a private citizen, though he was an LNP MP at the time, and media coverage referred to Laming in his government role as an MP. Laming had earlier been forced to make a public apology for a separate incident regarding his treatment of two women in his Queensland electorate.⁷⁶

Despite these cases of defamation sitting separate from government, they exemplify how powerful individuals can use a legal mechanism to protect their vested interests, and the cases of Christian Porter and Andrew Laming, resulting in intimidation of the ABC.

73 Michaela Whitbourn, "Christian Porter Launches Defamation Action against the ABC," Sydney Morning Herald (15 March 2021), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/christian-porter-launches-defamation-action-against-the-abc-20210315-p57arg.html>.

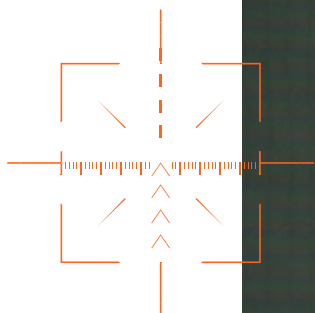
74 Luke Costin, "Liberal MP Sues ABC Journalist Over Tweet," Canberra Times (28 June 2021), <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7316796/liberal-mp-sues-abc-journalist-over-tweet/>.

75 Paul Karp, "No Precedent for ABC's \$200k Payment in Louise Milligan Defamation Dispute, Auditor General Says," The Guardian (18 October 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/oct/18/no-precedent-for-abc-200k-payment-in-louise-milligan-defamation-dispute-auditor-general-says>.

76 Latika Burke, "PM Urged to Act after Laming Apologises for 'Shocking' Trolling Behaviour," Sydney Morning Herald (26 March 2021), <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/pm-urged-to-act-after-laming-apologises-for-shocking-trolling-behaviour-20210325-p57e6y.html>.

1.9 Selective Access

A recent statement by senior Coalition Minister Peter Dutton about ABC journalists says much about the Coalition Government's current attitude towards the ABC: "They don't realise how completely dead they are to me."⁷⁷



An analysis of media appearances by the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and Treasurer – the three most powerful positions in Cabinet – shows a clear skew towards appearing on commercial media over the ABC. This was especially so for the Prime Minister and Treasurer.

Although the analysis below is necessarily focussed on just three senior cabinet members, ABC viewers and listeners will have also become familiar with hosts telling their audiences that they had invited the relevant government minister to appear on the program. These include when Prime Minister Scott Morrison was invited on 7.30 to comment regarding Brittany Higgins and his government's management of her case,⁷⁸ or more recently in regards to the New South Wales COVID-19 Omicron wave⁷⁹, with the invitation refused each time.

77 Paul Karp, "ABC and Guardian 'Dead to Me', Says Dutton after South African Visa Criticism," The Guardian (22 March 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/mar/22/south-africa-risks-food-shortages-if-white-farmers-go-to-australia-nationals-mp-says>.

78 7.30 Report "Open Invitation for Scott Morrison to speak to 7.30" ABC (23 March 2021) <https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/open-invitation-for-scott-morrison-to-speak-to-7.30/13270260>

79 7.30 Report, @abc730, Twitter (3 January 2022) <https://twitter.com/abc730/status/1477939981297405953>

Prime Ministerial Appearances

- The Prime Minister has done appearances on commercial media roughly six times as often as on the ABC (in the 46th Parliament).
- That pattern is becoming more pronounced. It was 4:1 in 2019, up to 6:1 in 2020. For 2021, so far, it is slightly higher at 6.1:1.

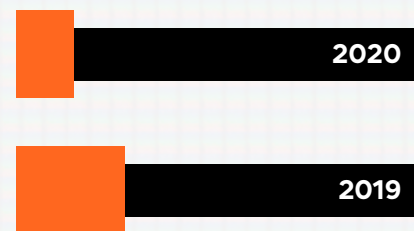
Treasurer Appearances

- The treasurer does appearances on commercial media roughly three times more than on the ABC (2019 election to present).
- That pattern is becoming more pronounced. It was 2:1 in 2019, up to 3:1 in 2020. For 2021, so far, it is roughly 4:1.

Deputy Prime Ministerial Media Appearances

- Current Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce does appearances on commercial media around twice as often as on the ABC.
- Former Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack, during his tenure in the 46th Parliament, appeared on commercial media four times as often as on the ABC.

Prime Minister appearances on the ABC vs. Commercial Media



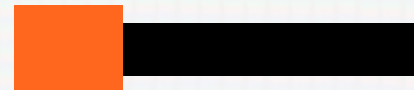
Treasurer appearances on the ABC vs. Commercial Media



Barnaby Joyce



Michael McCormack



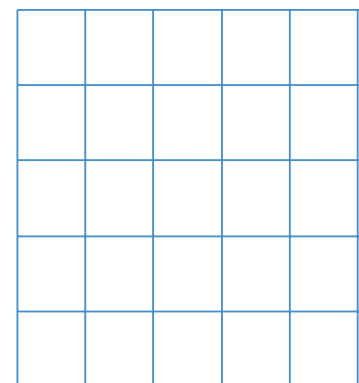
ABC

Commercial Media

It is also worth noting the genre and style of the ABC programs that are able to secure interviews: transcripts show that the Prime Ministerial appearances on *Australia All Over* with Macca in April and November 2020 took a much more human-interest tone than would be expected on, for example, the ABC's flagship current affairs program 7.30.

The analysis shows that Prime Minister Morrison's media strategy is not as blunt and unsubtle as a total boycott of the ABC. The relatively short-format current affairs program *AM* with Sabra Lane is able to secure interviews, but the ratio of appearances shows a disproportionately high ratio in favour of commercial media.

It is also remarkable that when Prime Minister Morrison chose to write a 'public address'-style post, celebrating the end of Victoria's COVID-19 lockdown, it was not published on the national broadcaster's platform but behind a paywall in the privately Murdoch-owned *Herald Sun*, thereby restricting access to anyone who does not choose to either buy a newsstand copy or pay the *Herald Sun*'s subscription (the annual cost of which is A\$364). Like the apparent strategy of the Prime Minister's Office for broadcast media, this is an example of disadvantaging the ABC's online news service.



5.

CONCLUSIONS

If anything is certain for the coming decades, it is that people in Australia will continue to need trustworthy and reliable information and media services to help understand and orient themselves through the coming era of change. They will continue to need the ABC. Our work and social habits have been completely overturned by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the potential of similar outbreaks defining our futures. Australia's economy must decarbonise, and our communities will need to adapt to the global heating that is already unavoidable. We can ride those waves of change and prosper through them, but only with discussion and public debate that must be based on solid, reliable information. Through it all, we have the opportunity to tell uniquely Australian stories that should be cherished for their own sakes and also prized as stimuli for cultural growth. As we look to the mid-century, the ABC's mission to educate, inform, and entertain has never been more relevant and valuable.



The ABC has fearlessly and consistently upheld its commitment to its charter; informing, educating, and entertaining Australians with a comprehensive and high-quality range of essential and accessible services. The ABC has continued to deliver on their charter in some of the most challenging times, when Australian communities have relied on its services more than ever. What makes this exceptional is that the ABC has managed to do so in the face of harassment and pressure by the current government, which has only intensified the approach of governments since 2013.



It is clear the government uses a broad range of tactics and mechanisms in a long-running and relentless campaign to interfere, harass, pressure, and harm the ABC, a reality at total odds with the responsibility to instead support, promote, and enhance a valuable and vital democratic institution. As the new and historical incidents highlighted in this report show, the government’s strategy is not to land a fatal blow but to administer death by a thousand cuts to the ABC – many of them financial, but others legal, editorial, and the boardroom. This steady and pernicious pressure and withdrawal of support is equally as damaging to the ABC as drastic attempts at destruction.

“

Newcastle is the second-largest city in NSW and the seventh-largest city in Australia. At the end of 2014, [in the aftermath of the 2013 budget cuts], ABC Local Radio in Newcastle suffered the loss of one-third of its staff and its status as a ‘metropolitan’ station downgraded to ‘regional’.

The local afternoon program that I had hosted was ‘decommissioned’ and replaced by a networked Sydney program. The importance of local news and information to communities is understood and accepted, yet it beggars belief that ABC Newcastle’s listening area of some 600,000+ people is considered ‘regional’. By comparison, the ACT has a population of around 430,000 people and Hobart of 206,000 people.

In times of crisis, communities turn specifically to local media for information – particularly the ABC. Having worked on-air through several disasters (storms, floods, bushfires), I know only too well how critical timely and accurate local information can be. Local knowledge saves lives.

Emergencies, however, are only one part of the profound and diverse experiences that make a community. Local news and information is also important to businesses, creative industries, social support and inclusion, and equity of information and experience.

Australians need to know that someone will tell them the truth – fearlessly. One effect of continued funding cuts or threats of cuts is the creation of a culture of fear, particularly when covering political issues. False balance is alive and well within the ABC (although denied) but it is the inevitable product of an environment of

fear – the fear of repercussions if ‘the other side of the story’ isn’t given equivalent time. The false balance battles are fought in areas such as politics and elections, climate change, and immunisation. In some cases, e.g. climate change, it took years for the ABC to produce an ‘Editorial Guidance Note’ to give program makers clear information and confidence in how to handle the topic; where the weight of scientific opinion lies.

A similar editorial guidance note on elections requires programs be ‘accurate and impartial’, but also stipulates that ‘making up the difference’ in airtime apportioned to the different parties should be resisted. Programs nonetheless time political interviews to the second as a matter of course to ensure ‘the other side’ is given equal time, largely motivated by fear.

It’s never been more important to fight for a fully-funded and fearlessly independent ABC and to reverse the decades of cuts that have cost local jobs, skills, stories, and opportunities.

The choice you make at this federal election will have ramifications for generations to come.

Vote wisely.

”



Carol Duncan is a former ABC Newcastle broadcaster. She hosted the local afternoon program for almost 14 years.



6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This report shows urgent change is needed to safeguard the independence of the ABC against political interference, and in turn protect our democracy. The current policies and practices in place are insufficient to cultivate an environment where the ABC doesn't just survive under various governments, but thrives – empowered to innovate and adapt, and fulfill its unique role in our democracy. Changes to policies and practices need to be supported by the government in collaboration with the ABC and the communities it serves.

It is a government's duty to empower and protect public broadcasters as a vital democratic and cultural institution. Government hostility – like that shown by the current government to the ABC – is profoundly undemocratic in two ways – it attacks a crucial organ in our public sphere, and it's counter to the needs and demonstrated preferences of the Australian people that value and rely on the ABC so much..

1. Funding

- **The government must immediately restore and fully fund the ABC.** This must be to a level determined by non-partisan and evidence-based assessment, aimed at ensuring the ABC can fulfil its vision and purpose according to its charter, and with the full involvement of, and consultation with, the ABC.
- **Tied-funding must be ceased.** The tied funding mechanism allows undue control by the government to selectively resource specific work from outside the ABC, leaving scope for other work to be left under-resourced or neglected.
- **A stable five-year funding cycle must be introduced, allowing the ABC to resource work and forward-plan with certainty.** Deviations from this rhythm should only occur in extreme circumstances, such as genuine national emergencies, for which an appropriate and formal case must be made.
- **Funding decisions must be supported by evidence, in consultation with the ABC, and made publicly available.** In line with a five-year funding model, a detailed and evidence-based report of the ABC's anticipated costs should be made publicly available. The government and ABC have the responsibility to ensure that this is resourced for public transparency

2. Reviews and Inquiries

- **An end to hostile, partisan, reviews and inquiries.** All inquiries and reviews must be in line with terms of reference decided by a bipartisan body – ideally the Senate References Committee – and under the provision there is sufficient evidence for their establishment. Lead authors must be unbiased, qualified, and non-partisan.
- **The ABC must continue proactively commissioning reviews to identify matters needing independent review.**

3. Board Appointments

- **The government must align with international best practice in its appointment of ABC directors and Chair.** This includes adhering to the arm-length, merit-based process set up in 2013.
- **An end to 'Minister's pick' and 'Prime Minister's pick' exceptions for independent directors and Chairs.** The announcement of any appointment must include a comprehensive and formalised statement of any potential conflicts, including personal and business relationships.
- **A public register of directors' actual and potential conflicts should be supported and resourced to be published on directors' biography pages on the ABC website,** including personal and business relationships with Government, Opposition Ministers, and senior staff.

- **The timing and terms of board appointments should be restored to a steady rhythm and comply with protections that prevent partisan considerations.** The end state should be independent directors and a chair with five year appointments (with a maximum of two terms), but with a set yearly start (1 July for example), and appropriate staggering.
- **The government's independent nominations committee must ensure that new directors have been identified and appointed in time to keep all board seats full.** In the unusual circumstance of a board member resigning or being dismissed, their replacement should 'see out' the original director's remaining term, and would be eligible for two subsequent full terms.

4. Editorial and Operational Pressure and Interference

- **The Government must comply with the appropriate channels for complaints (or praise) about the ABC's work** in accordance with the established democratic mechanisms in place. This includes recorded and archived correspondence and meetings between legislators and ABC directors, using the ABC's formal complaints channels, and Senate Estimates.
- **The Government should support the ABC in publishing a record of ad-hoc contact between the ABC directors and Government Ministers, Opposition Ministers, and senior staff.** This would include meetings that take place in Parliament House as a normal part of the ABC executive and independent directors' engagement with elected officials. It would also include phone calls and texts to and from ABC directors. The government should be on notice that attempts at pressure, harassment, and interference towards ABC executives and senior editorial staff would also be logged and made public.
- **Government and Opposition representatives must adhere to appropriate levels of respect and good faith, when pursuing transparency and engagement.** Although institutional culture cannot be set by laws, elected representatives have a civic responsibility to carry out public debate with respect and in good faith. Senators must adhere to their democratic duty to use Senate Estimates hearings and questions on notice for genuine information gathering and accountability. That democratic duty extends to Senators' and MPs' conduct in public fora, such as the ABC's competitive media, social media, and public events.

- **The Government and Opposition have a responsibility to not attempt to interfere, harass, or pressure the ABC over editorial and operational decisions.** Where this is not adhered to, the ABC must be empowered to support sections 1 and 3 of its editorial policies, which cover independence and complaints respectively. This may include publishing guidance notes on best practice for executives and senior editorial staff to handle pressure and attempted interference from government. This would include definitions of legitimate contact as part of the reporting and fact-checking process – that is, normal journalistic processes – versus communication with intent of lobbying for editorial or operational interference. These standards should be encouraged and supported by government representatives and upheld by the ABC, leaning towards transparency and blocking pressure outside the formal channels referred above.

5. Access

- **The Government has a responsibility to default towards making themselves available for interviews on the ABC.** Government has a responsibility to communities to be accessible to the nation's most far-reaching national broadcaster. They must be made available and not deny access to the ABC beyond reasonable means in order for the ABC to fulfill their duty informing communities across the country.
- **The ABC should be supported and resourced to publicly disclose when government representatives deny access.** When representatives are approached for comment or an interview and do not make themselves available within reasonable context and timeframe, the ABC should be encouraged to publish on its programs websites when this is the case.

7.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCING

This report has been researched and written according to an overarching principle to be accurate, fair, and representative of the evidence. To achieve this, wherever possible, the sources of facts and evidence for interpretations have been footnoted, and/or explained in the text itself. This would allow fair readers of the report to reproduce the findings.

In a small number of cases, specific facts or overall impressions have been based on firsthand interviews with people directly involved in the relevant matter but who have asked to remain anonymous. Where that has been the case, it has been indicated in the text. Any anecdotes, assertions, and perspectives that the authors were not able to verify via at least one other source have been omitted.

The ‘typology’ of harms, pressure, interference, and harassment itself, which forms the headings in Section 4, was reviewed by a number of experts, including leading media academics and observers, a former senior ABC executive, a senior federal civil servant who works in the communications domain, and others (the typology was refined as a result of that consultation, and further refined during the research period).

The ABC was formally given the opportunity to comment on a late draft of this report, well before the report’s target publication date, and elected not to comment. A number of other stakeholders were contacted, and their feedback has been considered and incorporated where relevant and justified.
