

The ABC's partisan preferences are not limited to Australian politics.

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The taxpayer-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) occupies a position in Australia similar to that enjoyed by the BBC in the United Kingdom.

The ABC runs two free-to-air national television channels, four national radio networks, nine metropolitan radio stations in major cities, 51 radio stations across rural and regional Australia and a range of Internet and subscription services.

No Australian commercial network approaches the ABC in terms of reach and, arguably, influence. It is well-funded, amply staffed and under more or less constant criticism for projecting a left-wing take on just about every aspect of Australian life that it touches.

Grahame Morris, a chief of staff to former conservative Prime Minister John Howard, once described the national broadcaster as, "our enemies talking to our friends."

The recently retired presenter of ABC TV's national gardening show was a former member of the Communist Party. The ABC, you see, takes no chances. Even when you were invited to tiptoe through the tulips, the ABC provided an ideologically reliable guide.

Obviously, the political and cultural disposition of the national broadcaster, as it sucks up taxpayer dollars, is an important and legitimate area of public debate. The left does not see it that way. Conservative criticism of the national broadcaster's political and cultural perspectives is usually brushed off by the ABC and its friends as an attack on the "independence" of its journalists, producers and managers.

But an obligation to provide balance and diversity of opinion is enshrined in the ABC's charter; and the corporation's editorial policies and style guide set out rules for news and current affairs journalists in an attempt to ensure that the obligation is met.

The ABC's partisan preferences are not limited to Australian politics. Consider this comment in the lead up to the 2004 U.S. presidential election from Red Symons, the presenter of one of its prime time radio programs:

"774 ABC Melbourne is, of course, supporting Senator John Kerry in his endeavor to become President of the United States. We can't take sides in

Australia, but I've had it from management we can take sides elsewhere in the world. We want Kerry to win."

The Australian chapter of Democrats Abroad would have been chuffed to know that.

There are broadcasting codes that can be used to try to hold the ABC accountable to its charter. The process is far from satisfactory because, in the first instance, the ABC itself is the arbiter of complaints made about it.

So between 2005 and 2008 the Howard Government attempted to use the Senate Estimates Committee process to take the problem of political bias straight to the corporation's managing director.

Over the three-year period, the Government tabled more than 1,000 examples of ABC journalists violating the organization's editorial guidelines and style guide—its rule books for providing fair and balanced reporting. The examples were extracted from a very small part of the network's output—the program transcripts that the ABC makes available online—and thus represented only a very small percentage of the total network programming. Unquestionably, a complete analysis of ABC output would have yielded thousands more.

A particularly egregious example of ABC mischief had occurred in February 2003 when Prime Minister Howard visited then Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri in the lead up to the war with Iraq.

In a meeting with Mr. Howard, the president of the world's largest Muslim nation gave an undertaking that her Government would explain to the Indonesian public that a war on Iraq would not be regarded as a war on Islam.

However, ABC News, broadcast across Australia and beamed into Asia, that evening reported, "Well, there's support for Iraq tonight from the world's largest Muslim nation. Indonesia claims a war on Iraq would be a war on Islam."

The ABC was forced to run a correction the next day, but the damage to the national interest had been done.

The Howard Government's efforts to modify the behavior of the ABC resulted in a number of smoke-and-mirrors efforts to address the issue of bias in its current affairs broadcasting.

However, one year ago, the 11-year-old centre-right Liberal-National coalition of John Howard was defeated in a federal election by the centre-left Australian Labor Party (ALP) led by Kevin Rudd.

On election night, the ABC's TV anchor and network icon Kerry O'Brien, on air live from the national tally room, declared that there had been a big swing "to the ABC" in Bennelong, the electorate of Prime Minister John Howard.

The gaffe, if O'Brien's comment had, indeed, been unintended, provided an eloquent metaphor for the symbiotic relationship between the ABC and the ALP.

Maxine McKew, the ALP candidate who went on to win Bennelong from the prime minister, had been a 30-year veteran journalist and presenter at the ABC. She left the network at the end of 2006, laughing off suggestions that she intended to stand as a Labor candidate in the federal election.

Two months out of the ABC, McKew joined the office of Labor Party leader Kevin Rudd; and one month after that she announced her intention to contest Bennelong for the ALP.

Kerry O'Brien, the election night anchor, presents a 30-minute national current affairs program four nights a week on ABC TV. In the 1970s, O'Brien himself was on the staff of a Labor Party leader.

On Sunday mornings, ABC TV presents "Insiders," a national review of the week in politics anchored by Barrie Cassidy. In the 1980s, Cassidy served as press secretary to Labor Party Prime Minister Bob Hawke.

ABC Radio National has Phillip Adams, another former member of the Communist Party, covering politics and current affairs for about seven hours a week. One of his regular guests is Bruce Shapiro, contributing editor to The Nation.

The gratitude of one Labor prime minister for the election-time efforts of the ABC is recorded in the Cabinet diary of a former minister: "The ABC deserves a decent go because it has done well by the ALP in the last two elections," Labor's Paul Keating said in 1992.

The Rudd Labor Government has promised to restore a staff member to the ABC board of directors, a position that was abolished by the Howard Government. It has also said it will depoliticize the ABC board; which really means it will stack it with its own ideological allies and friends.

The ABC, after almost 12 years of confrontation with a conservative foe, once again has in Canberra a government that many of its foot-soldiers are happy to believe in.