

Opinion

Left to its devices, it's their ABC



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It was one of those curious occasions when the truth popped out and hung there on the airwaves. I was doing an ABC radio interview last week. A listener sent in a text message – which was read out – suggesting the ABC should engage me as a radio host. I said: “I don’t think I have the right political views for the ABC.” It was not said with any malice, just an observation of an obvious fact.

If I had been on my guard I would not have said it. The ABC does not like the idea that its presenters have a common political outlook. Although the media like to give criticism, they do not like to receive it. And if you criticise the media you can expect rough treatment in return. Experienced media hands will always advise you that no matter how bad your treatment, never complain about it: that will only lead to worse.

But I was not on my guard. I am not now at the mercy of the media so I can afford to say what everyone on the conservative side of politics knows: the ABC is hostile territory.

I once walked into ABC headquarters at Ultimo and was confronted by an employee who began hissing at me. The station manager was so shocked he organised a written apology from management. He told me the employee would be “counselled”. I wasn’t shocked, I knew I was on foreign soil. I never worried about what occurred off air. I worried about what would be broadcast.

The on-air interviewers for the ABC are generally aggressive, which is a pity. In my experience, if a subject is relaxed and lulled into dropping their guard, they are more likely to make revealing disclosures. With the ABC, the line of questioning is always predictable. It

always comes from the Labor/Green perspective.

Labor will tell you sometimes it gets a hard time on the ABC – and sometimes it does if it is perceived to be betraying “true Labor principles” or being too “pro-business” or being insensitive to the environment. But Labor will never be criticised for entrenching union power, or going soft on law enforcement, or spending money it doesn’t have.

There are rural and regional programs that stick to local issues and leave the politics aside. But the flagship national current affairs programs – *AM*, *PM*, and *The 7.30 Report* – have a consistent editorial perspective.

The 7.30 Report has been a good training ground for politicians, producing a Labor premier of Western Australia, Alan Carpenter, and a Northern Territory Labor chief minister, Clare Martin. The former Victorian Labor minister Mary Delahunty and Maxine McKew have also worked for ABC news and current affairs. *The 7.30 Report* is hosted by the former Labor staffer Kerry O’Brien. I have no objection to former staffers working in the media. It’s just that you notice the preponderance of those from a particular side at the ABC.

When I dropped my inconvenient truth in last week’s interview it didn’t provoke any outrage or comment. It just hung there. There was a mild effort by my interlocutor to defend the corporation. He pointed out there is a Liberal employed on ABC local radio in Perth. Which says it all. It is quite an oddity that they know about this man in Melbourne. Out of the 4500 ABC employees, they know there is one Liberal.

The ABC would do well to get a second or a third (and no, I am not interested). I have no doubt opening up the airwaves would open the ABC to wider sections of the public. There would be screams of protest from the true believers who want no plurality to the current line. But some different opinion would spice things up. It is possible to have divergent views in an organisation that broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Five nights a week Phillip Adams broadcasts on Radio National. He claims he has been close to every Labor leader from Whitlam to Beazley. Robert Manne has described Adams as “the emblematic figurehead of the pro-Labor left intelligentsia”. Back in 2001, the ABC’s then managing director declared he would look for a right-wing Phillip Adams to balance that program. It must be an exhaustive search. The new managing director is now in his fourth year of office. Apparently, the corporation is still looking.

I predict they will still be looking under the next managing director. There appears nothing urgent about the task of getting balance into the ABC. But if it did find a right-wing Phillip Adams, we would then have a Liberal in Perth and one in Sydney too.

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