

Australia: Rallies against ABC/SBS cuts promote Labor and Greens

Oliver Campbell
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Several thousand people attended rallies this week against the Abbott government's cuts of more than \$300 million over the next five years to the budgets of the two public broadcasters, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).

Around 3,000 people participated in the Sydney protest on Saturday, while some 2,000 attended the Melbourne event the following day. Smaller rallies were held in cities and regional centres throughout the country, with more planned this week.

Mark Scott, the ABC's managing director, announced yesterday more than 400 redundancies, close to 10 percent of the ABC's workforce, along with significant changes to programming and news coverage, including the axing of TV production in South Australia.

The cuts, which follow years of restructuring and corporatisation of the ABC and SBS, are not only aimed at slashing government spending, but at pressuring the broadcasters, particularly the ABC, to function ever more openly as mouthpieces of government policy.

Far from advancing a genuine opposition to this agenda, the rallies organised by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), had the character of Labor Party-Greens election campaign events. Senior members of the two parties were given platforms to posture as opponents of the Abbott government's program of austerity.

Federal Labor leader Bill Shorten was the keynote speaker in Melbourne, while his deputy Tanya Plibersek spoke in Sydney.

Both couched their remarks in demagogic, nationalist terms. Shorten declared that the ABC "is our national

identity, our national soul!" He said Abbott and his government were "savages ripping at the heart of our institution."

Plibersek said the ABC's role was to ensure "that Australian kids can grow up with Australian accents, knowing Australian stories."

By contrast, the sentiments of those who attended the rallies reflected concerns over the loss of jobs and programming, as well as the further narrowing of the cultural and political scope of the public broadcasters. Although always operating within well-defined political limits, the ABC and SBS have offered some alternative to the corporate media.

Labor's opposition to the Coalition government's cuts is entirely hypocritical. Some of the deepest cutbacks to the ABC took place under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. Operational funding fell from \$1.1 billion in 1985 to \$750 million in 1996. While the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments made modest funding increases between 2007 and 2013, much of that was dedicated to furthering government policy, notably via the contract to run the Australia Network, focussed on Asia.

The Greens were featured on the protest platforms as well—Senator Scott Ludlum in Sydney and MP Adam Bandt in Melbourne.

Both delivered populist denunciations of the relations between the Abbott government and big business. "Can you think of a government, at any time in Australian history that has been more thoroughly and transparently owned by the top end of town?" Ludlum exclaimed.

In fact, the previous Labor minority government, propped up by the Greens, was completely geared to the interests of the corporate and financial elite—from its imposition of a carbon tax to the austerity measures to slash social spending. Both Greens representatives

insisted that the critical question was the ousting of the Coalition government at the next elections—i.e., the re-election of another Greens-backed Labor government.

Speaking at Sydney’s rally, Quentin Dempster, a prominent ABC journalist, underscored just how much the ABC is part of the political and media establishment. He opposed the cuts but expressed his support for the government’s aggressive foreign policy, favourably acknowledging Canberra’s involvement in the US-led provocations against Russia. He repeated the unsubstantiated claim that the Putin regime was responsible for the downing of flight MH-17 over Ukraine.

In a fawning appeal to the government, Dempster noted that Coalition governments established both the ABC and SBS. He called on ministers to recognise their importance to the “institutional strength of our democracy within the sovereign state of Australia”—that is, to maintaining the charade of bourgeois parliamentary democracy.

The Sydney rally concluded on a pathetic note, with attendees urged to flood Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s office with “I love the ABC” postcards, before a rendition of the theme song of the children’s Playschool program.

WSWS reporters spoke to rally participants in Sydney and Melbourne.

In Sydney, a 30-year-old programmer, said: “It feels like the Abbott government is just in bed with the big corporate entities. A first-world society should have the right to a public broadcasting service that doesn’t have to please advertisers like the corporate stations. In their terms of reference, it says that the ABC is meant to be for the people.

“The problem is that everyone knows that there’s no fundamental differences between our two major parties—the Labor Party’s not acting as an opposition. There are a whole series of controversial issues, and Shorten’s just going along with it.”

In Melbourne, **Kusdi**, a freelance photographer originally from Indonesia, said the cuts to the ABC were being imposed because “they don’t want the public to have access to independent information. When the people don’t know what’s going on, the minority, the rich, are able to control the majority.” He added: “They’re cutting education and health spending as well.”

James said: “I am working as an actor but these cuts will definitely reduce my chances of getting work. Drama will be seriously affected. We need to have, to keep, an impartial associated press. It should not be influenced by one party or the other. These cuts and censorship, taken to extremes, would verge on dictatorship. I don’t want it. [Rupert] Murdoch has enough control already.

“Look at Julian Assange being persecuted. They want to put a face to it. WikiLeaks is the showpiece for the attacks on press freedom. The politicians make all the promises. They are only puppets on a string for the real people in control. They want to censor films to prevent political views being shown.”



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