

# Australia: When is Free Speech Unfree? When it involves the Abbott Government

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*Let's get a few things straight. Australia, thin-lipped conformist society that it is, possesses minimal freedoms on that marked concept of liberal democracy called freedom of speech. For those who laud the Racial Discrimination Act, free speech is more than a racial matter. For those who think there is some implied right to communicate on political matters, free speech is more than politics. At its core is the value, not of tolerance, but tolerating intolerance. At best, Australian free speech is an bite size entrée dressed up as a weighty main meal.*

Nasty, unpleasant and vicious thoughts may be, but forbid them at your peril. The authoritarian flunkies will be around the corner to nab you for what they, in turn, designate as appropriate.

But on the national broadcaster's customary Monday showing of Q&A, where the nation supposedly listens to the latest chatterbox line-up on matters of minimal importance, things got rather more exciting. It featured an encounter between a government member, Liberal MP Steve Ciobo and an individual, Zaky Mallah, who had pleaded guilty to attempting to kill an officer of Australia's domestic spy service, ASIO.

There was nothing that should have suggested Mallah as the cast bogeyman. As a young man, fundamentalism seemed enticing. He was acquitted of two counts of planning a terrorist attack. He did travel to Syria. His copybook was blotted for threatening to kidnap and kill an ASIO officer. He then reformed, so much so he does deem those behind the Islamic State "wankers".

Then came the exchange. Having been the first to be tried, and then acquitted under the anti-terrorism laws introduced by the Howard government in the last decade, Ciobo suggested that he would be content to see Mallah loose his citizenship. Mallah shot back: "The Liberals have just justified to many Australian Muslims in the community tonight to leave and go to Syria and join ISIL because of ministers like him."

Prime Minister Tony Abbott could not wait. An inquiry into the program, one he claimed involved a "lefty lynch mob," was immediately announced. Themes of treachery proved powerful. "I think many, many millions of Australians would feel betrayed by our national broadcaster right now, and I think that the ABC does have to have a long, hard look at itself, and to answer a question which I have posed before: whose side are you on?"

The government's preferred view is to have a compliant broadcaster, diligent in percolating its views through various formats. Scrutiny of dissenting views is demanded; censorship is requested. Whose side a person is on is always answered in advance: that of the

government.

This is US naval officer Stephen Decatur's recipe about his still newly established state: "My country, right or wrong." Carl Schurz would add his bit before the US Senate in February 1872, a somewhat more balanced corrective – "if right to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right."

Abbott channels his tyrannical urges all too clearly. The government has become rather attracted to the idea of the thought crime. Think ISIS and of mean, keen ideas of a theocracy, and then you must be, somewhere, a mutating criminal ready to lose your citizenship. (Yes, that decision is to be made by the insentient dark matter of ministerial indiscretion.) Dislike Australia, or how it is run, then something must be generally wrong with you.

Unfortunately for those believing that civil liberties do matter, not merely to the select view, but to all, the display on Q&A did get its reactionary boost. Complaints were made to the broadcaster. According to an ABC spokesman, "There have been a number of threatening phone calls." A caller to radio station ABC 774 in Melbourne suggested on Wednesday that, "That guy the other night... I was a little undecided if we needed the legislation [stripping citizenship]. We definitely do." [1]

The venal tabloids did the rest, claiming a vast conspiracy of unpatriotic indecency at work within the ABC. The Murdoch machine went on a defamation drive, superimposing the ABC logo on a flag held by a purported terrorist. Suddenly, free speech was the problem, even if being a bigot, according to the Attorney-General George Brandis, is an Australian's given right.

Miranda Devine wrote of how a platform had been granted to Mallah, and in so doing gave him even more publicity. "Yes, the vast hordes of journalists and producers employed by the ABC know exactly who Zaky Mallah is. But they don't care." Of course, it mattered to Devine that Mallah was a reader of "Fairfax allegiance" rather than the papers of her employer, Rupert Murdoch. [2]

Even those who have defended the broader editorial approach of the ABC do so in a backhanded way. One anodyne response by Denis Muller of the Centre for Advancing Journalism at the University of Melbourne suggests that editorial matters were sloppy – allowing Mallah on the show was improper and should have been duly screened. [3] Surely this is not more so than any government minister that endorses deportation of citizens and stripping them of their citizenship without due process, whatever the evidence, whatever the scrutiny. Extremism comes in all shades.

The ABC, in allowing something called debate to take place, was doing precisely what it is designed to do: foster discussion. The ABC's managing director Mark Scott has explained, as if he even needed to, that "free speech principles mean giving platforms to those with whom we fundamentally disagree." [4]

For that reason, it is being crucified. The irony of ironies is that it is being done by the very ghouls who claim to be free speech's arch protectors. This is not my country right or wrong, so much, as G. K. Chesterton observed, "my mother, drunk or sober."

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## Notes

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-06-26/cassidy-the-old-tony-abbott-is-back/6574296>

[2] <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/opinion/abc-doing-the-devils-work-in-giving--terrorist-sympathiser-zaky-mallah-a-voice/story-fni0cwl5-1227412165676>

[3] <https://theconversation.com/abbott-spins-tangled-web-of-free-speech-and-editorial--judgement-43775>

[4] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/abc-offices-in-security-lockdown--after-threats-following-qa-zaky-mallah-episode-20150625-ghy48b.html>

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