Cremorne NSW 2090

18/5/2013

Mr. Gerard Henderson
Executive Director
The Sydney Institute
41 Phillip Street
Sydney 2000

Dear Mr. Henderson,

I am sending this letter c/-The Sydney Institute rather than to the Sydney Morning Herald as I am sure it will find you more directly. However, the contents refer to your articles in the Herald rather than to events or speakers at the Institute.

In fact I am writing on behalf of a number of staunch Liberal friends who are finding your continual anti-ABC articles in the SMH to be totally against what they believe the Liberal party once stood for.
And indeed totally contrary to the programmes they watch on ABC TV.
Please read on. You may find it interesting.

We all believe in democracy, free enterprise, the capitalistic system, freedom of speech and worship. For myself, I have attended Sydney Institute evenings as a guest of members, have had an extremely successful career in marketing and advertising in Sydney, Melbourne, London, New York and Hong Kong with some of the world's best known international companies; Nestle, Unilever, Coca-Cola, Colgate Palmolive etc etc.
As well in my own Sydney retail businesses.
I have also been heavily involved in the advertising for a NSW Liberal Party election campaign.
So I am hardly a leftie.

Working on Madison Avenue and eight trips to the U.S. have seen to that.
Plus the horrors of Mao and Stalin's communist regimes.

As far as current domestic politics are concerned we believe Gillard shouldn't have become PM and the government's many stuff ups appalling.
Yet more than a few of us have to admit some of her policies have been what was needed in certain areas.

IN YOUR OPINION THAT WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY MAKE US TRAITOROUS LEFTIES LIKE AMANDA VANSTONE.

Don't think so.
We just happen to believe there is an unprecedented, abysmally low level to which discussion of political matters has descended into today.
Name calling, past personal histories (whether on the left or right) and derision above logical discussion. Especially in the media.

So, can we make the following points and ask the subsequent questions.

(1) **You have written that not one of the ABC's "prime products" have a conservative presenter, producer or editor.**

How can anyone view the ABC TV's current affairs programmes such as

(a) Canberra Press Club broadcasts where both left and right have equal time.
(b)"Q&A" where the audience's political persuasions are displayed.
(c) Plus the un-edited ABC broadcasts of Parliamentary Question Time –

and say the ABC's prime current affairs programmes are all "left" influenced?

(Incidentally, where are the commercial TV channels' democratic broadcasts of Parliament or Canberra Press Club talks? Or audience participation Q&A type programmes? Nowhere.)

(d) "7.30". Those on the left say it's rightish. On the right say it's leftish. Perhaps it's both?

(e) "At Home With Julia". Was this inanely unfunny series a dastardly leftish plot? More like a right-wing idea gone bad.

(f) The Drum – boring, not leftish, certainly with appearances from Tim Wilson of the extreme right wing Institute Of Public Affairs etc.

(g) ABC 7pm News. 24 News
Both "left"? Hardly think so!

(h) Australian Story? Four Corners?
Both "left"? Hardly think so.

(i) Lateline? Insiders. Both "left'? Hardly think so.

(i) Media Watch. You say it has had all leftish presenters over the years.
If so, we have missed their insidiously left messages completely.
As far as we have observed there has been an unusually well balanced presentation of media foibles and inaccuracies badly needed in this communication age.
If all those presenters you named were aiming at a left communication they seemed to have failed miserably.
Take the current host. If anyone can declare him leftish after his declaration of belief in free speech, the free market etc on May 7 and his presentation on May 14 they must indeed be approaching an advanced stage of paranoia. Surely criticism of the media is not necessarily the sign of a leftish stance, just one of publicising both sides of the story? Is the media to be above valid criticism?

BELIEVE ME, IF ALL OR ANY OF THE ABOVE LISTED ABC TV PROGRAMMES WERE CONTINUALLY LITTERED WITH LEFTISH MESSAGES AND BIAS WE WOULD BACK YOU TO THE HILT.

HOWEVER, IF YOU MAINTAIN ALL OR THE MAJORITY OF ABC TV'S CURRENT AFFAIRS PROGRAMMES ARE "LEFT" INFLUENCED YOU ARE IGNORING CURRENT REALITY. AND WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, WE FEEL YOUR ARTICLES ARE EXTREMELY SELECTIVE AND MISLEADING TO THOSE OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC WHO PERHAPS DO NOT WATCH THE ABC.

Even the headline "Left-footed ABC" on your SMH article of 7 May implies the whole of the ABC to be "left". Anyone perusing it would take that as your message. As you know, readership of newspaper headlines drops alarmingly when it comes to the number of readers who read the whole or most of the following copy. A trick often perfected by the Herald itself and even by such paragons of journalistic integrity as The Daily Telegraph (many of my Liberals want me to stress they never read it and regard it a rag but amongst us we monitor it).

(2) I hesitate to mention this, but the attitudes of some of my Liberal friends have also been shaken by occasionally clicking on to your Media Watch Dog website. Against the standards of the ABC's Media Watch over the past years (when it has often criticized the ABC itself), the Dog does not attract.
"Puerile." "Petty." "Policy-discussion barren." Their quotes, not mine.

(3) If your worry is that the ABC is a taxpayer funded body, would you honestly and with a straight face present the offerings of the commercial TV channels' nightly "current affairs" shows and American lowest-common-denominator programmes as preferable to ABC TV programmes?
I have to say my Liberal friends are eternally grateful for the ABC's existence in comparison with the at times excruciatingly low standard of both commercial TV and radio. Moreover, they certainly do not regard either Alan Jones or Andrew Bolt as presenting the Liberal point of view but a more extreme and ranting far-right position.
So are my friends all misguided, intellectual snobs?
No way. Not one of them. They're Liberals. North Shore Liberals.
Who also watch SBS for the same reason they watch the ABC. The excellent internationally produced movies, documentaries and adult scripted shows.

In complete contrast, commercial radio and TV commentator Andrew Bolt called for the disbanding of the ABC and his followers write: *"The ABC and SBS networks must simply be eliminated. This will remove the largest mass propaganda machine from the Communists."*

How anyone can view ANY or ALL of the ABC TV or SBS's TV programmes and come up with the notion they are a Communist propaganda machine defies all logic. Many of SBS's audience would include people who have fled communist persecution in both Europe and Asia,
The lunar right? Then why is he/she a supporter of Bolt? Who professes to be "middle of the road"?
We could add many insane supporter comments from the IPA's web site as well. They are incredibly inane. That is what worries us enormously.

Even the most ardent supporters of Bolt and Jones would not describe either as middle of the road, despite the couple's protestations to the contrary.
In fact, we believe you did yourself a grave disservice by linking their stance to your own in one of your SMH pieces.

Bolt and Jones et al could unwittingly be producing a generation of extreme right wing followers, not conservative and liberal at all. The number and frequency of their fact-free, hysterically worded blogs is very worrying.
Free speech today appears to have been reduced to venomous 140 character Twitters.

(4) Why do so many Liberals think the media right is becoming the extreme right, not conservative or even middle of the road?

One of our group recalled an English "Spectator" journalist visiting Australia last year who appeared on Q&A. Writing about his experiences he made the point how surprised he was to find Tony Jones, whom he had been told was one of the many lefties at the ABC, was not "left" at all but open to all sides of the political spectrum.

Donald MacDonald must have had a similar experience. Perhaps he discovered the den of ABC leftie iniquity was not as firmly based in reality as supposed. Perhaps those with personal left or right views do not always let those views intrude into their work as much as their backgrounds would lead us to believe? That has been all of our personal experiences in the highly competitive business world. Playing the man instead of the ball does not always work.

As for your inference that Mr. Scott must be allowing a leftie ABC agenda, the disclosure he worked for the Greiner Liberal government and Terry Metherell seems to cast that opinion somewhat in doubt? Indeed, is the fact Scott has enlarged the digital ABC network in line with commercial TV the real reason for the so-called conservative's animosity towards the ABC?

(5) ABC RADIO.

Only a small number of us listen to 702. Some of the views expressed on it seem to cover a wide spectrum. Whether they are all "left" is another question. (You complain of Vanstone at 4pm, how about apparently leftie Spencer at 5.30am!)

If it is really is the case that ABC radio is totally "left" as you maintain, do you honestly believe Australia's freedom of speech is being threatened by eight or so ABC presenters, directors and producers against the combined audience of the right wing Murdoch press (65% of our national print media) and the immensely greater audience of national commercial radio with its Alan Jones, Ray Hadley, Andrew Bolt and their fellow interstate commentators?

Moreover, do you not feel the possible reason there are "lefties" on ABC radio is to balance the fact there are no regular "left" commentators on the by far larger national audience of commercial radio?

The ABC's radio audience is dwarfed by the vastly more numerous commercial radio stations which broadcast right-wing shock jocks.

In fact, a very good argument could be made that ABC radio actually provides a much needed balance for Australian radio listeners.

(6) Are you also saying all the presenters, producers or editors you name as "left" on ABC radio should be fired and only "conservative" personnel be allowed on ABC radio?
This would seem to smack of outright censorship.

THE PUBLIC

(7) We don't know the bona fides of Essential Research but we see their polling regularly shows the ABC a standout performer on TRUST against other media.
Example. ABC TV news and current affairs trusted by 70% of respondents.
As against 48% trust for commercial TV news and current affairs.
Trust in ABC radio and news 67%. As against commercial radio and news 46%.
("Essential Research Trust in Media" figures from Dec 2010 onwards, Google).

Such research aside, my personal experience and that of many of my Liberal group who have also worked on the fringes of commercial radio and TV over many years has only confirmed this general feeling regarding the public's trust in the ABC.

(8) IN ALL YOUR ARTICLES YOU NEVER MENTION THE FOLLOWING.

What are the total viewership figures for all commercial TV channels (all right rather than left leaning organisations) across Australia as against the ABC's total TV audience?

What is the total reach of commercial radio networks (all or mostly right wing) across Australia against the ABC radio reach?

The Murdoch press controls around 65% of Australia's print media .
With complete dominance in many capital cities.
How many newspapers does the ABC own and publish? None of course.

No one wants to admit to these basic facts. Why?

(9) What are the total audience figures for the ABC radio and TV public affairs

programmes against the total audiences for all commercial radio and TV public affairs programmes across the country?

In Sydney ABC TV has TWO adult channels against NINE commercial channels.

ABC's one Sydney radio current affairs/talk back, 702, is vastly outnumbered by the number of commercial radio stations.

If you listed all the "right" commercial TV and radio presenters, producers and editors against the ABC's they would be far, far more numerous, would they not?

(10) Question. Would all those thousands, perhaps millions, who listen to Alan Jones, watch Andrew Bolt and their counterparts across Australia and read the Murdoch press every day across every state have become quite pro the Labor government if those same media outlets had been praising Labor policies for the past five years?

Indeed, some of my Liberal friends have themselves admitted the Coalition's rise in the polls may have less to do with Tony Abbott's personal efforts but to the barrage of anti-Labor messages by the Murdoch press and commercial radio over the past five years.

Some retailers have even complained in discussions that the talking down of the economy and the preaching of doom and gloom by Alan Jones and co over the past years have unwittingly helped create the retail slowdown. Who wants to spend amidst talk of the country going to the dogs?
An heretical thought perhaps but....

(11) Incidentally, in the name of balance and freedom of speech, do you ever complain to the commercial radio stations and TV channels about their surfeit of right-wing commentators like Alan Jones, Ray Hadley, Andrew Bolt etc., and factual inaccuracies in their nightly "current affairs" TV programmes?

(12)" LEFT", "RIGHT" AND "CONSERVATIVE"

Above all, so many of my Liberal acquaintances wish you would define the difference between "conservative" and "right". And "left."

They note you never use the term "right" but employ "left" non-stop.
You seem ashamed to nominate the Coalition as a "right-wing" party. Odd.

Is the word "conservative' intended to position the Coalition as a middle-of-the-road party? To many in this day of unrelenting, ever challenging change throughout the world, "conservative" may not have the best of connotations.
I know many, many Liberal voters who are proudly right wing. Are they supporting the wrong party? And have I been voting Liberal all these years when it is not right wing? Pity.

Because we also have to record the fact that too many Liberals we've spoken to believe both the left and right sides in Parliament have lost their original beliefs and we are witnessing the lowest level of political debate in years.

And anyone who believes in the absolute truth of one side over the other is deluding themselves.

In fact, one went so far as to say:
"Frankly, I don't care if the ABC is full of lefties as long as they air the quality programmes they do – as against the unmitigated crap that is most of commercial radio and TV. And how do such ABC lefties produce so many good, in depth current affairs programmes compared to the commercial channels?"

He then went on to name the type of ABC public affairs programmes listed above in (1) as politically balanced and fair in their coverage in comparison with commercial TV and radio airings like The Bolt Show. And he is a Liberal.

(13) FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Gerard, you may be surprised to hear it, but as Liberals we feel we have to say Australia is still a democracy and the "left" has the same right to exist as the "right". This is not the opinion of the right wing shock jocks for sure.

We need more open debate, not less, From both sides. With far less sweeping generalizations, spin and venom.

"The Australian Communications and Media Authority is a threat to freedom of speech and should be shut down" said Chris Berg, Research Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs on his web site - along with many factually untruthful statements on the authority's findings in an Alan Jones case.
Contacted re these he would not reply.
Interesting, as the Institute has on its agenda the breaking up of the ABC because it is a danger to free speech!

The recently formed Australian Taxpayers Association backed by some prominent Liberal MPs also declared a main plank of its agenda was a defense against the threat to Australia's freedom of speech.
Asked who was threatening it they would not reply.

All this has led some of my long-term Liberal friends to say quite openly in discussions that it seems a real democracy for some on the right/conservative side today seems to be where there are no "left" or "left of centre" opinions at all.
In print,
on radio
or TV.

And especially not on the ABC whose charter says it must strive for balance.
And these are long time Liberals! (who will all vote Liberal in the next election for a guaranteed whopping Coalition win).

SUPPOSITION. IF BERG, BOLT, JONES ET AL HAD THEIR WISHES GRANTED AND HAD THE ABC (AND COMMUNIST SBS) DISBANDED, WHAT COULD BE THE RESULT?

NO MORE PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION TIME BROADCASTS
NO MORE CANBERRA PRESS CLUB BROADCASTS
NO MORE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION Q&A-TYPE BROADCASTS
NO MORE MEDIA WATCH OR ANY PROGRAMME LIKE IT
NO MORE AUSTRALIAN STORY
NO MORE FOUR CORNERS WITH ITS WIDE RANGE OF TOPICS BOTH DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL
NO MORE COMPLETE BUDGET NIGHT BROADCASTS – OR REPLIES
NO BALANCED ABC NEWS V SHOCK/HORROR COMMERCIAL TV'S
NO MORE ONE HOUR EVENING WORLD/DOMESTIC NEWS A LA SBS
NO MORE EXCELLENT INTERNATIONAL SBS DOCUMENTARIES
NO MORE DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMES
NO MORE QUALITY ADULT PROGRAMMES IN COMPETITION WITH COMMERCIAL TV'S LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR SHOWS
NO MORE CLASSICAL MUSIC
NO MORE SPECIALIST RURAL TV PROGRAMMES
NO ESCAPE FROM TWENTY MINUTES OF ADS PER HOUR ON COMMERCIAL TV (AND THEIR BARRAGE ON COMMERCIAL RADIO)
NO MORE COMPREHENSIVE BOOK OR MOVIE REVIEW SHOWS ON TV
ETC ETC ETC
PLUS SEVERLY RESTRICTIVE "LEFT' VIEWS IN MAINSTREAM PRINT MEDIA
DITTO FOR COMMERCIAL RADIO
DITTO FOR COMMERCIAL TV .

SO IS THIS THE NEW "CONSERVATIVE" VERSION OF DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH FOR AUSTRALIA?
A HUGE LOWERING OF THE NUMBER OF MEDIA OUTLETS AND LOSS OF THE DIVERSITY WE LIBERALS SUPPOSEDLY CHERISH.

SOUNDS LIKE IT'S VERGING TOWARDS A HUGE RESTRICTION ON FREE SPEECH. ***ISN'T THAT OFTEN CALLED BY ANOTHER NAME?***

(14) Perhaps you do not agree with Andrew Bolt and co in their calls for the disbanding and selling off the ABC.
Perhaps it should be made clear in print exactly what your position is?
Perhaps you say you are merely calling attention to the political persuasions of a certain number of ABC personnel connected with a certain (small) number of ABC current affairs programs, whether on radio or TV.

If that is the case all we can say is you are being very selective in your facts and by so doing are ascribing the term "left" to all ABC current affairs programmes such as those listed above. When it is certainly not the complete picture.
One of our number has a contact within the ABC who says quite clearly the organisation perhaps forty or fifty years ago was in somewhat the state you now say it is. Today they say it is completely different. The internal checks are much more stringent and watchful and obvious bias monitored.

In fact during our discussions we cannot but help commenting that much of your criticism of the ABC and its personnel has to do with the past. Without being disrespectful, do you not think that your undoubted, unquestioned knowledge of Australian communist/ Labor/left/right politics over generations (Santamaria, Whitlam, Fraser etc) is perhaps clouding your judgment as to what is happening in today's ABC?

In a recent piece you complain the ABC is proposing to check the facts of political parties and other organizations. Why should this worry you?
If there is obvious error or bias in their findings surely the media will quickly disclose this. And they will be dealing with today's parties and bodies, not yesterday's.
From correspondence with some "other organisations" and their evasions we can't help feeling it is high time they were scrutinized, whether of the left or right.

The general public knows the ABC is taxpayer funded.
But, for instance, do they know who funds the Institute of Public Affairs who are calling for disbanding the ABC? No.
A secretly funded organisation calls for the removal of a taxpayer funded organisation that has well served both city and country centres in democratic Australia for generations. Mmmm.

As some one more erudite than any of us once said: Freedom of speech is one of the most precious things we possess. However, half truths and factual untruths are an abomination when uttered under the disguise of free speech.

A view with which we are sure you agree.

(15) Lastly, in case I, as the signatory to this letter, am being branded in your mind as a wanton "leftie" for putting these questions in writing (albeit them coming from long time Liberals) I must repeat I am a traditional Liberal voter and every week read The Economist. As you know, an exceedingly "conservative" pro-business journal but one that I have to say possesses a much wider view of the left-right world than that expressed so vociferously in some of our media today.

(16) Above all, this letter, despite its length, is a direct, personal one to you and meant as a thought provoker - not an abusive missile. Other people may send barbs through your Media Watch Dog site but that is not our conservative style. Above all, we certainly wouldn't wish to see selective quotes from this correspondence in any of your weekly SMH pieces – if that was our intention we would have composed a complete Opinion piece for publication ourselves.
It is a personal communication, section by section, to you alone. For your consideration and deliberation alone.

Best regards,

B.R. Gilchrist.