

Not again Gerard, not again...

An open letter to Gerard Henderson from Tim Bowden - 10 Aug 2015

Dear Gerard,

I can't believe you are STILL banging that tired old drum about ABC left wing bias in your usual tiresome nitpicking way. It clearly matters little to you that over 80 per cent of ABC listeners (according to many opinion polls over the years) appreciate and like what the ABC is doing. But you and that vitriolic stable of ABC-bashers in The Australian go on and on. Your piece in the news section of the Oz on August 8 for God's sake, not even in The Inquirer, was its usual mish mash of bile, paranoia, and deeply entrenched hatreds.

Some years ago, I opined in an address to the Brisbane Institute that your views on the ABC seemed to come 'from your spinal cord, not your brain'. You took exception to this, and tried to get the Institute to take down my speech from their website (adding censorship to your list of inconsistencies). They didn't. Well I'm saying it again.

You conveniently brushed aside the fact that when Stuart Littlemore was the original presenter of Media Watch in the early 1990s (before Google) and he trawled through old newspaper files to reveal your paragraphs of recycled invective about the ABC's alleged vile left wing bias. Although you have doubtless had to be more careful not to plagiarise yourself any more in the digital age, you are still singing the same old refrains.

In your most recent piece you applauded the ABC Board's decision to buckle to Prime Minister Abbott's outrageous interference in the ABC's editorial policies, to put Q & A under the allegedly more editorially rigorous News Division. Well what a surprise. You should have been condemning this sledgehammer to crack a nut that was only ever a storm in a teacup until it was beaten up by the usual suspects. I also think it rich that you bring up Prime Minister Hawke's equally improper railings against the ABC for attempting to take a balanced position on the Iraq war, which history has now revealed to have been a singularly ill-judged disaster. Hawke's pro Zionist attitudes should not have been allowed free rein without being questioned. And when the academic who mildly put up some other views on the conflict was pilloried and the ABC forced to drop him as a commentator, it was a travesty of democracy and reasoned debate. Doubtless you applauded.

You wrote, 'The re-positioning of Q & A within the management structure is a useful reform in that the news and current affairs unit is expected to focus on accuracy, rather than entertainment'. Entertainment Gerard? God help us. How terrible! I happen to be of the view that the cardinal rule of broadcasting should be 'Thou shalt not bore'. What is the point of Q & A unless it is canvassing a variety of opinions from a pot pourri of speakers that entertains, not bores us rigid with the kind of sententious political correctness you seem to be advocating. This reminds me that we once shared spots the last half hour of ABC's Radio National's Breakfast when Peter Thompson hosted it in the mid 1990s. You were brought on board as part of the ABC's then effort to bring on more conservative commentators. I recall you didn't last all that long, which I am sure you put down to the leftie in house culture. It wasn't. I happen to know you were dropped, not because of your political persuasions, but because you were so dull.

I should not have to say this to you yet again, but the personal political views of presenters are irrelevant, as long as they ask pertinent and difficult questions of either side. As Kerry O'Brien did in his day on 7.30, and so does Leigh Sales. I recall when I was doing BackChat on ABC TV in the late 1980s and early 90s, Prue Goward took over from Richard Carleton when he left TDT. Now Prue as you know is no leftie, and is now a minister in the NSW Liberal Government. She and her husband wrote a biography of John Howard which was an unapologetic hagiography. Yet people used to write to me at BackChat to complain was a nasty little leftie she was. One correspondent dubbed her, 'Our little acid drop'. At the risk of being a bore myself, Gerard, she was simply doing her job. For God's sake get over it. Perhaps you need some psychological counselling about your deeply entrenched ABC obsessions.

Phillip Adams once revealed, himself, that he was fascinated by conservatives, and often had them on Late Night Live - like William Buckley Jr and a raft of others in that camp. You also said that no one at the ABC seemed to be able to name conservative presenters. What about Amanda Vanstone and Tom Switzer? Or are they not strident enough in your view? It is just possible they like their programs to be 'entertaining'. And as for Murdoch's Fox News giving more weight to lefties than the ABC does to conservatives - are you having a lend us us? Because you would have to be joking.

If the ABC is ever run in a way that pleases you, and the rest of your ABC-hating confreres on the Oz, it is unlikely to have a national audience of any useful or relevant size. You would be delighted, I am sure. But perhaps there is hope. The ABC survived in reasonable shape after having Janet Albrechtsen on the Board (at least she had to stop writing her anti-ABC pieces in her column while she was there) and former Board Chairman Maurice Newman, climate change denier extraordinaire, and who recently I heard, wrote a piece in The Australian saying the ABC should be abolished! With friends like that, who needs enemies?

Cheers,

Tim Bowden

Tim Bowden, AM, is an author, radio and television broadcaster and producer, and oral historian.