

Chapter 19

Media bias and ABC blues

You, as a public broadcaster, particularly on my ABC, have a responsibility to present a balanced view. I've never heard you talk about the obvious unsustainability of growth. And you continually present growthist dogma. Stop living the comfortable lie, mate.

– Brian Bucktin

Now, almost invariably, when housing unaffordability is raised in the printed media, radio, and television, the experts whose views are sought are the exact same people who brought about this human tragedy in the first place. They now would have the public believe that they are all working with single-minded determination to bring housing affordability back to the Australian masses once again. This line is accepted unquestioningly by almost all the news media; and the supposedly independent ABC is no exception.

– James Sinnamon³⁰⁷

CRUCIAL TO THE COUNTRY'S democracy, the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or ABC owes its loyalty to the Australian public. At a time when democracy is under stress and when the major commercial media are owned by a handful of tycoons, the ABC remains able to speak for the people – and regularly does.

But there are problems – especially with ABC TV news and current affairs. That we are about to highlight these problems does not arise out of personal grievance. Neither of this book's authors can complain of their treatment by the ABC.³⁰⁸

Yet facts must be faced. Fairness and objectivity in the ABC's reporting on economics, population and immigration are woefully lacking.

Though it is often accused of being 'left-wing', the ABC's

handling of economics and population is anything but. Biased towards conservative or conventional economics, and towards the point-of-view of big business, ABC TV and radio news is infatuated with 'the economy', whose saga it endlessly relates. It is respectful of economic 'authorities' whose predictions are regularly wrong, and who persist in treating the economy largely in terms of the crude measure called GDP. Presenters regularly refer to 'economic growth' or to the economy being 'healthy', when all they mean is that there has been an increase in the cash value of goods and services purchased. The ABC's uncritical repetition of such economic mantras helps push our nation towards plutocracy. Hardly ever, for example, does ABC News question how an ever-expanding economy is compatible with the government's stated aim of ecologically sustainable development. For years ABC TV ignored books, studies, and media releases warning about peak oil. By the time they admitted this might be an issue, it was already a reality, and oil prices had quadrupled.

It is true that alternative economic views occasionally receive a run. Among the vast number of episodes of *Lateline*, *The 7.30 Report*, *Four Corners*, and so on, a number have aired views like those of the World Bank's Herman Daly or Sydney University's Professor Ted Wheelwright. In practice, however, 'unconventional' economic views are regarded as exotica. They remain the subjects for special episodes whose lessons are never integrated into the next week's reportage; they are 'covered' rather than absorbed. The ABC's economic researchers and experts give even less attention to enviro-population issues that might counter their market obsessions.³⁰⁹

It took the ABC's own former head of Religious Broadcasting, Father Paul Collins, an energetic insider, to finally get the ABC involved as part-sponsor in a project featuring population. The result was an excellent TV documentary (*God's Earth*) on the tragic failure of nations and of religious leaders to deal with the moral issues of over-population and consumerism. Even so, ABC programmers condemned it to the post-10 p.m. 'graveyard shift'.

This reflects the ABC's view that economic issues are more important than population issues – assuming the two can be disentangled. Relative to its fixation with economics, the reluctance of some ABC TV programs to cover population issues is extreme.

To appreciate this, one needs to consider the huge appetite for subject matter these programs have.

The 7.30 Report needs 3 or 4 issues a night to pursue, and its producers and researchers must often be tearing their hair out for a new angle on any of the current major debates. *TV News* needs even more issues a night. *Four Corners* needs one very major issue a week. *Lateline* needs one major issue a night. All of these programs must examine several possible issues a day to see if they 'have legs' before the presenter can triumphantly announce, 'That's our story tonight!'

One would therefore expect population to be covered repeatedly, and from all possible angles, much as 'the economy' is. Instead, the subject is taboo. Nevertheless, hints of what might be sometimes slip through. In 2003 the ABC screened a major BBC series, David Attenborough's *Life of Mammals*, which concluded with the words:

Mankind is looking for food not just on this planet but on others. Perhaps the time has now come to put that process into reverse. Instead of controlling the environment for the benefit of the population, perhaps it's time we controlled the population to allow the survival of the environment.

Attenborough's conclusion exposed a stunning silence. The ABC itself would never produce an environmental program with such a population-charged ending.

Sometimes the ABC deals with birth control, but almost exclusively in terms of personal choice rather than social and demographic consequences. There is more coverage of immigration, but again only from limited angles, and usually colored by ABC TV's obsession with 'race' and racism.³¹⁰

Meanwhile, our immigration policy is environmentally, economically and morally a shambles; Australians have overwhelmingly rejected it in all opinion polls. Yet you could watch a whole year of the ABC's *TV News* and *7.30 Report* and learn only that our high immigration policy is good and inevitable, and that anyone who questions it is probably a secret member of the Hitler Youth League. ABC News misrepresents the majority of Australians who oppose high immigration as a small and suspect minority while presenting the small minority who endorse it as responsible mainstream opinion.

Even worse, ABC News ignores obvious lies when it comes to population. For example, Peter Costello, backed by a legion of boosters, often claimed our population was falling or would be but for immigration. The claim was easily refuted by simple reference to ABS statistics. Yet, the ABC repeatedly failed to consult the facts. *The 7.30 Report*, for instance, after repeatedly interviewing Costello and often mentioning the baby bonus, never pointed out that Australia's population was not falling, nor in danger of falling, but in fact rising steeply.

Others went further. In February 2008 ABC TV News informed viewers that Australia's low fertility was a disaster because, 'not enough babies [are] being born to replace people dying.' The program refused to correct the error. ABC Complaints, which is said to reject 96% of complaints, took weeks (after the presidents of SPA and ACF complained) to admit to Ian Lowe and others that the presenter's claim was simply wrong – but no correction was ever broadcast.³¹¹

Since then other ABC presenters have carelessly made similar assumptions. Perhaps we should not blame the presenters of talk-back programs. They have heard the likes of Pru Goward, Peter Costello, Joe Hockey, Malcolm Turnbull, Jim Soorley, Jon Stanhope, and Cardinal Pell, talking about the country being in desperate need of more people. Obviously, if this was untrue then the better-researched ABC programs like *Four Corners* and *The 7.30 Report* would have exposed them. Since this has not happened they assume the claims must be true.

Of course funds are tight. Perhaps even the ABC's major news programs now lack researchers capable of going to the ABS website and noting the facts? But in any case, the information is handed to the ABC (and all other media) on a platter. For instance when Cardinal Pell came out with his claim that Western nations were in crisis from too few children, Sustainable Population Australia promptly produced a media release pointing out that Pell was ignorant of demographic facts.³¹²

That ABC TV should ignore any particular media release as not topical or not right for them (even though they gave great prominence to Pell's remarks) is their prerogative. What is not acceptable is that they never follow up such releases, and never appear to learn even the basic demographic facts that are repeatedly

pointed out to them. Over the past 10 years each major ABC news program has ignored about 100 timely and well-informed releases from Sustainable Population Australia.

In its silence the ABC is missing a scoop. Dissecting the various myths about population decline, what business groups support them, the role of the APOP (the Australian Population Institute) and other growth support-groups like 'The Committee for Sydney/Melbourne' would make a good *Four Corners* story. Journalists might also mention the number of growth proponents who have turned out to be shysters. For example, a Victorian judge recently described booster and disgraced former businessman Steve Vizard 'as an unreliable witness, whose evidence included false denials and feigned forgetfulness'. Furthermore, the ABC might follow up Green accusations about boosters making huge donations to the NSW Liberal Party.³¹³

Reporters miss even the most obvious links. Despite frequent mention of Australia's huge current account deficit, ABC TV has rarely if ever related it to our very high immigration rates. Yet economist Stephen Joske, senior Trade bureaucrat Colin Teese, the former Finance Minister, Peter Walsh, and others have pointed out a connection.³¹⁴

And so the ignorance continues. Even faced with food riots and fuel riots spreading around the world in early 2008, ABC TV news insisted, as with Peak Oil, on not seeing population growth as a cause. Instead they repeatedly interviewed 'experts' who assured them the shortages were due to speculation in bio-fuels – though how not using food oil for diesel-fuel would have relieved the joint pressure on food and fuel was never explained.

Occasionally however, very occasionally, population gets noticed. In responding to Pell's claims, the NSW edition of *Stateline* ran part of an unused 3-year old interview with Professor Albert A. Bartlett. Presenter Quentin Dempster was able to present Bartlett as a prophet for predicting, back in 2005, 'a world crisis through the statistical convergence of population growth, peak oil and declining food production efficiency and capacity'. Dempster concluded: 'Population growth policy is not often prominent in the domestic Australian political and economic debate. With climate and World Youth Day, thanks to Cardinal Pell, that's all changing'.³¹⁵

Dempster may have proved himself a prophet. Within a week ABC TV News allowed through a brief but accurate report, following several articles in that day's papers, of the study by Robert Birrell and Ernest Healy pointing out that population growth would make a nonsense of Rudd's greenhouse plans.³¹⁶

Nevertheless, much as the two major parties have a bipartisan agreement to maintain high immigration, the media, including the ABC, co-operate by suppressing most elements of the debate. During years when Australia's per capita migrant intake was the highest of the world's 200-plus countries, no one succeeded in mentioning this fact on any of ABC TV's several news or current affairs programs, though many tried. Yet air-time was repeatedly given to propagandists claiming that our 'shamefully low immigration quotas' were proof of 'racism'. SBS News has sometimes been equally incompetent.

Indeed for much of the 1990s it seemed as if former Labor MP Andrew Theophanous had a permanent 'gig' to be wheeled in at the end of immigration 'debates' to remind us that anyone who dared criticize high immigration was probably a 'racist'. It was not media investigations but a wiretap from the National Crime Authority that finally undercut his pretensions to be a moral authority.³¹⁷

This bias and suppression does not mean that staff are on the take, or that they have consciously conspired to conceal the facts. Nor can an outsider tell if researchers have concealed information from presenters, or if instead presenters or editors have refused to use material selected by their researchers. Nor can one tell if bias has been dictated by producers, strategy planners, or even 'higher up'. Or it may be coming from somewhere unpredictable.

All one can say is that issues and news items that require at least occasional coverage have been persistently ignored. These issues must certainly have reached at least the initial attention of those researchers who filter stories up the chain. Thus we are forced to speak of a given ABC program 'suppressing' stories, even if many or most of those in a given unit have been unaware this was going on.

But there is certainly bias. One ABC News insider who has gone public with her pro-natalist views is presenter Virginia Haussegger. In a September 2006 column for the *Canberra Times*,

she welcomed an increase in Australia's birth-rate, which she described as 'looking healthy' and as an 'improvement'.³¹⁸

At a time when the ABC needs all the friends it can get, and needs to be able to trade on a reputation for unquestioned objectivity, the partiality of its news programs is a betrayal of colleagues in so many other sections of the ABC. There are wonderful programs elsewhere on ABC TV and radio that are being slashed and bled to death because governments and electorate alike see the news units as biased.

This perception led to new 'balance and accountability' guidelines released by ABC boss Mark Scott in October 2006. These aim to redress the ABC's perceived left-wing bias, but are unlikely to succeed, in part because left-wing and right-wing inadequately describe the range of possible views on issues. More significantly, the new guidelines will not address ABC News's pro-growth, pro-natalist, pro-conventional-economic views. Because these views sit comfortably with many of the ABC's critics as well as defenders, they are ignored.³¹⁹

Among its many acts of censorship, ABC TV News long suppressed the fact that the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Australian Democrats had policies calling for zero net migration. Yet as soon as the One Nation party announced a zero net migration policy, the ABC cited it as evidence of 'racism'.

ABC Radio National's record is more mixed than that of ABC TV. Scientific and environmental radio programs treat population seriously, whereas current affairs programs largely airbrush population problems out of existence. Honorable mention must go to Robyn Williams, the late Andrew Olle, David Rutledge, Father Paul Collins, and to Ticky Fullerton (almost alone) among the TV people.³²⁰

SBS, even though it often behaves as if its charter is to promote very high immigration, tends to be more savvy and cautious about claims of racism. Most of its presenters have real expertise in ethnic cultures; their struggle to balance the demands of conflicting ethnic groups makes them aware that one person's 'racism' may be another's ethnic patriotism. But they are still in denial about population.

Because commercial TV stations tend to poach trained people from the ABC, the ABC's ideology tends to flavor much of

commercial TV's news coverage, albeit with a less highbrow flavor and with more obvious kowtowing to sponsors' interests.

But population blindness is not confined to the ABC or to commercial TV; it infects the rest of the Australian media. Shortly before the 2007 NSW state elections, for example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialized on some of the problems facing the state. These included severe water shortages, 'the state's inexorably growing need for power' and the chaos on Sydney's roads. It accused Morris Iemma's government of incompetence and procrastination. This was undoubtedly true but the charge sidestepped the real problem: media and government inability and unwillingness to focus on an underlying cause: population growth.³²¹

It took a letter-writer to make the obvious connections:

What water shortage? What power shortage? What infrastructure shortage? Our problem in Australia is over-population of a dry, inhospitable continent with finite resources. Yet the immigrants keep coming, so the problem can only get worse. It's not rocket science, is it?³²²

Our analysis of the ABC has largely avoided identifying individuals. The failure of ABC news and current affairs programs through nearly three decades to deal with population issues – the most important matter facing Australia today – may have less to do with individuals than with a pervasive institutional culture. Yet there is also a possibility that it may, like the sabotage of the Australian Democrats' population policy, be the work of a handful of well-placed bigots. If there are such persons blocking the debate, then it is surely time they were persuaded to move on to other areas where their biases will do less harm.

The ABC has a problem with these programs. It may not be able to rectify past unfairness, but it needs urgently to offer guarantees that the censorship will cease, and that at least in future those who disagree with high immigration or with 'birth-bribes' will receive equal time on its programs.