

*Is the ABC so left-wing that it is left of the Labor Party, as Treasurer Peter Costello alleges? Alan Moran, director, deregulation, at the Institute of Public Affairs, argues it is even worse than that. But Friends of the ABC national spokesman Darce Cassidy argues that these charges are a figment of fertile conservative imaginations.*

Australian Financial Review, 1 June 2002

Many politicians fail to distinguish between bias and the obligation of the media to hold tall poppies, of all colours, up to scrutiny.

Peter Costello has said that the ABC has a culture that is "even left of the Labor Party".

So why don't Coalition supporters, let alone the general community, believe him? A Newspoll survey (February 2001) found that only 22 per cent of Coalition voters believed the ABC was biased against the Coalition. A majority of Coalition voters (52 per cent) said the ABC was unbiased, 21 per cent were noncommittal, and a small number (5 per cent) actually thought it was biased in favour of the Coalition.

Polls consistently confirm overwhelming public confidence in the ABC.

How do we account for this substantial gulf between the Coalition leadership and its supporters? Perhaps the leaders can't understand the difference between partisanship and the obligation of the fourth estate to scrutinise the powerful.

The notion of a fourth estate was developed by conservative thinker Edmund Burke, who saw the reporters' gallery as almost a branch of government, sharing power with the other three estates nobles, clergy and commons. More recently it has been seen as a fourth institution that scrutinises the legislature, the executive and the judiciary.

This concept is at the heart of the "ABC culture" that some politicians want to change.

It is also central to the culture of the broadsheet press in Australia.

Many of the people who attack the ABC also attack the broadsheets, particularly the Fairfax press. Both Piers Akerman and John Laws, for example, lump Fairfax in with the ABC.

The Institute of Public Affairs goes further and includes The Australian. Mike Nahan of the IPA claims "the media is full of friends of the ABC". Michael Warby of the IPA identifies The Australian's David Fagan, John Lehmann, Kimina Lyall and Christopher Dore as members of the "ABC's media bodyguard".

One senior Liberal minister comes close to seeing a distinction between bias and critical scrutiny. The minister was quoted by The Australian in February last year as rejecting the view that the ABC was partisan, while complaining: "But what you get annoyed about quite often is the anti-establishment line, its almost juvenile, undergraduate approach they've got to be 'shock horror', it's got to be outrage on every front and 'this is what the nasty, vicious government is doing today', whether it is our government or the other government."

Although unhappy with what he saw as a sensationalist and undergraduate approach, he recognised that the ABC applied the same scrutiny to all governments. So, too, do many of the broadsheets. What galls governments is that they are paying the ABC to do it.

Conservative businessman Bob Mansfield and hard-nosed auditors from the Australian National Audit Office have reviewed the ABC. What did they find?

The Age reported in January 1997 that the Mansfield review found "no evidence had been produced to show that the ABC was biased in its political coverage".

This year the Audit Office conducted a detailed study of how the ABC was fulfilling its charter obligations. It found "the procedures and practices observed were effective in assisting the ABC to deliver news and current affairs programs that reflected the charter requirements of independence, accuracy and impartiality". It also concluded that "the ABC's approach to the control of standards of political and electoral broadcast matters was robust and effective".

Can anyone explain how they failed to notice that the lunatics were running the asylum?