

# Stubborn ABC refuses to die despite constant attacks

By Michelle Pini

4 October 2018



Cartoon by Mark David / @MDavidCartoons

**This Coalition Government may have had several incarnations but it seems all three of them – the Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison versions – have been hell-bent on destroying the ABC.**

Ten days since the now former ABC Chairman [Justin Milne](#) appeared on our screens to inform Australians that Managing Director [Michelle Guthrie](#) had been unceremoniously shown the door, details of the Coalition's ongoing behind-the-scenes undermining of the public broadcaster continue to unfold.

Far from easing our concerns, or trying to appear objective about the matter, current Prime Minister Scott Morrison has, so far, been unable to conceal his glee over the ABC's woes.

"I expect the ABC board to do better. And if they don't, well they can expect a bit more attention from me," [@ScottMorrisonMP](#) tells

[@barriecassidy](#) [#Insiders](#) [#auspol](#)  
[pic.twitter.com/QtyEGmU6zwt](https://pic.twitter.com/QtyEGmU6zwt)

— Insiders ABC (@InsidersABC)  
[September 29, 2018](#)

First, he [contradicted](#) Milne's suggestion that he, like the nation, had likewise only just been informed of Guthrie's removal.

Then, he [appeared on \*Insiders\*](#) to remind the ABC and the rest of Australia who's boss, telling the ABC, without any trace of irony, that it needs to stop talking about itself and go back to work or "*it can expect more attention*" from him. He also managed, during this interview, to stick the boot into that pesky [Emma Alberici](#) tax cuts article, once again.

And, finally, wildly flaying his arms around and barking in his customary fashion, he informed us all, in case we hoped the issue of political bias may have been addressed, that the Coalition, currently in the throes of finding a suitable replacement for Milne, [would not seek bipartisan support](#) for the appointment by consulting with the Opposition.

Of course not. As Mr Morrison keeps repeating, the ABC is, after all, an "independent" organisation — with ever-decreasing funding from his Government, a board appointed by his Government, a selection process overruled by his Government and a [Nomination Panel](#) also

chosen by his Government. Yep, nothing to see here.

[IPA stalwart](#) and Communications Minister [Mitch Fifield](#), meanwhile, who [hasn't even attempted to hide his loathing for the ABC](#), argued that a Senate inquiry (for which the ALP and Greens have been pushing) would not be necessary since his Department – the one which is part of the Government that stands accused of bullying the public broadcaster – would be investigating to ensure all was hunky dory with the independence of the ABC Board.

From sacking journos, to stacking the board and attacking the [#ABC](#): Fifield's fingerprints are everywhere and he must stand aside.

While he has made a fool of himself, he has not fooled the Australian people.

[#auspol](#)<https://t.co/FKZSYt68g5>

— Michelle Rowland (@MRowlandMP) [October 1, 2018](#)

And rising star, the consistently underwhelming newly-appointed Treasurer, [Josh Frydenberg](#), went about his regular automaton-like process of denial (just like his denial over the failed NEG), declaring in a trainwreck interview with [Hamish Macdonald](#) on ABC *Breakfast* that he could think of no

*“... powerful reason to change the selection process of the ABC.”*

If only Josh did, occasionally, think.

[As previously mentioned](#), all of this drama was not first reported on the

ABC but in the Murdoch Press, though, perhaps in a bid for "balance", later leaks went to Fairfax.

Managing editor Dave Donovan [explained last week](#) that Guthrie's untidy removal from the ABC was absolutely politically driven, as evinced by leaked emails indicating Milne's concerns over the Government's "hatred" of Guthrie, his pressure on Guthrie to [sack](#) Emma Alberici, [Andrew Probyn](#) and [Jon Faine](#) and other inappropriate interference over ABC programming decisions:

*'The end game, no doubt, is to sell off the ABC to News Corp as soon as practicable. It is, after all, the official policy of the Liberal Party National Council to [privatise the ABC](#).'*

Really Josh Frydenberg? Can't think of one powerful reason to review ABC Board selection process? Michelle Guthrie's sudden ABC exit and the Morrison / Murdoch connection <https://t.co/CaSMEbL52c> [@IndependentAus](#)

— Michelle Pini (@vmp9) [October 1, 2018](#)

It would appear that the Opposition had no prior knowledge of, or involvement in, Guthrie's sacking.

Shadow Communications

Minister [Michelle Rowland](#)'s office gave IA the following statement:

*On Monday morning, Michelle Rowland spoke with Justin Milne after the story of Ms Guthrie's departure broke in the news and after the ABC published its statement.*

*She was not aware of any other calls made to or from Mr Milne about Ms Guthrie's departure.*

*Given Justin Milne allegedly pressured Ms Guthrie to sack journalists, Labor is keen to understand whether the current or former Prime Minister or the Minister for Communications were consulted on negotiations to oust Ms Guthrie, and what her sacking will cost the taxpayer.*

*According to reports, Communications Minister Mitch Fifield was present at the meeting with Malcolm Turnbull and Justin Milne which prompted the former ABC Chairman to ring former Managing Director Michelle Guthrie and demand the sacking of an ABC journalist. Minister Fifield has not denied he was present at the meeting which reportedly left the ABC*

*Chair with the impression an ABC journalist needed to be sacked in order for the ABC to receive government funding. While Minister Fifield has released a statement denying involvement in staffing matters, it is apparent that Justin Milne was influenced by this meeting with Turnbull and Fifield.*

Fifield clearly needs to go, he refused to follow independent advice and delivered what was ultimately a shit sandwich as an [#ABC](#) board [#auspol](#) <https://t.co/iu3w039W0f>

— Peter Wicks  
[\[?\]\[?\]\[?\]\[?\]\[?\]](#) (@madwixxy)  
[October 2, 2018](#)

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten has indicated that should Labor form government, it would commit to following the recommendations of an independent selection panel in choosing [new appointees](#) to the ABC Board. He has also called for Fifield's removal from his portfolio.

Whether Labor would have been fussed at all had later leaks not shown the Government's

fingerprints to be all over Guthrie's removal, is hard to determine.

An article appeared this week [in the Daily Telegraph](#), however, painting the ABC Board as the aggrieved party and implying that Guthrie herself had reneged on an earlier, mutual deal to leave the ABC by the end of this year on civil terms. The article also suggested, in the final paragraph, that Bill Shorten was both aware and unconcerned about Guthrie's termination.

Of course, the Guthrie part of that article is highly questionable, if not downright ludicrous, since Guthrie supposedly walked away a few weeks short of the purported \$900,000 bonus and has since [indicated she is considering legal action](#) over her termination.

Despite tireless efforts to get confirmation from Mr Shorten, however, and assurances that answers would be

forthcoming, the subsequent media conference transcript sent in response to IA by his office does not deal with the *Telegraph's* implication that he, like Morrison, was similarly previously informed and unconcerned of the move to sack Guthrie.

Milne email reveals Guthrie sacking to be politically motivated [@IndependenceAus](https://t.co/lkj0agP5mh)

— Sir Clyde Of Nob (@nobby15) [September 27, 2018](#)

Regarding the independence and qualifications of the current ABC Board, Mr Shorten stated:

*... I think probably that the board does have*

questions to answer. I also think Minister Fifield does.

... You've got the Chairman miraculously telepathically, apparently, understanding the wishes of the Government and wants to see journalists sacked ... As if the Chairman wasn't getting pressure from the Government to lean on the ABC...

You don't have an independent process and then totally ignore it for every director, and how much did these Board Directors know what's going on?

... I think that we've got to depoliticise board appointments to the ABC...

In the meantime, how about the current Prime Minister warning the ABC that if they don't do something he will?

What is it the Liberals don't get about ABC independence? They interfere with the choice of directors they cut the funding of the ABC, they appoint their mates and that doesn't work out, and then they just blame the ABC for everything that is going wrong. This is a failure of governance, it's a failure of politics, it's a failure of the Government.

This is why we should have a national integrity commission. I do not know why Mr Morrison is opposing setting up an anti-corruption commission nationally because I think that would provide reassurance to Australians that the political system is not broken.

Perhaps the lesson here is if you're Australia's public broadcaster – dependent on the government for funding and appointment

of management personnel – and you happen to upset this Coalition Government, there is no measure to the wrath they will bring down on your head — pardon the pun.

**You can follow senior editor [Michelle Pini](#) on Twitter [@vmp9](#).**

If [@ScottMorris](#) wants a ring-in to slip right in where Milne left off at the [#ABCBoard](#), he's got a

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