

# Beating the Drum for the Liberal Party

By Andrew Kos

6 February 2013

**The numbers don't lie, ABC TV's The Drum has a clear and definitive Liberal Party bias. [Andrew Kos](#) presents the statistics.**

*(Note: This article was originally published in 2012 and has been republished to include The Drum presenter Steve Cannane's response – as well as the author's and IA's rejoinder – which can now be found below the original article.)*



LOOKING over the period of a year (June 2011 – June 2012) and counting both politicians and former politicians, as well as former political advisers — the **Liberal Party took in 58% of the total political guest spots**. Out of the 221 guest spots, 129 went to the Liberal Party, and just 69 went to the Labor Party. This left the Labor Party, which got 50.12% of the two party preferred vote at the 2010 election, with only 31% representation.

**Click on image to enlarge.**

The top 5 political contributors on The Drum were: **Peter Lewis** (former Labor advisor) and **Peter Reith** (former Liberal front-bencher) on 22 appearances each; **Kerry**

**Chikarovski** (former Liberal politician) on 14; **Cate Faehrmann** (Greens politician) on 12; and **Sue Cato** (former Liberal Advisor) on 12.

The full list of political guests can be found in the table below, along with their political affiliation. I have also provided an explanation for some of the inclusions and exclusions in the table, as well as given background on guests whose past political roles may be unknown to some.

- **Sue Cato** was an adviser to former NSW Liberal Premier Nick Greiner and former Federal Liberal Party Leader Andrew Peacock.
- **Judith Sloan** has not held an advisory role but is a close Liberal Party affiliate. Former Prime Minister John Howard placed her on the board of the ABC and later made her one of the Commissioners at the now defunct Australian Fair Pay Commission, a legislative body created under the Work Choices legislation. Sloan's active party involvement is demonstrated by her [keynote address](#) to the conservative HR Nicholls Society in 1994, and more recently by being a [drawcard](#) for a Liberal Party fundraising dinner.
- **Tom Switzer** was an adviser to former Liberal Party Leader Brendan Nelson. After Nelson's departure from politics he was one of the Liberal candidates for the newly created seat

of Bradfield. There are perpetual rumours about Switzer heading to Canberra but, as yet, there is no definite word.

- **Cassandra Wilkinson** – who was a Labor Party adviser but now works at *The Australian* newspaper – was not included in the overall figures and chart, although she is listed in the table. Watch her [address](#) at the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) to see why.

In the speech Wilkinson states she is no longer a member of the party after erroneously joining in the 90s thinking it was a 'liberal' party. Yeah, that confuses me too. She derides the Labor Party as “*a boring old socialist party*“, without any hint of irony, and now sees herself as a “classical liberal”. I think it is fair to say she is no longer a spruiking for the Labor Party, if indeed she ever was.

### ***Click on image to enlarge***

When you take away the political insiders and you're left with just the politicians, both past and present, **the Liberal Party representation becomes even more dominant — at a staggering 64%**. Labor trails very far behind on 17%, only narrowly beating the Greens – a minor party – on 14%.

Out of the 104 spots taken up by politicians, Liberals took 66, and the remaining are shared between Labor (18), Greens (15), Nationals (1) and Independents (4).

### ***Click on image to enlarge.***

These findings are a damning indictment of

the ABC for failing to provide viewers with fair and balanced political representation on *The Drum*, and begs the question whether this situation is intentional or not. This Liberal bias however does not appear in isolation and follows off the back of evidence posted on this blog highlighting [bias shown to the IPA](#) and [bias to news media corporation, News Limited](#).

Both the IPA and News Limited take an openly hostile position towards the current Labor Government, a position that aids the Liberal Party's agenda, and serves to further cement the sense of right wing bias and anti-Government sentiment that many viewers feel the ABC promotes.

Tim Wilson from the IPA, who is a regular guest on *The Drum*, frequently derides the Government on Twitter. He declares his partisan hand unashamedly with tweets such as:

'@SwannyDPM [Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan] really is a great ambassador that no matter how dumb or intellectually lazy u are, you too can be the Nation's Treasurer #AusPol.'

Yet the IPA's 39 guest spots on *The Drum* during the same period of analysis were not included in the Liberal Party tally — even though a strong case could be made that they should.

For there to be such an overwhelming bias in the political representation on *The Drum* really is quite astounding. Allowing this to take place the ABC violates their Editorial Policy under section 4:

'Impartiality and diversity of perspectives.'

Standards:

'4.2 Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.'

and

'4.5 Do not unduly favour one perspective over another.'

The ABC needs to address this imbalance immediately and develop real mechanisms to ensure it is not favouring one party over another.

If you're not satisfied with how *our* ABC is running then send in a [formal complaint](#).

Also if you haven't already, please sign and share this [petition](#) to limit the exposure of the IPA on the ABC.



Click the image to access petition

- **For the full list of guests on *The Drum* between June 2011 and June 2012 click [here](#).**
- **To read more by Andrew Kos on the ABC, click here to visit his blog [ABC Gone to Hell](#).**
- **See also IA managing editor David Donovan's research and reports on the bias and false balance of the ABC's Q&A programme. Links to all the articles may be found at [here](#)**

## THE DRUM'S STEVE CANNANE REPONDS

### **Steve Cannane**

"The numbers don't lie" screams the subheading at the top of Andrew Kos's piece in *Independent Australia* on alleged Liberal

Party bias on ABC News 24's *The Drum*. I'm sorry Andrew, but your numbers do lie and here is why.

In his first sentence Kos maps out his criteria for what counts as a 'political guest' on *The Drum* as "...counting politicians and former politicians, as well as former political advisers." But before long his criteria goes out the window as he includes some guests and excludes others, fudging the figures to suit his argument.

Kos counts the academic and economist Judith Sloan as a Liberal Party guest. How does that fit his criteria? Judith has never been a member of the Liberal Party, and as Kos says, "has not held an advisory role". Sloan is no ally of Labor, but she considers the Liberal Party as being too wet and too interventionist for her liking. Yet Kos counts her as a Liberal.

Cassandra Wilkinson, another regular on *The Drum* does not qualify as a pro-Labor guest according to Kos because of comments she made at an IPA function. Cassandra did quit the party briefly in 2011 following the NSW election, but she is a paid up member of the Kings Cross branch of the ALP and ran for pre-selection to be Labor's candidate for Lord Mayor of Sydney in 2012! She has also been a long term Labor adviser. How does she not count as a Labor voice? More dodgy accounting.

Kos once again distorts his figures by counting Sue Cato as a Liberal. Sue did work as an advisor to Andrew Peacock and Nick Greiner, but she has not been a member of the Liberal Party since 1988. That's twenty five years ago! Cato is a 'small l liberal' who has been critical of what she has called "the Liberal Party's rampant conservatism." She is also a prominent advocate for poker machine reform and a critic of the Coalition's asylum seeker policies.

I'd hate to be the person who tells Greg Barns

that Kos is calling him a Liberal. Barns did work as a Liberal advisor in the 1990s, but the President of the Australian Lawyers Alliance quit the Liberal Party in 2002 after he was disendorsed as a candidate for criticising John Howard over his asylum seeker policies. In 2003 he published a book *What's Wrong with the Liberal Party?* He's also an advocate for drug law reform, winding back anti-terror laws and ending the NT intervention. Barns can hardly be described as a Liberal.

Towards the end of Kos's article he discards the former political advisers from his statistics and concentrates just on ex politicians. Going by these numbers alone, it does seem like there is a bias towards the Liberal Party. However it does not tell the full story. In the twelve months Kos looks at, ex Liberal Minister Peter Reith shared panels with former Labor staffers Lachlan Harris, Cassandra Wilkinson, Peter Bentley and Peter Lewis. At other times he butted heads with editor of *Left Turn* Antony Loewenstein, social justice lawyer Lizzie O'Shea and Miriam Lyons from the Centre for Policy Development. At all times the views of ex-politicians were balanced out by views on the other side of the political spectrum.

Kos cites appearances on *The Drum* by members of the Institute of Public Affairs and reporters from News Limited as further evidence we've got it in for the Labor government. Once again Kos ignores the fact that whenever we have someone on from "the right" we balance them with someone from "the left". The News Limited journalists we have on are critical of both sides of politics. It is inevitable that Labor will get more scrutiny at the moment, they are in government and are the ones making decisions.

At *The Drum* we take balance very seriously. I'm not sure you can say the same about Andrew Kos. When I pointed out to *Independent Australia's* editor David Donovan that Kos had not contacted us for a response or verification of his statistics, I was told "No

comment was required since it was an empirical research piece." Empirical research relies on an individual's observation. Andrew Kos sees what he wants to see. A man who has as a twitter handle @abconetohell does not seem to me to be the best person to be objectively analysing alleged bias on the ABC.

([Steve Cannane](#) is a journalist and presenter at the ABC. He spends half his time presenting *The Drum* on ABC News 24, the other half reporting at *Lateline* on ABC 1.)

## ANDREW KOS RESPONDS TO STEVE CANNANE



**Andrew Kos**

Based on Steve Cannane's response and the points of contention raised with the statistics in my piece, "*Beating the Drum for the Liberal Party*", I have revised the numbers to accommodate his representation of the program's guests.

There are a couple of valid points raised, however, I am not convinced by all his arguments.

First let's look at those in dispute.

It's true [Judith Sloan](#) hasn't held an advisory role within the Liberal Party (I said as much in my original piece), and according to Cannane, "*has never been a member of the Liberal Party*". However, Sloan has been advertised as a special guest and draw card at a recent Liberal party fundraiser and is comfortable with being associated with the HR Nichols

Society, co-founded by former Liberal Treasurer Peter Costello. While it's safe to assume Sloan doesn't vote Greens or Labor, her views and ties to the Liberal Party are apparently too ambiguous for Cannane to count her as a supporter. Fair enough, lets count her as an *independent non-aligned* guest.

Anyone who watches Cassandra Wilkinson's talk for the right wing think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), will hear less than flattering words about the Labor Party.

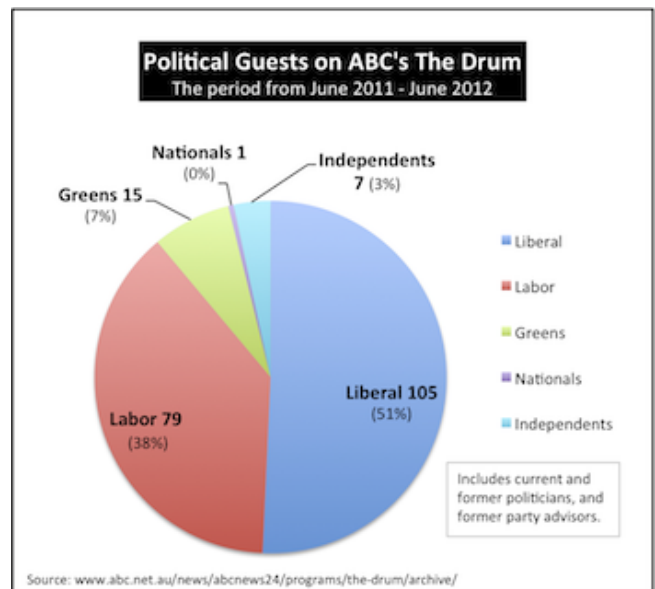
Apparently Wilkinson was just playing to the audience and I'm a dummy for not realising. I'm not sure how seriously someone takes their membership of a party if they can flippantly trash it in public, and the next minute run for Lord Mayor of Sydney as a born-again. The assured votes of Labor's base are alluring I guess. But back in the count for Labor she goes.

Sue Cato fits the former political advisor role and she's a confirmed "*small l liberal*" (just like former leader Malcolm Turnbull), therefore Cannane's umbrage to her inclusion is somewhat baffling. I've been accused of distorting figures, but when it suits Cannane he wants to discount the stream of liberalism that exists in the Liberal Party, and ergo Cato's place in it. If Cato is "*a critic of the Coalition's' asylum seeker policies*" then same goes for the Government's (they are the same after all), and if she is a ([paid?](#)) "*advocate for poker machine reform*" then a Government that shirked Wilkie's reforms provides little solace. I'm not convinced by Cannane's case that this makes her less inclined to support the Liberal Party, but out Cato goes.

A definite oversight on my part was placing Greg Barns in the Liberal camp, so his two appearances are removed with undisputed agreement. My apologies to Greg Barns for

this error!

Based off Cannane's interpretation, these new stats see the Liberal tally drop from **129 (58%) to 105 (51%)** with the loss of Sloan, Cato and Barns. While the Labor tally increases from **69 (31%) to 79 (38%)** with the addition of Wilkinson.



Despite the argy bargy over who's Liberal Party membership has lapsed, and who has re-ignited their light on the hill for Labor; finding foul of three former advisers out of seventeen doesn't strike me as "*fudging the figures*" but rather signifies a clash of information and interpretation.

In my original piece I provided the rationale for the inclusion of Sloan and Cato, and the exclusion of Wilkinson. I did not hide that process. I was up front and transparent on my thinking. Readers were free to make up their own mind on whether that was valid and could judge accordingly, as Cannane has done. A full list of guests was even provided so people could check up on my work! The charge of deliberate manipulation is a thrilling one, but hard to prosecute in the face of this.

When Cannane is confronted with the undeniable bias given to Liberal Party politicians (66 to Labor's 18), he argues that

the non-politician panellists on the left simply offset them. This argument unwittingly neglects that politicians have a party agenda to further their electoral advantage. Same for those now out of office and engaged in face-saving and legacy protection.

This is not something that can be said of non-politician guests. Antony Loewenstein or Miriam Lyons is not going to be a staunch defender of Labor when Peter Reith is in full flight against the Government, nor are they going to go above and beyond to spin a Labor policy. And why would they? It is more likely you'll see Loewenstein criticising Labor but for different reasons to Reith.

In regards to the IPA and neo-classical economist Judith Sloan, if *The Drum* were truly taking “*balance very seriously*” then the program would have a counterpart socialist think tank and economist on the books. And not only that, they would be afforded 39 and 12 guest spots respectively, as was generously bestowed on the IPA and Sloan over an entire programming year.

Furthermore, why does *The Drum*, and ABC in general, allow IPA carte blanche on its extensive media platforms? You'll find them on ABC TV, in digital print with weekly pieces on the *Online Drum*, and featured in radio segments. The IPA receives [funding](#) from the mining, oil, energy, pesticide, irrigation and tobacco industry, yet the ABC elevates this paid mouthpiece to a broadcast gold standard. At the very least the ABC should force the IPA and other think tanks to disclose funding. It is owed to viewers that when Tim Wilson sounds off on carbon pricing or the mining tax that it be known he is in receipt of monies by companies affected by and against these measures.

This gets us to the question of who balances out the corporate interests on *The Drum*? How often have civil society organisations such as the *Community Council for Australia*, *Australian Council of Social Services*, or *St*

*James Ethics Centre* been on to enrich discussion and give voice to constituents that aren't big corporations or part of the 'well to do'? Where is *The Drum* in presenting us with this often-marginalised voice in national debate?

Similarly, environmental organisations such as the *Australian Conservation Council*, and groups like *Lock the Gate* don't feature regularly. These are important points of view to be heard when the big issues facing us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are arguably climate change, population sustainability, and food and water security.

Full circle back to political balance and the fact that there are over 30 registered political parties and they receive next to no mainstream coverage. In the 2010 election 7% of voters (almost a million) gave their first preference in the House of Representatives to a party other than Labor, the Liberals, Nationals, or Greens. In the Senate 13% (1.7 million) gave their first preference to a candidate other than the big four. How has *The Drum* been showcasing and balancing the views of this large proportion of Australians?

I take balance and transparency very seriously too.

I have made no claim that the bias found is intentional, that a cross-section of society is calculatngly overlooked by *The Drum* producers in favour of ever-available think tank pundits, media hacks and restless ex-polities suffering media deprivation. In truth I think the reason is simple laziness. The ease of booking commentators that love and need the opportunity to get their message out and the difficulty I imagine in securing real diversity to fill up a four-day program.

My position, and you can read it on my [blog](#) where it has been since the beginning, has been to question the journalistic standards in news and political coverage on the ABC. I

don't see nor do I frame the drop in quality as a left or right issue. The issue as I see it is there is no longer a pursuit of quality, substance and truth but rather a detrimental adherence to [the church of savvy](#).

Glad you took the time to respond Steve.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

I was surprised by Steve Cannane's response to Andrew Kos' article. Rather than discuss the issues he decided to try to debate the figures, which even after including all his objections still ultimately did not alter one iota the overall thesis by the author Andrew Kos — that the Liberal Party dominates spots on ABC's *The Drum*.

Even regarding his objections, the thought that Judith Sloan is not aligned to the Liberal Party is spurious given her long and unabashed championing of conservative causes and association with Liberal Party aligned “think tanks”, such as the HR Nicholls Society. Cannane does himself little credit by trying to dismiss as “independent and unaligned” one so obviously in the Liberal camp.

We could, maybe, excuse that attempt were he not to descend into absurdities with the claim a former Liberal Party staffer and Party member, Sue Cato, is somehow not to be counted for the Party. As for her objection to a single policy indicating she *isn't* aligned, Steve Cannane should be reminded that [even some sitting Liberal MP's](#) disagree with the Libs harsh and punitive asylum seeker policy. All Cato's statements in this regard suggest are a little humanity.

Even even after all of Steve's nitpicking and highly debatable “corrections”, the Liberal Party still quite clearly dominates the programme by more than 10% over the other major Party. The ABC still marches to the beat of the Liberal Party *Drum* — even after this amusing little to and fro.

Furthermore, when it is taken into account that Andrew Kos very generously – and quite wrongly – did not include the clearly pro-Liberal Party think tank the Institute of Public Affairs in his calculations for the Libs, Cannane's argument becomes little more than a joke.

The IPA was, let us not forget, one of organisations that established the modern Liberal Party and itself arose out of the decline of the Liberal Party's forerunner.

Note Wikipedia's [entry for The IPA](#):

*The IPA was founded in the early 1940s, partly in response to the collapse of Australia's main conservative party, the [United Australia Party](#). The IPA was one of a number of groups which came together to form the [Liberal Party of Australia](#), and became an important fund raising*

body for the Liberal Party in [Victoria](#).

The IPA has never moved away from this clear-cut alignment — so to suggest the IPA is not currently aligned to the Liberal Party (as well as its undisclosed paymasters) is utterly preposterous. Anyone who believes otherwise should read IA's many investigations into this shadowy organisation, [notably this one](#).

During the period in question, indeed, the IPA had no less than 39 spots on The Drum, which if they were included – even after Cannane's highly dubious adjustments – raises the proportion of Liberal Party aligned guests from 51% up to almost 59% and Labor back down to 32%. Of course, add Sloan and Cato back in – as, of course, we should – and the figure jumps up above 60%.

The numbers don't lie, Steve. What you lose on the roundabout you more than make up for on the ferris wheel.

*The Drum* is biased towards the Liberal Party, and also towards the IPA — at least in preference to other far more worthy think tanks. Instead of wasting his (and our) time writing weak and easily refuted defences of his programme, Steve Cannane would be much better served fixing its blindingly obvious flaws.

Because many people are now asking why our public broadcaster has gone down that path it has. Many suggest that it may be because the [managing director of the ABC](#) is a former Liberal Party staffer and Party member himself? And, given the recent inconsistent and extremely unfair [treatment meted out to Jon Faine by ABC management](#), this seems to me to be very likely indeed.



**Mark Scott**

For instance, here's [what managing director Mark Scott said](#) just last year about the control he exercises over the ABC's "leading content directors" (presumably his gobbledygook management-speak term for "journalists"):

*I am Editor-in-Chief of the ABC and am finally responsible for all the content that goes*

online, all that goes to air across five television networks and six radio networks, including 60 local radio stations across the country. And at times, I will talk with our leading content directors about the stories and issues of significance, how we are covering them, angles we might be missing. And we will discuss our performance and the quality of our work.

How much control does Mark Scott and ABC management exercise over the choice of guests on *The Drum* and other ABC current affairs programmes, such as Q&A?

You can be assured that IA will be delving even more deeply into the performance of our major publicly funded broadcaster during this election year.

See also links to all of managing editor David Donovan's research into the ABC's popular Q&A programme by [clicking here](#). Read David Horton's recent piece on the rise of ABC rightwing bias by [clicking here](#). )



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