

## Je suis Zaky: ABC boss Mark Scott leaps to Q&A's defence

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ABC Managing Director Mark Scott has defended the Q&A program in a speech. Source: News Corp Australia

Bill Shorten has accused the Coalition of launching a “full-on attack against the independence of the ABC”, warning the public broadcaster must not be “a propaganda arm of the government”.

The Opposition Leader’s comments come after Christopher Pyne ridiculed ABC managing director Mark Scott’s “free speech” defence of Q&A.

The program and the broadcaster have been under fire all week after airing an extremist’s views on the program on Monday night. Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull and former Liberal minister Peter Reith have joined the attack on Q&A.

Mr Pyne today accused Mr Scott of “trying to change the debate into something that it isn’t”. Mr Scott last night compared extremist Zaky Mallah’s right to appear on Q&A with the campaign for free speech that flowed from the jihadist murder of 12 journalists from the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo.

Despite the ABC’s apology on Tuesday for an “error of judgment” on Monday night, an under-siege Mr Scott mounted a defence of having broadcast a question from “terrorist sympathiser” Mallah, arguing that other media outlets had given him airtime over the years.

Firing back after a week of silence, Mr Scott complained that he was operating in “highly polarised and partisan times” and said some politicians did not understand the “importance of the - independence of the public broadcaster from political pressure and interference”.

“As someone said to me this week, free-speech arguments would be easier if you were always defending Martin Luther King,” Mr Scott said at a Centre for Corporate Public Affairs’ function. “At times, free-speech principles mean giving platforms to those with whom we fundamentally disagree. “It was the crux of the Charlie Hebdo argument last year and, of course, the source of the maxim that was used to describe Voltaire’s beliefs: ‘I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.’ ”

His comments came after Tony Abbott said “heads should roll” following the ABC’s decision to repeatedly rebroadcast the inflammatory Q&A segment.

But Mr Pyne attacked the speech.

“He’s trying to pretend the government is trying to close free speech at the ABC. This is typical of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation; rather than ‘fessing up to their mistake, which was to bring a convicted terrorist on to the audience of Q&A and give them a platform ... (and) put at risk the people in the audience,” Mr Pyne told the Nine Network.

Mr Shorten said Q&A’s decision to give Mullah’s views a live airing on the national broadcaster was “a mistake – no ifs, no buts” and criticised other broadcasters for following suit.

“But beyond that, the ABC is independent of government; it is not a propaganda arm of government,” he said. “While I think it is right to be critical of the Q&A audience proposals and who they put in the audience, I am not satisfied it warrants the full-on attack against the independence of the ABC.”

Mr Shorten said the Prime Minister “overreached” with his comment yesterday that “heads should roll” at the ABC. “I think if he had his time again Mr Abbott wouldn’t use such clumsy language,” he said.

Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese said it was “a stupid decision” to give Zaky Mullah a platform. “Since then, we’re talking about it now, he’s been on The Project, he’s been on pages and pages of The Daily Telegraph et cetera. I’d rather this bloke not get any coverage at all, because that’s what he’s about,” Mr Albanese said.

Libertarian senator David Leyonhjelm argued speech was “better off out in the open” unless it is advocating violence or harm to others. “It was probably an error of judgment. The ABC’s apologised for it. At the end of the day, the ABC is independent of government – or we’d like them to be – and I think it’s their problem,” he told ABC Radio.

“I am a fierce defender of free speech and the question then is: do we not want to hear views that we don’t like, that we pretty much all disagree with? My view is generally let those voices be heard and then criticise them rather than suppress them.”

Craig Emerson, a former ALP cabinet minister, said the ABC’s replaying of the program rubbed “salt into the wound” but rejected calls for the ABC to become “a straight, fact-reporting network”. “There is satire, there’s Clarke and Dawe, there’s programs that send up governments of all political persuasions,” Dr Emerson told Sky News.

“The ABC hammered, hammered the Gillard government all the way through, so it’s not really a matter of a left conspiracy unless you think of the ABC being to the left of the Labor Party and with the Greens. It’s just that they have a particular approach, no one in government likes it, but we have to put up with it.”

Peter Reith, a former Liberal cabinet minister, accused Mr Scott of reducing the ABC's blunder to a question of audience security and not the "shocking and offensive" decision to give Mallah a platform.

"The ABC head was basically saying the real problem is that 'we didn't manage the security side of it' as if, you know, if they'd got that right then having this guy on would be OK," Mr Reith told Sky News.

"It is not OK to have a bloke on the show who through social media has been suggesting that women should be put on stage basically and raped in front of an audience."

The Prime Minister launched an urgent inquiry into Monday night's program, saying that internal investigations by the broadcaster had a tendency to become "virtual whitewashes" of any wrongdoing.

Mr Scott confirmed that Mallah had been in the Q&A audience previously and said media organisations often gave airtime to the criminal and corrupt.

In an email sent to ABC employees today, Mr Scott directed them to a transcript and video of his speech

"Clearly, some of these issues have become highly politicised, and some of our media competitors can never be accused of lacking opportunism," Mr Scott writes in the email. "I want to make special note of the staff who have found themselves in the front line of this: from those unfairly singled out in press coverage — to those on the switch who have had to field intemperate and hostile calls. "I am continually affirmed by the enormous goodwill and affection for the ABC held by the overwhelming majority of Australians. They understand we are not perfect — but they also cherish the role we play in their lives and Australian life. And they are passionate about the independence of the ABC. They are our owners — it is to them we owe our service."

Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull, speaking on the ABC's 7.30 last night, said Mr Scott and the ABC board had a responsibility to explain why Mallah was allowed to appear on Q&A.

"This guy on social media not so long ago nominated two female journalists and said that they should be publicly raped," Mr Turnbull said. "What if he had said that again in the Q&A live audience? Why would you ever put a person (like that) in a live audience? It's incredible."

Mr Scott took aim at The Australian for publishing an article on Mallah in 2012, ignoring the fact it was this newspaper that exposed Mallah's terrorist sympathies in 2003. Mr Scott suggested Mallah's question should have appeared via video, "just as other controversial figures have asked questions on Q&A before, like Julian Assange".

"We know that live television is dangerous," Mr Scott said. "That it can be unpredictable and compelling. Part of the success of Q&A is that the audience knows it's live."

Mr Scott said he did not foresee major change to Q&A. Both sides of politics criticised the ABC for allowing a convicted criminal to appear on prime-time TV and there has been a strong public backlash.

Mr Abbott said the broadcaster's decision to rebroadcast Monday night's program in full yesterday was "utterly incomprehensible".

"Here we had the ABC admitting a gross error of judgment and then compounding that terrible mistake — that betrayal, if you like, of our country — by giving a platform to this convicted criminal and terrorist sympathiser," he said.

“Now, frankly, heads should roll over this ... I’ve had a good discussion with the Communications Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, I know he has made a very strong representation to the ABC. “We’ve announced that we are not satisfied with an internal ABC inquiry because so often we’ve seen virtual whitewashes when that sort of thing happens.

“There is going to be an urgent government inquiry with recommendations, and frankly the ABC ought to take some very strong action straight away.”

The ABC had agreed to “fully co-operate” with the inquiry, which will report on Tuesday.

Justice Minister Michael Keenan’s office confirmed that the Australian Federal Police had been in touch with the ABC board about improving security arrangements to ensure the safety of guests, panellists and audience members on Q&A.

Mr Turnbull said ABC management needed to take responsibility for the latest incident “and there needs to be consequences from this”.

“I think it’s very important that we get an understanding of the reason this judgment call (to invite Mallah) was made, which was clearly, as the ABC has acknowledged, so mistaken,” the minister said.

Greens senator Scott Ludlam accused the “shrieking” government of “high-pitched, flag-based fearmongering”.

Additional reporting: Sharri Markson

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