

## **News, ABC, 28 Sept**

PRIME Minister Scott Morrison hasn't ruled out merging the ABC and SBS as the leadership crisis at the national broadcaster spills into its fifth day.

It comes as the Prime Minister also revealed his nomination to be acting chair of the ABC would be board member Dr Kirstin Ferguson, an adjunct professor at the Queensland University of Technology and a former RAAF officer. Dr Ferguson rejected calls for the remaining ABC board members to resign today after she was officially appointed acting chair by the Governor-General just after midday.

"If anyone does want to put the best interests of the ABC first, that is not the right answer right now," she said in her first interview on ABC after beginning her two year term. "The matter of who the government might select to be board members is a question for them but I can tell you the board is very united and focused on what is only in the best interests of the ABC."

She also said: "We are grateful to Justin [Milne] for resigning yesterday. It was his choice and we were grateful he made the decision."

Dr Ferguson also said the board backed its decision to sack managing director Michelle Guthrie on Monday, saying: "It was in the best interests of the corporation."

The new chair has sat on the ABC board since 2015 and has previously sat on the boards of infrastructure and mining contractor CIMIC, the Queensland Theatre Company, Queensland Rugby Union, water infrastructure company SunWater and DartEnergy.

Amid calls for the remaining ABC board members to resign after chairman Justin Milne quit amid a "firestorm" yesterday, the Prime Minister this morning failed to rule out a merger between the ABC and SBS if it was recommended by an efficiency review currently underway.

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Do you think SBS and the ABC should merge?

Yes

No

Undecided

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<https://polldaddy.com/poll/10120858/>>Do you think SBS and the ABC should merge?</a>

“I’m going to wait for the results of the review to come back, Jon,” Mr Morrison told ABC radio host Jon Faine today. “Those sorts of ideas have been floated before but look ... I’ll wait to see what the review says. I think that’s the fair and sensible thing to do. “It’s not about whether I’m tempted to [merge them] or not, it’s about what the evidence is and what the report is.”

Despite the Prime Minister’s comments, the terms of reference for the 2018 National Broadcasters Efficiency Review specifically state that a merger between the ABC and SBS is not within its scope.

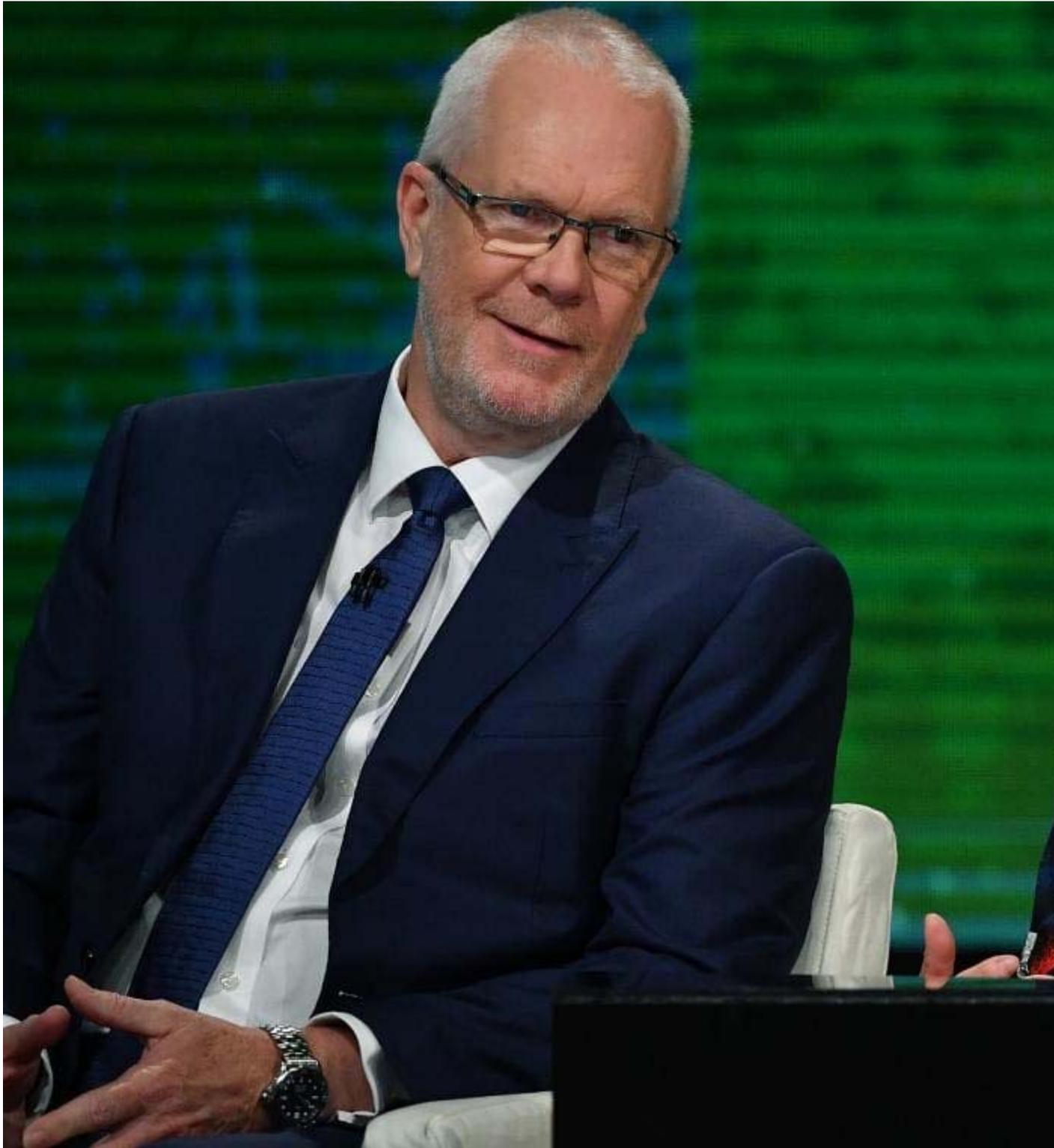
Labor communications spokeswoman Michelle Rowland said this afternoon called for the Prime Minister to reveal whether the merger was truly out of scope.

“Scott Morrison had a clear chance to reassure Australians that he will not merge the ABC and SBS during an interview on ABC radio this morning,” she said.

“Instead he dodged the question and said he would await the findings of the Government’s own 2018 National Broadcasters Efficiency Review, despite the fact the terms of reference for that review expressly exclude consideration of such merger.”

Ms Rowland also noted Labor was “deeply concerned” that Foxtel chief executive Peter Tonagh, one of two people conducting the efficiency review, had said the vacancies at the helms of the ABC and SBS meant the review could be “more creative” and wasn’t as “constrained as we might have been”.

More than 60 per cent of respondents to a News Corp reader poll said they would back a merger between the two broadcasters.



Former ABC managing director Michelle Guthrie (right) and former ABC Chairman Justin Milne. Picture: AAP

Meanwhile, calls are mounting for the remaining ABC board members to step down after it emerged that they knew for a week Mr Milne had called for two ABC journalists to be sacked after complaints from Malcolm Turnbull but did

nothing. Mr Morrison has rejected the suggestions, saying its “important that they get back to work and they get on with the job”.

#### ABC DECLARED ‘A MESS’

But Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese this morning said “board members who can’t do their job should be considering their position” as he declared the ABC “a mess”. “What the board needs is people on it who will stand up for the independence of the ABC,” Mr Albanese told the Nine Network’s Today Show. “It is critical that it be a public broadcaster, not a government broadcaster.”

Acting Opposition leader Tanya Plibersek said: “There seems to be increasing evidence that the board members knew a lot about the issues that have caused Justin Milne to resign before actually taking any action themselves and they’ve only really taken action on Justin Milne when there’s been a media controversy around the suggestions of political interference in the ABC.”

She added that the board needed to “examine whether they have fully discharged their responsibilities to protect and defend the ABC or whether, in fact, they’ve been voluntarily or involuntarily complicit in the government’s political interference”. She said she hoped Dr Ferguson would be able to provide leadership at a very difficult time for the ABC.

The Greens yesterday called for a clean out of the entire board.

Acting Labor leader Tanya Plibersek said “very serious allegations of political interference” had been made but did not back calls yesterday for the remaining board members to resign. “I think it’s very important to investigate the allegations that have been made,” she said.

Asked today if he thought the board had become politicised, Mr Morrison said: “I don’t get into gossip. We make appointments to the board. I expect them to do a job and if they don’t do a job they should go.” Senior government ministers have also dismissed the calls today, saying an investigation by Communications Department Secretary Michael Mordak should be completed first.



ABC reporter Emma Alberici. Picture:

Supplied

Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton hit out at bias in some parts of the ABC today but told the Nine Network any decisions about the rest of the board should be made after the inquiry, while Education Minister Dan Tehan also said it was important to “wait and see what that review says”.

#### ABC CHAIRMAN’S LEAKED EMAIL

It comes after the full details of a leaked email showing Mr Milne urged former ABC managing director Michelle Guthrie to “get rid” of journalist Emma Alberici were revealed last night, undermining his claim that the text was presented “out of context”. “After two glasses of red of course there’s an agenda. They fricken hate her. She keeps sticking it to them with a clear bias against them. We clear her as OK. We are tarred with her brush. I just think it’s simple. Get rid of her. My view is we need to save the corporation not Emma. There is no g’tee they will lose the next election,” Mr Milne reportedly wrote.

The full details of the email were obtained and reported by Fairfax Media last night.



Andrew Probyn. Picture: Supplied

Ms Guthrie sent the details of the text to the board last week amid a push for her to be sacked but the board chose to back the move to fire her regardless. It also did not reveal publicly that Mr Milne had pressured her to fire journalists after complaints from the then-Prime Minister.

The email between Milne and Guthrie was sent on May 8. It is not clear what he was meaning when he referred to “two glasses of red”.

#### WHY ABC CHAIRMAN QUIT

Mr Milne, who resigned yesterday, stated that his concerns were partly because he wanted to secure \$500 million in funds for a major digital transformation called Project Jetstream. Mr Milne denied that his friends and former business partner, Malcolm Turnbull, called and asked for Alberici to be sacked.

He also said he did not remember saying Ms Guthrie should “shoot” political editor Andrew Probyn.

Mr Milne said he did not think he had ever called Ms Guthrie “the missus” or having used the term “babes”. He did say that he sometimes called women he liked “chicks”. “It’s colloquial, it’s kind of matey,” he said, apologising.



ABC staff outside of the network's Sydney offices responding to a story that Chairman Justin Milne was trying to get senior journalist Emma Alberici sacked. Picture: John Feder

Communications Minister Mitch Fifield welcomed Dr Ferguson's appointment today, saying she brings "exceptional business and leadership experience to the role and a deep understanding of the ABC".

Originally published as ABC 'a mess' as PM won't rule out SBS merger