

apparently passed to the Malaysian government by the US Ambassador recently.

The bottom line is that firm US proposals are required for the public debate in Australia to go further if indeed it needs to go anywhere. You cannot really fly a kite successfully without something firm to tether it to.

Ducking criticism

Now since its bipartisan founding in 1975 the Australia Defence Association has genuinely striven to be as apolitical as it can be. The Association considers it needs to be apolitical in order to improve our national defences by raising political and community consciousness of defence issues. We could not function any other way even if we wanted to. A truly apolitical stance takes effort both in actual objectivity and fairness, and in scrupulously observing appropriate conventions and being seen to do so. Generally speaking we are confident that we hit the mark pretty consistently. All mainstream political parties respect the Association, even when we disagree with one of them from time to time.

The Association therefore hesitates to enter the perennial debate in Australia about the degree of political bias exhibited by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The ADA notes, however, that in both the 1991 and 2003 wars with Iraq, Australian governments of both Labor and Liberal political persuasions have perceived that the ABC has shown a marked tendency to left-wing and anti-American views, rather than professional objectivity, in much of its war coverage. Perhaps these perceptions have arisen not just because of the existence, or otherwise, of bias but through the ABC's apparent reluctance to observe appropriate and commonsense apolitical conventions.

We also note that the ABC continues to vigorously deny the charges, as did its famous 'internal inquiry' into the 1991 Gulf War accusations. We further note that part of this attempted defence is to quote statistics that purport to illustrate letters of complaint about ABC bias are 'politically balanced' in overall numbers.

The ADA's archives contain letters of complaint and letters of praise from Australian governments of both main political persuasions. They contain even more complaints from cranks across the full political spectrum. Our experience is that the quality of the letters is just as important as the numbers. With this distinction in mind, and based on observation of media coverage of the recent war in Iraq by ADA members with some experience as professional warfighters, the following thoughts on the issue of ABC bias are offered.

Bias in broadcasting is not just a matter of what is said or shown. It includes the conscious or unconscious exclusion of alternative views and TV 'vision' to what is said and/or who is interviewed and for how long. Bias can also arise through a lack of real intellectual

diversity in the journalists, producers and researchers employed. In terms of war coverage, bias can also easily sneak in through ignorance of basic military operational matters (tactics, weapon capabilities, international law, need for operational security, etc.), or in not giving proper weight to the difficulties of reporting from both sides of the conflict. This is especially so where one side is a totalitarian state with a much greater motivation and capacity to deny access, stage manage supposed incidents, or intimidate those 'bystanders' who might be 'interviewed' by foreign media.

The concept and practice of being apolitical, even if you hold strong personal beliefs, is faced daily by members of the ADF and the forces therefore place great importance on being apolitical. The defence forces serve governments of all political colours with considerable professionalism and pride in this regard — even when governments do silly things concerning defence. The forces usually react to even the silliest criticism and comments from the general public with impressive equanimity. The general reaction of many ADF personnel when recognising perceived ABC bias is therefore interesting to note. As members of a profession proud of its apolitical traditions and record they rarely show outrage at the nature of the bias itself. More often than not, by a wide margin, ADF personnel are genuinely offended or disappointed by the lack of public broadcasting professionalism involved when a broadcast is not, or does not strive to be, apolitical.

In general, the apparent bias in ABC news and current affairs coverage during the wars in Iraq appeared worse on television than it was on radio (with the probable exception of JJJ), and not as bad on Radio Australia as on other radio. Problems with access and 'vision' may have contributed. It is also worth noting in comparison that the apparent pro-American bias in coverage by the Fox cable network was just as bad, if not probably worse.

With this in mind, and admittedly based on anecdotal evidence only of the apparent popularity of BBC coverage of the war among Australian viewers, the question of relativity concerning letters of complaint might be worth reviewing. Perhaps many Australians of a conservative bent have stopped writing letters of complaint to the ABC because they fear it does no good or because they have stopped watching or listening to the ABC altogether. Perhaps many Australians of a left-wing bent are unconsciously quite comfortable with the ABC, and only write to the Corporation because they are so shocked when finally (and rarely) confronted by the odd broadcast that makes them actually uncomfortable.

Now there will also always be those who will seek to defend actual or perceived ABC bias on the grounds that commercial media frequently exhibit the most egregious examples of 'cant and slant', and that the ABC is somehow 'merely providing balance'. This is

a false argument. Just like the publicly funded military who serve and defend all Australians equally, publicly funded broadcasters must always be apolitical in absolute terms.

Finally, ABC coverage of the recent Iraq war has also been defended on the grounds that the journalists and producers involved were just employing due scepticism when challenging announcements by the Coalition partners. There is, indeed, nothing wrong with scepticism in itself. However, to be truly fair such scepticism should be used politely, not based on what may be fairly perceived as questionable assumptions, and deployed with equal vigour against all sides of an argument. The real problem is that the question of broadcaster bias and its cure exist as much in perception as fact. The Association suggests that the key to solving the

problem of actual or perceived bias in ABC broadcasts is to convince ABC staff that the problem actually does exist, and that even a hint of bias is both unprofessional journalism and an abuse of the ABC Charter.

There will probably continue to be at least some ABC staff who reject the accusations of left-wing and anti-American bias out of hand. There will undoubtedly be many who genuinely believe, however mistakenly, that they undertake their reporting or production duties objectively even when covering issues on which they have strong views. However, on the matter of identifying bias in their broadcasts perhaps they should discount resorting to such rhetorical camouflage and remember the old Aussie bush saying about appearances: 'if it walks like a duck, smells like a duck and quacks like a duck — then it must be a duck'.

Conference Calendar

ADA members and *Defender* readers may be interested in the following public conferences scheduled over the next few months:

**Chief of Army Military History Conference 2003
Foundations of Victory: The Pacific War 1943–44
National Convention Centre, Canberra
10–11 July 2003
Enquiries: (02) 6266-2744**

**Royal Australian Navy 2003 King-Hall Naval History Conference
The Navy and the Nation
Telstra Theatre, Australian War Memorial, Canberra
24–25 July 2003
Enquiries: (02) 6266-2654**

**Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies (Australian Defence College)
US Grand Strategy: Implications for Alliance Partners
Hyatt Hotel, Canberra
01 August 2003
Enquiries: (02) 6266-0664**

**Australian Defence Studies Centre 2003 Homeland Security Conference
Safeguarding Australia: Frontline Issues
National Convention Centre, Canberra
31 July to 01 August 2003
Enquiries: (02) 6262-7337**

**Australian Financial Review 'National Critical Infrastructure Security Conference
Four Points Sheraton, Darling Harbour, Sydney
22–23 September 2003
Enquiries: (02) 9080-4307**