

Massacre of ABC funding hopes?



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On media

AS the ABC rolls out its big guns to support its quest for more funds for the next three years, no one involved should allow their hopes to rise too far. There are forces within government that are determined to punish the ABC, and stemming its flow of funds is seen as a neat way to do it.

What follows is a remarkable tale of how a persistent lobby group's push for changes to the ABC's complaints procedure has been hijacked by political forces and held out as a reason to deny the ABC funds.

The story has its beginnings in the events surrounding the events in the West Bank town of Jenin in March 2002, when at least 52 Palestinian and Israeli soldiers and civilians died in a gun battle.

In August last year the ABC's foreign editor, Peter Cave, presented on Radio National's **Correspondents Report** a piece which dug into the causes and effects of the action and asked: Was there a massacre in Jenin?

Before he reached a conclusion, he noted the difficulty in sorting the wheat from the chaff of claim and counter claim between the Israelis and Palestinians, and the lack of an independent UN investigation.

He even resorted to two dictionaries to define the meaning of the word "massacre", and, based on the definition "the unnecessary, indiscriminate killing or slaughter of human beings" decided that, yes, there had been a massacre.

In a world without absolutes, and in a war-torn time when truth is a constant casualty, this seemed to be a valid attempt to put a perspective on the Jenin events.

But it did not satisfy some listeners, especially a small band of like-minded folk in Melbourne. Although they could be called deeply partisan, they set about trying to correct the record to show there had not been a massacre. The group formed a lobby group which they named Jews Against Bias in Media and set about preparing a 55-page dossier to document their case.

It contained correspondence from a number of JABM members to the ABC. The charge was consistent — bias. The reply was also consistent — the ABC bends over backwards to be fair and even handed.

After initially railing against individual correspondents and the views they expressed in their reports, and finding only support from their ABC bosses, JABM switched tactics.

They declared the ABC's complaints procedure flawed. JABM spokesperson Ralph Zwier told me: "Our experience is that the complaints process sees its job as convincing the complainant that he or she is wrong."

This is in spite of the ABC's MD, Russell Balding, announcing in November last year the establishment of a new complaints procedure, for which he was commended by Communi-

cations Minister Richard Alston.

Under the new plan, people with complaints have a four-level process. They make their complaints first to the head of audience and consumer affairs in each state capital. If that does not satisfy the complaint is referred to the new position of complaints review executive, headed by Murray Green.

If that fails, the complainant has recourse to the Australian Broadcasting Authority, and then to a non-ABC body called the Independent Committee for the Review of Programs.

In spite of Balding's efforts to beef up the complaints procedure, JABM was not satisfied. On March 4 and 5 its members joined a deputation in Canberra lobbying parliamentarians on behalf of Israel's interests.

"We sort of tagged along with the others," Zwier says. "We had 30 copies of our dossier printed, and we handed it out to anyone who showed interest. We left copies with the Minister for Communications and the Prime Minister's office."

Not much interest was shown until government sources let it be known the JABM dossier was being taken very seriously at the highest levels of government because it was seen as confirmation of the ABC's fundamental disregard for the truth and the existence of permanent biases within the organisation.

It was reported by these sources that the JABM dossier was seen alongside "the Jakarta incident" where the

introduction to a report filed by political correspondent Jim Middleton was changed in the production process to erroneously assert Indonesia's view was that a war on Iraq would be a war on Islam.

John Howard was furious, and complained about the story, saying it had damaged the national interest. The ABC published a correction and apology the following night.

In my view, you have to draw a very long bow to make any connection between the Jenin complaints and Jakarta events. Zwier also expresses bemusement at the dossier becoming a tool against the ABC. "That was not part of our intention whatsoever," he says.

So why does the government appear hell bent on denigrating the ABC? One source told me: "Because the Prime Minister is seriously pissed off with them and he wants them to know they're well down the financial totem pole when they come asking for more money."

At stake is a request for \$250 million over three years. Don't get your hopes up, folks.

► **Truth is a constant casualty**