

Democratic decision-making is under threat: where does the ABC¹ stand?

Dr Mark Diesendorf

Democracy and the mass media

Today's topic is an important one, democracy, and I suppose my talk may be controversial, because I'd like to have an adult conversation about democracy, not the idealised version taught in schools and reinforced by the mass media, but the reality in 2026. And I'd like to discuss what our ABC could do to help make democracy function better.

We all know that democracy only works well when its citizens are well informed about the issues that confront us. Then we, the people, can choose representatives who will truly represent our concerns and needs between elections. Democracy is not limited to voting once every few years.

The mass media play a vital role in informing us about the issues that confront us. For democracy to work, and fascism to be kept at bay, we need an independent media.

In the United States, the Trump autocracy has bullied most of the mass media into submission and Trump's billionaire mates have bought up the remainder.

Propaganda and assault on the truth, including control of the mass media, is one of the 10 characteristics of fascism set out by the historian and author, Rutger Bregman. He argues that nowadays the US satisfies all 10 characteristics; that it has become a fascist state, like former Nazi Germany.² Would our ABC dare to broadcast a program debating this proposition?

Our ABC is one of two members of the Australian mass media that's nominally independent of vested interests. If it fails us, then the information to assist the struggle for democracy is left to the *Guardian* and several small independent media with low circulations: *Pearls & Irritations*; *Michael West Media*; *Inside Story*; *Independent Australia*; and *Crikey*.

State capture

As adults, we understand that democracy is continually threatened by vested interests, that these interests pressure governments, oppositions and the public service to provide policies that serve their own interests, instead of the public interest. They pressure the mass media to provide misinformation and disinformation to sway public support. When these pressures work, it results in *de facto* control of the nation-state—this is known as *state capture*.³

State capture is much more powerful, more far-reaching, than ordinary old corruption, where someone pays a politician to get a contract. It's more far-reaching than *regulatory capture*, where a close, unhealthy relationship develops between a vested interest and the government department or agency that's supposed to regulate it.

Although state captors are mostly industries, they can also be criminal networks, professional organisations, religious organisations and foreign governments.

The methods used to capture the nation-state include:

- political donations and election expenditure;
- lobbying behind the scenes;
- revolving door jobs between government Ministers and their advisers on one hand and representatives of vested interests on the other;
- concentrated media ownership and pressure on the mass media to conform to mainstream thinking;
- so-called ‘think tanks’ like the Institute of Public Affairs, which receives millions in funding from Australia’s richest person Gina Reinhart, and the Australian Strategy Policy Institute, which I’ll say more about later; and
- in some cases, bribery, blackmail and physical intimidation.

In my latest book, *The Path to a Sustainable Civilisation*⁴, and latest peer-reviewed article⁵, I argue that state capture is the principal driving force of several existential threats and other major threats to human civilisation, namely:

- human-induced climate change;
- destruction of our life support system, the natural environment, due to corporate greed in an economic system that fosters greed;
- war, that could easily become nuclear war, with US bases in Australia making us the first targets;
- the increasing gap between rich and poor, demonstrated by large and increasing gaps in wealth and income, and the housing crisis;
- erosion of the right to protest;
- erosion of worker rights; and
- erosion of cultural and educational institutions that practice free speech.

Clearly, state capture threatens the existence of civilisation.

It is also, by definition, a major threat to democracy. When vested interests determine media reports and opinion, the arts, public attitudes and government policies, then democracy and the public interest suffer. Yet state capture is rarely exposed and analysed publicly in the mass media.

The ABC’s discussion of state capture

Our ABC has a mixed record. It did well to publicise the excellent report on state capture published by the Australian Democracy Network in 2022⁶. Since then, it has broadcast a news investigation on regulatory capture by the gambling industry.⁷ The recent *Four Corners* program ‘Campus Chaos’ investigated claims that private consultancy firms are ‘manufacturing’ financial crises to justify sweeping restructures and cuts to courses. Not state capture, but a possible example of capture of our universities by consultancies.

So far, not bad, but our ABC could and should do more. Like the rest of the mainstream media, it has failed to discuss *the methods* of state capture apart from political donations and election expenditure.

Let’s consider the ABC’s performance on state capture of Australia’s response to human-induced climate change.

Many years ago, the ABC started by giving much airtime to campaigners against climate action and renewable energy who had no appropriate scientific qualifications—or no qualifications at all. Fortunately, the ABC has come to realise that ‘balance’ does not require giving equal time to anti-science and science.

Despite its poor start, I think the ABC has done well on educating the public about climate change overall; less well on the role of the fossil fuel industry as a vested interest that strongly influences government policy on climate, whichever party is in government. It has given little airtime to the analysis of the methods used by the industry to gain political power.

It has also failed to discuss the major factor slowing climate mitigation and threatening the environment. While renewable energy is growing in Australia and the world, so is energy consumption, with the result that renewable energy is chasing a retreating target. So it’s very unlikely that Australia, or the whole world, could substitute for all fossil fuel use by 2050. This is not the fault of renewable energy, which has been, and is, a great success, far beyond expectations. The problem is growing consumption.⁸

Independent researchers, including myself, drew attention to this fundamental problem in peer-reviewed journals several years ago. This was before the rise of data centres which will substantially increase the growth rate of electricity demand. We managed to get limited publicity for our research in *The Conversation*⁹, in *Pearls & Irritations* and in *CleanTechnica*, but all the mainstream media, including our ABC, ignored the official media release from UNSW.

The ABC and the critique of conventional economics

Growth in energy consumption is driven by the growth in economic consumption.

Economic growth is driven by believers in conventional economics together with big business which employs psychologists to design advertising and lobbyists to influence political decisions on growth and so-called ‘economic development’. This generally overrides protection of the environment and the rights of Indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, the excessive emphasis given to GDP ignores the gap between rich and poor, ignores the value of unpaid work, especially by women¹⁰, and ignores the environmental impacts of economic activities.

The dominant economic system, in particular neoliberalism¹¹, is based on ideology and appallingly bad science¹². Nevertheless, it has captured governments of both political parties, the public service and the mass media, including our ABC. In this capture, it has been assisted by the support of most big business, which has no objection to exploitation of the environment and most people.

Supporters of neoliberalism fill the mass media, social media, and economics courses in secondary schools and universities, with economic ideologies and myths. These myths fail to stand up to scientific examination. For example, the myths that

- endless growth on a finite planet is feasible;
- wealth trickles down from the rich to the poor, despite empirical studies refuting it¹³, and the evidence that mostly wealth actually trickles up from the poor to the rich¹⁴;
- GDP is a measure of wellbeing;
- the market gives the value of everything;

- the national budget is like a household budget that must be balanced.

All these myths are spread by vested interests – big business and the conventional economics profession. It's an incongruous alliance, because top business managers recognise that they can make better business decisions when they ignore neoclassical economic theory.

When someone does manage to publish a critique or alternative view that actually receives publicity, the full weight of these vested interests descends upon them. When Treasurer Jim Chalmers introduced the modest concept of a wellbeing economy, the Murdoch press and the Australian Financial Review attacked him mercilessly.

Rarely does the ABC provide a forum to debate these economic myths on air. An organisation must be brave to broadcast a challenge to the ideology of neoliberalism, which has captured governments, the public service and the mass media.

State capture by foreign governments

The challenge to the ABC becomes even more serious when the nation-state is captured by a foreign government.

Since the end of World War II, every Australian government, bar one, has been subservient to the United States government in foreign affairs and defence. Presumably this has been due to the false notions that (1) Australia is still a European oasis in an Asian sea and (2) that US will protect us if we are attacked. These notions have resulted in the US dragging Australia into a series of pointless, destructive overseas wars: Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and now the unprovoked attack on Iran by Israel and the United States.

The state capture of Australia by the US military-industrial complex has been reinforced by several methods:

- When our ABC interviews a so-called expert on foreign affairs and defence, it often chooses a representative of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). But it omits to inform the listener that ASPI has a conflict of interest: it's funded by the US and Australian governments, and the weapons industry.
- Retiring Ministers of Defence have walked into highly paid jobs in the weapons industry. Does the ABC ever comment on these conflicts of interest?
- Before the Australian government's decision to join AUKUS, our Department of Defence employed as consultants a gang of six US retired admirals and senior US public servants. This raises the question, was joining AUKUS really *our* government's decision or the US government's? The US consultants were exposed, not by any of the Australian media, but by investigative reporters of the *Washington Post*, before the billionaire Jeff Bezos decimated it.

On Middle East policy, Australia and our ABC appear to be captured by Israel and the United States. The ABC's unlawful termination of Antoinette Lattouf is just the tip of the iceberg. The judge in Ms Lattouf's legal case for wrongful dismissal found that she was dismissed because "she held a political opinion opposing the Israeli military campaign in Gaza". The judge also found that the ABC's decision was made to appease pro-Israel lobbyists.¹⁵

In 2025, a YouGov Poll, commissioned by the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network, found that the majority of Australians support sanctions on Israel over its ruthless campaign in

Gaza. The poll was reported by *Guardian Australia*¹⁶ and even *Sky News*, but not by our ABC.

I've found that, if I wish to receive a wide range of expert analysis of the conflicts in the Middle East, I have to read *The Guardian*, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, reports by the United Nations, and Australia's own *Pearls & Irritations*. I watch videos broadcast by the overseas groups *Democracy Now*, *The Intercept* and *Neutrality Studies*, and by journalists Owen Jones and Chris Hedges. These sources interview commentators such as Francesca Albanese, Yanis Varoufakis, Jeffrey Sachs, and others who dare to speak out. I watch interviews with Jewish historians and political scientists who are bravely critical of Zionism and Israel's genocide—such scholars as Ilan Pappé, Omer Bartov, Avi Shlaim and Norman Finkelstein.

These people are rarely interviewed by the ABC, never on TV. Of the four Jewish scholars I just mentioned, only Pappé was interviewed more recently than October 2023. It seems that the Israeli lobby has been effective in getting the ABC to exclude almost all these eminent speakers from the ABC since then.

For several years, the ABC has referred to “Israel's war against Hamas” and “Israel's war against Hezbollah”. But is this appropriate or is it the unthinking adoption of Israeli propaganda? After all, Israel has killed 70,000 to 100,000 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, by bombs, missiles, gunfire and starvation. It has destroyed almost all buildings and infrastructure: hospitals; schools; universities; refugee camps; power stations; water supplies; and sewerage works. It is attempting to herd two million Palestinians into what amounts to a concentration camp. Is that “a war against Hamas” or a deliberate strategy to conduct a reign of terror against Palestinians and destroy any possibility of a two-state solution?

Is Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon, and the deliberate destruction of infrastructure across Lebanon, just “a war against Hezbollah”, or a land grab?

If the ABC permitted the independent overseas experts I mentioned to be interviewed nowadays, then listeners and viewers could consider an alternative story. Namely that Israel, backed by the USA, is following a deliberate policy to capture and rule all of Palestine, from the river to the sea and beyond, and to turn all of Israel's neighbouring countries into failed states. They have already succeeded in Gaza, the West Bank, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Lebanon. Iran has been severely bombed. And some Israeli politicians are already saying that Türkiye is next on the list.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that the ABC should present this story as the only account of Israel's and the USA's motives. I am saying that the ABC should allow its listeners to hear *both* Israel's story and the alternative stories by experts, and allow listeners to make up their own minds.

Conclusion

If we wish to live in a genuine democracy, we must expose and challenge state capture by vested interests and its methods of gaining political power—whether these interests be the fossil fuel and gambling industries, the conventional economics profession, the military-industrial complex, or foreign governments.

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