

## Don't blame the media, Malcolm

Written by The Conversation

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Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull earlier this week linked the Liberals' leadership crisis to “bullying” by journalists covering Australian politics. He was not suggesting, I don't think, that the media were directly to blame for Tony Abbott's difficulties with his own party room. Rather, the government, and politicians in general, on all sides of politics have in his view become overly submissive before the Fourth Estate.

[As reported by the Guardian](#) , Turnbull said:

I must say that over the years the great mistake that politicians have made is to allow yourself [sic] to be bullied by the media. It's vital to win the respect of the public and indeed of the media itself, to stand your ground and stand up for what you believe in and not be bullied into an echo chamber.

The implication of Turnbull's remarks is that Australian politicians are conceding their integrity by gearing their statements and policy pronouncements to the excessive, “bullying” demands of the media. Turnbull's was a general observation, but read as having particular relevance to Australian talk radio host Alan Jones, one of the country's most vociferous and influential media figures, who had rather aggressively interviewed Turnbull last year.

Prior to the leadership spill, Jones had dedicated two weeks of early morning radio to waging a campaign against the Queensland government of Campbell Newman, at that moment fighting a state election on the back of poor polling numbers. Although on the right of the political spectrum and thus perhaps the kind of journalist one would have expected to support Newman's bid for re-election, he embarked on a campaign of denunciation of Newman's “lies” around a proposed gas development.

Newman lost his seat of Ashgrove in Brisbane, and the Liberals as of this writing looked like losing power in Queensland to Labor.

So, if I might paraphrase the UK Sun when it claimed credit for the Conservative Party election victory of 2001, woz it Alan wot won it for Labor in Queensland? Even just a little bit? Are the

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men and women of the media bullies? And in any case, does it matter? Do they exert undue influence on the politicians, or the public for that matter?

The evidence on the latter point is unclear. The Courier-Mail is a steadfast supporter of the LNP in Queensland, but no matter how tendentious its coverage for the Liberals and against Labor, the state's biggest newspaper could not prevent Newman and his colleagues haemorrhaging votes on January 31.

On the other hand, one might conjecture that without the impact of a major tabloid in the Newman camp, the defeat would have been even bigger. We may never know the precise relationship between media coverage of politics and electoral outcomes, even if we can be pretty sure that there is one.

With regards to Turnbull's assertion of media "bullying", I'm going to say "bullshit", Malcolm. The fact that a politician allows him or herself to be bounced into bad policy by a calculation of what the media wants to hear is hardly the journalists' fault (that isn't Abbott's problem anyway – a knighthood, your majesty?).

If, rather than stand his or her ground, as Turnbull recommends – and he has himself been less than consistent on environmental policy since returning to government – a politician seeks to manipulate the media by saying what he or she perceives to be the right thing, that's the pollied problem, not the journalists.

Journalists have a duty to the public to tell truth to power, exercising critical scrutiny over our elected representatives. Call it bullying if you like, but this is their fundamental democratic responsibility, and indeed the only ethical justification for the freedoms they possess to attack and criticise individuals in the public domain.

Jones' attacks on Newman were exceptional in their personal bitterness, as well as their use of unambiguous terms such as "lies". He is being sued as a result, and will no doubt be able to substantiate his on-air accusations. Win or lose, however, the Australian media as a whole should not be put off engaging in the toughest possible questioning of the politicians who act and spend (and cut) in our name.

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In that context it has been interesting to observe The Australian turning on Abbott these last few weeks, thereby demonstrating that even they – hitherto so committed to the LNP's program and philosophy – have reached some kind of threshold in the amount of elite incompetence they will stand, no matter how right-wing it is.

They are playing the man and not the party, of course, hoping to influence the Coalition in such a way as to maximise its chances at the next election. For the rest of us, The Australian's mounting criticism of the prime minister signals that the Liberals' crisis is very real, and not the product of some mid-term blues.

But bullying? I think not. A bit more honest critique of this kind – applied to the LNP and not just the ALP – would go a long way to restoring The Australian's reputation as the country's leading, and best broadsheet.

The ABC also performed well on the critical front this week, with Chris Uhlmann on TV and Patricia Karvelas on radio in particular adopting low-key but devastatingly effective interview and commentary styles. They had excellent material to work with, of course.

On the day when Abbott declared that "good government starts", Uhlmann on ABC News 24 had fun with a hapless pro-spill Liberal now pretending to be back on the team, fully behind the premier. Karvelas on RN Drive on Tuesday evening made mincemeat of the government's inability to articulate its policy on submarines, albeit in a very polite way.

The great truism of political journalism is that one person's bullying and harassment is another's legitimate adversarialism. In the modern world of highly professional media management by parties (though Abbott's has by common agreement been a disaster), and where being on message is mandatory for politicians in search of advancement, I veer towards the journalists who harry their prey and won't let go until some kind of truth is revealed.

For sure, there can be hyper-adversarialism – gladiatorial journalism of the type that grandstands the journalist before it informs the citizen. In Australia, though, the balance is about right, it seems to me. Turnbull's attempt to set the hare running on a diversionary debate about media bullying is unlikely to go anywhere.

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*Brian McNair does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.*

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