

Shorten promises to reverse budget cut to the ABC

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Bill Shorten has moved to make the ABC an election issue, promising to reverse the Turnbull government's \$83.7 million budget cut and to guarantee funding certainty over the broadcaster's next budget cycle.

Ahead of appearing on the ABC's Q&A program, Shorten and frontbench colleagues declared the Coalition had "launched the biggest attack on the ABC in a generation".

In recent months Communications Minister Mitch Fifield has sent a stream of complaints to the ABC about stories, both online and on air, contesting facts and interpretations. The Prime Minister's Office has also complained. Government frontbenchers and backbenchers frequently make cracks at or about the ABC, echoing a theme of many conservative commentators.

The ABC is also under constant attack from News Corp, driven by both ideology and commercial interests. The government has an inquiry underway into the ABC's competitive neutrality, which was part of a deal with Pauline Hanson but also important in the context of News Corp's argument about the government-funded ABC encroaching on financially strapped commercial media.

When the government made the \$84 million budget cut – which took the form of a freeze to indexation - Treasurer Scott Morrison said "everyone has to live within their means". Managing director Michelle Guthrie said that "the decision will make it very difficult for the ABC to meet its charter requirements and audience expectations."

In a statement Shorten, communications spokeswoman Michelle Rowland and regional communications spokesman Stephen Jones said Labor's commitment would ensure the ABC could meet its charter requirements, safeguard jobs, adapt to the digital environment "and maintain content and services that Australians trust and rely on".

They said the Coalition since 2014 had "overseen \$282 million in cuts to the ABC that has seen 800 jobs lost and a drop in Australian content and services".

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“Labor will stand up for the ABC and fight against the conservatives’ ideological war against our public broadcaster,” the statement said.

The promised investment “demonstrates Labor’s commitment to the ABC’s independence and to maintain the ABC as our comprehensive national broadcaster.

“Now, more than ever, Australians need the ABC – our strong, trusted and independent public broadcaster.

“At a time when too many Australians feel disengaged from their democracy and distrustful of their representatives, Labor wants to restore trust and faith in our institutions. Part of restoring trust is supporting a healthy public interest media sector, and protecting that trusted institution – the ABC”.

Michelle Grattan provides commentary for the ABC.

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