

## Government sets up inquiry into embattled ABC chairman's email

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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The government has ordered an investigation into ABC chairman Justin Milne's [reported](#) email that urged then managing director Michelle Guthrie to "get rid of" a senior journalist who had angered the Turnbull government.

With the ABC in crisis and multiple calls for Milne to resign or stand aside, Communications Minister Mitch Fifield announced late Wednesday that after a meeting with Scott Morrison, he had asked Communications department secretary, Mike Mrdak, "to establish the facts in relation to today's media reports surrounding the ABC".

Mrdak would report to him as soon as possible, Fifield said, adding: "It is important for the community to have confidence in the independence of the ABC".

Earlier, Labor and the Greens flagged they would seek a Senate inquiry, with ABC board members called to appear.

The ABC affair – which began with the sacking of Guthrie on Monday - spun out of control on Wednesday, following the leaking to Fairfax Media of a highly damaging email, showing Milne's attempted editorial interference.

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**Read more:** [ABC board sacks managing director Michelle Guthrie](#)

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The email was sent from Milne to Guthrie on May 8, after then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull complained about the coverage by chief economics correspondent Emma Alberici.

The email said: "They [the government] hate her. We are tarred with her brush. I think it's simple. Get rid of her. We need to save the ABC – not Emma. There is no guarantee they will

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lose the next election”.

Alberici was not sacked or moved.

The revelation of the email was quickly followed by claims that Milne had sought to interfere on other editorial fronts, including Triple J's moving the Hottest 100 from Australia Day.

The Guardian [reported](#) that Milne “tried to convince the ABC board to reverse the Triple J decision, saying ‘Malcolm [Turnbull] will go ballistic”.

ABC staff in Sydney and Melbourne passed a motion calling for Milne to stand aside while an independent inquiry was conducted. Staff in Brisbane called on Milne “to publicly acknowledge if the political interference in the reported email is true and, if so, immediately resign from his position”.

Milne said in a [statement](#) : “The job of the ABC board is to independently govern the corporation, protect its best interests, ensure that it is well funded, well managed and that our content is of the highest standards.

“That is precisely what the board has done and will continue to do. I do not propose to provide a running commentary on day to day issues which arise in pursuit of our duties.”

Later the ABC [reported](#) that in “a text message exchange with ABC radio presenter Rafael Epstein, Mr Milne said “yes” when asked if he intended to remain in the role”.

The ABC board held an emergency conference hook up. It reaffirmed its earlier support for the removal of Guthrie. Milne's position was not on the table.

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The government has been a vociferous and constant critic of Alberici. It reacted furiously at the time to Alberici pieces on company tax, published in February. Some amendments were made. The Milne email came immediately after Turnbull complaints about a story on the government's research and innovation spending.

Alberici on Wednesday accused Milne of having a conflict of interest because he chaired a company featured in one of her articles.

"I don't think someone should be making recommendations on something if they have a conflict of interest or at least have an appearance of a conflict of interest", she told the ABC.

Bill Shorten said the government had made Milne's position "untenable".

Labor declared it would be "moving to establish a Senate inquiry into the Liberal government's political interference at the ABC".

Labor's communications spokeswoman Michelle Rowland said she had rung Milne, and Labor was not satisfied with his response.

She said there needed to be an explanation of whether or not the requirements of the ABC Act for the board to maintain the independence and integrity of the ABC had been compromised.

Greens communications spokeswoman Sarah Hanson-Young said the ABC board as well as Guthrie should appear before a Senate inquiry.

The government – which has since the Abbott days made repeated attacks on the ABC and specific journalists – at first tried to distance itself from the furore.

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Fifield said in an initial statement: "From time to time, I have raised factual errors in ABC reporting, but have always respected the legislated operational and editorial independence of the ABC.

"I have never involved myself in staffing matters, nor am I aware of any member of the government who has sought to do so. The operations of the ABC are entirely matters for the board and management of the ABC which, by law, the minister does not have a role in.

"Questions about the ABC's board and management are matters for the ABC."

But following the conversation with Morrison the government changed tack.

Milne was appointed by the Turnbull government and is personally close to the former prime minister, once being in a business venture with him.

He has declined to spell out the detailed reasons for the sacking of Guthrie, saying it was a matter of her leadership style not being what the organisation needed. He did also point to the need for better relations with the government.

One-time ABC chairman David Hill – who later became managing director - said he thought Milne "has to consider his position and he has to go.

"The fundamental role of the board of the ABC and its chairman - indeed it is [a] legal responsibility - is to protect the independence and impartiality of the ABC.

"And here we have reports that the chairman, to handle political pressure from Canberra, is suggesting that the managing director dismiss, offer as a sacrificial lamb, one of the ABC's top journalists - it's quite extraordinary. And it's not the chairman's job."

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Conservative commentators Andrew Bolt and Chris Kenny, both unrelenting critics of the ABC, said Milne should resign.

Bolt – who said Alberici was biased and had made mistakes - [wrote](#) on the Herald Sun site: “We have a close mate of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, who got him the job, taking up a personal beef Turnbull had with one staffer to demand her sacking, when Alberici’s failings were not sackable offences.”

The Australian’s Chris Kenny [wrote](#) that Milne’s “intercession in the controversy over a shoddy report by economics correspondent Emma Alberici - revealed in a leaked email – was beyond the pale and reeks of political interference”.

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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