

Justin Milne quits as ABC chairman after furore over attack on political editor

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

ABC chairman Justin Milne has resigned, after a board meeting asked that he stand aside while his actions were investigated.

Milne [told](#) the ABC that he had said he should quit because there was a firestorm and he wanted “to provide a release valve.”

“Clearly there is a lot of pressure on the organisation, and as always, my interests have been to look after the interests of the corporation. It’s clearly not a good thing for everybody to be trying to do their job with this kind of firestorm going on,” he told ABC’s Leigh Sales.

The board held its Thursday morning meeting without Milne being present.

Earlier the crisis engulfing the ABC had deepened after it was [reported](#) that Milne had told then managing director Michelle Guthrie that then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull hated the ABC political editor Andrew Probyn.

“‘You have to shoot him’, Mr Milne told Ms Guthrie” in a phone conversation on June 15, the Daily Telegraph reported on Thursday. The detail was in documents Guthrie provided to the ABC board last week.

According to the report, Milne had said that if she didn’t fire Probyn, she would be jeopardising half a billion dollars in funding for the proposed Jetstream infrastructure project for a comprehensive digital database for the organisation.

The government breathed an obvious sigh of relief at Milne’s decision to go.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison tweeted: “ABC Board and Chairman have made the right call. Time for the ABC to resume normal transmission, both independently and without bias. That is

what Australia's taxpayers pay for and deserve."

Before Milne's announcement Communications Minister Mitch Fifield conspicuously failed to back him when addressing reporters.

Asked whether Milne should stay in his position, Fifield said: "Well, it's a matter for every high office holder to continually assess whether they retain the capacity to effectively discharge the duties of their office."

The government on Wednesday ordered a departmental inquiry to establish the facts after an email from Milne to Guthrie was [leaked](#) in which he told her to get rid of the ABC's chief economics correspondent Emma Alberici, declaring the government hated her. The government had publicly and repeatedly attacked pieces Alberici had written, saying they contained errors and were biased.

Labor and the Greens have been proposing a Senate inquiry. Shadow communications minister Michelle Rowland said after Milne's resignation: "Serious questions remain to be answered about political interference at the ABC. These issues go the health of our democracy and can only be addressed through a full and public inquiry."

Read more: [Government sets up inquiry into embattled ABC chairman's email](#)

Turnbull, who is in New York, bought into the imbroglio, [insisting](#) that while he had complained about erroneous coverage he had never sought to get anyone sacked. Fifield, who has been a frequent complainant, made the same point.

"The bottom line is I've never called for anyone to be fired; my concern had been the accuracy and impartiality of reporting," Turnbull said.

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In his interview, Milne told Sales: ““There was absolutely no interference in the independence of the ABC by the government. Nobody from the government has ever rung me and told me what to do in relation to the ABC.”

He defended his interventions in editorial matters, and argued the email about Alberici had been taken out of its context.

“When there is an issue of editorial independence and accuracy it’s appropriate for the chair to be involved — it’s the chair’s job,” he said.

“I have never sent an email to Michelle Guthrie or anybody else, which says you must sack Emma Alberici or Andrew Probyn or anybody else.”

In a formal statement he issued, Milne said:

“Following a discussion with the ABC Board this morning, I have come to the conclusion that the best interests of the ABC will be served by offering my resignation as Chair.

The Board met this morning and proposed that I stand aside for the duration of the proposed inquiries into matters raised in the media. It was my suggestion that I resign as it is plain the organisation needs to get past this issue.

I have never been directed by any member of parliament to seek the sacking of an ABC staff member, nor have I ever directed ABC management to sack a staff member. I have only ever acted with the interests of the ABC at heart. I have always and continue to respect editorial independence as a bedrock principal of the ABC.”

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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