

## Turnbull did not suggest ABC sack journalists: report

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Neither Malcolm Turnbull nor any minister asked or suggested the ABC sack its chief economics correspondent, Emma Alberici or its political editor, Andrew Probyn, according to a report from the Communications department secretary.

But both the then chair, Justin Milne, and then managing director, Michelle Guthrie, were clear the government's obvious anger about some pieces from these journalists would affect support, including funding, for the organisation from within the government.

The [report](#) from Mike Mrdak, commissioned by the government in the wake of Guthrie's sacking, examined media claims of Milne's editorial interference in reaction to Turnbull's anger about articles by Alberici and a report by Probyn. Milne resigned amid the controversy.

The Alberici pieces were about company tax and the government's innovation policy; the Probyn reports related to the Super Saturday's byelection timing.

Mrdak, who interviewed both Milne and Guthrie, said they had no doubt that the government was "very concerned at the issues of opinion and accuracy and editorial standards raised" in the several pieces.

"They do consider that these concerns would affect the ABC's standing, relationships and support within government, including for future investment and funding support".

But both Milne and Guthrie said that while concerns were expressed in writing, messages and conversations by ministers about the four disputed matters "there was no request or suggestion by the former prime minister or any government minister to terminate the employment of a journalist or ABC staff member".

Tabling the report, Fifield revealed Milne had told him on September 12 that the board did not believe Guthrie was best placed to lead the organisation, and that he would be telling her that next day. Milne had said he hoped a mutually agreeable path could be reached. A few days

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later Milne told him discussions with Guthrie was ongoing.

Then on September 23 Milne informed him the board had decided to sack Guthrie the following morning.

In relation to Alberici and Probyn, it was reported in the media that Milne had told Guthrie to “get rid” of Alberici, given the danger to ABC funding, and to “shoot” Probyn, because Turnbull “hates” him.

In their interviews with Mrdak, Milne and Guthrie had opposing versions of their exchanges.

“The chair does not consider that either communication was a direction to the MD. He considers that he presented his view on the actions which needed to be considered, ” Mrdak said.

Guthrie did consider the Milne email about Alberici was a direction; she said it was consistent with Milne’s “interventionist approach to individual staffing and editorial matters”.

Milne acknowledged that the phone conversation he had with Guthrie over Probyn involved a “heated disagreement”. Guthrie “considers that this was an angry and upsetting phone call from the chair where she felt significant pressure to terminate Mr Probyn’s employment.”

Neither journalist was sacked.

But the inquiry was not able to determine whether Guthrie’s handling of the Alberici and Probyn matters had a direct impact on the board’s decision to sack her.

Milne said the handling of these matters was “not a direct factor” in the board’s decision. He argued her dismissal was the end of a process over months during which the board lost

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confidence in her ability to respond to its concerns about her management.

He maintained that “while editorial oversight was a general factor, specific instances such as the Alberici and Probyn matters were not driving the decision of the board in respect to her employment”.

Guthrie disputed Milne’s version, and believed the Alberici and Probyn matters and issues about the Tonightly program were related to the chair’s handling of her dismissal.

“There is a difference of view amongst the parties I interviewed as to the extent to which the matters reflected in media reports contributed to the board’s decision to terminate the MD’s employment”, Mrdak said.

*Michelle Grattan provides commentary for the ABC.*

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