
Four Corners in political crosshairs over juvenile justice report

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A top producer at the ABC's flagship current affairs program Four Corners has accused her program's detractors of being "politically motivated" amid mounting criticism it omitted key facts from a report into the Northern Territory's juvenile justice system.

Four Corners executive producer Sally Neighbour described the controversial episode as the most important piece of reporting on juvenile indigenous incarceration in years.

It is rare for ABC producers to break cover to publicly defend their work, reflecting frustration about attacks by the Giles government and other critics. The statement came in response to questions from *The Australian* after NT Chief Minister Adam Giles stepped up his -attacks on Four Corners last week over its controversial expose on youth detention.

He accused the -program of being "an absolute -disgrace" responsible for causing himself and public servants to be "spat on".

Much recent debate has centred on a letter written by ABC -reporter Caro Meldrum-Hanna to then minister for corrections John Elferink, seeking access to Northern Territory detention facilities.

In it, Meldrum-Hanna praised the NT government's improvements to corrections as a "a significant legacy", and spruiked Four Corners' bona fides as "the only program in the country with the resources and time to make a document of record that is nuanced, non-sensationalist, culturally sensitive, accurate and balanced." The letter, marked confidential but later obtained by Sky News, was branded "a Trojan horse" by Deputy Chief Minister Peter Styles.

Neighbour said yesterday her reporter's words had been misinterpreted, explaining that at the time the letter was written on June 2 Four Corners was "planning a broader story on incarceration issues, and had not yet seen the CCTV footage showing abuse of young detainees".

"After we obtained that footage, several weeks later, the focus of the story markedly changed," Neighbour said.

"This change in focus was made clear to the minister, who was given ample opportunity to respond. His relevant responses were included in the program." She declined to address specific questions about what had and had not featured. The NT Department of Corrections quietly issued a statement shortly before the program went to air stressing that the incidents it was expected to cover were historical and had been dealt with through "a number of independent investigations and reviews".

Stills from the CCTV footage Four Corners obtained had appeared in government reports alongside transcripts. Those reports and other events shown by Four Corners had already been covered by the media. Some of the CCTV footage had even been broadcast by the ABC before.

The program touched on this history but moved on to allege the abuse had continued. It did not say most of the guards depicted had been investigated and none successfully prosecuted, partly because of the broad protections afforded by NT youth justice laws.

Four Corners also neglected to mention that several of its key sources were, or had been, involved in legal action against the NT government over youth justice.

When the Prime Minister rang into the ABC's AM program the next morning to announce plans to establish a royal commission, he did not seem appraised of the full history.

In her statement, Neighbour characterised the show as "an example of Four Corners at its best".

"This was an extremely -important story, which focused more attention on the critical issue of juvenile indigenous incarceration in Australia than any other piece of reporting in recent years," Neighbour said. "The criticisms of the story are clearly politically motivated." Mr Giles claimed Four Corners had acted "in cahoots" with Labor and said the show had "a lot to -answer for". He promised to lodge a formal ABC complaint and -demanded a response from what he branded the "taxpayer - machine".

Other ministers have tried to link the Don Dale program broadcast on July 25 that sparked a royal commission within 24 hours to another Four Corners program, in 2011, that prompted Labor to -impose a ban on live cattle exports later blamed for unfairly damaging NT industry. Mr Giles has a history of -attacking the media. During a leadership crisis in February last year he claimed unnamed senior police were "in cahoots" with his own colleagues in trying to bring him down.

In his latest spray, Mr Giles said Four Corners had "put an indictment" on public sector staff.

His remarks last week were at odds with those he gave immediately after the Four Corners episode was broadcast. Mr Giles then told media he had "recognised horror through my eyes" and took credit for helping to establish the Don Dale royal commission.

He appeared to change tack after feedback emerged on social media of Country Liberal sup-porters unsympathetic to abuse claims and more frustrated about juvenile delinquency.

The day after the show aired, on July 26, NT Police issued -statements about a 12-year-old who had tried to sexually assault a 76-year-old woman the night -before, and another about five youths who had been charged with 125 offences related to a crime spree.

Earlier this month Mr Giles -accused the ABC of "stirring up -racism" and of attempting to "give Labor a leg up" before the August 27 election.

Country Liberals president Victoria Menshelyi told *The Australian* last night that while the party had not specifically polled voter reactions to the Don Dale saga, feedback on doorsteps had been "more about law and order".

"What sort of came up was that people were sick and tired of being broken into and of having cars -stolen," Ms Menshelyi said. "I wouldn't say it (the program) has been a benefit, especially given the way it was reported." Former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett used the Country Liberals' campaign launch last weekend to attack the ABC for "using our money to set us all up, to ... only deliver part of the story for their own reasons", and suggested any commission should be into the ABC instead.