

## No ABC apology for Leak protesters



Latoya Rule; with her brother Wayne Morrison, who died in custody; and Q&A host Tom Ballard, who asked protesters to leave TAIT SCHMAAL

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The ABC has declined to apologise to the family of Bill Leak for an on-air outburst in which a known activist interrupted Monday's Q&A program by calling him a racist, an act condemned by federal frontbencher Zed Seselja as "dancing on the grave" of the late cartoonist.

Former prime minister Tony Abbott lashed out at the public broadcaster for refusing to say sorry over the slur and said the ABC would "fall over itself to apologise" if there had been some "insult against political correctness" in other circumstances.

"It's typical of the ABC that no responsibility should be taken," he said. "Our ABC really needs to lift its game."

Prominent Aboriginal figure Warren Mundine described the protest as that of "idiotic morons" who should "grow up and confront the real issues in our community".

*The Australian* understands the woman who led the action was Latoya Rule, a South Australian university student who came to prominence when her brother Wayne Morrison died in custody after a fight with guards at the Yatala Labour Prison in Adelaide last year. Ms Rule, a Wiradjuri and Maori woman, campaigned for

international attention over the death of her brother, who faced charges of rape and assault. Five prison guards required hospital attention following the fight.

Ms Rule posted on social media at the time: “This is not just another death in custody, this is state-sanctioned brutality.”

She was among organisers of a protest that blocked the streets of Adelaide on Australia Day this year. She shaved her head for the protest, she said, to highlight the suffering of Aboriginal people.

It is understood Ms Rule had applied to the ABC to be a member of Monday’s Q&A audience, and that, as is standard practice, her name and background would have been checked by the production team before her attendance was approved.

During a section of the discussion, panellists condemned leftists celebrating Leak’s death on Friday, but also criticised his controversial cartoon last year depicting an indigenous man with a beer can who could not remember his son’s name. At this point a group of protesters interrupted, shouting “Bill Leak is racist ... we won’t stand for it”.

Q&A’s fill-in compere, Tom Ballard — who told the audience he had previously signed a letter that labelled Leak’s August cartoon “racist” — responded to the protesters, saying “we appreciate your passion very much and we understand why you would want to make a stand at this particular moment”, but said the panel discussion had to continue and asked them to leave.

After the show, Ms Rule tweeted: “Today would’ve been Wayne’s 30th bday! I’m proud of the action we done on #qanda tonight as WAR! Aboriginal people do not stand by racism.”

Mr Mundine, until recently chairman of the Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council, yesterday said of the protest: “Anyone who does that and calls Bill Leak a racist is really burying their head in the ground.”

Mr Mundine described the artist as “a decent, knockabout Aussie bloke”, who in the cartoon in question had raised a genuine issue of abuse and neglect in some Aboriginal communities.

Senator Seselja, who is Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs, yesterday labelled the protesters “a disgrace”, accusing them of “dancing on the grave of Bill Leak”.

“You really have a continuation of some of the Twitter hatred that’s been directed - towards Bill Leak in his death, and I would just say to those individuals to perhaps have a little bit of decency and a little bit of compassion,” he told Sky News.

Senator Seselja said the pursuit of Leak over the cartoon through a complaint to the Human Rights Commission under section 18C had highlighted failures in the way the law dealt with race-hate allegations.

Lawyer Justin Quill, who defended Leak, said the Q&A protest was disappointing.

“I was very disappointed that this was able to happen in the week Bill is to be buried,” Mr Quill said.

“Bill knew he wasn’t a racist and to be labelled one on national television would have upset him enormously.”

An ABC spokesman said: “Q&A is live and unscripted and exchanges between the host, panellists and audience members are fast-paced and unpredictable. Discussions and viewpoints can be challenging, especially when controversial and emotive issues are being discussed.”

The spokesman said the program’s organisers “make it clear that we expect audience members and panellists to treat each other with respect”.

“Before each program audience members are explicitly warned not to call out or disrupt the discussion.

“That warning was delivered before Q&A in Adelaide last night. When a group of three people became disruptive they were quickly escorted out by producers. Moderator Tom Ballard dealt with the disruption quickly and effectively.”

Asked whether it was appropriate and wise to host a debate of the controversy surrounding Leak in the week of his death and with his public memorial service due on Friday, the ABC spokesman said: “Discussion of free speech issues, linked to the sad event of the death of Mr Leak, has been widespread throughout the media, including in *The Australian*.”

Ms Rule could not be contacted for comment.