

ABC missing in action on Witness K and Bernard Collaery persecution



The two outlets that led the coverage of the biggest scandal in Australian politics have fallen silent on its aftermath.

MEDIA

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MAY 30, 2019



*Barrister Bernard Collaery
(Image: AAP/Mick Tsikas)*

It's the biggest national security story in a generation — the ongoing cover-up of a crime committed by the Howard government to help a major Australian company, exposed by two patriots with decades of service to Australia.

But it's one the ABC has gone strangely silent on.

The ABC has failed to provide any substantial coverage of the prosecution of Witness K and Bernard Collaery for six months, having last reported on the government's campaign of harassment against the men when Geraldine Doogue [discussed the case with Jonathan Pearlman](#) in November.

The notorious [February 28 hearing](#) of the case in Canberra — in which Attorney-General Christian Porter sought to use secret documents to prosecute Collaery and K appeared to do everything possible to drag out the prosecution — received only brief mentions on ABC NewsRadio and the Sydney 6pm news bulletin that day. There was no follow-up analysis or reporting of Porter's actions. The only other mention of Collaery (a former ACT attorney-general) by the ABC this year was in an interview on [the 30th anniversary](#) of the first meeting of the ACT assembly.

Other media have done better. Alexandra Back of The Canberra Times has covered the hearings. Unusually, The Australian Financial Review provided profiles of the case over summer and noted Porter's eagerness for closed proceedings. The Guardian has covered it repeatedly this year. Eureka Street has written on it, as has The Saturday Paper, with Richard Ackland continuing to take a strong interest.

In addition to the ABC, The Australian is MIA. It hasn't covered the case this year — in fact, it hasn't mentioned it since mid-2018. That's interesting because it was The Australian [that broke the story](#) of the bugging of the Timor-Leste cabinet in May 2013 — although the government's handpicked Director of Public Prosecutions, former trade union royal commission counsel Sarah McNaughton, bizarrely omitted The Australian and its journalist from the summons to Collaery. She preferred instead to target ABC journalists and producers who followed up the story and the raids launched by the Abbott government against K and Collaery.

A spokesperson for the ABC declined to discuss why there was a dearth of coverage this year, and denied that ABC legal had discouraged news and current affairs staff from covering the story, or had discouraged on-air guests from outside the ABC from discussing it in broadcasts.

This is contrary to Crikey's experience of the issue: appearing on The Drum earlier this year, I was told that ABC legal had indicated they would prefer if I not discuss the K/Collaery prosecution (ironically in a segment intended to cover topics that guests felt had not received sufficient media coverage) because of its complexity and the potential for legal risk. It seems that, officially, ABC legal never did any such thing.

The result is that the two media outlets that led coverage of the biggest scandal in Australian politics are, so far this year, hors de combat despite government attempts to hide the prosecution from the public and use secret documents that K and Collaery and their teams will not be permitted to see.

The silence of major sections of the media is paralleled by the silence of the Labor Party, which has, to its enduring shame, said literally nothing about the persecution of K and Collaery — though understandably given shadow Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus approved the bugging of Collaery when attorney-general in 2013.

The only MP to defy Labor's complicity in this outrage is NSW MP and longtime Timor-Leste supporter Paul Lynch, who on May 7 told [NSW parliament](#):

These prosecutions are fundamentally misconceived and are wrong in principle -- the prosecution wants as much of the case as possible heard in secret. The Kafkaesque nature of these proceedings is shown by the fact that Mr Collaery cannot even see the brief of evidence used by the prosecutors.

The silence of the ABC and The Australian certainly plays into the government's strategy of hiding its persecution of K and Collaery, with Porter aiming to prosecute the two men in a closed court and using secret documents.

The government's apparent goal is to ensure a major crime by the Howard government and the intelligence community remains hidden, and any who would expose it are given the clear signal that they, too, will face exemplary punishment carried out in plain sight and, it seems, perfect obscurity.