

Royal Commissions and inquiries prompted by ABC journalism

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INTRODUCTION

Public interest journalism from the ABC has placed scrutiny on issues that governments would prefer to ignore, prompting numerous government inquiries and investigations – what Josh Taylor, writing in *Crikey*, called “The Four Corners effect”.¹

There has been notable, nationally significant investigative journalism done by commercial broadcasters, with profound consequences for Australian democracy, but at nothing like the same scale as that of Four Corners and other ABC journalism.

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM ABC JOURNALISM

Some of the most influential contributions from ABC journalism since 1979 include:

Party inquiry into Nazi links of powerbroker

A 1979 ABC documentary exposed Liberal Party powerbroker Lyenko Urbanchich as a former Nazi propagandist. This resulted in a party inquiry and a failed vote to expel him.²

Street Royal Commission

The big league, the 1983 Four Corners investigation into misappropriation of funds and judicial corruption, resulted in the NSW Royal Commission into Certain Committal

¹ Taylor (2016) *The Four Corners effect: 12 hours later, a royal commission*,
<https://www.crikey.com.au/2016/07/26/four-corners-effect-hours-later-royal-commission/>

² Sydney Morning Herald (2006) *Ardent Nazi took Liberal to extremes*,
<https://www.smh.com.au/national/ardent-nazi-took-liberal-to-extremes-20060304-gdn313.html>

Proceedings Against K. E. Humphreys (the Street Royal Commission) which found that magistrate Murray Farquahar had illegally intervened in the legal process.³

Fitzgerald Inquiry into Police Misconduct

The moonlight state, the 1987 Four Corners investigation that revealed extensive Queensland police corruption,⁴ resulted in the Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Misconduct (the “Fitzgerald Inquiry”). The Fitzgerald Inquiry spent two years investigating long-term systemic political corruption and abuse of power and is the “most successful inquiry in Australian history”.⁵

Four ministers were jailed, numerous police were convicted, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen was charged with perjury, and the Criminal Justice Commission (as it then was) was founded as a result of its recommendations.⁶

Commission of Inquiry into ASIS

Code name Mantra, the 1994 Four Corners investigation that revealed that former ASIS officers believed that the organisation’s accountability was questionable, prompted the Commission of Inquiry into the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (the Samuels and Codd Report).⁷

Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity

Corruption Inc, the 2004 Four Corners investigation that revealed that the Australian Crime Commission was “wearing the stain of corruption”, resulted in a commitment from the government to set up an independent national anti-corruption body, which would become the Australian Commission for Law Enforcement Integrity.⁸

³ New Matilda (2014) *Wran, the Balmain boy gone bad*, <https://newmatilda.com/2014/04/24/wran-balmain-boy-gone-bad/>

⁴ Four Corners (1987) *The moonlight state*, <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/the-moonlight-state---1987/2832198>

⁵ Hanrahan (2016) *What does it take to make a royal commission successful?*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-19/four-corners-nt-royal-commission-history/7945640>

⁶ Crime and Corruption Commission Queensland (2014) *The Fitzgerald Inquiry*, <http://www.ccc.qld.gov.au/about-the-ccc/the-fitzgerald-inquiry>

⁷ Commission of Inquiry into the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (1995) *Report on the Australian Secret Intelligence Service – public edition*, <http://apo.org.au/node/37293>

⁸ Four Corners (2004) *Corruption Inc*; Kirk (2004) *Fed Govt announces new national anti-corruption body*, <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2004/s1133017.htm>; ABC News (2004) *Govt to set up*

Hunter Inquiry; Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse

ABC Lateline reporting in November 2012 of child sex abuse in the Catholic diocese of Maitland–Newcastle was followed days later by the announcement of a NSW-level Special Commission of Inquiry into police handling of abuse by Catholic clergy in the Hunter and the much broader national Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.⁹

Financial Services Royal Commission

Banking bad, the 2014 Four Corners investigation that revealed a “sales-driven culture” within the Commonwealth Bank’s financial planning division, helped prompt the Senate inquiry that went on to recommend the Financial Services Royal Commission.¹⁰

Greyhound racing

Making a killing, the 2015 Four Corners–Fairfax investigation that revealed live-baiting in the greyhound industry, prompted a NSW inquiry that resulted in greyhound racing being banned in the state in 2016, though the ban was reversed later that year. The ACT also banned greyhound racing in 2016, and has not reversed its ban.¹¹

national anti-corruption body, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2004-06-16/govt-to-set-up-national-anti-corruption-body/1993618>; Brown (2008) *Towards a Federal Integrity Commission: The challenge of institutional capacity-building in Australia*, p 3

⁹ Oriti (2016) *Royal commission to explore child abuse ‘epicentre’ in Newcastle*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-31/royal-commission-to-explore-child-abuse-epicentre-in-newcastle/7799774>; Gillard (2012) *Establishment of Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse (archived)*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20121115102106/http://www.pm.gov.au/press-office/establishment-royal-commission-child-sexual-abuse>; Dempster (2019) *The ABC is now fighting for its survival*, <https://johnmenadue.com/quentin-dempster-the-abc-is-now-fighting-for-its-survival-speech-delivered-on-7-february-2019/>

¹⁰ Four Corners (2014) *Banking bad*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-05/banking-bad/5433156>; Chau and Clark (2018) *Banking royal commission: How did we get here?*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-30/banking-royal-commission-how-did-we-get-here/9210248>

¹¹ Four Corners (2015) *Making a killing*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-16/making-a-killing/6127124>; Slezak (2016) *Mike Baird confirms backflip on greyhound racing ban in NSW*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/oct/11/mike-baird-confirms-backflip-on-greyhound-racing-ban-in-nsw>; Belot and Polkinghorne (2016) *ACT government says it can no longer support greyhound racing after NSW decision*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6046937/act-government-says-it-can-no-longer-support-greyhound-racing-after-nsw-decision/>

Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the NT

Australia's shame, the 2016 Four Corners investigation that revealed strip searching, assaults and tear gassing of young offenders at the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, led to a Royal Commission being announced the next day (formally established days later as the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory).¹²

Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission (SA)

Pumped, the 2017 Four Corners investigation that revealed that billions of litres of water were being harvested by irrigators despite being purchased by the government for environmental use.¹³ The program resulted in the South Australian government's Murray–Darling Basin Royal Commission to investigate the Murray–Darling Basin system.¹⁴

Meriton fined for “masking” TripAdvisor reviews

In 2018, Meriton was fined \$3 million for “masking” TripAdvisor reviews, following an investigation prompted by a 2015 report on 7:30.¹⁵

¹² Taylor (2016) *The Four Corners effect: 12 hours later, a royal commission*; Standish (2016) *25 years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2016/09/05/4532950.htm>

¹³ Besser, Fallon and Carter (2017) *Murray-Darling Basin Plan: Taxpayer-purchased water intended for rivers harvested by irrigators*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-24/murray-darling-basin-water-pumped-by-irrigators/8732702>

¹⁴ Dayman (2018) *Murray-Darling Basin Plan potentially unlawful, royal commissioner warns*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-01/murray-darling-basin-plan-potentially-unlawful/9713534>; ABC News (2017) *Murray-Darling Basin: SA launches royal commission into alleged water theft*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-26/sa-to-launch-royal-commission-into-river-murray-theft/9194368>

¹⁵ Lewis (2015) *Meriton allegedly prevents guests from giving negative reviews, bribes them to improve ratings on TripAdvisor*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-21/meriton-apartments-allegedly-cheating-tripadvisor-system/6870256>; Chau and Letts (2018) *Meriton fined \$3 million for interfering with negative TripAdvisor reviews*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-31/accc-trips-up-meriton-over-fake-reviews/10055618>

Royal Commission into Aged Care

In 2018, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced a Royal Commission into aged care the day before Four Corners released its two-part series on aged care (*Who cares*),¹⁶ in a move described as “pre-empt[ing]” Four Corners.¹⁷

Law Reform Commission reviews NSW consent laws

“*I am that girl*”, a 2018 Four Corners report featuring Saxon Mullins, prompted the NSW Attorney-General to refer the state’s sexual consent laws to the Law Reform Commission two days later.¹⁸

Inquiry into ATO allegedly targeting vulnerable small businesses

Within one week of *Whistleblower exposes ATO “cash grab” targeting small businesses*, the 2018 Four Corners–SMH joint investigation into the ATO allegedly targeting vulnerable small businesses to meet revenue targets,¹⁹ then-Minister for Revenue Kelly O’Dwyer requested an inquiry from the Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman into the allegations raised by the investigation.²⁰

¹⁶ Ferguson (2018) *Royal commission will finally give the elderly a voice*, <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/politics/federal/royal-commission-will-finally-give-the-elderly-a-voice-20180915-p5040v.html>

¹⁷ Powell (2018) *PM announces royal commission into aged care industry, as operators hit out at the “complete misappropriation” of funds*, <https://www.smartcompany.com.au/business-advice/politics/royal-commission-aged-care-sector-australia/>

¹⁸ Milligan and Carter (2018) *NSW Attorney-General calls for review of sexual consent laws following Four Corners program*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-08/nsw-attorney-general-calls-for-review-of-sexual-consent-laws/9734988>

¹⁹ Ferguson, Robinson and Carter (2018) *Whistleblower exposes ATO “cash grab” targeting small businesses*, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-09/whistleblower-exposes-ato-cash-grab-targeting-small-businesses/9633140>

²⁰ Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman (2018) *Ombudsman calls for small businesses in trouble with ATO to “contact us”*, <https://www.asbfeo.gov.au/news/news-articles/ombudsman-calls-small-businesses-trouble-ato-%E2%80%9Ccontact-us%E2%80%9D>

ATO audit of Fernbrew

The ATO audited alcohol wholesaler Fernbrew Pty Ltd after it was exposed by a 2018 ABC investigation.²¹

Inquiry into Orroral Valley bushfire

The 2021 ACT Chief Coroner inquiry into Orroral Valley bushfire was prompted by ABC reporting.²²

Independent investigation into the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission

The 2021 Four Corners report *Watchdog or lapdog?* prompted the Victorian Gambling and Casino Control Commission to commission an independent investigation into the allegations.²³

Review of “figure four” restraint in Western Australia

Within a week of a 2022 Four Corners report showing a child in a WA detention centre being restrained via a “figure four” or “folding up” technique, Premier Mark McGowan committed to a review of and potential ban on its use.²⁴

²¹ Stuart and Miskelly (2019) *ATO closes in on fake alcohol wholesaler Fernbrew after audit found company owe large tax bill*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-08/ato-closes-in-on-fake-alcohol-wholesaler-fernbrew/10791292>

²² Allen and Inman (2021) *How the ABC exposed a massive communications breakdown and sparked a coronial inquiry*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-01/how-abc-exposed-communications-breakdown-orroral-valley-fire/100340210>

²³ VGCCC (2021) *Independent investigation findings into allegations broadcast on Four Corners*, <https://www.vgccc.vic.gov.au/media-release/independent-investigation-findings-allegations-broadcast-four-corners>; Willingham (2021) *Gambling watchdog probe urges ban on high-roller junkets, but critics say “they’ve missed the point,”* <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-13/victoria-crown-investigation-junket-vcglr/100535234>

²⁴ Burmas, Carmody, & Robinson (2022) *“Folding up” restraint may be banned as Banksia Hill summit announced by WA government*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-15/banksia-hill-detention-centre-summit-called-by-wa-government/101654226>

Inquiries into the Office of the Public Trustee

After a 2022 Four Corners report into the Queensland Office of the Public Trustee, the Queensland Attorney-General announced both an internal and an external review. The Disability Royal Commission will look at the guardianship and trustee system in 2013.²⁵

External review of Perth Mint options

After a 2023 Four Corners investigation revealed concerns about the purity of gold sold by the Perth Mint, the WA Government announced an external review to consider options for the mint, including privatisation.²⁶

²⁵ Connolly, Russell and Zillmann (2022) *Queensland's Public Trustee system to be investigated after Four Corners report revealed high fees and financial mismanagement*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-15/public-trustee-system-under-fire-over-fees-to-vulnerable-people/100908772>

²⁶ Bourke (2023) *Here's what you need to know about the Perth Mint controversy — and why it matters*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-03-09/perth-mint-gold-doping-explainer/102070850>; (2023) *Sale of Perth Mint among options to be considered as WA government announces review*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-20/bill-johnston-perth-mint/102246062>