

Opinion

Melodrama at The Monthly shows how a good debate needs two sides



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I first met Sally Warhaft in March when we were guests on ABC1's Q&A. The program likes to mix up the guests, so the fact we were sitting next to each other gave me a fair idea we were expected to express contrary views.

We got on well and engaged in friendly conversation while waiting to go on camera. I was intrigued to find out she was originally an anthropologist. More recently she had become the editor of the small magazine published out of Melbourne, *The Monthly*.

To quote Eddie McGuire, Warhaft was "boned" at the magazine a few weeks later. And it appears that I played an accidental part in her downfall. Let me apologise.

Warhaft published an essay under the name of Kevin Rudd, which argued that capitalism had failed and it was up to social democrats, like Rudd himself, to fix it. On Q&A that night, Warhaft and I were both asked our views on the essay. The compere, Tony Jones, then asked Warhaft if she would publish an essay from me on the subject.

She replied she had been inviting Malcolm Turnbull to write for her magazine and said if I was Opposition leader she hoped I would respond to those invitations. She went on to say she didn't "want to live in a one-party state." After our television appearance, Warhaft proposed to her editorial board that they publish a reply from me. She wanted to open the pages up to different parties. But that was not the view of the owner and the editorial board.

The Monthly is owned and financed by Morry Schwartz. He has done well out of the capitalist system and he uses his own money to publish the magazine. He has every right to decide what views he wants to publish. If he wants to criticise market capitalism then so be it. If he doesn't want a contrary view then so be it. It's his magazine.

But he cannot hold the magazine open to only one side and then claim it is open to competing views. Plainly his magazine is not open to both sides of debate. It is a partisan monthly. I have plenty of other opportunities to publish, so it's no skin off my nose to be black-balled by Schwartz and the chairman of the editorial board, Robert Manne. They own the press. They control it.

But views like this are not usually the views expressed by leftist publishers. Publishers might think like that, they might act like that, but they will seldom talk (publicly) like that.

And this is where I feel sorry for Warhaft. She was asked on live television whether she would publish a reply to Rudd. She said she would. But in fact she was not allowed to—at least not allowed to publish one from me. What should she have said on television that night? "No we won't publish Costello because we disagree with his view."

You can imagine how that would have gone down. Even to an ABC audience largely hostile to conservative views, it would be embarrassing to admit such intolerance.

What if Warhaft had (truthfully) said: "I am happy to publish Peter Costello but Morry Schwartz and Robert Manne

won't allow it." Not only would this have been a downer, it would have shown the owner and editorial chairman in an embarrassing light in front of the ABC and the national audience. Likely her editorial career would have ended earlier.

So what was Warhaft to do? She could expose the magazine as one that doesn't allow competing debate or she could maintain it was open and tolerant and hope the owner and board would back her at a later date.

Unfortunately they wouldn't.

In 1982 Manne edited *The New Conservatism In Australia*. This was not a book bemoaning conservatism in Australia. It was one extolling it. Manne wrote in the introduction "much of the more original and interesting social and political criticism in Australia seemed to come from those whom I regarded as being, in one way or another, on the political 'right'."

To be fair to him, when he wrote that he was going through a conservative phase. As he explains in his book *Left Right Left* he has now shifted back again the other way.

But it might still be true that there is interesting social and political criticism on the conservative side. You'll never know if you don't hear it. The ABC is big enough to air alternative opinions on Q&A. Strip out the alternative views on it, you are left with an electronic edition of *The Monthly*.

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