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AWI: Wool and Innovation, or bullying and intimidation?



WOOL and innovation? How about bullying and intimidation.

The toxic "our-way-or-the-highway" culture that has enveloped Australian Wool Innovation — the nation's peak wool body charged with overseeing the research, development and marketing of the millions of dollars in grower levies collected annually — has dragged on long enough.

And given the amount of money Australian taxpayers pump into the company each year through matching funds, it's high time Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce grew a backbone and intervened.

The latest incidents involving [AWI chairman Wal Merriman secretly viewing an industry meeting he wasn't invited to from behind a one-way mirror](#), and [later telling a journalist that questioned him on the matter to f-- off](#), shouldn't come as too much of a surprise to anyone that has shown half an interest in wool politics in recent years.



AWGA - News Update

It's symptomatic of a culture that has been allowed to deteriorate in recent years.

Mr Merriman next month will chalk up nine years as AWI chairman — longer than his three predecessors Brian van Rooyen, Ian McLachlan and Maree McCaskill combined.

During this period, wool growers claim the waters have been muddied by jobs for the boys, conflicts of interest, backstabbing and votes of no confidences. Research and development that doesn't fit the board's interests has all but been abandoned, mulesing has become a taboo topic, despite increased consumer demand for an end to the controversial farming practice, and success is measured less by science and more by one person's opinion and the size of a ribbon in the show ring.

Not that you can dare question the organisation on its motives. As not only the ABC journalist that was on the receiving end of Mr Merriman's most recent tirade at an industry event in South Australia knows all too well.

The Weekly Times on Monday emailed AWI for a response to questions about whether Mr Merriman's comments to the journalist had the support of the board and organisation management and whether, like a number of woolgrowers were arguing, he should stand down.

It prompted an almost-immediate phone call from the organisation, which labelled the incident "fake news" and part of a broader vendetta by the media to undermine AWI and Mr Merriman's leadership.

A statement that arrived only moments before *The Weekly Times* went to print yesterday laid blame for the incident squarely at the foot of the ABC journalist. It described Mr Merriman's comments as "unfortunate" but at no point did it apologise for him calling a reporter charged with asking legitimate questions on behalf of its woolgrower audience, who fund the organisation, a "useless prick".

Instead it sought to discredit the journalist further, calling his actions "disingenuous" and intimidating. It also said the "issue of media intimidation of AWI and misleading coverage of the wool industry at a time of great optimism" had been raised at an AWI committee meeting that met earlier in the day of the incident.

For an organisation that struggles so much with ethics, it's surprising when it calls into question that of others. As for claims of intimidation, AWI should also well know those in glass houses don't throw stones.

Numerous woolgrowers calling for Mr Merriman to resign over the recent scandals wouldn't go on the record when contacted by *The Weekly Times* for fear of "the wrath of AWI". With good reason. During my phone call, AWI said it would only answer questions if I revealed "who was asking them".

It's certainly not the first time AWI has attempted to control and intimidate the media or their wool-growing audience.



AWGA - News Update

On numerous occasions, journalists have been accused by the organisation of “trying to destroy the wool industry” when asking legitimate questions on the industry or its direction.

When *The Weekly Times* published an on-farm profile with a woolgrower last year involved in AWI’s Fibre of Football campaign (which is legitimately a great initiative), AWI took the paper and the farmer to task over the word mulesing, used three times in a 735-word story.

In the article the farmer mentioned his sheep didn’t require mulesing, which he considered an advantage given the whole “mulesing debate”. In an email to the grower, his agent and the journalist that wrote the article, AWI said while it was “happy you got the jumper” associated with the campaign it was “not happy that a great campaign had to be linked with mulesing”. When pressed on the matter, AWI accused this paper of trying to “turn growers and industry against us”.

It is this constant blame game emanating from the hallways of AWI that needs to stop.

Maybe it should take a look in the mirror, instead of through it.

<http://www.weeklytimesnow.com.au/news/opinion/awi-wool-and-innovation-or-bullying-and-intimidation/news-story/0f4de66c8747f595f99b1bc428595502>