

## International

## Tears, insults as media's role in Aussie election questioned

## Shorten first leader in decades not to seek Murdoch's endorsement

**SYDNEY:** The man tipped to become Australia's next prime minister pilloried the country's right-wing media yesterday after an attack about his late mother that has turbocharged an already heated debate about press partisanship. Decrying a "new low" in Australia's bare-knuckle politics, the usually phlegmatic Labor leader Bill Shorten became emotional as he lashed out at "bloody lazy" journalism and "gotcha sh\*t" ahead of the closely fought May 18 election.

Like Britain and the United States - Australia's stridently rightwing media plays a prominent role in political life. But some experts, like Tony Walker, a communications professor at La Trobe University, have accused titles owned by mogul Rupert Murdoch of taking a "battering-ram approach" during this febrile campaign season. They "have stepped up the war against the Labor Party since the election was called", he wrote in a recent commentary.

The group's front pages and TV commentaries have echoed and amplified ruling Liberal party campaign messaging that targets Shorten - a former union leader whose party is a few percentage points ahead in the polls. The confrontation reached a peak yesterday when Sydney tabloid "The Daily Telegraph" accused Shorten of misleading voters about his deceased mother's life, in a front-page splash that carried the block-caps headline "MOTHER OF INVENTION".

Shorten had told the story of how his mother had been forced to defer her dreams of being a lawyer to help her family, which the Daily Telegraph suggested was misleading because she did eventually attend the bar in her 50s. "Who do some people in News Corp - and it's not all the journalists I make that very clear - who do some of these lazy people think they are?" Shorten railed after being asked about the piece, his voice cracking with emotion. "They play gotcha sh\*t about your life story, and more importantly my mum's."

The tabloid is a News Corp Australia publication, a branch of Rupert Murdoch's global media empire which also includes America's influential "Fox News" and Britain's "The Sun". Daily Telegraph writer Anna Caldwell defended the story, telling Murdoch's Sky News it "in no way, shape, or form was an attack on Bill Shorten's mother".

## Changing times?

It is not the first spat between Australia's left-leaning leaders and Murdoch's notoriously combative press, but it may prove to be one of the most consequential. The mogul has occasionally backed leaders from the center-left - most notably Tony Blair - but only when the political writing was on the wall for conservative contenders. Even his highbrow titles have become more overtly political over the years, according to Margot Saville, a journalist who joined "The Australian" as a cadet in

1987. "It was still very much the paper of record," she said, noting a shift toward more opinion. "It changed a lot."

Similarly, Australia's leftist leaders have usually held their tongue about Murdoch until long after the end of their political life. Former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd sought and received his support when running for office, but last year described him as "the greatest cancer on the Australian democracy". "Murdoch is not just a news organization. Murdoch operates as a political party, acting in pursuit of clearly defined commercial interests, in addition to his far-right ideological world view," Rudd claimed.

Few would doubt that Shorten's tears were real, but there is also little doubt he seized a political moment. His response is symbolic of a growing sense among some on Australia's left that Murdoch's once-feared machine has lost touch with mainstream voters and is vulnerable - even as President Donald Trump and Brexit backers reap the rewards of his support. Shorten is the first leader in decades not to seek Murdoch's endorsement. Throughout his career, the 51-year-old has often been accused of being bland and uninspiring, but not after his furious attack on News Corp. "This is certainly not the first time a Labor leader has had a bash at the Murdoch media in a recent campaign," said Michelle Grattan of the University of Canberra. "But it was probably one of the more effective." — AFP



CANBERRA: Australia's Labor leader Bill Shorten (left) and Liberal Leader and Prime Minister Scott Morrison shake hands at the start of "The Leaders' Debate" at the National Press Club of Australia yesterday. — AFP

## News in brief

## France confirms arms shipment to Saudi

**PARIS:** The French government confirmed yesterday that a new shipment of weapons will head for Saudi Arabia, despite claims Riyadh is using the arms in the Yemen war. Defense Minister Florence Parly told BFM television the weapons would be loaded onto a Saudi cargo ship scheduled to arrive Wednesday in the French port of Le Havre. She refused to identify the types of arms, but reiterated France's stance that they have been used only for defensive purposes by Saudi Arabia since it began its Yemen offensive in 2015. "As far as the French government is aware, we have no proof that the victims in Yemen are the result of the use of French weapons," Parly said. "France has strategic interests in this part of the world," Parly said, adding that the latest shipments were part of "long-term partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates." — AFP

## German train crashes into lorry

**BERLIN:** A passenger train slammed into a lorry that became stranded on a rail line in northern Germany yesterday, injuring twelve people, two of them seriously, police said. The crash at around 4:30 am (02:30 GMT) at a level crossing in Alt Duvenstedt, near Flensburg, derailed the regional train, which was carrying 22 passengers. "All of those injured were taken to hospital," a police spokesman told AFP, adding one victim of the crash was flown by helicopter to hospital in the port city of Kiel. The accident happened when the cab of the articulated lorry, towing 70 tonnes of heavy equipment, became stranded at the level crossing. The driver jumped clear before the crash, police told news agency DPA. The impact badly damaged the front of the train, which was lifted off the tracks. — AFP



BERLIN: Firefighters stand next to a demolished articulated lorry in Alt Duvenstedt yesterday. — AFP

## 13 dead in Mexico luxury jet crash

**MONTERREY, Mexico:** Mexican authorities found Tuesday human remains that confirm the death of the 13 people on board a luxury jet that crashed over the weekend in the north of the country. The private plane took off Sunday from Las Vegas and was traveling to the Mexican city of Monterrey but crashed in a mountainous area difficult to access, where forensic experts had to arrive by helicopter. Aboard the plane were two executives of the Mexican oil services company Typhoon Offshore, along with eight relatives, according to a company statement. The group had come to Las Vegas to attend a fight in which Mexican boxer Saul "El Canelo" Alvarez defeated Daniel Jacobs of the United States. On Twitter, the athlete expressed sorrow over the incident, saying "my prayers are with their relatives." The other three people who died were the crew of the plane, a twin-engine Bombardier Challenger 600 series. — AFP

## Bolsonaro eases rules for gun enthusiasts

**BRASILIA:** Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro signed a decree Tuesday making it easier for gun enthusiasts to own, carry and import weapons in one of the world's deadliest countries. Beaming members of Congress and industry lobbyists clapped and made pistol signs with their hands as the ex-army captain relaxed rules that critics fear could pave the way for the carrying of weapons in the streets. "I always said public security starts at home," Bolsonaro told a gathering in the capital Brasilia.

A summary of the decree released to reporters said sports shooters, hunters and collectors would be allowed to travel with a weapon, while all licensed gun owners would be permitted to buy up to 5,000 rounds of ammunition a year, depending on the type of weapon. It also promises the "debureaucratization" for the importation of arms and ammunition - long demanded by global manufacturers and fans of foreign brands - which was aimed at "stimulating competition, rewarding quality and safety."

Limits on the "amount and quality" purchased by public security institu-



BRASILIA: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is surrounded by parliamentarians during the signing ceremony of the decree that facilitates to own, carry and import weapons, at the Planalto Palace on Tuesday. — AFP

tions would also be scrapped, the document said without specifying if it was referring to guns or ammunition or both. "We went to the limit of the law, we did not go over the law," Bolsonaro said. Brazil had 64,000 murders in 2017 - a rate of almost 31 per 100,000 inhabitants, or three times higher than the level the United Nations classifies as endemic violence.

The decree has created a "breach" that makes it easier for anyone to own a weapon, said Caio Pizetta Torres, a security specialist at Control Risks. Bolsonaro controversially passed a law relaxing gun ownership rules soon after assuming power in January,

delivering on a campaign promise. He has also spoken out in favor of allowing people to carry weapons on the streets, but that will require the support of Congress to change the law.

Bolsonaro reiterated Tuesday that his latest decree stemmed from a 2005 referendum organized by the left in which nearly 64 percent of Brazilians rejected a law that included, among other things, a total ban on the sale of arms. Foreign and domestic arms makers have been hoping that Bolsonaro's rise to power would translate into looser laws and greater government spending in the sector. — AFP

## S Africans vote in health check for ruling ANC

**JOHANNESBURG:** South Africans voted yesterday in nationwide polls all but certain to return the ruling ANC despite anger over corruption scandals, sluggish growth, and record unemployment. The election is the first measure of whether President Cyril Ramaphosa can reinvigorate support for a party whose backing rests largely on its liberation credentials, but now faces the prospect of a reduced majority. "The ANC has been in power for the past 25 years and I don't see any change," lamented unemployed father-of-two Jacob Marethwa, 30, who lives in a shack in Coligny in the North West province.

Ramaphosa, 66, took over last year after the ANC, which first swept to power in 1994, forced then-President Jacob Zuma to resign after a nine-year term dominated by corruption allegations and a struggling economy. Zuma oversaw the party's most significant drop in support in the democratic era. "This is a vote that reminds us of 1994... heralding a new period," Ramaphosa said after casting his ballot at a school in Chiawelo, Soweto, and described himself as "excitedly confident" of the outcome. "I am truly humbled by the turnout... it's a vote for the democratic system we have been building for 25 years," he said. "This is like a rocket booster for democracy."

The 1994 vote saw Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress take power in the country's first multi-racial polls, marking the end of apartheid. Support for the ANC has fallen in every election since 2004 with the party taking 54 percent in 2016 municipal elections, compared with 62 percent in 2014's national vote. Most opinion surveys suggest the ANC will secure nearly 60 percent of the Wednesday's vote, thanks to Ramaphosa's appeal and a fractured opposition. "It reflects the weakness of the opposition, more than it does reflect the achievements of the ANC," said political scientist Collette Schulz-Herzenberg from Stellenbosch University.

## Not happy with the ANC

The ANC has been confronted by deepening public anger over its failure to tackle poverty and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. "It's not easy to make the



SOWETO, South Africa: Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa and the African National Congress, casts his vote at Hitekani Primary School voting station yesterday. — AFP

right choice," said Soweto-based first-time voter Nokuthula Shongwe, 18, who stated her priorities are unemployment and crime. "I'm nervous." The economy grew just 0.8 percent in 2018 and unemployment hovers around 27 percent-soaring to over 50 percent among young people.

Of the 47 opposition parties in the race, only the main opposition centrist Democratic Alliance (DA) and the radical-left Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) are major players. The DA is hoping to shed its image as a white, middle-class party. Its first black leader, Mmusi Maimane, is contesting his maiden general election since taking the helm in 2015, and is expected to make modest gains on the DA's 2014 vote share of 22 percent. "Vote for the future of this country and the South Africans who are unemployed," Maimane said after voting in Soweto, insisting the poll was not "a beauty pageant but a contract" between voters and their representatives.

"This vote is about competence... so we can clean up this country," added Maimane, wearing a suit in the DA's signature blue and posed for selfies with voters. But the EFF, founded six years ago by former ANC youth leader Julius Malema, is predicted to make major gains, growing from 6.3 percent to a forecast 11 percent. "A lot of people died for us to vote - we are here to honor their memories," said Malema as he cast his ballot in Seshego in eastern Limpopo province. "If you need change, EFF is the way to go," added Malema, sporting his signature red and a green baseball cap with a red star. — AFP

## Italy avoids crisis by sacking far-right minister

**ROME:** Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte yesterday sacked a graft-tainted junior minister close to far-right leader Matteo Salvini, averting a government crisis weeks ahead of European elections. Infrastructure and transport undersecretary Armando Siri, a member of coalition partner the League, is alleged to have accepted a €30,000 (\$33,000) bribe - or the promise of it - from a businessman for promoting the interests of renewable energy companies. Prosecutors also suspect the businessman of being in league with a Sicilian who has links to a Mafia boss.

Salvini, who is head of the anti-immigrant League party and deputy prime minister, had repeatedly insisted his ally Siri has done nothing wrong and should stay in his job. "Today the cabinet decided, as proposed by the prime minister, to start the procedure to revoke secretary of state Armando Siri," co-deputy prime minister Luigi Di Maio said after the cabinet meeting. "Not because he's guilty but simply because for us, if a corruption and Mafia investigation is mentioned, (then) the political world must react before the judges do," said Di Maio, who heads the Five Star Movement (M5S).

The M5S, which made "honesty" a keyword of its political campaign before being elected last year, had demanded Siri resign. Premier Conte had on Thursday said Siri should resign, but the latter had refused, with Salvini's backing. "Today this is a victory for Italians, the honest Italians who represent the vast majority of the population and who demand firmness in a country where corruption is a national emergency," said Di Maio. — AFP

## US 'sex slave' guru on trial in New York

**NEW YORK:** Sex slaves, branding, actresses, heiresses, extortion and fraud - a jury in New York began hearing evidence Tuesday about all of that and more. An American "self-help" guru who allegedly ran a cult-like society of women sex slaves has gone on trial in Brooklyn, and some of his former female supporters were the first to take the stand. Six people had been due to appear in the dock, but 58-year-old Keith Ranieri will now be the only one to stand trial. He faces a host of federal charges, including sex trafficking, extortion and conspiracy.

The other five - all women who held management positions in various organizations headed by Ranieri, including actress Allison Mack - have pleaded guilty one by one and avoided going on trial. Ranieri was the leader of Nxivm, a purported life coaching group that prosecutors say instead extorted money from followers and enabled the accused to sexually exploit female devotees. Over the course of two decades, more than 16,000 people took at least one of Ranieri's "self-help" workshops, which promised to develop a student's "human potential" - to the tune of \$5,000 for a five-day course.

Many who signed up quickly became indebted and ended up having to work for Nxivm (pronounced Nexium) to pay for their courses. "He was a mentor, but he was a predator," federal prosecutor Tanya Hajjar said in her opening statement. "He was a leader of a criminal organization." Ranieri once sported sleek long hair, beard and circular glasses - in almost Christ-like fashion - but on Tuesday, he appeared in court with his head shaved. The defendant was visibly relaxed - even smiling - and taking copious notes during the proceedings. From the beginning, Ranieri - who asked followers to call him "Vanguard" - is believed to have had a circle of 15 to 20 women under his influence, with whom he had sex at will. One may have been only 15 years old when she joined the group's inner sanctum. Based in Albany, the state capital of New York, the organization had centers in several cities across the United States, Canada, Mexico and other Central American countries. It has now been disbanded. As with many cult-like groups, everything rested on the powerful psychological influence of Ranieri, who allegedly used a mixture of pseudo-philosophical teachings, attention to his female subjects and humiliation to assert control. — AFP