

We Need to Talk About Julia

Written by Simon Philpott

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SIMON PHILPOTT, JUL 9 2013

Australia's first female Prime Minister has come and gone. Three years after defeating Kevin Rudd on a ballot of federal Labor MPs, Julia Gillard was vanquished by her predecessor in exactly the same way. This third leadership spill of her premiership brought to an end the drawn-out and spiteful conflict between Gillard and Rudd and probably finished off Labor's chances of retaining power at the federal election to be held in the next few months. And yet, despite heading a minority government, there were considerable policy achievements. On one reckoning, no Australian PM has presided over the passing of more legislation than Gillard. So why was Gillard, given her accomplishments, the subject of such personal vitriol? It may be that Julia Gillard's prominent position in Australian life has brought into much clearer focus a corrosive culture of commentary on difference.

Accusing people of 'political correctness' has long been the favoured put down of right wing media commentators in Australia but political discourse may now have reached a nadir where caustic commentary on issues of identity has become normalised. Gillard's critics in the media and parliament alike have repeatedly alleged that she played the 'gender card' while continuing to assail her in gender specific terms. Opposition MPs and Senators have queried Gillard's fitness for office on the basis of her being 'deliberately barren' and argued that her government framed poor family policy because its leader had no children. But not all attempts to besmirch Gillard went to plan: when her late 2012 speech on Opposition leader Tony Abbott's alleged misogyny went viral, winning Gillard plaudits around the world for her courage, Rupert Murdoch's *The Australian*, misread the moment and returned fire on Gillard for her supposed desperation.

Gillard's humiliation in public discourse is unique. No other Australian PM has been pilloried about the sexuality of their partner on live radio by a populist presenter. No other PM has been subjected to crude remarks about their physical features and genitalia at a party fundraiser attended by senior members of the Opposition. No other PM has endured calls for their assassination jokingly made by one of Australia's most popular broadcasters, a man that within weeks of Gillard's father's death opined that shame at his daughter's conduct in politics was the cause of his demise. No other PM has been attacked in such blatantly gendered terms, with no less than the Opposition leader happily speaking in front of banners referring to Gillard as a witch and the bitch of a (male) Greens politician.

Does this imply Australian society is uniquely misogynistic? Unlikely even if rates of violence against women are sufficiently high for there to be on-going campaigns to reduce it. Many visitors to Australia do though speak of their surprise at the casual racism of white Australians and this may form part of the explanation for a broadly based tolerance of abusive public discourse whether on issues of ethnic identity or gender. There is little to be gained in seeking origins for the abrasiveness of Australian discourse on matters of identity but former Liberal PM John Howard's refusal to censure the right wing populist MP, Pauline Hanson, for her incendiary maiden parliamentary speech in 1996 underwrote a certain tolerance for racist commentary in the contemporary public domain. Aborigines, immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers have borne the brunt of such negativity but as feminists observe, disentangling ethnic, class and gender identity is a fraught task.

The dominant position of the Murdoch-owned media in Australia is also an important element in the consolidation of a culture of abuse. The various elements of Murdoch's print and electronic media make no real attempt at balance and fairness. Unrivalled in the Australian print media market, Murdoch organs such as the only national daily, *The*

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Australian, have been openly hostile to Labor throughout its most recent term of government. Inevitably, the unrelenting negativity about Labor in office becomes snagged up with the person most visibly associated with the government, the Prime Minister. Whilst the language of senior *The Australian* journalists such as Greg Sheridan, Paul Kelly and Dennis Shanahan owes little to the more febrile commentary of their News Corp colleagues in the popular press, their own negativity about Labor and Gillard specifically provides a cloak of respectability to the open hostility of Andrew Bolt and others writing and telecasting under Murdoch auspices.

Australian political culture may not be unique in having problems with misogyny and inappropriate public commentary on gender, ethnic, sexual and other forms of identity. But its descent into base, personalised barrages of abuse speaks volumes about the dangers of a media where public ridicule of a female PM is deemed 'fair game' and where voices raised in opposition to such tactics and strategies are cast as prisoners and promoters of political correctness run amok. Gillard may have departed, but we really do need to talk about Julia.

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