

“Sexual Despotism” in Australia: Malcolm Turnbull’s “Bonking Ban” for Politicians

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It's all the rage at the moment, stirring the halls of power in certain countries, and satisfying some sense of puritanical virtue. Bonking is off the cards for politicians – at least in certain contexts, and some states.

In Australia, the issue of the Deputy Prime Minister’s relationship with an ex-staffer whilst married persists in gripping politics with what is now a deadening hand. Not, however, for a certain Australian prime minister, **Malcolm Turnbull**.

In the United States, political representatives [rushed to a vote](#) instituting a new regime that will regulate (read ban) sexual relations between politicians and staffers. An office providing legal support to staffers claiming sexual harassment is also proposed. Much of this is an emergency measure to cope with a slew of sexual misconduct claims that have [scalped various politicians](#), including **Rep. John Conyers** (D-Mich.), **Sen. Al Franken** (D-Minn.), **Rep Trent Franks** (R-Ariz.), **Rep. Blake Farenthold** (R-Texas) and **Rep. Ruben Kihuen** (D-Nev.).

For all that sermonising, much of it inspired by the legislative working of **Rep. Barbara Comstock** (R. Va.), that country knows all too well that such restrictions tend to not only fail but spawn something worse. Human desire is often beyond the chamber vote or parliamentary diktat.

The situation has become palpably absurd, a moral nonsense that has propelled leaderships into faux outrage. Prime Minister Turnbull [made no secret about who](#) was behind the inspiration of the new ministerial code of conduct regarding sexual relations, a churchly anti-bonking directive.

“Barnaby made a shocking error of judgment in having an affair with a young woman working in his office.” He had “set off a world of woe for those women and appalled all of us.”

He needed to take gardening leave, time needed to apologise, to seek forgiveness, to build a new home.

The past, for Turnbull, was a dark country filled with moral error and fall. In the modern world, it is unacceptable to engage in such conduct.

“Today in 2018, it is not acceptable for a minister to have a sexual relationship

with somebody who works for them.”

The ministerial code covering such behaviour was “drafted a long time ago, and it gets amended from time to time, but the truth is, that it is deficient.” Nodding towards such social media driven phenomena as #MeToo, Turnbull purported to be a modern leader, claiming that the modern code “does not speak strongly enough to values that we all should live, values of respect, or respectful workplaces. Of workplaces where women are respected.”

What Turnbull has effectively done is assume the role of priest and policy maker, the moral guardian who is still worried about the sentiments of the electorate. Is it for the prime minister to dictate how consenting adults engage in the workplace. Yet only a week ago, the prime minister was claiming the issue to be “a deeply personal matter relating to Barnaby Joyce and his family.”

Joyce’s life has effectively been held up as a model not to emulate, his personal relations condemned as political poison. The personal, in other words, had been brought to the fore, the workplace given a private gloss. For political watchers, the message from the prime minister was clear: his deputy, despite being a member of another political party, had to go.

Joyce was in no mood to accept Turnbull’s assessment. The prime minister, Joyce thundered, was “inept”, “damaging” and even “unnecessary”. Hurt, as a result of such comments, had been “reinvested”. The “scab” had been pulled off.

The Turnbull formula here has already drawn quizzical responses. His decreed, despotic sex ban between ministers and staffers, and his attitude to Joyce, brought in a new “yardstick”, one not previously evident in Australia. According to [Katharine Murphy](#) of *The Guardian*, this was distinctly not Australia’s traditional “live and let live”, “she’ll be right mate” sort of politics.

For **Senator David Leyonhjelm**, a self-professed libertarian, such bans ignored Australia’s social realities. The word getting back to him was that his electors [would tolerate](#) some “casual bonking” in the workplace.

It also drew arbitrary distinctions in workplace relations, effectively condemning other forms of intimate endeavour – the doctor and nurse, the teacher and student. Even idiosyncratically, it signalled ministers as an exceptional class of celibate being – at least when it came to staff. Other members of Parliament need not be quite so worried.

Such codes of conduct are doomed to fail. Even politically, Turnbull is now coming across as an interventionist, a dictator to his junior coalition partner. The message from Joyce to Turnbull: stay out of National Party leadership discussions. Besides, any protocol or body of regulations attempting to control conduct in the bedroom can never stem the call of the flesh. Passion and desire will out, and in time, such executively driven approaches will be treated with deserved scorn.

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