

## Weaponising Rumour: Australia's New Political Sensitivity

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Theme: [Media](#), [Politics](#)

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*The hide of Australia's political classes has been worn. Some members, admittedly, never had one. With tiptoeing around language ravaging, and in some cases savaging discussion, pondering policy has become nigh impossible. What matters after the **Barnaby Joyce** affair is rumour and private speculation.*

First came the threatening malice associated with Jobs and Innovations minister **Michaelia Cash**. Having been pressed by Labor **Senator Doug Cameron** in a Senate Estimates hearing about her newly hired chief of staff, including relevant employment record, Cash went volcanic. The minister, wrote [Jenna Price](#) with tart disgruntlement, "is what you get when you hire on merit. Or at least the Liberal Party's version of merit."

Having touched upon "staff matters" - a self-designated sacred zone - [Cash warned](#) Cameron to be "very, very careful" as she was "happy to sit here and name every young woman in Mr Shorten's office over which rumours in this place abound."

This gave an odd twist to proceedings: the former minister for women had effectively made women potential dynamite in an unsubstantiated claim of impropriety, sexual or otherwise. It would be for "Mr Shorten to come out and deny any of the rumours that have been circulating in this building now for many, many years."

After the hearing, Labor **Senator Penny Wong** weighed in, demanding Cash withdraw the "outrageous slurs... impugning the staff working for the Leader of the Opposition". This Cash did, "if anyone had been offended by them" and duly lodged a complaint about media filming her whiteboard shelter as she entered another estimates committee hearing.

Deputy Opposition leader [Tanya Plibersek](#) suggested that Cash had undermined "the professionalism of the many competent, intelligent, hardworking young women who work on all sides of politics."

The stir duly became a whirlpool, sucking in all its adherents. **Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull** explained to members in the House of Representatives how Senator Cash had been "bullied and provoked by [Labor] senator [Doug] Cameron... who was making insinuations about staff."

Former **Prime Minister Tony Abbott**, never considered a merry friend of women, cared to angle it differently from his successor, telling Sydney radio 2GB that the minister had suffered a "brain snap". "There's been far too much cheap smear and it's time it ends... it must end."

In this age of hashtag outrage and social media clicktivism, a paradox has emerged. Never have people been more engaged in snark and venality online while upholding a fictional standard of purity in political debate.

A blurring has now taken place, to the point where suspicions abound, and everything is fair game

. “Tabloid culture, emboldened by the looseness of social media,” claims [Jacqueline Maley](#) of the Sydney Morning Herald, “has merged with the openness encouraged by the #metoo movements to create a new atmosphere where previously unsayable things are being said.”

As if to prove the point, Home Affairs minister [Peter Dutton](#) told his customary reactionary refuge, 2GB radio, that “we’ve sat here taking a morals lecture from Bill Shorten in relation to Barnaby Joyce over the last few weeks and people know that there’s a history of problems in Bill Shorten’s personal life, **Tony Burke’s** personal life.” A view charmingly free of any policy critique.

Soon afterwards, a similar incident unfolded in another estimates hearing. Veteran Labor **Senator Kim Carr**, whose length of time in the chamber has essentially imprinted him into Canberra’s furniture, felt so comfortable as to call his opposite number, a young **Senator James Paterson**, a “member of the Hitler Youth”. Paterson expressed outrage; Carr claimed he was being facetious. Withdrawals duly followed.

“Jeez,” went [Jane Norman](#), “Senate Estimates is getting Feral. Wednesday: Michaelia Cash threatens to reveal unverified rumours about female staff in Bill Shorten’s office. Thursday: Kim Carr suggests James Paterson would’ve been part of the Hitler Youth. This is #auspol.”

Norman, in turn, received a social media rebuke tantamount to a cold shower. The journalist had missed the beat, ignored the register.

“Do you understand the word ‘Satire’?” shot [Socialist Sarah](#). “Do you as a Journalist have skills in English, Research, History, Politics, or Agribusiness? Do you know how to investigate anything outside your echo chamber?”

The political zone that is Canberra finds any concept of satire these days highly repellent.

The threshold of debate in Australian politics has been sewer-low for decades, but the latest turn has added another disfiguring side. The moment Turnbull decided that ministerial sexual conduct would become a matter of regulation in Parliament, the private became political. This public outing has destroyed perspective and proportion on what is relevant in Canberra’s political discourse. Innuendo can be used as weapon and shield; allegation can be implied and imputations delivered.

Instead of returning to the drawing board of measured discussion and the jousting associated with interaction in Canberra – policy and legislation needs to be made – political figures such as **Cathy McGowan**, MP, see the prospect of more regulation and codification.

“The community does have expectations of how politicians behave... that you be honest, that you be trustworthy, that you don't tell lies, but they're not encoded.”

In doing so, all presumption to propriety, precisely because it requires encoding, goes out the window. The moral and ethical police will be emboldened, and they shall come from all sides of politics.

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**Dr. Binoy Kampmark** was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: [bkampmark@gmail.com](mailto:bkampmark@gmail.com)

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