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& galleries**Kate Galloway**

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Alan Jones and contempt for women in the public sphere: Vilification?

BY KATE GALLOWAY / SEP 02, 2012 16:55PM / [PRINT](#) / (10)

Feelings are still running high about Shock Jock Alan Jones' comment on Friday that women (ie the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, Sydney Mayor Clover Moore, former Victorian Police Commissioner Christine Nixon) are "destroying the joint".

Tory Maguire, writing in *The Punch*, suggests that feminists should save their energy for "battles that might change something". I agree with her that it is unsurprising to hear Alan Jones make derogatory statements about women, and I agree that it becomes wearing to expend our energy on each insult leveled at women in the public sphere. (And there have been a number of them this week.)

I do think, however, that concerns about women who do not have the power of the Prime Minister, Sydney Mayor or a state Police Commissioner; concerns about access to safe abortion and employment conditions, are all related to the

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increasingly public vilification of women - including women in power.

My question is why, in 2012, are women belittled in this way. To ascertain this, let's be clear: first, that it is women (not individuals) who are targeted; and that it is designed to belittle.

Targeting Women

Alan Jones did not try to mask his comment in its application to women generically. In contrast, Grahame Morris a week earlier, tried to indicate that "cow" as an insult was not gender specific. He did concede that there were probably more suitable terms to use, such as "a tough interviewer".

In the US in February following Sandra Fluke's submission on insurance cover for contraceptives, conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh referred to her as a "slut". While the Australian context may differ, this brings a much wider context to the contemporary public discourse of vilifying women.

In my view these examples are not personal to the recipients of the insults but reflect a wider misogynistic undercurrent. These insults are indicative of views held by public figures about women generally. They are not insults that would be leveled at men. I acknowledge that men, particularly male political figures, are insulted regularly. Likewise, journalists are criticised for "soft" or partisan interviews. It is the tenor of these insults that belies their gendered origin. They are not aimed at the person based on their job. They are aimed at women.

Vilification?

Anti-vilification legislation in Australia has come under some criticism as stifling freedom of speech. I do not propose to enter into this debate here, and do not suggest that the insults of these past weeks are offences at law. I do however turn to these legislative provisions to draw an analogy between these public statements and vilification.

Vilification, usually proscribed in respect of race and sexual orientation, is:

a public act, to incite hatred towards, **serious contempt** for, or **severe ridicule** of, a person or group of persons on the ground of [race/sexual orientation...] (emphasis added)

Rather than addressing the Prime Minister's policies; rather than focussing on the quality of Leigh Sales' interviewing; rather than addressing policy or even moral concerns associated with insurance for contraception, each of the men cited above chose instead to use language that raised at least some contempt for, or some ridicule of each of the women cited but also for women generally.

I suspect that in the Australian cases there is possibly not serious contempt or severe ridicule to constitute vilification. However if we recast these provisions and think about gender, I think that it is correct to suggest that these statements constitute at the very least:

a public act to incite contempt for or ridicule of a woman or women on the ground of their gender alone.

In this blog, Anne Lambert writes that Jones' comments do breach similar provisions in the Code of Conduct for Commercial Broadcasters. In any case, even if not found to be vilification, these comments are not what we would expect in 2012 in a western democracy.

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But Why?

In 1982, Dale Spender wrote:

When women come to be visible, when they assert the validity of that experience and refuse to be intimidated, patriarchal values are under threat. [p11]

It seems to me that public discourse about women is demonstrating this fear - so eloquently put by Alan Jones, that women are indeed "destroying the joint". The joint that is under threat, it seems, is the domain of men.

One of the techniques that men have used over millennia to silence women is to devalue what women have to say - from what they say to how they say it. In this way women have been invisible in the historical record.

That women have not been treated as serious intellectual beings is an understanding that is central to my explanation for women's disappearance. [Spender, p19]

The statements cited here show attempts by men in various ways to silence women's views through belittling their capacity for engagement in the "serious" world of public debate. I think that this attitude while ostensibly affecting women in power, goes much deeper. It affects all women, and will surface again in issues such as access to safe abortion and employment conditions if we do not demand a better level of public debate - one that does not devolve into statements of contempt for women.

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Accepting Alan Jones' comments without expending energy against them just allows women and men, girls and boys, to assume that his must be reasonable comment rather than the blatant misogyny it is.

The fact that women in positions of power have to put up with this kind of endless commentary from men in positions of power, should serve to remind us that when Alan Jones and Graham Morris and their like get away with it, it gives further permission to less powerful and visible men and boys to do the same. Who pursues the apology from the neighbour, the accountant, the nurse, the mechanic, the sports teacher, and the shopkeeper when they, emboldened by constant public and commercially successful hatred of women, think and say the same? It's too easy to become numbed and exhausted by the everyday, everywhere, casual contempt for women as this article describes: <http://jezebel.com/5917887/whe...>

Frighteningly, at times, I think responses to men like Jones and his possibly neurotic fear/hatred of a powerful woman starts to look a little like Stockholm Syndrome "Stockholm syndrome can be seen as a form of traumatic bonding, which does not necessarily require a hostage scenario, but which describes "strong emotional ties that develop between two persons where one person intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses, or intimidates the other. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S...> feminist energy, all of our feminist energy, should be harnessed to fight these and every other battle on every other front that needs to be fought. To fight hatred against women wherever it rears its ugly and brutal head.

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