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Gender is never off the agenda while denigration of women is a national pastime

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There has been a renewed focus on gender-related issues in Australian politics lately. Kate Galloway argues that it is time to address the deep seated disdain for women in our society.

According to some commentators, [8] women, including the Prime Minister, have been playing the 'gender card'. Whatever the 'gender card' may be however, it is men who have showed their true hand with revelations of puerile sexual jibes at the Prime Minister's body [9] and a direct assault on the Prime Minister's partner's sexuality. [10] This array of sexual harassment and vilification was topped off by the exposure of 'demeaning and degrading' sexual harassment in the Australian Defence Forces. [11]

Responses to these incidents are instructive. Many responded to the childish 'joke' about the PM's body by suggesting that one would not like to read about one's wife or daughter in these terms. While genuine sentiments, these highlight a lack of empathy with how the Prime Minister may have felt in response to the 'joke'. They reflect a proprietorial and protective view towards women. While it is good to know that people will stand up for her, or for any woman, the foundation of such comments is misguided. These words should be rejected as demeaning her humanity; rejected for objectifying her and seeking to ridicule her in a sexualised way. The words are inherently wrong. It should not simply be an attitude afforded to one's female relatives.

The furore about the PM's partner's sexuality has focused on the inappropriateness of the questioning and the increasingly diminished respect for the office of Prime Minister. This is accurate, but only tells half the story. What has been omitted is the inherently sexist nature of the questioning and the double standard being applied. The reason for diminished respect for the office of Prime Minister is a direct consequence of her gender. Like PMs before her, she has made mistakes, she has made questionable policy, she has played politics. Other leaders have been satirised, criticised, caricatured and lampooned. But, as argued by Anne Summers, [12] never before has there been this level of sexualised vitriol.

I link this to the profound challenge a woman prime minister offers to our conceptualisation of what is a woman – and what is a prime minister. Australians have, it seems, a conceptualisation of power invested in the office of PM that is exclusively male. I have written about this before. [13] Julia Gillard further challenges our norms by being both unmarried and childless. This is an affront to our assumption of woman as mother and wife. Women who choose to remain unmarried, but particularly women who choose not to (or who cannot) have a child, challenge our very understanding of what is a woman.

This is why Howard Sattler felt free to question the PM about whether she had been proposed to; whether her partner was gay. The PM defies description in terms of what we 'know' to be a woman. We are still, it seems, trying to understand just what she is.

In addition to our puzzlement at an unmarried and childless PM, what is also telling is not even that we could not imagine any former PM having been questioned like this. First, it is almost impossible to imagine *any* man being asked this question. Secondly, the narrative of sexuality accepted by the law – reflecting societal attitudes – accepts that it is rational and excusable for a man whose own sexuality is questioned, to assault and even kill the

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