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To cite this article: Nicholas Bromfield, Nicole Wegner & Alexander Page (2024) Framing sexual and gender-based violence: Australia Day, nationalism and conservative prime ministerial policy discourse, Australian Journal of Political Science, 59:1, 1-19, DOI: [10.1080/10361146.2024.2327984](https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2024.2327984)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2024.2327984>



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Published online: 13 Mar 2024.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Framing sexual and gender-based violence: Australia Day, nationalism and conservative prime ministerial policy discourse

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ABSTRACT

Grace Tame's 2021 Australian of the Year (AOTY) award directed public attention towards sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), as did Australia Day award recipients Donna Carson in 2004 and Rosie Battie in 2015. We use mixed-method textual analysis of a corpus of prime minister's Australia Day speeches between 1990 and 2021 to show how conservative Liberal Party prime ministers have narrated a discourse of idealised national identity to manage activist demands regarding SGBV policy. We quantitatively find that prime ministers promote masculine and heteronormative representations of Australian identity and then develop a qualitative typology of conservative SGBV frames employed by prime ministers that gloss over SGBV as a pressing and chronic policy issue and position idealised Australian femininity to condone and obscure SGBV. This paper builds upon scholarship on public policy and gendered nationalism to explain this pattern of SGBV problem definition and framing by conservative prime ministers.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Accepted 4 March 2024

KEYWORDS

Gender; Public policy; Prime minister; Nationalism; Australia Day

Introduction

Social justice movements, including global movements like #MeToo or the Australian movement #LetHerSpeak, have exposed the endemic state of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). In Australia, SGBV is 'found across all cultures, ages, and socio-economic groups, but the majority of those who experience these forms of violence are women' (Phillips and Vandenbroek 2014). Despite this prevalence and consequent SGBV activism, there has been notable rhetorical management and contradiction of activist framing of SGBV from Australia's political leadership. In this paper, we ask: how is gender mobilised by Australia's political elites, and then used to frame the SGBV agenda when directly presented with policy demands by activists? We use prime ministerial Australia Day speeches as a case study and especially explore the ways conservative

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prime ministers from the Liberal Party of Australia have rhetorically mobilised nationalistic and gendered idealisations about female SGBV activists. Building upon Bromfield and Page's (2020) longitudinal analysis of gender dichotomies, values, and roles reinforced by prime ministers in Australia Day speeches, we document how conservative political elites have strategically used the day to define and frame SGBV as an anomaly, rather than as a pressing policy problem via the reproduction of idealised Australian gender identities. These gendered representations function politically to manage SGBV as a policy problem: obscuring and tacitly condoning SGBV, and therefore contributing to its continuing discursive legitimisation.

In our mixed-method textual analysis, we quantitatively document a pattern in prime ministerial Australia Day speeches from 1990 to 2021 where they favour male embodiment as an idealised Australian identity. Significantly, this gendered quantitative pattern is interrupted when women SGBV activists are present as Australia Day award winners. Our qualitative analysis focuses on these instances and the rhetorical problem definition and framing of three conservative Liberal Party prime ministers – John Howard, Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison – regarding three Australia Day award winners – Donna Carson in 2004, Rosie Batty in 2015, and Grace Tame in 2021. We find that the rhetoric of these prime ministers has reinforced SGBV as an individual and personalised issue, rather than defining and framing SGBV as a political, gendered, and structural issue. We develop a typology of conservative SGBV frames used by these prime ministers to effect this reification of idealised Australian femininity where SGBV victims are resilient in the face of male violence. Doing so, we posit, avoids political accountability to address the gendered structures that enable SGBV or the failures of SGBV policy implementation that these SGBV activists identify, and contribute to the broader cultural, structural and institutional discourses that factor into SGBV.

Our paper makes two related contributions: firstly, to the literature on the problem definition and framing of SGBV as a policy problem to manage activist framings; and secondly, to an empirical understanding of gendered discourse about Australian national identity and its effects on Australian policy-making. The article proceeds as follows: first, we provide the context for our analysis and situate our research within existing literature before outlining our theoretical contribution to SGBV problem definition and framing. Second, we overview our mixed-method approach and detail our quantitative findings. Third, we qualitatively analyse the case study data and unpack the intersections of conservative Liberal Party framing of celebrated Australians, gendered language, and of SGBV as a policy issue to manage activist demands. And finally, we conclude by assessing why prime ministerial definitions and framings of Australianness matter to the discursive management of SGBV and the way they function to avoid political responsibility for the cultural and structural changes needed to address this issue.

Policy problem definition and framing through gendered nationalistic discourse on Australia Day

Difficult issues pose political problems for governments that they would rather avoid (McConnell 2003, 399) and managing the demands posed by organised activists and interests is therefore a routine activity of governments (Bali and Halpin 2021, 334). Political actors may subsequently engage in shaping the definition and framing of

issues in a manner that is as innocuous as possible for that actor or ‘try suppressing initial demands for government action, often by seeking to delegitimise individuals and groups calling for change’ (Cobb and Elder 1983; McConnell 2003, 399). These two related and overlapping discursive elements, *problem definition* and *policy framing*, are prominent in the public policy literature. This approach assumes that policy problems are not simply given, and are instead malleable, interpretable, and contestable (Rocheftort and Donnelly 2012; Yates 2020). Problem definition refers to the inherently political perception of policy problems and their solutions and pays attention to the way perception shapes the realm of possible solutions (Bacchi 1999; Rocheftort and Cobb 1994). Policy framing broadens the analysis of problem definition, examining macro-level worldviews, values and ideologies that shape perceptions of policy issues, policy processes, and political identity (Rein and Schön 1993; Van Hulst and Yanow 2016). Problem definition and policy framing have been regularly employed to analyse SGBV policy both in Australia and internationally (Bacchi 1999; Krizsan and Popa 2014; Murray and Powell 2009; Yates 2020). Elite actors can therefore manage the demands of SGBV activists with discursive strategies that define and frame policy problems and solutions in particular ways to marginalise critique. In this paper, we focus on the rhetoric of conservative prime ministers via problem definition and framing of SGBV activist demands to avoid critique and the ways they subsequently contradict and undermine existing SGBV policy.

January 26, Australia Day is a routine agenda-setting occasion, where prime ministers celebrate recipients of the Australian of the Year (AOTY) award, address the nation and define and reflect upon the past year’s trials and triumphs. In their speeches, prime ministers recognise the various awardees and nominees of the AOTY, including the title honour, ‘Australian of the Year’, and sub-categorical winners of the ‘Senior Australian of the Year’, ‘Young Australian of the Year’, and ‘Local Hero’ awards. The awards are determined by the National Australia Day Council (NADC), a type of semiautonomous government-owned company common in Australian governance (Aulich and Wettenhall 2012, 38–39; NADC 2020).¹ Prime ministers acclaim AOTY award winners as idealised Australians, but also in terms often reflective of the government’s policy agenda (see Bromfield 2018; and Bromfield 2017 for how similar processes occur on Anzac Day). Yet, the recipients of AOTY may challenge prime ministerial Australia Day agenda setting, which prime ministers, in turn, respond to with problem definition and framing strategies.

The gendered politics of nationalism are key to understanding these Australia Day problem definitions and framing processes. Feminists have long considered how depictions of the state, idealised roles for men and women, and gendered logics dominate nationalistic discourse (Nagel 1998; Peterson 1999; Yuval-Davis 1996). Gender is a central component in national identity construction, where values, identities and bodies are often celebrated and exalted over others (Mulholland, Montaga, and Sanders-McDonagh 2018). In the Australian context, nationalist discourse has often been imagined with explicit reference to masculinity (Johnson 2015; Mayer 1999, 16) and there is a rich scholarship on the ways political elites and the media reproduce gendered hierarchies and unequal representations in politics, policies, and institutional roles (Ghazarian and Lee-Koo 2021). Political scientists have considered how representations of identity by prime ministers involve gendered performances (Johnson 1997; Johnson 2020; Johnson and Williams 2020), the ways that gender is performatively reinforced

in Australian political culture, and the ways that gender interweaves within the nature of politics itself (Ghazarian and Lee-Koo 2021). Finally, Australian scholarship has frequently noted the partisan framing of SGBV, with the Australian Labor Party (ALP) tending towards structural, societal-level gender inequality framing of SGBV causes and the Liberal-National Coalition tending to degender, individualise and contest the problem (Chappell and Costello 2011; Harris Rimmer and Sawer 2016; Johnson 2022; Yates 2020).

Our analysis builds upon this literature, arguing that elite problem definitions and framings of idealised gendered citizens in nationalistic terms can be mobilised to manage activist demands. We see Australian cultural and political identity and idealised national values as mediated, reflected, and reproduced through gendered elite discourse. Our data analysis explores how these representations function to enable and disable specific problem definitions and framings. Political elites need to manage demands made by civil society activists, especially when they involve valence issues where there is widespread agreement that they cannot be ignored (Cairney 2020, 157). And whilst elements of Australia's intergovernmental SGBV policy framework do operationalise a structural framing of SGBV in policy (see Yates 2020), SGBV continued to occur during the operational period of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022, under conditions of policy and implementation fragmentation and inconsistency (Phillips and Guthrie 2019). Our analysis finds that conservative prime ministers resist framing SGBV as a structural problem (Yates 2020; Krizsan and Popa 2014) when confronted by activist evidence and demands, and strategically manage these activist demands to limit public outcry.

Table 1 identifies the conservative SGBV frames used by Liberal Party prime ministers in our data. It builds upon the work of Yates (2020) and Krizan and Popa (2014) regarding SGBV policy frames, Cobb and Ross (1997) regarding strategies of agenda denial, and our own empirical observation of the data.

There were 25 male and 7 female AOTY awardees from 1990–2021. We analyse instances where women have been commended for enduring SGBV and upheld as idealised Australians. The problem definition and framing of SGBV by conservative prime ministers, in response to the annual selections made by the NADC, has failed to address the winners' activist framing of SGBV as a structural and widespread problem or their personal experience of SGBV policy implementation failure. SGBV is a 'current, complex, and increasingly critical public policy issue' (Kuskoff and Parsell 2020) which Australian governments have addressed with prioritisation of prevention mechanisms (Morgan 2011) and policies aimed at destabilising cultural and normative

Table 1. Conservative framing of activist demands for SGBV policy change.

Conservative SGBV frame	Purpose and effect
Denial	An active frame that explicitly refuses to acknowledge SGBV, its gendered basis and its harms
Non-recognition	A passive frame that implicitly refuses to acknowledge SGBV, its gendered basis and its harms via silences.
Obfuscation	An active frame that acknowledges SGBV but obscures its gendered basis
Idealisation	An active frame that acknowledges SGBV but reimposes gendered stereotypes onto victims
Placation	An active frame that acknowledges SGBV but fails to respond to the substance of SGBV activist demands

values that enable and legitimise men's violence against women (Kuskoff and Parsell 2020, 227). Followingly, we argue that meaningful social change requires challenging framing of SGBV that misrepresents its structural nature or fails to recognise gaps in SGBV policy implementation.² Our work theorises how prime ministerial narration of celebrated Australian femininity functions to rhetorically side-step responsibility for failures in implementing political and policy change by positioning a discourse of SGBV as an individualised tragedy, rather than a widespread structural issue.

Methodology: mixed-method textual analysis

We employ a mixed-method textual analysis to analyse prime ministerial problem definition and framing, gendered nationalism, and SGBV discourses on Australia Day. After an explorative quantitative analysis of 103 prime ministerial speeches and media releases given on, and close to, Australia Day from 1990–2021, we built upon initial findings with an in-depth qualitative discourse analysis (Tarrow 2010). The mixed-method combines quantitative robustness and generalisability, aiding our sense of the consistency of these discourses over time, with qualitative detail and richness for specific case study analysis.

The corpus was constructed by searching around the dates of Australia Day (January 20–30) between 1990 and 2021 to capture all relevant Australia Day speeches. Materials were primarily gathered from the PM Transcripts archive, but also cross-checked and augmented by prime ministerial libraries, media reports, and pm.gov.au. The corpus represents the entirety of prime ministerial Australia Day speeches for the period, to the best knowledge of the authors.

NVivo software was used to code the corpus with textual variables. To aid our understanding of gendered representation on Australia Day, gendered nouns and individuals named by prime ministers were searched for, using computer coding for preliminary counts of gendered nouns and hand-coding by the authors to identify individuals and clean and verify the data. Descriptive content analysis was used to quantitatively analyse the text for the percentage of these variables in the corpus over time. Descriptive content analysis treats 'all variables analysed [as] measures from within the content analysis, without attempts to infer or predict to source variables or receiver variables' (Neuendorf 2017, 73) and as such, our claims are limited to this corpus.

Building upon the quantitative findings, the qualitative analysis focused on three years where women were award recipients on Australia Day: Donna Carson (2004) as Local Hero, Rosie Batty (2015) and Grace Tame (2021) as AOTY. The framing of these women by prime ministers was investigated using post-structural discourse methodologies (Bacchi 1999; Doty 1993) that consider how predication, pre-supposition, and subject-positioning are textual mechanisms that create meaning in discourse. We assessed how these AOTY women are predicated (their features and capacities), what is presupposed knowledge about their circumstances, and how their subjectivities are positioned within the discourse against other subjects and objects (Milliken 1999; Shepherd 2012). We considered what prime ministers attributed to the three award winners, how these winners are compared with other celebrated Australians, what kind of language is used to describe the winners' capacities and motivations, and importantly, how the political contexts in which they won their awards are articulated. We juxtaposed prime ministerial

framings of SGBV and the female AOTY winners with narratives from these individuals themselves – through Carson, Batty and Tame’s award acceptance speeches and published personal memoirs – to further demonstrate the degendered, individualising and obscuring problem definition and framing of conservative prime ministers.

Quantitative findings: the gendering of Australia Day

Quantitative assessment of gender in prime ministerial speeches on Australia Day indicates that men-identified citizens were recognised and celebrated more often than women-identified citizens. The ratio of men to women in the overall corpus was 1:0.65. Instances of conjoined gendered nouns (e.g. ‘men and women’, ‘mothers and fathers’) were also tested for but did not figure prominently in the corpus and were thus eliminated from the analysis.

We acknowledge that this ratio may reproduce gendered binarism in SGBV research, including reifying its representation in Australian political discourse. However, our findings demonstrate that prime ministerial discourse is dominated by a strong heteronormative, binary representation of gender in this corpus. As we coded the corpus, we searched for, and found, that prime ministerial discourse does not acknowledge queer, trans, or non-binary identities as associated with idealised Australian identity. The only exception to this finding in the corpus was in Abbott’s (2015a) brief recognition of Tasmanian of the Year and LGBT rights activist Rodney Croome.

We also found that men were more often mentioned in the corpus than women in a majority of years where binary gender was coded: men more mentioned in 13 years; women more mentioned in 11 years (see Figure 1). Notably, many of the instances where women are more mentioned than men correspond with Liberal Party prime ministers (9 of 11), but not always when women won AOTY.³ For instance, the 2001 spike in female-gendered nouns is related to the Honouring Women initiative of the Howard government. This initiative recognised that only 30% of Australian Honours nominees were women in 2000 and recruited 30 prominent Australian women to promote the

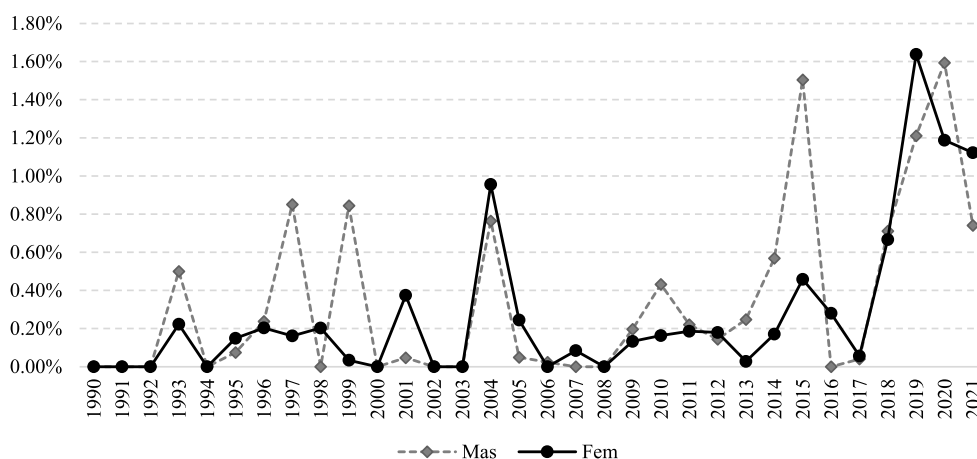


Figure 1. Male and female embodiments as a percentage of speech content drawn from prime ministerial Australia Day speeches, 1990–2021.

nomination of women for national awards (Newman 2001). The 2019 spike is related to the AOTY's atypically large number of female AOTY award nominees and Morrison's frequent reference to his nuclear family (his wife, Jenny, and his two daughters). But in particular, we noted the cases of Donna Carson in 2004, Rosie Batty in 2015, and Grace Tame in 2021, where Liberal Party prime ministers recognised the Australia Day honours of these SGBV activists at length.

These findings inform the focus of our qualitative analysis – the case studies of female Australia Day award winners, Carson, Batty and Tame. Having established the masculine gendered dimension of Australia Day and prime ministerial language, we wished to understand how gender was mobilised by these conservative Liberal Party prime ministers to discursively manage the demands of SGBV activists who had broken through the gendered pattern of Australia Day and prime ministerial speech.

Qualitative findings: defining and framing SGBV via idealised Australian femininity

This section focuses on the three cases identified in the quantitative data. Carson, Batty, and Tame's SGBV activism and their subsequent Australia Day awards helped set the wider national agenda and pressured prime ministers to acknowledge these women and SGBV. But it also created political pressure on prime ministers, who responded by defining and framing Australian nationalism in terms that managed this pressure. These three leaders individualised and degendered the SGBV problem to avoid political responsibility for the policy and implementation failures that these women experienced.

Case 1: Donna Carson and John Howard, 2004

In 1994, Donna Carson's intimate partner beat her, poured petrol over her face and body, and set her alight. Following her six-month recovery in hospital, Carson fought various levels of government bureaucracy to regain custody of her children and had to petition to take the stand and testify against her assailant. Frustrated by institutional and judicial inaction, Carson became an educator and activist for victims of SGBV, resulting in her 2004 'Local Hero' Australian of the Year award.

Prime Minister John Howard's (2004) Australia Day address spoke to Carson's experience:

And then of course we were all touched by the incredibly painful and inspiring story of Donna Carson, a lady who endured the most terrible pain and injury at the hands of, and the consequence of a very wicked deed. And her getting through that and rebuilding her life is an example of how tragedy and suffering can be overcome, and it represents yet another part of the national character and the national traits that constitute Australians.

Howard's framing idealised Carson as a good victim, celebrating her resilience as representative of the Australian 'national character'. 'Australianness' operated as a floating signifier, using Carson as an example to the nation of positive idealisation of survivorship – 'tragedy and suffering can be overcome' – and an idealised representation of Australianness itself. Carson was celebrated for her ability to endure despite trauma. Howard avoided the policy and political impediments to her recovery and wellbeing

by narrating Carson as a national exemplar of someone who was resilient in the face of an individualised personal tragedy, rather than as someone who was victimised in a larger cultural and structural environment of gendered violence.

Idealisation layered with Howard's employment of a non-recognition frame: failing to name the structural and endemic nature of gendered violence by positioning her experience as both abnormal and formless. Howard's non-recognition presented Carson's suffering as a one-off 'wicked deed', as if her experience of SGBV appeared from nowhere and did not percolate in a series of pre-existing violent and controlling patterns of behaviour by her attacker or as if both policy and cultural attitudes did not restrict her ability to seek justice afterwards. His few words on Carson's survivor story signalled pity rather than outrage, championing Carson's survival, but failed to condemn her aggressor's actions. The failure to condemn the violent acts of perpetrators is a notable pattern across the cases examined. This defined the incident as a singular tragedy that did not necessitate policy attention to address the gendered and agentic nature of the crime committed.

Howard's representation stands in stark contrast to the way Carson understood and presented herself. Carson's (2007) memoir details the ways she actively campaigned for SGBV recovery services and lobbied to change bureaucratic and judicial practice. Howard's account of Carson's experience ignored her resisting, negotiating, and campaigning to change practices and services for victim-survivors of SGBV. Instead, Howard's frame placated, only vaguely acknowledging the violence that Carson experienced [getting through that] but failing to respond to the substance of her activism: 'rebuilding her life' with no reference to what was built by her activism or was being recognised by her award.

For Howard, the problem was defined not as an inadequate policy infrastructure that failed SGBV victim-survivors, nor was it a matter of cultural attitudes that enabled this kind of violence. Rather, his account represented the problem as nameless evil where SGBV was a 'painful', but individualised, crime that Carson endured and overcame because it was enacted by 'evil', not by active agents or structuring political attitudes and policies. Howard's problem definition and framing of Carson's experience therefore failed to recognise these factors and instead rhetorically managed the uncomfortable policy failures she represented by celebrating her endurance of gender-based violence as an idealised model of feminine Australianness.

Case 2: Rosie Batty and Tony Abbott, 2015

In 2014, Rosie Batty's son Luke was murdered by his father on a sports oval in Melbourne, following Luke's cricket practice. The murder followed a history of violence by Luke's father against Batty and violent threats towards Luke. Following this event, Batty immediately began speaking publicly about abusive relationships and engaging in activism to address systemic SGBV failures.

In 2015, Batty was awarded AOTY, recognising her SGBV advocacy. Prime Minister Tony Abbott (2015b) responded with an idealisation frame:

I salute the Australians of the Year ... especially Rosie Batty, our Australian of the Year. Her courage is different from that of Ben Roberts-Smith, but we all know courage when we see it,

and we know that courage is always an act of love; love of family, love of neighbour and love of country. We know Rosie that you still mourn. We know that you still grieve. Yet we know that you still strive to build a better Australia and will do so every day for the rest of your life.

Abbott described Batty as having idealised and individualised ‘courage’, but in stereotypically feminised nationalistic terms: her individual love of family, neighbour and country, and feminised grief. And like Howard, Abbott also celebrated how Batty endured gendered violence, rather than naming and condemning it. But significantly, this feminised idealisation was immediately juxtaposed with the ‘courage’ of a male elite soldier, Ben Roberts-Smith, who had also been on-stage when Batty received her AOTY award. Roberts-Smith is a former Special Air Service Regiment Corporal who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. He won Australia’s highest military honour, the Victoria Cross in 2011, but in 2023 was found by Justice Anthony Besanko, on the balance of probabilities, to have murdered unarmed civilians while serving in Afghanistan (Doherty 2023). However in 2015, Roberts-Smith as an Australian soldier and Victoria Cross recipient, represented a celebrated embodiment of idealised Australian citizenship: the male war hero and nation’s protector, whose ‘courage’ exemplified traditional, masculinist tropes about honour, duty, and bravery (Bromfield 2019; Wegner 2021).⁴ Abbott’s gendered juxtaposition of idealised Australianness is a stark framing: women endure violence, while men wage it.

In a similar non-recognition framing to Howard’s, Abbott idealised Batty but failed to identify Batty’s SGBV advocacy work or the structural gendered violence that prompted it. Rather than focus in any detail on Batty or SGBV, Abbott centred the masculinist values Roberts-Smith embodied and his ‘courage’ to engage in violent lethality on Australia’s behalf. But in her own accounts, Batty (2015a; 2015b) is clear that the SGBV she experienced was not a singular or individualised problem, but rather a series of terrifying and documented escalations whereby the state structurally failed to prevent the murder of her son. Batty is clear in defining the problem, listing the various reports of her abuser’s violence to police, his arrests, and his intervention orders that failed to restrict his access to Batty and Luke (Davy 2014). In her own AOTY acceptance speech, Batty (2015b) placed the onus of responsibility onto government, with specific policy demands:

... strong leadership to change these rising statistics and your investment into both preventing the violence and long-term, secure funding to our specialist women’s services to deliver the intensive support so desperately needed.

Batty’s activism, for which she was awarded the AOTY, therefore had the potential to challenge and undermine the legitimacy of the state as an institution invested in the welfare and safety of its citizens. The silence of Abbott’s non-recognition frame operated to avoid the gendered basis of SGBV that Batty identified and the implementation failure that she symbolised.

Abbott’s problem definition and framing characterised Batty’s experience as an individualised tragedy and her response as a reflection of idealised Australian femininity – enduring struggle and violence as idealised Australian women (should) do. Like Howard’s 2004 speech, this idealisation operated in conjunction with non-recognition of Batty’s experiences or SGBV itself. Abbott’s avoidance of naming these acts of violence similarly sidestepped naming the necessary policy action to address the policy failures Batty experienced or change broader SGBV cultural attitudes.

Case 3: Grace Tame and Scott Morrison, 2021

Grace Tame was groomed and raped by a teacher over a period of months as a secondary school student in Tasmania. Tame's assailant served 18 months in prison, but following his release, posted lewd details of his assault and Tame to social media.⁵ Conservative media narrated Tame's situation as one of a 'relationship', and men's rights activist Bettina Arndt described Tame's behaviour as 'sexually provocative' (Funnell 2019). Yet, Tame was unable to respond due to an antiquated Tasmanian law preventing journalists from naming sexual assault survivors, even with their consent. Tame championed a social media campaign, #LetHerSpeak, to overturn these laws and has since worked as an activist to raise awareness about sexual assault and grooming of children through the Grace Tame Foundation.

Tame was awarded AOTY for this work in 2021. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's (2021a) Australia Day address represented Tame in a similar individualised and idealised frame to our previous cases, commending her 'immense moral courage and strength' and emphasising how inspiring Tame was in her individual capacity to overcome traumatic events. But unlike Abbott and Howard, Morrison (2021a) explicitly named SGBV, demonstrating an obfuscation frame:

... leading the #LetHerSpeak campaign, and ... giving voice to survivors of sexual assault.

Morrison's obfuscation frame recognised Tame's sexual assault and resulting activism but failed to condemn her perpetrator's actions or to define the problem relative to Australian culture and society. Importantly, Tame's history of being groomed and raped by her teacher, followed by the subsequent legal restrictions that prevented her from speaking publicly against her assailant, went unaddressed in Morrison's acknowledgements.

Obfuscation layered with a placation frame in this speech, with Morrison conceding that Australia was 'not perfect' but avoiding the substance of Tame's experience of assault, her subsequent activism, or his agency as Head of Government to lead broader policy action:

Grace's work is a reminder, as is the work of so many of you – that Australia is not perfect. And the way to make it better is to work for it into the future as all of you are (Morrison 2021a).

Morrison's placation acknowledged SGBV but positioned the burden of change not upon government, but upon women to campaign for change.⁶ He did not call on Australia as a nation to change attitudes and outlooks, nor promise legal or structural changes to address implementation failures or to ensure better protection, support, or rectification of factors that perpetuate SGBV. Rather, Morrison commended Tame and other women nominees for their 'tremendous work to make our own country a better place for Australian women' without a commitment from the state to prioritise SGBV policy reform as an issue.

Tame's AOTY (2021a) acceptance speech appealed to Australians to take seriously child sexual abuse and 'the cultures that enable it'. Following her acceptance of AOTY, Tame later recounted Morrison's unprepared private remarks about her speech:

Do you know what he said to me, right after I finished that speech and we're in front of a wall of media? I shit you not, he leaned over and right in my ear he goes, 'Well, gee, I bet it felt good to get that out' (Tame 2021a).

This interaction suggests Morrison understood Tame's problem definition as an inability to speak freely about sexual abuse and that rhetorical placation, rather than tangible policy, would be satisfactory. This narrow and individualised perspective paralleled Howard and Abbott's non-recognition of the structural and cultural conditions that contributed to Tame's abuse and SGBV more generally.

It is also worth noting that Morrison's AOTY speeches did not recognise the atypically large number of women activist nominees in 2021 as a patterned or collective response to broader feminist social concerns. Morrison (2021b), in a parallel opinion piece in *The Australian* newspaper, employed a denial framing that repudiated the political context of Tame's award following global and national movements like #blacklivesmatter and #MeToo. Morrison (2021b) penned:

We do this, because in Australia we believe in the unique value of each Australian as individuals, rather than seeing or indeed allowing ourselves to be defined solely through the identity prism of our age, race, gender, ethnicity or religion. As Australians we are more than any and all of these things, and together we share and steward our Australian inheritance.

Morrison's denial of structural systems of power (ageism, racism, colonialism, sexism etc.), layered with his idealisation, obfuscation and placation frames to suggest that Tame, and other activists, should be celebrated for their individual achievement rather than as a collective of young, gendered, ethnic, or racialised people working to address structural barriers to policy action regarding issues like SGBV.

A month following the AOTY speech, Tame (2021b) spoke at the Australian Press Club and explained that 'the cycle of abuse cannot be broken simply by replaying case histories.' In contrast to Morrison's obfuscation, denial, and especially placation about being relieved to speak freely, Tame (2021b) identified that while talking is the 'first step', change requires more than rhetoric:

We need structural change. A national system that supports and protects survivors and deals with crimes in proportion to their severity. Let's *start* by considering the implications of linguistics ... where empathy is placed, where blame is placed, and how punishment is then given [*emphasis added*].

Tame's Press Club address speaks to a recurring pattern in our three cases: AOTY winners agenda setting their definition, framing and demands regarding SGBV policy and implementation on Australia Day does not equate to a legitimisation of the specificity of their demands by these conservative prime ministers (Dery 2000). Tame has been clear that Morrison's government fell short of action on SGBV that met her terms. For example, in the following year's AOTY awards ceremony, Tame, as outgoing AOTY, was photographed looking disgruntled meeting Morrison and his wife Jenny at the welcome reception. Many news outlets published photos depicting Tame scowling and glaring sideways at the Prime Minister. Tame addressed the meaning of her expression in her memoir:

I frowned at Scott Morrison *deliberately* because, in my opinion, he has done and assisted in objectively terrible things. No matter what your politics are, the harm that was caused under his government was some of the worst in our nation's history, including but not limited to survivors of domestic and sexual violence. To have smiled at him, to have pretended that everything was alright, would have made me a fucking liar (Tame 2022, 323–324).

Tame outlines in her memoir that she is more than her experience as a groomed and abused child. She is a complex individual refusing to be captured for someone else's political agenda and it was transparent that she viewed Morrison's framing as a shallow and gendered idealisation of her experience and resilience of SGBV. She explains in her memoir: 'I survived being Australian of the Year because I knew already that it wouldn't be a true reflection of my worth' (Tame 2022, 298). What Morrison's AOTY speeches did not capture, but Tame herself has been clear about, are the ways that patriarchal norms and policies were complicit in her abuse and in SGBV in Australia more broadly.

Discussion: why prime ministerial definitions and framings of Australianness matter

We have quantitatively found prime ministers represent Australianness in masculine and heteronormative terms. We then qualitatively analysed Howard's, Abbott's, and Morrison's Australia Day speeches and their problem definition and framing of SGBV to demonstrate the power of gendered language in the discursive management of activist framing and demands. All three conservative prime ministers managed the activist framing of SGBV, and the policy failures their experiences represented, by defining and framing the violent acts that women face as abnormal and individualised personal tragedies, rather than results of structurally gendered conditions that enable SGBV. Idealised Australian femininity, as celebrated by conservative political leaders, was framed as the ability to endure and overcome gendered violence. Resilience was celebrated as an ideal national characteristic, while gendered violence and the political and cultural conditions that enable it, was alternatively denied, unrecognised or obscured. Occasionally, placation was deployed to acknowledge SGBV but avoid tangible policy action in the terms demanded by SGBV activist AOTY winners. In our three case analyses, the burden of change was shifted to victim-survivors, rather than to their repeated and explicitly articulated demands that the Australian polity and its policies change. Crucially, in these three cases, prime ministerial Australia Day narratives about celebrated Australian women trivialised and normalised SGBV, failed to summon collective action to solve these issues and communicated this framing to the nation as the very representation of Australianness *itself*.

All three AOTY award winners were activists whose awards were not simply because they were resilient or idealised Australians. They were recognised because of their willingness to challenge state and judicial barriers and build awareness and policy support for survivors of SGBV. Prime ministerial discourses used their activist testimonies to placate and 'giv[e] voice' (Morrison 2021a), casting them as 'good' victims' who passively endured violence (Phipps 2021). Notably, all three awardees were white, able-bodied heterosexual women, a 'good victim' positionality which likely made their stories worthy of grievability and thus (more) worthy of attention (Butler 2004). Both Tame (2021b) and Batty (2015a) speak to this in their surrounding speeches by recognising how other marginalised women and groups still struggle for justice.⁷ And yet, despite their 'good victim' status, prime ministerial representations of Carson, Batty, and Tame's idealised and resilient Australian femininity functioned to decontextualise and depoliticise the structural and gendered context of their abuse and their own prime ministerial positionality to address SGBV via policy. These problem definitions and framings served as a discursive

strategy that individualised SGBV and avoided state accountability for dealing with these activist demands, contradicting and undermining existing SGBV policy.

Conclusion

Our article has argued that elite nationalist representations of idealised gendered citizens can be mobilised to manage activist demands. Australian prime ministers have done so with discursive strategies of problem definition and framing regarding the policy and cultural problem of SGBV. We developed a typology of conservative SGBV frames to argue that these strategies, in combination with the prime ministerial narration of a gendered and masculine Australian nationalism, contradict existing SGBV policy in Australia. These contradictory discourses are given public prominence on Australia Day and form part of the explanation of why there continue to be failures of policy and inadequate progression towards policy reform in the terms demanded by the SGBV activists considered in our three cases – these conservative prime ministers simply did not define or frame the problem in activist terms.

Our paper makes two analytical and theoretical contributions: firstly, to the literature on problem definition and framing of SGBV as a policy problem in the face of activist framings and policy demands; and secondly to empirical understanding of the role of gender in articulating national identity and the subsequent impacts on public policy. Firstly, our paper has found considerable support for the individualising problem definition and framing of SGBV by the conservative prime ministers and resistance to structural gendered definitions and frames (Chappell and Costello 2011; Harris Rimmer and Sawyer 2016; Yates 2020). We have nuanced this finding by unpacking the range of frames employed by these conservative Liberal Party prime ministers, even when directly challenged on the issue by SGBV activists: denial, non-recognition, obfuscation, idealisation and placation. We recognise our cases do not represent all instances of SGBV problem definition and framing and future research might like to test these frames in other contexts, especially where conservative political elites seek to manage SGBV activist demands via language and discourse.

Secondly, we found that when prime ministers celebrate idealised Australians in Australia Day discourse, they have more frequently named Australian men. There have been exceptions to this pattern, prominently when resilience in the face of masculine violence features as a trope of celebrated and idealised Australian femininity. We have textually analysed the discourse of conservative Australian prime ministers and argue that this is not only revealing of gendered visions of nationalism but also illuminates part of the repertoire of how uncomfortable or damaging political problems can be discursively managed by political elites. This has enabled conservative prime ministers to rhetorically avoid their responsibility for addressing the failures of SGBV policy and implementation, whilst also claiming the unique characteristics of survivors-as-advocates as indicative of an exemplary Australianness. Nonetheless, these strategies have only been ‘precariously successful’ with ‘clear signs that the agenda and business of government [was] struggling to suppress a politically difficult issue’ (McConnell 2010, 355–356). This was especially the case during Morrison’s tenure as prime minister, when wider public discourse around gendered violence in Australia’s federal parliament exploded as a public issue (Palmieri, Williams, and Sawyer 2021).

As such, conservative Australian politicians may struggle to continue these problem definition and framing strategies on the issue of SGBV in an era of public ‘mass disclosure’ of SGBV by survivor-victims (Tame cited in Luscombe 2021) and global movements to address systemic gendered and sexualised oppressions. While we have critically examined how past leaders have obscured SGBV as a policy issue here, we suspect that these kinds of avoidance strategies may not be effective in the future. Activists like Tame continue to raise awareness of the political, structural, and systemic nature of SGBV, name and condemn Canberra’s ‘cover up culture’ (Tame 2021b), and actively demand governments take particular actions to rectify these forms of violence. We argue, with cautious optimism, that the increasing unacceptability of SGBV and its deepening embeddedness as a valence issue (Cairney 2020, 157) means that, moving forward, political elites will be less able to deny, fail to recognise, obfuscate, idealise or placate regarding SGBV.

Notes

1. The NADC is semi-autonomous. While prime ministers do not have direct decision-making power over the AOTY awards, the NADC is governed by a board appointed by the prime minister, consisting of civil society leaders and a Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet representative. The board selects a national AOTY award recipient from a pool of nominees put forward by the states and territories. The politics of nominee selection is beyond the scope of this paper, but the selection of nominees, and the achievements they are recognised for, nonetheless constitutes an additional politics of agenda setting of which issues do or do not receive attention.
2. SGBV is, of course, not exclusively male-on-female violence. Queer persons, and trans women particularly, face high levels of violence, and especially so when intersectional identities are considered (Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety Limited [ANROWS] 2020). Supported by scholarship that sees culture as a determinant of SGBV (Flood and Pease 2009, Kuskoff and Parsell 2020), and expansive interdisciplinary feminist theorisations of culture and gendered violence (Berns 2001; Piedalue 2017; Yates 2018), our analysis considers how political elite rhetoric influences cultural values that enable and condone SGBV.
3. In this corpus, women won AOTY 7 out of 32 years, in 1998 (Cathy Freeman), 2003 (Fiona Stanley), 2005 (Fiona Wood), 2013 (Ita Buttrose), 2015 (Rosie Batty), 2018 (Michelle Simmons), and 2021 (Grace Tame). It is outside the scope of this research paper to analyse all these instances, but it is worth noting the intersection of identities and the relative lack of women-identified representation in 1998 when Indigenous woman Cathy Freeman won AOTY, compared to 1997 and 1999 (in 1999 white Australian male cricket captain Mark Taylor was celebrated at length by Howard, as was subsequent white male cricket captain Steve Waugh in 2004). Also note the total absence of women-identified representations in 2003 and near-total absence in 2013 (0.03%), despite women winning AOTY.
4. Contemporary accusations that Roberts-Smith was involved in war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan (Doherty 2023) are not unrelated to the values that Abbott commended him for: celebrating his masculine willingness to lethally ‘protect’ the nation. The celebration of militarised masculinity according to simplified tropes like courage or aggression is a political problem that is correlated with excessive war violence, as identified in feminist literature (MacKenzie 2015).
5. It is worth noting that after his conviction, and despite being a registered sex offender, Tame’s abuser was accepted on a scholarship to complete a PhD program at the University of Tasmania and lived in residence with students who were minors. At almost all stages of the criminal investigation, Tame’s assailant was protected and enabled by individuals at many levels, from his colleagues at the secondary school to university stakeholders.

Patriarchy in Australian society is remarkably evident when we consider how Australian institutions protect predatory men, a key social norm that enables SGBV.

6. Notably in 2021, in addition to Tame, for the first time across the corpus a woman was awarded in each category of the AOTY awards.
7. This has also been recognised in scholarship on non-heteronormative individuals' frustration about the binarism present in discourse on survivorship and SGBV (Seymour 2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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