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► To cite this version:

Amada Dawe. Linguistic Violence in the Political Discourse of the Liberal National Party of Australie (2010-2013): an Intersectional Feminist Issue. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2017, Violence and Intersectionality, 42, pp.107-127. hal-02339431

HAL Id: hal-02339431

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02339431>

Submitted on 30 Oct 2019

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Linguistic Violence in the Political Discourse of the Liberal National Party of Australia (2010-2013): an Intersectional Feminist Issue

Many individuals, not just in Australia but also around the world, would classify bullying as a form of violence. The following definition of bullying can be found on the website of the *Australian Human Rights Commission* (AHRC): “when people repeatedly and intentionally use words or actions against someone or a group of people to cause distress and risk to their wellbeing [...or] to make someone else feel less powerful or helpless” (AHRC, “What is Bullying”). As words are a key component of this definition, it seems that language can be classed as a tool that is used to harm others. Words and expressions can therefore –depending on the context– be described as forms of violence. Words are not violent alone but in context–depending on both the intentions of the actor and the interpretation of the various recipients.

Following the example of philosopher William C. Gay, it is acknowledged that linguistic violence is an extension of the term violence which, whilst capable of inciting other –more serious– forms of violence, is not comparable to physical violence (Gay, “Linguistic”, section 2.1). Furthermore, identifying linguistic violence does not equate to advocating for censorship. Well-known American feminist Judith Butler suggests that censorship is a multi-faceted issue and its use is often counter-productive: “prohibition [...] conjures the speech act that it seeks to constrain” (Butler, 131). Indeed, Butler’s statement seems representative of the current political climate in the U.S.A. for example. The struggle against left-wing political correctness as a form of censorship was a major component in Donald Trump’s success and the success of many right wing political parties around the world for whom the right to free speech has become a central pillar of their campaigns, despite their words and actions often contradicting such rhetoric. On the other hand, whilst taking into account Butler’s arguments that censorship is often counter-productive and is itself a form of power (Butler, 133), some academics such as William C. Gay and philosophy professor Ruth

Tallman have made a strong case for the moral obligation to self-censor (Tallman, 73-84).

Politics is an interesting –though complex– sphere to observe the mechanisms and consequences of language as the political arena is an obvious site of power play. Political discourse is defined here as the discourse of Australian politicians, not only in parliament but also on the public record –including in the mainstream media, in newspaper and magazine articles, on television and radio and on social media. This definition will include the discourse of journalists and public figures that Australian politicians have publicly defended. Indeed, a politician’s defence of linguistic violence makes them complicit in its use. The focus is therefore on the discourse of political actors who are certainly aware that their words –or the words of those they defend– have “functions and implications” (Van Dijk, “What is Political Discourse Analysis?”, 14) and are therefore not harmless or without consequence. Such individuals are also capable of subjecting their own speech to additional ethical consideration and analysis, although many choose not to.

Indeed, whilst linguistic violence often appears to be driven by unconscious bias, such as the ways women can be dismissed as being ‘emotional’ or ‘manipulative,’ there are also numerous examples of it being intentional, driven by various aims such as professional competition, political agendas or power. Furthermore, just as power is reinforced through language, so is the powerlessness of certain minority groups. French Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu discussed such uses of language as forms of ‘symbolic violence’, which enable the validation of social hierarchies such as masculine domination (Bourdieu). For example, derogatory gender stereotypes can result in the naturalisation of the exclusion of women from many domains. For this reason, both political discourse and linguistic violence are pressing feminist issues. Discourse analysis is an effective tool in women’s fight against the fabrication of ‘truths’ such as the idea that 21st century social hierarchies are somehow ‘normal’, ‘natural’ or ‘non-existent’ and that ‘merit’ is now an objective judgement.

However, these are issues that also affect other minority groups in Australia, including Indigenous Australians, groups that identify as non-cis and certain (mostly non-European) ethnic groups. William C. Gay also noted the continuum of responses to linguistic violence coming from other oppressed communities (Gay, “Linguistic”, section 4.2). In a political arena that is hostile to women but also hostile to individuals of

diverse ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations, it has become evident that one way minorities can push back against unequal social hierarchies is if they come together to brand certain discourse as unacceptable. Identifying and rejecting linguistic violence is therefore an intersectional feminist issue, which certainly does not exclude men who can also be affected by harmful language.

Linguistic violence does not only oppress groups but is also capable of affecting individuals. Indeed, there is a difference in the way linguistic violence directly affects certain –though not all– individuals who can describe feeling ‘hurt’ or ‘offended’ and also affects groups– such as the way sexist language affects all women in the struggle against oppression. American philosopher Stephanie Ross notes that this oppression is not dependent on the victim’s awareness and cooperation (Ross, 199).

However, many Australian feminists successfully identified linguistic violence in the Australian political arena during the mandate of Australia’s first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (2010-2013), although it should be noted that the perpetrators of linguistic violence during this period were not always men and not always members of the LNP. The focus of this particular article –politicians from the LNP (the majority of which happen to be men)– is a response to the perceived increase in violent discourse during Julia Gillard’s mandate. At this time, the members of the LNP who perpetrated violent discourse were in parliamentary opposition and therefore had the political aim of destabilizing their opponents. However, it was unlikely that this was the only repercussion of the use of linguistic violence in the political arena as the way individual women are spoken to and about in politics has wider repercussions on the social status of women in general.

LINGUISTIC VIOLENCE IN THE DISCOURSE OF THE LNP: THE EXPERIENCES OF CERTAIN WOMEN AND MINORITIES

Julia Gillard

To a certain extent in Australia, language that harms is illegal. The *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (RDA), specifically section 18C, makes it unlawful for someone to act in a way that is reasonably likely to “offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate” (Attorney General, *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*). Importantly, recent debate about changing the law has focused on the premise that the ability to offend is crucial to freedom of

speech. Members of the LNP have also been campaigning to remove or modify section 18C of the RDA despite strong resistance from numerous community groups including “the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, the Arab Council Australia, the Australian Hellenic Council, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the Chinese Australian Forum, the Vietnamese Community in Australia, the Lebanese Muslim Association, the Armenian National Council of Australia, the United Muslim Women Association and All together Now” (Freri).

What is often lost in debate is the real enforcement of the act, notably that the RDA details exemptions to section 18C in Section 18D which “ensure that artistic works, scientific debate and fair comment on matters of public interest are exempt from section 18C, providing they are said or done reasonably and in good faith” (AHRC, “At a Glance”). Furthermore, political reporter Jane Norman explained that complaints are initially lodged with the Australian Human Rights Commission, which either dismisses the complaint or engages in reconciliation processes. She went on to note that “if the matter cannot be resolved, it can be taken to court but –as of 2014– fewer than 5 per cent of complaints made it this far. Of the complaints that have made it to court, the majority were dismissed” (Norman) for different reasons including the exemptions provided by section 18D.

Secondly, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (SDA) was used during the mandate of Julia Gillard, Australia’s first female Prime Minister (24 June 2010 – 27 June 2013) by certain feminists who questioned the behaviour and language of many Australian politicians, mostly LNP members. The preliminary findings of a 2008 enquiry into the effectiveness of the SDA concluded that “the HREOC¹ complaint process can increase knowledge and awareness of rights and responsibilities under the law” (AHRC, “Inquiry” Section 1037). On the other hand, it also noted, there are

concerns that in the complaint process, patterns and practices of discrimination will be dealt with as exceptional individual incidents and therefore remedy will only focus on individual redress with no identified need or incentive for common respondents, such as government and corporations, to address systemic causes. (AHRC, “Inquiry” Section 1037)

Inadvertently, the way feminists such as Anne Summers used the SDA to question Julia Gillard’s rights at work (Summers, “Her Rights at

¹ Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission.

Work”) gave the SDA a public platform and also highlighted the possibility of language being a systemic cause of discrimination.

This was supported by Julia Gillard in 2012 in her –now infamous– Misogyny Speech², in which she reiterated the words of her political opponent –leader of the conservative LNP– Tony Abbott who, in her opinion, threatened women’s political participation:

He [Abbott] has said [...] ‘If it’s true [...] that men have more power generally speaking than women, is that a *bad* thing? [...] what if men are by physiology or temperament, more adapted to exercise authority or to issue command?’ The other person participating in the discussion says ‘I think it’s very hard to deny that there is an underrepresentation of women,’ to which the Leader of the Opposition says, ‘But now, there’s an assumption that this is a *bad* [her emphasis] thing.’ (Gillard in tennews)

Here, Julia Gillard identified language that oppressed women by normalising their exclusion from politics. She gave other examples of expressions that Tony Abbott had used such as “abortion is the easy way out” and “what the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing...” (Gillard in tennews). The latter was an expression used by Tony Abbott in order to criticise a carbon pricing scheme that Julia Gillard had proposed. His attempt to do so was perhaps counter-productive however, as his simplification of policy for women and his alluding to conservative roles that women no longer felt connected to were seen by many as oppressive, patronising or simply out of touch (“The Best Reactions”). Abbott’s words were not directly violent but stigmatized women for their choices and excluded them from the sphere of intelligent conversation and politics. Julia Gillard’s Misogyny Speech was a clear reaction to the harm that the leader of the opposition did to all women with his words that metaphorically excluded them from decision-making.

The words that Tony Abbott used in Parliament were accused of having a trickledown effect on the national conversation and numerous Australian feminists applauded Gillard’s choice to highlight them, including Anne Summers –prominent author, feminist and former political advisor for the left-wing Australian Labor Party (ALP). Summers, in her speech entitled “Her Rights at Work”, detailed many instances of sexism that Gillard had been victim of, focusing not only on the political arena but also on the media and social media. Summers concluded that

² Colloquially known as the ‘Misogyny Speech’ in Australia. See tennews.

Australian politicians were responsible for setting certain ethical language standards as their words affected public discourse: “it is now possible to posit that this conduct is having a negative influence on the national conversation” (Summers, “Her Rights at Work”).

This conclusion was supported in 2012 by twenty academics from the University of Melbourne Law School who wrote an open letter to parliament condemning the sexist and gendered attacks against Julia Gillard, writing from the premise that politicians should condemn this kind of debate as damaging for all women. The letter addressed the mainstream media and social media and also demanded that politicians separate political debate from gendered insults:

We note that large numbers of ordinary Australians are contributing to this vilification with comments on Facebook and by forwarding chain emails that contain derogatory material. We believe, like Mary Crooks in ‘Democracy in Distress’ (Sunday Age 16 Sept) that this behaviour is being encouraged by the example set by some members of Parliament, and by shock jocks and certain cartoonists. This behaviour undermines the civility necessary for democracy to operate effectively, and risks creating an environment that denies women equal opportunity to contribute to Australia’s democratic government. (“Academics Point”)

Language that oppressed women as a group was something that many Australians recognized, not only Julia Gillard, who was discredited in many instances because of the obvious political gain that could have resulted from smearing her opponent.

However, in some instances, violent language was directed at Julia Gillard on a more personal level. The second part of her speech addressed this :

I was offended too by [...] the leader of the Opposition catcalling across this table at me as I sit here as Prime Minister, “If the Prime Minister wants to, politically speaking, make an honest woman of herself...”, something that would never have been said to any man sitting in this chair. (Gillard in tennews)

Anne Summers elaborated :

to make an honest woman of someone usually entail[ed] a man marrying a woman who [wa]s pregnant. The use of this term in relation to Gillard was a none-too-subtle reminder to voters of the Prime Minister’s unorthodox relationship status as an unmarried woman. (Summers, “Conspiracy”)

Although Stephanie Ross’s writings convincingly ruled out that hurt and harm are provoked by the etymological roots of language (Ross,

195-201), the question remains whether Tony Abbott understood the underlying meaning of his words. Certain elements such as the expression ‘politically speaking’ are possible attempts to disguise the comment’s intent, perhaps also an indication of the intentional nature of the comment. Indeed, the SDA refers to “discrimination on the grounds of marital or relationship status” (Attorney General, *Sex Discrimination* sub-heading 6) and if Tony Abbott’s language was purposefully discriminatory then Anne Summers’s suggestion that Julia Gillard’s rights at work were threatened by the language of certain members of the LNP could gain credibility.

Perhaps the most prominent example of violent language directed at Julia Gillard was not directly sexist but directly personal. During her mandate, in a private dinner function for the Sydney University Liberals Club –a club for aspiring members of the LNP– conservative political commentator Alan Jones stated that Julia Gillard’s recently deceased father died of shame because of her poor political performance: “the old man recently died a few weeks ago, of shame, to think that he had a daughter who told lies every time she stood for parliament” (Jones A. in Stonewell). At the same event a chaff bag jacket –a reference to a previous comment made by Alan Jones that Gillard should be tied up in a chaff bag and thrown out to sea– was auctioned off (Jones B.) with Alan Jones himself being the winning bidder. These instances of linguistic violence became public when they were leaked and published in numerous newspapers.

Tony Abbott’s response to such insults was instructive as, whilst he condemned the remarks as wrong and offensive, he also refused to boycott Alan Jones’s program. Tony Abbott stated: “look, I’m not in the business of ignoring a big audience” (Abbott in Jones B.). This was criticized by political commentator Laurie Oakes who stated that Tony Abbott was “creating a climate where people th[ought] he [was] excusing what Alan Jones did” (Greenshake, “Karl”). Attorney-General Nicola Roxon agreed: that “this [was] an environment that the modern Liberal party [was] breeding” (Greenshake, “Karl”). Furthermore, as Julia Gillard later pointed out in her Misogyny Speech, Tony Abbott clearly showed his support for Alan Jones’s statements when, in parliament, he controversially repeated Jones’s words:

Every day the Prime Minister stands in parliament to defend this speaker will be another day of *shame* for this parliament, another day of *shame* for a government which should already have *died of shame* [my emphasis]. (phonytonyabbott)

This suggested that the language used against Julia Gillard should not be viewed in terms of isolated incidents but as part of a pattern of behaviour of certain members of the LNP and the political commentators whom they supported and who supported them. It is difficult, however, to pinpoint whether such patterns were political strategy, unconscious bias, or a combination of these.

Penny Wong

In discussing exclusionary discourse in the political arena, the treatment of Senator Penny Wong, an openly homosexual Malaysian-born woman, the first Asian-born woman to have been elected to the Australian Parliament, also warrants mention. Although her experiences are less well documented than Gillard's, Penny Wong's career has been marked by numerous battles against derogatory language such as that used to describe immigrants, women and more recently –as debate for marriage equality has entered politics– the LGBTQI community. Indeed, she has expressed numerous times that she feels, as an individual, to be at the crux of these battles. In a recent interview, she reiterated this unique situation: “When I was touted for pre-selection, how many people who were a, female, b, Asian and c, gay, were being pre-selected for a party of government?” (Wong in Sainty). The violent discourse that Australian minorities are subjected to was cited by Wong, in 2015, as the reason that she felt unable to envisage taking on the role of Prime Minister of Australia: “there's too much sexism and homophobia and racism in our society for me to want to expose myself to that, and my family” (Wong in Sainty).

Examples of violent language directed towards Penny Wong were not difficult to unearth. In 2011, she was meowed at in an estimates hearing for her refusal to be interrupted by Liberal (LNP) Senator David Bushby who cut her off when she spoke. The comments that followed the *YouTube* video of this hearing added weight to the hypothesis that sexist language had a trickle-down effect on the national conversation. They also supported Wong's assertions that Australia has a long way to go in combating the violence that is directed towards minorities by many Australians through language. For example, internet user JesusisGod [sic], referring to Penny Wong, asked: “why is this woman dressed like a man? Is she working through ‘Daddy always wanted a son’ with a child

psychologist? [sic]" Another cybernaut Chris James stated: "That's no woman??? Who is that ugly chink bloke? [sic]" Thomosa1937 agreed:

Um Penny just 1 problem you dress like a man so who wears pants in your relationship. So easily offended. Your whole life style offends me. You dated jay weatheral the south australian premier and turned him into a bitch. You don't like meow then take a hike you freak show [sic]. (tonymadmonkabbott)

Indeed, the comments section under this video supported the idea that political discourse influences the national conversation. A 'meow' in parliament seemed to set off a tirade of online abuse. It also supports the idea that violent language facilitates more violent language, which adds to the case for self-censorship. Furthermore, it highlights the need for an intersectional approach to linguistic violence, as there seems to be equal discriminatory language directed towards Wong's gender status, sexual orientation and migrant background.

Nova Peris

Another example of the need to highlight the intersectional nature of derogatory language was seen when Nova Peris, the first Indigenous Australian woman to be elected to federal parliament, made the decision to prematurely step down as ALP Senator. In response to this announcement, conservative journalist Andrew Bolt –whose views were often defended by politicians from the LNP– suggested that such a decision only reinforced negative stereotypes about Indigenous Australians. The specific stereotypes used were "Aboriginals not sticking to it," "letting the team down" and "going walkabout" (NITV News). The latter was an expression used by Indigenous Australians themselves to describe a literal journey away from civilisation for cultural or spiritual purposes. However, early European settlers saw it as evidence of a casual attitude towards work and settlement (Thomas and Neal, 92-93). Indeed, some Australians of European descent have adapted this expression into a stereotype that implies laziness and serves to other Indigenous Australians: "an aspect of aboriginal culture which prevented 'them' from ever being like 'us'" (Thomas and Neal, 93). It is often used in the context of personal criticism as was seen in Andrew Bolts' comments. In reaction, Nova Peris pleaded in her parting speech: "no one should judge me [for the decision to leave politics]" (Peris in Qldahh) alluding to the need to address derogatory stereotypes in the political arena.

Whilst many members of the LNP supported Bolt's views, self-identified left-wing Indigenous feminist Celeste Liddle, backing statements made by academic Liz Conor, offered a contrary reading of Nova Peris's political contributions in her article "Nova Peris Didn't Let the Team Down, She Blazed a Trail" :

Rather than Aboriginal people perpetuating stereotypes of 'walkabout,' it is in fact colonising white men who feel put out because an Aboriginal person dares to venture on to a space they perceive as theirs. I'd only add that I am yet to hear Bolt accuse a white male politician who has resigned to attend to family matters as "going walkabout". I doubt I ever will. (Liddle, "Nova Peris")

Here, similar to the way Julia Gillard pointed her finger at 'men in blue ties', Celeste Liddle blamed 'colonising white men' for the continued use of linguistic violence that oppressed Indigenous Australians by validating their exclusion from politics. However, is this not also language that categorises and stigmatises? Shouldn't those who point out the oppression that words are capable of be exemplary in their own use of language, or is certain derogatory language deemed necessary to point out certain social patterns?

It could be argued that Indigenous Australians are derided through language to a much greater extent than white Australians. The latter also dominate positions of power in the political arena, especially white men, as Celeste Liddle pointed out. Furthermore, certain gendered or racial stereotypes such as those used by Tony Abbott towards Indigenous Australians at Garma Festival 2013, an Indigenous festival in the Northern Territory, were used almost casually, suggesting unconscious bias. In discussing the effects of alcohol on the Northern Territory's Indigenous populations, Tony Abbott described: "women, cowering in their houses, or in their huts, in fear of what some drunken relative might do [and] men, who should have been looking after people, sometimes becoming a deadly threat to them" (Abbott in "Garma Festival"). In this speech, Tony Abbott used stereotypes that derided both male and female Indigenous Australians.

Academic Ludvine Royer pointed out that Indigenous women generally rejected the manner in which they were labelled as victims and in which Indigenous men were labelled as perpetrators of violence by non-Indigenous Australians. She noted that Indigenous Australians were aware of the risks –notably governmental intervention into their communities– that stigmatization and victimization entailed (Royer, "Droits de l'Homme", 16). However, Indigenous women in Australia are

often affected by linguistic violence on account of being women, on account of being Indigenous and on account of being Indigenous women. Nonetheless, in their struggles for social justice, it appears rare for them to put sexism before racism. This seems understandable when research highlights Indigenous women's continued struggles against the effects of colonialism and derogatory stereotypes of Aboriginal culture and when such stereotypes, such as those noted above, largely escaped the feminist scrutiny that Tony Abbott's comments towards Julia Gillard were subjected to (Clough).

These particular examples of what appears to be unconscious bias suggest that non-Indigenous Australians do not fully understand the ramifications of the words that they use to describe Indigenous Australians, which is perhaps also the case in the casual sexism that was displayed during Julia Gillard's mandate. In order to address whether bias is conscious or unconscious, it is necessary to look at the way the perpetrators of linguistic violence in the LNP have reacted to the accusations made by many individuals that this language offends and oppresses them.

THE LNP'S DEFENCE OF LINGUISTIC VIOLENCE: THE 'RIGHT' TO OFFEND AND OPPRESS

Free Speech or "the Right to be Bigots"

When language such as that articulated by individuals such as Andrew Bolt is protected and supported by politicians in office, this suggests that its acceptance is deeply implanted in Australian culture. The extent of the LNP's support for Andrew Bolt's views was perhaps best illustrated in 2014, when Senator George Brandis defended Andrew Bolt after he was prosecuted under the RDA in 2013 for publishing articles claiming that fair-skinned Aboriginals were not authentic Aboriginals (*Eatock vs Bolt*). George Brandis stated, in parliament, "people do have the right to be bigots you know" (Greenshack, "People"). Their defence of Andrew Bolt was at the base of the LNP's political stance on removing section 18C of the RDA, as previously noted. This outlines a situation in which the government of Australia supported the discriminatory views of an individual in 2014, an individual whose employment of vilifying stereotypes was later repeated in degrading an Australian Senator –Nova Peris– in 2016.

After the court made the decision to prosecute Andrew Bolt, the Human Rights Law Centre (HRLC) noted that he said: “this is a terrible day for free speech in this country” (Bolt in “Myth”). It was also documented that Tony Abbott responded to the decision by saying: “we should never do anything that restricts the sacred principle of free speech” (Abbott in “Myth”). The LNP’s advocacy for ‘free speech’ appeared to be, in this instance, a method of defending linguistic violence for those who hold similar conservative political beliefs to them. Nonetheless, Andrew Bolt’s comments were found to have breached section 18C of the RDA. In justifying his decision, Justice Bromberg evoked the historical context of the forced removals of fair-skinned Aboriginals: “It will be of no surprise that a race of people subjected to oppression by reason of oppressive racial categorisation will be sensitive to being racially categorised by others” (*Eatock vs Bolt*, Section 171).

Rather than agreeing to recognise and avoid oppressive racial categorisation, many members of the LNP have adopted the strategy of introducing policy that would modify the RDA in the name of the highly ambiguous expression ‘free speech’. In the above ruling, Justice Bromberg stated that “like all good things, freedom of expression has its limits.” However, whilst members of the LNP are certainly aware that limits to free speech are at times necessary, they often omit this from their public discourse. As a result, when members of the LNP use laws that protect individuals against unfettered free speech, their actions are logically interpreted as contradictions. For example, the HRLC noted that “Tony Abbott himself successfully sued a book publisher for defamation over false and offensive remarks about him, receiving a significant compensation order in 1999 for damage to his reputation” (HRLC, “Myth”). Defamation indeed appears to be a contradiction to the LNP’s defence of free speech. Furthermore, in the case of Andrew Bolt, it was specifically noted by Justice Bromberg that

The intrusion into freedom of expression is of no greater magnitude than that which would have been imposed by the law of defamation if the conduct in question and its impact upon the reputations of many of the identified individuals had been tested against its compliance with that law. (*Eatock vs Bolt*, section 423)

Members of the LNP have then opposed protection against words that oppress or offend certain individuals and minority groups whilst simultaneously benefitting from the safeguards that are provided

by defamation legislation. Whilst it could be argued that defamation is unlawful primarily on the basis that defamatory statements are factually incorrect, this was also found to be the case in *Eatock vs Bolt*:

The lack of care and diligence is demonstrated by the inclusion in the newspaper articles of the untruthful facts and the distortion of the truth which I have identified, together with the derisive tone, the provocative and inflammatory language and the inclusion of gratuitous asides. (*Eatock vs Bolt*, section 425)

Post-feminist and Post-racist Narratives

One –perhaps more insidious– mechanism of avoiding condemnations of linguistic violence was to uphold the narrative that Australia was in a post-feminist or post-racist phase –a phase in which social progress had been so successful that racism and sexism no longer existed. After Julia Gillard’s Misogyny Speech, many members of the LNP, including female politicians, defended the use of violent language to the point that they became accomplices in propagating the notion that Australia was now a post-feminist (‘post’ meaning ‘after’), post-racist, egalitarian society, thereby sidelining those who spoke out against the mechanisms of linguistic violence. For example, Tony Abbott’s only female Cabinet Minister, Julie Bishop, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Leader of the LNP, denied the need for feminism –simultaneously denying the importance of condemning linguistic violence– on different occasions:

[Bishop] reiterated that she does not describe herself as a feminist and denied that former prime minister [sic] Julia Gillard was treated badly because she was a woman. ‘Stop whinging, get on with it and prove them all wrong,’ said Ms Bishop when asked what advice she would give to women. ‘Please do not let it get to you and do not become a victim, because it’s only a downward spiral once you’ve cast yourself as a victim.’ (“Australian Magazine”)

By insinuating that Gillard was “winging” and “cast[ing] herself as a victim” Julie Bishop, like many other members of the LNP, could be said to have shown a certain complicity in the violence that Julia Gillard experienced, though in this case it was perhaps motivated by political competition as well as conservative political ideology. However, the demonization of the term ‘victim’ serves to discourage real victims from speaking out.

During Julia Gillard’s term in government the idea that Australia was a post-feminist society and that feminism was thus unnecessary became common. Indeed, accusations were made by certain public figures,

including the political opposition, who suggested, following Gillard's misogyny speech, that she initiated 'gender wars' simply by highlighting sexism as an obstacle. It was thereby insinuated that gender discrimination was rare or non-existent. In support, Tony Abbott –despite his own record of sexism– stated that Australian women had smashed almost every glass ceiling (Lenny). He then elected only one woman to his front bench. On the other hand, Julia Gillard used methods to gain votes such as the “Women for Gillard” movement (Jackman) that gave some validity to claims that she used her gender to gain a political advantage. The derogatory stereotypes and language used against women in politics were however, documented to a point that it became undeniable that women were treated differently in public discourse.

The feminists discussed in this article including Celeste Liddle, Penny Wong and Nova Peris stood not only against the use of violent language that stigmatized women and other minority groups but also against the denial that such stigmatization existed. For example, Celeste Liddle addressed the issue of post-feminist and post-racist discourse in 2014 when she blogged that she was exhausted by Australians' continued denial that sexism and racism existed:

Mark Sawyer [journalist] last week [...] claimed that racism is as limited as people just saying stupid things and therefore it is not really racism at all. As Aamer Rahman rightly points out, having a white guy erroneously tell me this for what is approximately the 475,589,669th time in my life is about as ridiculous as having any bloke tell me sexism really is not a thing. It does not make it true. It's just an extraordinary amount of privilege trying to sell itself off as the rational and neutral opinion when it is neither and due to its incredible lack of experience of such matters, it shouldn't be considered as such. (Liddle, “I'm Just”)

Celeste Liddle wrote about the issues of post-feminism and post-racism a number of times. She blatantly and persistently refused the suggestions of many right-wing commentators at the time who suggested that the individuals who exposed sexism and racism were somehow responsible for its existence. For example, in the following article, she sarcastically attacked right-wing journalist Andrew Bolt for his comments:

[Andrew Bolt suggests] the ones calling out 'racism' are the biggest 'racists' of all because they draw attention to race when this divider doesn't even occur to good right-wing folk who are most interested in a person's individual merit. (Liddle, “Andrew Bolt”)

Indeed, such writing bears striking resemblance to the feminist struggle against the treatment of Julia Gillard at the time. Julia Gillard was accused of playing the gender card –or using her gender as a political strategy– an argument that threatened to further repress women’s desire to speak out against linguistic violence. ‘The gender card’ painted the discrimination based on Gillard’s gender –that was explicitly demonstrated by feminists at the time– as non-existent. ‘The gender card’ was perhaps a stereotype in its own right. It paints a picture of a perceived lack of courage and personal stamina of the feminists who discuss gender, which then threatens to reinforce classic stereotypes such as ‘women are weak’ and ‘women are manipulative.’

By establishing certain post-feminist and post-racist ‘realities,’ individuals who reject these ‘realities’ can be considered not only manipulative but also untrustworthy and intolerant. Consider the following: 1. All Australians are social equals. 2. Sexism and racism no longer exist. 3. Individuals who highlight race or gender are thus: A. racist or sexist, B. manipulative or C. liars.

Demonizing Political Correctness

In the Australian political arena between 2010 and 2013, individuals who questioned the use of harmful language were sometimes rebutted with the idea that political correctness was rampant or even a form of “social engineering” (Bernardi). LNP Senator Cory Bernardi suggested in 2008 that political correctness not only stifled speech but also threatened “the legacy of Judeo-Christian values, freedom, choice and strong social institutions.” The term ‘politically correct,’ like the word ‘victim,’ has become a derogatory term, arguably aimed to coerce into submission any attempt to highlight male domination, cultural imperialism and other forms of social hierarchy.

Just as the LNP’s stance on free speech appears contradictory, their definitions of political correctness also seem ambiguous. Cory Bernardi explained: “some people claim that political correctness is about being nice to people, being tolerant and treating others with respect. But that’s just good manners” (Bernardi). Does he then believe that good manners are important in the political arena? Indeed, many of the examples of linguistic violence that have been explored would have been avoided if good manners were indeed a priority for all LNP politicians. Secondly, Cory Bernardi apparently did not include good manners in his

demonization of “social engineering,” nor did he include the domination of men’s voices in the political arena as a form of social engineering. Indeed, both omissions point to flawed logic.

Various examples of questionable behaviour from members of the LNP enable an exploration of the question of whether or not they indeed value good manners. In 2015, LNP supporters reportedly received a photo of Queensland Labor Leader Anastacia Palaszczuk via email that was accompanied by a caption that read: “don’t wake up with regrets” (Remeikis). In response to public outrage, LNP member George Christenson stated that criticizing such language and behaviour was “unAustralian, given taking the Mickey [i.e. teasing] –especially out of politicians– ha[d] always been a strong part of our national culture.” He continued: “I just wish we would lighten [up] and have a laugh sometimes. I fear as a nation we are losing our sense of humour to political correctness” (Christenson in Remeikis). Here, laughing at a member of parliamentary opposition’s perceived lack of sex appeal was defended through notions of free speech and criticisms of this behaviour were reflected by the derogatory term ‘political correctness.’ But just what is acceptable speech in the political arena? Does the LNP then advocate that there should be no limits whatsoever to political discourse? Is discussing women’s anatomy acceptable? Is condoning violence acceptable? Is everything acceptable in the context of a joke? Acceptable language certainly seems to be a question of context. Public reaction to linguistic violence in the political arena suggests that it remains one context in which politicians are held to certain ethical standards.

CONCLUSION

Looking at political discourse shows that much linguistic violence is carefully scripted and reviewed. From linking women’s proclaimed failures to their relationship status or their looks to blaming the perceived failures of Indigenous Australians on their “laziness,” many politicians from the LNP are implicated in using language that has both harmed and offended individuals and oppressed groups. Indeed, in many of the cases presented this was seemingly done with the aim of degrading the reputation of certain individuals or minority groups. The use of linguistic violence by many members of the LNP, as well as their largely unapologetic stance towards the use of language that individuals have claimed to have harmed and oppressed them, justifies the decision to

single the party out for scrutiny. Although they are far from the only political party responsible for propagating and justifying ethically questionable language, their stances on “free speech” and “political correctness” suggest that tackling such language is not a priority for them. However, such stances have also been shown to be inconsistent, with the party’s use of defamation laws perhaps contradicting their liberal use of the notion of “free speech.”

Australian feminists have made important progress in identifying and rejecting linguistic violence. Intersectional feminists, in further embracing the views of minorities have revealed that different minority groups experience certain forms of linguistic violence differently and are offended and oppressed by words and expressions that women of European descent are not. On the other hand, experiences of linguistic violence create a central axe where the experiences of many Australian women, Australian Aboriginals and Australians of migrant heritage merge. It is in their determination to combat violence in language that feminists of European origins should perhaps see other minorities as allies. This article aims to do this by paying tribute to the unique struggles of migrants and Indigenous Australians in the Australian political arena, an environment that has deep patriarchal and colonial roots. It also pays tribute to the feminists of different walks of life who have contributed meaningfully to combating the effects of linguistic violence in this arena. It is also necessary to acknowledge that their efforts often go unnoticed and that credit is not given where it is due.

The study of linguistic violence in political discourse shows that in many instances, racist, xenophobic and sexist language come hand in hand and can be linked to the same perpetrators. Although many examples appear to stem from unconscious bias, it is possible to break away from harmful cultural stereotypes and linguistic violence that have become habit by simply laying out and questioning our own use of language and that of our elected representatives. This article has shown that many Australians have spoken out to demand certain ethical standards in political discourse but in many cases the importance of self-censorship and ethical consideration has been eroded by the demonization of ‘political correctness’.

In order to correctly analyse linguistic violence in political discourse the political context needs to be recognised as one that conveys power and shapes meaning. In light of this, analysing the justifications of linguistic violence alongside its functions and implications are integral

parts of questioning and refuting the naturalisation of power relations in contemporary Australia. A united intersectional response would facilitate the unpicking of the tightly woven mechanisms of linguistic violence that affect many minority groups and encourage politicians to address their use of offensive and oppressive language, even if only in the name of good manners.

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