

## Flirting with confected outrage fails to impress women

Bettina Arndt, The Australian, January 7, 2016

What a joke. West Indies cricketer Chris Gayle [laughingly makes a pass](#) on national television during an interview with Network Ten reporter Mel McLaughlin.



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

Predictably, commentators line up to condemn the man's offensive behaviour as yet another example of vulnerable women needing protection from predatory men.

But the real lesson from this latest media beat-up was a very positive one.

It was great seeing McLaughlin so clearly able to handle Gayle's banter — it's a fine example for younger women to see such a confident professional woman able to bat off this type of flirtatious nonsense.

Equally, last year many people enjoyed watching Maria Sharapova flirting with a male reporter, telling him: "I was just admiring your form."

Such harmless flirtation is not sexual harassment and luckily there are many in our community who resent the constant intrusion into enjoyable male-female interaction by thought police determined to stamp out any hint of what Helen Garner famously described as "Eros — the spark that ignites and connects".

There are plenty of women who bristle at the present male-bashing climate where men are forced into tiptoeing around their female colleagues for fear they will be accused of saying or doing the wrong thing.

There are women who regret efforts to brand all compliments about their appearance as inappropriate and who want to retain the right to make their own choices about whether they enjoy male-female sexual banter and what they choose to do if it becomes offensive.

That's the essence of what has gone wrong in [the Jamie Briggs affair](#). The young woman concerned didn't mention harassment, nor did she seek to make a formal complaint.

Given the trivial behaviour under discussion it's not surprising she chose simply to ask Briggs's chief of staff to let him know he had been out of line. That's exactly the approach recommended in these circumstances. Back in the 1970s when sexual harassment policies were first being framed in Australia, the focus in more trivial matters was all about education — setting up mediation so victims could convey their concerns to the perpetrators and teach them why their behaviour was inappropriate.

The aim was to clearly differentiate minor matters from serious concerns that required a punitive approach involving adjudication and possible criminal sanctions.

How this line has now blurred. What's shocking about the Briggs case was that the woman's sensible desire for a low-key approach was disregarded, with some politicians seeing the issue as a means of forcing Briggs out of the ministry.

This is what led to all the nonsense that has followed. Now we have Malcolm Turnbull jumping on board, bemoaning the impact of all this on the young woman concerned, when it was he and his colleagues who set the whole thing in play.

There's a pattern emerging here as the Prime Minister seems determined to go overboard on such issues — stressing the seriousness of the “inappropriate behaviour” and making endless motherhood statements about “respect for women”. He's clearly convinced that playing the gender card wins votes from women.

He shouldn't be so sure. He's ignoring the lesson from recent political history where Julia Gillard's misogyny speech ultimately failed to win votes from women who were unimpressed by her blatant effort to use gender politics to salvage her dwindling support.

Gender beat-ups may impress social commentators but leave many ordinary women unmoved. Witness the reaction of many women to some of the high-profile sexual harassment cases that have played out in Australia, where women stand to gain so much by accusing men of unseemly behaviour. We've seen widespread public debate, led by female as well as male commentators, who are extremely cynical about the supposed innocence of many of the accusers.

Women know all too well that the truth in many of these situations is often a murky shade of grey. There's good reason female jurists make it harder to gain convictions in sexual consent cases. Notions of sisterhood often go out the window when it comes to making judgments about the behaviour of other women, precisely because we know that women are capable of matching any man when it comes to manipulative, duplicitous behaviour.

Many women were concerned by Turnbull's first major policy announcement on domestic violence, which whitewashed this complex issue by presenting men as the only villains. When I wrote last year about research showing the prominent role women played in violence in the home, I received many supportive letters from women, including professionals working with families at risk from violent mothers and other women who had grown up in such homes, or had witnessed brothers, fathers, male friends experiencing violence at the hands of a woman.

Many commented how surprised they were that Turnbull made such an offensive, one-sided policy announcement.

Politicians who play gender politics risk antagonising not only men fed up with the constant male-bashing but also women determined not to live their lives as victims, women who want responsibility for aggressive, offensive behaviour to be sheeted home to the true perpetrators — male or female.