

Janet Albrechtsen: ‘Skanky ho’ one day, an enemy of PM the next



Janet Albrechtsen reflects on her falling out with the PM and that infamous Mark Latham insult.

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Columnist Janet Albrechtsen has laid bare the deterioration of her friendship with Malcolm Turnbull, who in 2002 rang as a friend to alert her she had been called a “skanky ho” in federal parliament, but last year as Prime Minister blocked her from a board reappointment.

“I worked out very early on in this job that you make a new set of friends every week and a new set of enemies, and that’s just kind of how it is,” Albrechtsen told *The Australian’s Behind the Media* podcast.

In 2014 the Abbott government appointed Albrechtsen to the National Museum of Australia’s council for a three-year term.

“At the end of last year I was told that I wouldn’t be renewed on the board of the National Museum even though I’d been told by the relevant minister that I was going to be renewed.

“And then I heard that Malcolm Turnbull had said, ‘Well, I can’t possibly — why would I reappoint her? She is an enemy of mine.’

“And I’m thinking, I’m not an enemy. I’m writing from the centre right. I regard myself as a liberal. I’m not a member of the Liberal Party but a small ‘l’ liberal.”

Albrechtsen contrasted the attitude of Mr Turnbull to that of former prime minister John Howard, who agreed to an interview with her on the *Sunday Night* program in 2014 even though she wrote an influential column in 2007 urging him to end his prime ministership.

It was very different back in November 14, 2002, when Turnbull, a family friend via her then husband John O'Sullivan, rang to alert her that Labor MP Mark Latham had stood up in federal parliament and used an American slang term of abuse, referring to her as "a skanky ho who will die in a ditch to defend the Liberal Party".

"It was Malcolm Turnbull who rang me. I was sitting in my office at home writing and he rang and said, 'Oh, did you hear what Mark Latham has called you in parliament? He called you a skanky ho.'

"And I said to Malcolm, 'What does that mean, I don't know.' I should have just asked one of my children.

"So I'm on the phone to Malcolm and I started Googling to work out what the hell does skanky ho mean and, oh boy, I got lots of porn — I got more porn than is decent when you've got three children running around the house."

Latham, then a Labor MP, actually got his reference wrong, according to Albrechtsen. "He actually didn't call me a 'skanky ho' the first time, he called me a 'shanky ho' as if I were some kind of cut off a lamb. I was more shocked than hurt; it takes a bit more to hurt me. You just don't expect to get written up in Hansard as a skanky ho."

Under the Howard government, Albrechtsen was appointed to the ABC board, a controversial appointment after *Media Watch* had claimed she misrepresented the work of academics in one of her columns. Albrechtsen says she utterly failed to change things during her term on the board. "It was only controversial when it was seen kind of through the filter of the left. I wanted the ABC to abide by its charter. When I first joined as a director we went to one of these social events to meet staff members and people from TV and radio, and one woman came up to me and started stroking my arm and said, 'Oh, I just didn't realise you'd look like this.'

"I just don't know what they expected, someone with two heads or three eyes?"

Now in the age of social media insults, Latham's attack on Albrechtsen seems not such a big deal, but back in 2002 it was enormously controversial.

Albrechtsen never sought redress in her columns but asked parliamentary officials to remove the reference. But she was told columnists are regarded as having their own platform and can't have Hansard corrected.

Later Latham apologised to her at a function and wrote of his regret in his published diaries.

"I remember when he became opposition leader, I sent him a note congratulating him and signed it 'regards skanky ho'."