

# Australia's "Iguanagate": the politics of scandal

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For three weeks now (and counting) the population at large in Australia's "premier state" has been forced into the role of captive audience for a scandal dubbed "Iguanagate". The nation's media outlets have seized on a series of relatively minor incidents in pursuit of aims that have little to do with the aggressive tendencies of a female MP.

By now the bare bones of "Iguanagate" are probably familiar to all in Australia who own a television set or pick up a newspaper. On June 6 John Della Bosca, a senior minister in the New South Wales (NSW) government, and his wife Belinda Neal, a federal Labor backbencher, visited Iguana's Waterfront Bar in Gosford, just north of Sydney. When their party was asked to shift to a different table, Neal allegedly abused staff, shouting at them: "Don't you know who I am?"

In an agitated state, Neal allegedly threatened to revoke the restaurant's liquor licence and have police visit the venue every weekend to shut it down.

Neal's behaviour and the couple's subsequent shabby efforts at cover-up—including intimidation of personal staffers and the alleged drafting of false statutory declarations—are clearly unimpressive. They also backfired badly. Waiters and bar attendants publicly challenged the power-couple's version of events, no doubt angry they had been treated like lowly vassals. Patronage at Iguana's has since leapt by 25 percent, a significant show of support for the club's workers against a government widely regarded as arrogant and contemptuous of ordinary people.

But words of caution are in order.

As a rule, the process by which a capitalist politician finds him- or her-self suddenly reduced to pariah-status, or conversely, elevated to god-like invincibility, has little to do with the actual characteristics of the politician concerned. Anything is possible. A Labor head-kicker like Paul Keating, protégé of the anti-Semitic former NSW state premier Jack Lang, can be easily air-brushed into a pin-up boy for contemporary "multiculturalism" and "big-vision" politics. A sleazy numbers man like former Labor MP Graham Richardson can appear as a marsupial-hugging minister for the environment.

According to insiders, Neal's aggressive behaviour has been an open secret among NSW press gallery journalists for years.

So why the publicity now? Suddenly, in June 2008, no stone is being left unturned in the fight to expose Neal's erratic conduct. In the face of such a media campaign it is always necessary to take a step back (and a breath of fresh air) and ask the question: what's the story behind the scandal?

Since news of their night at Iguana's first broke on Sunday June 8, the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* has led the charge on "Iguanagate". Of seventeen editions since June 9, eleven have placed Neal and Della Bosca on page one. In the sensationalist and racy tone that is fast becoming the *Herald's* house style, the June 12 edition carried a screaming front-pager which could have been lifted straight from Ezra Norton's *Truth*: "Belinda Neal is explosive with her husband" ran its headline, "She keeps a list of enemies in her freezer".

With competition like this, Rupert Murdoch's muck-raking tabloid *Daily Telegraph* had some work to do. Its June 12 front-page headline ran "RAGING BELINDA" while the day before, the paper carried two separate front pages: a state of origin football wrap-around which yelled "SACK THEM" and another page-one headline (and photo-spread) devoted to "Labor MPs amazing soccer field attack: NEAL'S RED CARD RAMPAGE".

Photographs of a bedraggled and clearly distressed Neal have been plastered throughout the print and electronic media. The only thing missing from these dreadful photos is a pair of devil's horns. The *World Socialist Web Site* holds no brief for Neal, but there is something disturbing about this type of personal vilification. The scale of the media furore bears no relationship to the Labor MP's original crime. We are not, after all, dealing with Adolf Hitler, but with a federal backbencher who clearly requires some sort of professional emotional assistance.

Three short years ago the very same media outlets unleashed a hate campaign against then state opposition leader John Brogden. Let us recall that sections of the political establishment had decided the new Liberal leader was not to their liking, and set about, behind the scenes, to remove him. These anti-democratic methods were exceedingly blunt. Senior editors and reporters dredged up various boozy indiscretions, portraying the married father of two as a sexual predator and racist. The result was Brogden's attempted suicide. Will News

Limited and Fairfax editors perhaps allow a similar fate to befall Neal before they desist from their current relentless baying?

Behind all the gutter journalism and moral hysteria over “Iguanagate” there are definite agendas at work—but they have nothing to do with concern over Neal’s rudeness toward hospitality workers, or her perversion of the course of truth and justice. This is the bourgeois media we are talking about! The “crimes” of Neal and Della Bosca pale into insignificance besides, for example, the brazen lies and disinformation spread by politicians *and media outlets* on a daily basis to justify Australia’s ongoing military occupations of Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

Had Iguana’s hospitality staff dared protest last year against WorkChoices they would not have been interviewed by “A Current Affair” or featured on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Were their parents among those who protested in February against the threat to thousands of local power station jobs as a result of privatisation, the *Herald* would have described them as unrepresentative rabble.

Indeed, it is instructive to pose the following question: At what point did “Iguanagate” burst onto the political scene? And if “Iguanagate” did not exist, what stories would have appeared in its place?

The hysterical baiting of Neal and Della Bosca has provided a major distraction from serious political crises afflicting the entire political establishment. Prior to June 8, the stories making front page news at the *Herald* were those relating to the Iemma government’s electricity privatisation push—rejected by a whopping 85 percent of the public—and its state budget, which introduced, among other measures, a punitive 2.5 percent cap on public sector wages.

Opposition by millions of working people toward the state Labor government found reflection in the *Australian’s* Newspoll findings, gathered over a two month period and published on June 25. It found Iemma’s approval rating slumped at 26 percent. His disapproval rating, a crushing 63 percent, was the worst result for a state premier since Newspoll began in 1985.

While “Iguanagate” has provided a major headache for Iemma, it has taken the heat off a deeper problem as he moves to impose the single most unpopular decision of Labor’s 12 years in office. What no Newspoll could capture were the far-reaching conclusions undoubtedly drawn by masses of people as the Labor premier stood side-by-side with Liberal leader Barry O’Farrell on June 16, announcing a sweetheart deal to ram through privatisation enabling bills in flagrant defiance of the vote of Labor’s own state conference. Political relations in NSW were becoming dangerously exposed.

The *Sydney Morning Herald’s* editors campaigned fearlessly—from their offices in Darling Harbour—for the privatisation of the state’s electricity assets. Editorials and comments castigated government ministers, lest they cave in

to... overwhelming public sentiment. “Iguanagate” was that newspaper’s final contribution to the cause, a lightning rod momentarily deflecting opposition from the inner-mechanics of a privatisation coup and drowning it in salacious gossip, character-assassination and scandal. Mission accomplished.

As for the Liberals, the night of the Iguanas was an absolute godsend. Here at last was a point of difference between Labor and O’Farrell’s opposition Liberals! At a press conference held on June 11, O’Farrell alleged “a cover-up of Watergate proportions”, a comparison in equal parts ludicrous and desperate. The sheer scale of O’Farrell’s histrionics served to mask his party’s bi-partisan support for every aspect of Labor’s free-market agenda.

For the financial and business elite, the situation in NSW is serious. The state is highly exposed to the global liquidity crisis. The finance and insurance sectors account for 10 percent of the state’s economy (nearly double the national average) and business investment in the state is expected to halve next year. An infrastructure meltdown is adding further fuel to the fire. Under these conditions the scale of Labor’s unpopularity poses real problems. How will business weather the looming storms with such a widely reviled and incompetent crew? The *Herald’s* editorial on Thursday June 26 spelt out the conundrum as follows: “If the NSW government was a business, it would be in receivership. It is not a matter of money. This bankruptcy is far worse. It is a deficiency of talent, of basic managerial ability.”

The problem faced by business is the lack of a viable opposition. What’s the alternative? State and federal Liberals merely offer differing angles in a process of political implosion and irrelevancy. Herein lies another element of Iguanagate. Like all scandals it acts as a warning-shot or headmaster’s cane, keeping incumbent governments—in both Macquarie Street and Canberra—“in line” and “on their toes”. In this way the ruling elite presses its agenda—with utter ruthlessness, concealing its real aims and objectives from the public view.

Next time the hired hands at Fairfax or News Limited spring a scandal—of any description—watch for the fine print. If “Iguanagate” did not exist, they would need to invent it. Or something very much like it.



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