

The Australian Labor government and the “sexism” debate

Patrick O'Connor
13 October 2012

Official Australian politics has been dominated this week by a highly orchestrated campaign over “sexism”, waged by the minority government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, in a desperate bid to claw back support in the lead up to an election due next year. Unable to address the real reasons for the widespread public hostility to her government—its savage austerity measures, attacks on basic democratic rights and militarism—Gillard is targeting Liberal Party opposition leader Tony Abbott as a man who has a “problem with women”.

The campaign was initiated with the release last month of a biography of Abbott written by “left” liberal journalist David Marr in the “Quarterly Essay”. Sections of the media seized on an incident related in the book, when, decades ago, Abbott, as a student politician at Sydney University, allegedly tried to intimidate a female rival by punching the wall near her head. From there, the attacks intensified, with female Labor ministers—dubbed the “hand-bag hit squad” by the opposition—lining up to criticise Abbott. The so-called “gender wars” escalated further after rightwing radio “shock jock” Alan Jones declared at a Liberal Party function that Gillard’s recently deceased father had “died of shame” because his daughter was “a liar”. This provided more grist to the mill as Labor politicians again targeted Abbott for failing to condemn the insensitive remarks strongly enough.

These events paled, however, in comparison with the antics of the past few days. In a debate over the removal of parliamentary speaker Peter Slipper, Gillard launched into a 15-minute tirade of personal abuse, condemning Abbott for his sexism and declaring that she would expose “misogyny” wherever she saw it. Opposition politicians rushed to point out that Gillard was speaking in support of Slipper, whose derogatory private text messages about female genitalia were the basis for the Liberal Party’s demands for his removal. The opposition motion failed, but under intense pressure Slipper resigned anyway. Both the opposition’s use of the Slipper text messages and Gillard’s response were utterly hypocritical diversions.

The debate continued for the remainder of the week, despite

demands from the corporate media that the parliament start focussing on the impact of the worsening global economic crisis on the Australian economy. Gillard’s determination to proceed with her campaign against “misogyny” is aimed at both diverting public attention from her anti-working class agenda and at appealing to a very specific upper middle class constituency to rally behind her government. At this stage Labor is set to lose the next election.

Not surprisingly, Gillard’s speech evoked a response from her intended audience. Her remarks were enthusiastically hailed by liberal pundits, feminists and online commentators in Australia and around the world.

On the ABC’s *Drum* website, journalist and feminist Anne Summers enthused: “It was not just the passion of her delivery that was so electrifying. It was *what* she was saying... Here, finally, was a powerful woman speaking out against the sexism and misogyny that so many of us have to deal with.”

Writing for *New Matilda*, Ben Eltham considered that it was Gillard’s “most important speech” as prime minister “by far”, and pointed to the political and electoral considerations involved. “Feminism is back. In the short term, that’s probably good news for Julia Gillard and Labor, given Labor’s obvious lead over the [opposition] coalition on gender and family issues.”

Gillard’s campaign has nothing to do with supporting women in general. She is targeting privileged layers of the middle class. The Labor Party long ago lost the allegiance of its previous constituency, the working class. Between 1983 and 1996, the Hawke-Keating governments worked with the trade unions to orchestrate a ruthless pro-business restructuring agenda that saw millions of workers desert the Labor Party in disgust. Now, working people despise Gillard, not because of her gender, but because of her rightwing policies, including her support for the criminal US-led wars abroad and her attacks on democratic rights and living standards at home.

A definite social stratum, which includes academics, writers,

environmental entrepreneurs, trade union officials, lawyers, and other professionals, has come to form a significant component of the Labor Party's base of support. Preoccupied with various forms of identity and lifestyle politics—based around gender, sexual identity and race—these layers have seen the value of their stock market and property portfolios rise under the Labor government's "free market" economic program. Now, however, they fear the potential impact on their personal wealth of the worsening turmoil on the world markets, the slowdown in China and the collapse of the boom in mineral commodity prices.

Indifferent to and contemptuous of the working class, these middle class elements instinctively approve of the Labor government's efforts to make workers bear the full burden of the economic crisis. Gillard's speech is not just aimed at energising this layer for an election campaign, but at establishing a social base for the imposition of the European-style austerity measures being ever more insistently demanded by the financial elite.

Feminism, as it was promoted after the 1970s, became the vehicle for the self-promotion and self-enrichment of a very narrow layer of women, who were provided with new openings in the upper echelons of the state apparatus and corporate world. Labor's campaign against "sexism" serves to assure such elements that their interests will continue to be advanced, while also reminding them that the Liberal Party, which has different social constituencies to satisfy, may not provide them with as many opportunities if it comes to power.

The disdain of these social layers for the working class was evident on the day of Gillard's "historic" speech. While denouncing Abbott's supposed sexism, the Labor government on the same day passed legislation that stripped existing Parenting Payments for around 100,000 single parents, 90 percent of them women, forcing them onto the much lower unemployment benefit. Because of this, many vulnerable working class mothers will have their weekly income slashed by more than \$100 a week, so as to cut government spending by a reported \$700 million. Neither Anne Summers, Ben Eltham, nor any of the other cheerleaders for Gillard saw fit to even mention the plight of the 100,000 single parents targeted by the government.

This silence points to the role played by identity politics in obscuring the fact that class, not gender, or race or sexual preference, is the basis of the fundamental divide in Australian society.

Working class women, like their male counterparts, have been the victims of the Labor government's rightwing, pro-business economic policies. The vast majority of women

struggle to cope with mounting financial pressures, stemming from rising costs of living, insecure employment, stagnating and declining wages, and deteriorating public services and infrastructure.

Young women have been especially targeted as part of the government's drive to increase "workforce participation", that is, to widen the pool of exploitable cheap labour on behalf of big business. This is another factor behind the move to place single parents on the poverty-level unemployment benefit. It has also driven the design of Labor's paid parental leave scheme. Falsely touted by the government and the trade unions as a historic progressive reform, the scheme is aimed at increasing women's "attachment" to the workforce and thereby lowering average women's wages by at least 2 percent.

Labor's pro-business offensive is set to rapidly accelerate. While the feminist sideshow has dominated the headlines throughout the past month, senior economic policy makers have raised the need for far sharper austerity measures to permanently lower the living standards of the working class, in order to maintain the international competitiveness of Australian capitalism. (See: "Australian Treasury secretary outlines austerity offensive for Labor government")

One of the clear political strategies behind the "misogyny" campaign is to delegitimise in advance any opposition by the working class to this agenda, by portraying any criticism of, or hostility to, Gillard and her government as rightwing, and sexist. Without a doubt, the various ex-left organisations, which have long promoted identity politics as "progressive", will, in one way or another, be in the forefront of this reactionary drive.

Workers should reject the entire "gender politics" framework being promoted by Gillard, her government and its supporters. A conscious political break must be made from the Labor Party and its various props, including the trade unions and the Greens, and an independent political movement developed that unites workers--men and women--of all nationalities, races and sexual orientations, in defence of their shared class interests. Such a movement must advance a political struggle against both the Gillard government and the outmoded capitalist profit system that it defends. Only through the establishment of a workers' government and a socialist society can genuine social equality be established and democratic rights ensured for all.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact