

Australian media in a frenzy over allegations of sexual assault in federal parliament

Oscar Grenfell
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For the past week and a half, the Australian media and what passes for official political discussion in the country have been dominated by allegations that a Liberal Party staffer was sexually assaulted by a colleague inside federal parliament two years ago.

On February 15, *news.com.au* first published an article detailing the account of the complainant, Brittany Higgins. She has stated that late on the night of March 22, 2019, her and a colleague on the staff of Defence Industry Minister Linda Reynolds, left a social gathering together and went to the parliamentary offices alone. Higgins has said that she was intoxicated and that she awoke on a couch in Reynolds' office, sometime very early on March 23, as the man was raping her.

It hardly needs stating that sexual assault and rape are serious criminal offences. If a credible allegation is made, it should be investigated by the relevant police agencies. If there is sufficient evidence, charges should be laid, and a trial convened to determine the veracity of the allegations and the guilt or innocence of the accused.

In this instance, that entire process, based on fundamental legal and democratic principles, including the presumption of innocence, due process and the right to a fair trial for both parties, has been circumvented and undermined by what can only be described as a sordid media frenzy.

Literally from the moment that Higgins' allegations were made public, the establishment media, spanning from the Murdoch-owned press, to the outlets of Nine Entertainment and the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), has been full of stories all but asserting the guilt of the accused and baying for his blood.

To the extent that the word "alleged" has been used, it has had the character of a legal disclaimer, not a statement of fact. A typical headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Tuesday blared "'Not a nice person': Man accused of Parliament rape stood down from current job." The frenzy has intensified as different corporate outlets have published three anonymous accounts, alleging additional offenses by the man, spanning from rape to touching a woman's thigh

without prior permission during a social dinner.

The unhealthy character of the media campaign has been demonstrated by many of the responses on social media. Some, caught up in the frenzy, responded with glee to reports last week that the accused had checked himself into a psychiatric facility. Others declared, without reference to facts or reason, that this showed he was "hiding out." The man's name has been leaked, and has repeatedly trended on Twitter over the past several days.

The media has made the most far-reaching claims about the significance of the allegations. The Australian population has been told that it is now in the midst of an "urgent national conversation," a "reckoning," etc. The central issue of the day, according to many media pundits, is workplace relations, not as they affect millions of ordinary working people, but as they find expression in the corridors of parliament and the interactions of political staffers, especially those between men and women. "There is a huge untapped fury among women staffers and politicians," one ABC article informed its readers.

This has been connected to assertions of a cover-up of the allegations by the Liberal-National Coalition government and Higgins' claims that she received insufficient support from her superiors.

Last week, Prime Minister Scott Morrison told parliament that he only found out about the allegations the day that they were aired in the media. Since then, material has been leaked to the press, indicating that staffers in his office were aware of the alleged incident less than a fortnight after it occurred. Intentionally misleading parliament is widely viewed as a sackable offence that can be used to compel MPs to resign their position.

In other words, the media campaign has immediately deepened a crisis of the government, which has found other expressions, including the resignation of extreme right-wing backbencher Craig Kelly on Tuesday.

This demonstrates a point that is clear to every observer who has not lost their head amid the media frenzy. Whatever took place two years ago—and the incident should be

investigated by the police—what has occurred over the past week and a half has had a highly political character. It has involved political people, conducting a campaign through the media, and extensive leaking from within the Liberal-National Coalition and the government itself.

Higgins only issued a complaint with the Australian Federal Police yesterday, a week and a half after raising the allegations in the media. The consequence has been that Morrison and government MPs have been grilled over their knowledge of the affair for 10 days, without being able to decline to comment on the grounds that a police investigation is underway.

There is a long history of sexual misconduct scandals being used as a vehicle to advance unstated political agendas. Such issues are often elevated to centre stage, amid factional political conflicts that are played out behind closed-doors.

The precise motives behind the current frenzy remain obscure.

It is notable, however, that the Murdoch press, and particularly its national flagship the *Australian* has been in the forefront of the campaign. The publication, among the most prominent media vehicles of the financial elite, has generally supported Morrison.

Over recent weeks, however, it has increasingly expressed the frustrations of sections of business with his government. These have centred on complaints that it is not proceeding quickly enough with a sweeping pro-business overhaul of industrial relations and a full return to physical workplaces, both of which are aimed at boosting the profits of the corporate elite. The *Australian* in particular vented little-disguised fury at the latest lockdown in Victoria following the new infections leaking from quarantine hotels, declaring that border closures and restrictions cannot continue every time there is an outbreak of the virus.

The current furore, at least as it is playing out in the pages of the *Australian*, may be intended as a warning to Morrison, that he must step up his implementation of this agenda, or face moves to replace him.

Then there is the issue of the deep-going factional conflicts within the Coalition itself. Among the first prominent public figures to cast doubt on Morrison's claims that he was not aware of Higgins allegations earlier was former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. He was deposed by Morrison in a party-room coup in August, 2018.

This week, it has been revealed that before joining Reynolds' staff, Higgins was employed by Steven Ciobo, a key cabinet minister in Turnbull's government. He was sidelined after Morrison's ascension and quit the government ministry in early 2019.

For its part, the Labor Party opposition has repeatedly

grilled government ministers on the allegations over the past week. Labor has attempted to create a Watergate-style scenario, based on the question, who knew what, and when did they know it.

This is obviously aimed at catching out Morrison and others for allegedly misleading parliament. It evades a broader substantive issue, however, and lines up with the undermining of due process being spearheaded by the media.

Higgins has stated that when she was informed of the allegation, Senator Reynolds immediately suggested her going to the police. Higgins then lodged a police complaint, but withdrew it some two weeks into the investigation. She has since claimed that she was fearful that she could lose her job if the investigation proceeded. In October 2019, a media inquiry was lodged with Reynolds' office about the alleged incident. Higgins has stated that she was "horrified" that the media had the information and did not want it reported in the press.

Many issues remain contested. However, if it is the case that Higgins withdrew the police complaint herself and wanted the issue to be kept out of the media, it is unclear what Labor and those leading the media frenzy would have had Reynolds and the government do.

Labor's stance has a cynical and desperate character. It is seeking to differentiate from the government, on the reactionary basis of gender politics and implicit attacks on the presumption of innocence. This is under conditions in which Labor has marched in lockstep with the government for the past period, supporting virtually all of its right-wing policies, including its pro-business response to the pandemic, its October budget, which handed the corporations and the wealthy massive tax cuts, and its escalation of Australia's involvement in the US-led confrontation with China.

Whatever the immediate political issues that are being fought out through this media campaign, it has served to divert attention from the deepening social and economic crisis facing millions of people, and to whip a middle-class constituency that is obsessed with issues of gender and sexual relations into a frenzy.

As with the #MeToo campaign, the attacks on the presumption of innocence establish a dangerous precedent that can be used far more broadly, including against social and political opposition from below.



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