

Australian parliament dominated by recriminations over sexual misconduct

Oscar Grenfell
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This week, discussion in the Australian parliament has been dominated almost entirely by sexual misconduct scandals, some long-running and others being aired for the first time on the floor of the Senate itself.

The furor began with clear evidence, published in the press, that Labor had weaponised and exploited murky sexual assault allegations while in opposition, to weaken the former Liberal-National Coalition government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Now, by week's end, the focus has shifted to allegations that Liberal Senator David Van inappropriately touched and made advances to women, including parliamentarians, several years ago.

In the first instance, the discussion has a highly diversionary character. The preoccupations of the parliamentarians, staffers, other members of the political elite and corporate journalists are a world away from the issues facing working people.

While they have engaged in furious denunciations of one another, Labor and the Coalition have been in a bipartisan front on the key political issues. They include full commitment to Australia's frontline role in US-led plans for war with China, including through the AUKUS purchase of nuclear-powered submarines, and an unprecedented onslaught on the social and living conditions of the working class.

The misconduct issue, however, is significant from two standpoints.

First, within the framework of official politics, dominated as it is by lies and keeping ordinary people in the dark, scandals are always a means through which other, unstated agendas, are fought out. Second, in the course of a years-long saga, the official parties, together with much of the media, have trashed the presumption of innocence in an attack on the democratic rights, not solely of those directly involved, but of the entire population.

The latest eruption was provoked by the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper's publication, beginning last week, of text messages between former Liberal Party staffer Brittany Higgins and her partner David Sharaz, as well as the audio of a five-hour meeting the pair held with Lisa Wilkinson and producers of the Channel Ten program, "The Project."

The texts and the meeting were in the lead-up to a February 15, 2021 episode of "The Project," which included an interview with Higgins. In it, she alleged that she had been raped by another Liberal staffer, since revealed to be Bruce Lehrmann, inside parliamentary offices almost two years before, in the early hours of March 23, 2019.

The text messages allegedly show Sharaz planning "drops" to reporters deemed to be favorable. They make plain that the public airing of the allegations was timed to have maximum political impact, being made at the start of the first sitting week of parliament in 2021.

The political motivations of the duo are also pointed to, with Higgins in one exchange reportedly writing, in reference to Morrison: "He's about to be f.ked over. Just wait. We've got him." Roughly a month after the program aired, Sharaz allegedly texted Higgins: "Don't ditch me now you're famous," and, "We exude power."

Most explosively, Sharaz indicated that he had a close relationship with federal Labor MP Katy Gallagher, whom he described as a friend. The texts indicated that Sharaz was effectively briefing Gallagher, in the lead-up to Higgins' public announcement. Sharaz assured Higgins that Gallagher would assist them, including by peppering the government with questions about the matter in parliament, after Higgins' public announcement was made.

In 2021 and 2022, Higgins would be referenced in the Senate 338 times, 135 of those by Gallagher. The texts indicated that other Labor figures were also aware of Higgins' planned media campaign before it began.

The thrust of the Labor Party line on the issue, together with the sympathetic media coverage, was that Morrison and the Coalition had somehow covered-up the alleged rape of Higgins.

This narrative was always vague and sketchy. Very little of it remains.

While aspects of the incident and its aftermath remain in dispute, it is now established that in the wake of the alleged rape, Higgins' employers in the office of then Defence Minister Linda Reynolds, encouraged her to go to the police. They claim to have provided her with offers of counseling and other assistance, in keeping with standard workplace practices.

Higgins did make a police complaint, but withdrew it within several weeks, in April 2019. She has since stated that she was fearful that if she proceeded, her job would be in jeopardy. It seems inconceivable, however, that Higgins would have been sacked, as this would have been blatantly unlawful and political suicide on the part of the Coalition. It could have precipitated precisely the sort of media campaign Higgins and Sharaz later launched.

At the time, i.e., in 2019, Higgins also made it plain that she

wished that her allegation be kept out of the media. That changed sometime in 2020, the same year Higgins met Sharaz. His critics assert that he has longstanding and deep connections to the Labor Party.

In February 2021, Higgins conducted the interview with “The Project,” before completing a formal police interview. Police have stated they strongly advised her against the move. Finalising the police complaint could have blocked the interview, and subsequent media appearances, under sub judice laws.

Labor latched onto the Higgins case so enthusiastically, not out of concern for women, but because it provided the party with a means of differentiating from the Morrison government, on a thoroughly reactionary basis, and of whipping an upper-middle class constituency into a frenzy.

At the time, Labor was supporting the Coalition’s fundamental class policies, including intensifying collaboration with the US anti-China campaign, and preparations to dismantle successful COVID safety restrictions in the interests of business. Identity politics was all that separated Labor from the Coalition, then as now.

The Higgins case was also taken up by large sections of the corporate media, under conditions where powerful elements of the ruling elite were frustrated with the Coalition’s performance. It was increasingly crisis-ridden and was not pressing ahead with austerity measures as rapidly as demanded.

The Labor and media campaign was all premised on the assumption that Lehrmann was guilty. In line with the broader MeToo onslaught on basic civil liberties, his right to a presumption of innocence was all but obliterated. A criminal trial against Lehrmann collapsed last October, after alleged juror misconduct. Significant discrepancies had emerged in Higgins’ evidence during cross-examination.

Lehrmann has commenced defamation action against several media outlets. Various official inquiries are examining the handling of the case by the police, prosecutors and other authorities.

The texts referencing Gallagher were significant, not only because they indicated a shadowy political-media operation. They also raised questions as to whether Gallagher had misled parliament, a sackable offense. In June 2021, she stated she did not have any knowledge of the Higgins allegations, before they were aired in the media. “No one had any knowledge, how dare you,” Gallagher declared, in response to a question from Reynolds.

Gallagher has faced intense questioning along those lines by the Coalition. She has now acknowledged that she did know about the allegations but has claimed that she did not mislead parliament because “I did nothing with that information.”

Gallagher and other Laborites have improbably denounced the Coalition for “weaponising” Higgins’ allegations, two years after they plainly did the same. They have also cynically warned that the parliamentary debates will deter sexual assault complainants from coming forward in the future.

Most victims of criminal assault, it may be noted, do not have access to senior national politicians and the country’s most prominent journalists *before* issuing a police complaint. Under the Australian Capital Territory’s strict alleged victim protection laws, moreover, a sexual assault complainant can remain anonymous

throughout the duration of criminal proceedings and beyond. In other words, Higgins’ name is only on the public record because she ensured it was there by speaking to the media.

Questions have also been raised about a federal compensation payment to Higgins, reportedly worth \$3 million or more. It was approved by the Labor government, without contest, while Reynolds and other Liberal representatives were barred from giving testimony contesting the damages. Reports in the *Australian* have indicated that the payment was calculated based on Higgins, currently 30 years old, having lost the equivalent of 40 years future employment, with promotions and hypothetical career progression factored in.

Beyond all the immediate details, broader issues are no doubt at play.

There is every prospect that as in 2021 when the Higgins affair was used to place heat on the Morrison government, which was viewed as a squeezed lemon by segments of the ruling elite, so too is it being revived now to ramp-up the pressure on the Labor government.

Murdoch-owned outlets, while generally supporting Albanese, have expressed frustration over the pace of the country’s military build-up, as the US indicates that a planned war with China is evermore imminent. The business elites have also complained that Labor is not proceeding rapidly enough with its demands for “productivity” improvements, code for stepped-up exploitation of the working class, and budgetary austerity.

Whatever the exact backroom calculations, there are undoubtedly many more agendas at play than are being publicly discussed.

The fractious and increasingly chaotic scenes in parliament are playing out under conditions of a major crisis of the political establishment. Support for the Coalition has plummeted, but Labor, after decades of imposing the dictates of the corporate elite, has lost any stable mass base in the working class.

As they face demands from above for stepped-up militarism and austerity, the official parties look below and see the unmistakable signs of widespread and growing discontent. In its own way, the crisis and disarray of the political set-up is a harbinger of far more significant conflicts that will pit the working class against the entire capitalist establishment.



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