

Australian news site Crikey self-censors article critical of MeToo, Higgins saga

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With the Australian parliament and media dominated by sexual misconduct allegations and their fallout, there is scarcely any thoughtful or critical commentary in the press. Significant issues such as the protracted undermining of the presumption of innocence, the political character of the various scandals and the (reactionary) social forces involved are generally off limits. Superficiality and self-righteousness are the order of the day.

A rare exception was to be found in an article published on *Crikey* yesterday by Guy Rundle, one of the site's leading journalists. But, as if to drive home the point that no dissent from the official line will be tolerated, Rundle's article lasted all of a few hours. Almost as quickly as it was posted, it was retracted, scrubbed entirely from *Crikey's* website and replaced with a hypocritical and censorious apology by unnamed editors.

The retraction does not indicate that the removal of the article was based on legal issues, which do often emerge due to Australia's strict defamation laws. The apology asserted that Rundle's piece contained "factual errors," but the two cited were entirely open to interpretation, with no evident inaccuracy.

Instead, the article was condemned on the nebulous grounds of "tone." The apology stated "the tone of the piece did not meet *Crikey's* journalistic standards...." The publication "firmly believe[s] in promoting a space that publishes a plurality of views, and as editors we regularly publish opinion pieces that we may personally disagree with. But this piece doesn't fall into that category, and we regret publishing it."

Crikey did not say it, but the obvious reason for the cowardly self-censorship was a social media backlash to Rundle's article. For much of the publication's generally inner-city upper middle-class audience, MeToo and identity politics more broadly are articles of faith. Rundle, by offering any criticism, had committed an unpardonable

sin. Despite the removal of his article, the social media campaign continues, including with calls for Rundle to be fired.

The contents of the article make clear why it touched a nerve.

The context is recent revelations contained in leaked text messages between former Liberal Party staffer Brittany Higgins and her partner David Sharaz, together with the audio of a five-hour meeting the pair held with producers of Channel Ten's "The Project" television program.

The material, largely published by the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, makes clear that beginning in early 2021, Higgins and Sharaz conducted a well-planned media campaign, around Higgins' allegations that she had been raped in the federal parliament almost two years earlier by another Liberal Party staffer, since revealed to be Bruce Lehrmann. The duo was also, it is now clear, in discussions with senior members of the then Labor Party opposition before the media blitz.

Higgins aired the sexual assault allegations in an interview broadcast by "The Project" on February 15. She did so before finalising a police complaint. The allegation was immediately weaponised by the Labor Party, which vaguely insinuated a cover-up of the incident by the Liberal-National Coalition government. Higgins was presented in the media as an exemplar of courage and heroism.

As Rundle wrote, "whatever happened to Brittany Higgins, she, her partner and others were running a sustained, planned and strategised media campaign around her accusations."

This did not have any bearing on the veracity of her initial allegation. But, Rundle continued, "she's not a capital-V Victim, as the now largely dispelled movement around her presented her to be... Higgins and co. did what their role as political advisers trained them to do: they

strategised with their assets to maximum advantage. The Higgins we see in leaked texts is capable of distancing herself from what she alleges to be a crime against her, and of considering the best placement of stories, sorting allies from enemies, and so on.”

In one text message, shortly before “The Project” aired, Higgins allegedly wrote to Sharaz “He’s about to be f..ked over. Just wait. We’ve got him.” She was referring to then Coalition Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

Sharaz allegedly texted Higgins a month after the program was broadcast, “Don’t ditch me now you’re famous,” and “We exude power.” In another message, Sharaz wrote: “Are you getting spotted? Are people noticing you? Anyone recognise you?”

Rundle stated that the texts “became our business” and a matter of public interest “when Higgins received a compensation payment from the incoming Albanese government in a stunningly rapid process, and with a price tag believed to be \$3 million.”

The *Crikey* apology identifies this sentence as containing the only two factual errors it points to in the article.

It states: “Higgins lodged her claim in March 2022 while the Morrison government was still in office, and it was not settled until December 2022, seven months after the election of the current government.” And further: “There is no factual basis for the \$3 million figure; Higgins has publicly said that figure was her initial claim but that the final figure was much lower than that.”

That hardly refutes Rundle’s point. Higgins received the payment in a no-contest process with former Coalition government ministers barred from giving evidence. Rundle had noted Higgins’ claim that the payout was less than \$3 million. But, as he pointed out, she has refused to state the actual amount received.

The payment was agreed by a Labor government whose senior representatives are now accused of having colluded with Higgins while in opposition. Rundle wrote there was a “widespread perception” that the “process was rushed” for political purposes, including to “close the lid on any revelations concerning Labor involvement becoming a cause célèbre.”

In what were his most controversial comments, Rundle noted that Higgins’ allegations had never been proven in a criminal court. A trial collapsed last October, over juror misconduct. Significant discrepancies had emerged in Higgins’ account during cross examination.

Rundle wrote: “Either Bruce Lehrmann and Brittany Higgins had a sexual encounter in Parliament House or

they didn’t. If they did, it was either consensual or it wasn’t.

“The branching lines of this decision tree favour Lehrmann, since in two of the three scenarios he is innocent of any crime (and has not been convicted or re-prosecuted for any crime). But the content of the allegations tips the balance concerning his reputation the other way. That’s an assessment of the culture, not of his case. If someone is accused of fraud, we are quite capable of keeping an open mind. Allegations of sexual crime weigh the other way.”

Later, he wrote: “The brutal, ugly and, let’s face it, entrancing details coming out concerning this case are largely to do with whether Labor did or did not ‘weaponise’ a serious matter in a cynical fashion, in a process drawing tightly together the Higgins push, progressive media stars and Labor. The suggestion that the accusation at the base of it all must be, can only be, true, is ludicrous.”

Rundle outlined an alternative scenario, in keeping with Lehrmann’s insistence that no sexual assault and, in fact, no sexual contact occurred.

“We are supposed to pretend there is no possibility that this is the case. We are supposed to ignore the fact that this has occurred in a milieu of people who have chosen as their profession that of political adviser, whose prerequisite in our time is a willingness to lie cynically and strategically at every opportunity,” Rundle wrote.

This was all too much for the censorious and self-obsessed MeToo supporters on social media. Junking the presumption of innocence? Destroying a man’s life based on accusations that have never been substantiated in a court of law? Politicians exploiting serious allegations for political gain?

All of that and more is not only tolerated but often celebrated by these layers of the middle-class whose commitment to basic democratic rights and civil liberties eroded over the years as their wealth increased. But a single article, by a journalist, raising questions about a case that has dominated the press for years and even entertaining alternative hypotheses is beyond the pale. In its own way, the censorship of Rundle’s article underscores the point he was making.



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