

## Brutal edge of sexism revealed

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Former NSW premier **Kristina Keneally** didn't want to get dragged into the sexism debate, but then an envelope arrived in the mail. It was addressed to "The Approving Socialist Slut at Basketball Australia".

She gave a sigh of exasperation and tweeted a photo of the offending item, sent by someone upset with a planning decision she once made.

There are a long list of former NSW Labor premiers who might be unpopular with voters, but do any of the blokes endure sexual slurs the equivalent of being called a "slut"?

This week Prime Minister Julia Gillard made sexism a big part of the election agenda, speculating on the fate of abortion rights under a Coalition government.

In contrast, two years ago, Ms Gillard had played down her position as the first female prime minister, saying: "I never conceptualise my prime ministership around being the first woman to do this job."

Soon after her discredited "blue ties speech" at the launch of Women for Gillard on Tuesday, details of a menu describing Ms Gillard in crude sexual terms emerged. It had been created by a restaurant owner who had hosted a Liberal Party fund-raiser in Queensland.

By week's end, the chief of army David Morrison had stood down officers in yet another predatory sex scandal demeaning women, and a radio host was sacked for his treatment of Ms Gillard.

*The Sun-Herald* asked five prominent women to reflect on what the week said about the treatment of women in Australia - is sexism alive?

A "rank hostility to women" has emerged in Australian public life, said former West Australian premier and federal health minister **Carmen Lawrence**.

Sexist incidents such as the menu featuring Julia Gillard Kentucky Fried Quail with "A Big Red Box", were "deeply disturbing" and represented a huge step backwards in attitudes to women. "The idea that the PM's body and sex life are fair targets for sniggering public commentary is totally repugnant," said Professor Lawrence, who now teaches at the University of Western Australia.

She said she had been watching the past few days unfold with horror. "There's been coarsening of political discourse and discussion and an acceleration of sexist language and misogynistic perception that we haven't seen before. It's not just in the political arena."

Broadcaster **Ellen Fanning** was host of Nine's *Sunday* program when it was axed two years ago and says her new role as host of *The Observer Effect* on SBS was an act of "positive discrimination" because so many older women have been overlooked for on-air roles in the past.

Fanning says gender has been an issue throughout her career and little has changed. "When I was first appointed the presenter of the *PM* program at the age of 24, a male colleague sneered at me 'No t---, no spot'. The offensive word, referring to a part of the female anatomy, meant without a vagina you wouldn't get the job, which, let's face it, is hardly ever true," she recalled.

"That was 21 years ago. I still regularly find myself the only woman in the room, the only woman on the panel and so on ... Have a read of the summary of viewer logs to TV and radio stations after any challenging interview conducted by a female journalist and you'll see what I mean. I thought things would be different by now."

But Fanning says she was surprised when Ms Gillard put gender on the election agenda. "No one political party is the 'women's party'. They should be judged on their policies and actions."

As the "diversity chick", chief executive of the Diversity Council **Nareen Young** said she's been on the receiving end of sexist comments. But this week's developments made her grumpy, angry and appalled. "We clearly have an underlying culture of sexism and racism that appears to have been unleashed."

"There seems to be a double standard for politicians while every other person has to comply with legislative frameworks. If ordinary Australians said some of these things in the workplace, they'd be sacked."

She urged more people to come and out "name" the sexist and racist comments for what they were.

**Kerry Chikarovski** was "appalled" by the sexist jokes and questioning of Ms Gillard about her partner's sexuality, because it was irrelevant and showed a lack of respect. The former leader of the NSW Liberal Party was equally appalled when similar questions were put to her more than 10 years ago by two female reporters.

During an interview in the 1990s, the journalists produced a list of men, and accused her of having relationships with each of them. "After I said I hadn't, they then asked, 'So what's your girlfriend's name?' I asked them if they would ask the same questions of high profile men, and they said no.

"I find it unacceptable that we allow our political leaders to be treated with such contempt."

NSW Telstra Businesswoman of the year **Audette Exel** said "gender has been an issue to contend with in my journey". "The playing field in business is, and in my mind always has been, different and more difficult for women than it is for men, even for very lucky women like me," the chief executive of Isis Asia Pacific and Suncorp board member said.

"As a society we need to draw a line on discrimination in all forms. It is simply not acceptable."

She supports Ms Gillard's move to put gender on the political agenda. "Until the day when every little girl in Australia has the same opportunities as every little boy, gender will rightly be on the business, political and community agenda."

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/brutal-edge-of-sexism-revealed-20130615-2ob23.html>*