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## Not Funny

By Axel Bruns, Jason Wilson, and Barry Saunders

One of the most prominent recurring features of the long election campaign we've just put behind us were our politicians' and journalists' usually ill-fated moves to attempt the humour defence whenever some political stunt or statement didn't pay off.

We saw this first with Labor's star recruit Peter Garrett, who was reported to have said "[once we get in, we'll just change it all](#)" in what he was later at pains to describe as a "[short and jocular](#)" conversation with Channel Nine personality Richard Wilkins and talk radio shock jock Steve Price.

We're tempted to believe Garrett on this - you'd hardly spill campaign secrets if you found yourself talking to those two - but if nothing else he certainly showed some very poor judgment in joking with Price, who was subsequently proven to be [Australia's unfunniest radio DJ](#) this side of Kyle and Jackie O.

The "I was making a funny" excuse found only deaf ears and outraged faces when it was used again in the dying days of the campaign to soften the impact of [bogus campaign flyers in the Western Sydney seat of Lindsay](#) which claimed that Labor was sympathetic to Islamic extremism and supported the Bali bombers - a racist and deliberately deceptive stunt which some commenters in the blogosphere dubbed '[bogangate](#)'.

Not only were [the flyers themselves](#) offensive to anyone who bothered to read them (they cast a pall over retiring Lindsay MP Jackie Kelly, and ensured that in the face of [a 10% swing to Labor](#), would-be MP Karen Chijoff's career never even got started) - what was even more execrable were Kelly's painful attempts on [radio](#) and [television](#) to pass off the flyers as "a Chaser-type prank". As Laurie Oakes pointed out [when he savaged Kelly with righteous rage](#) after her interview, nothing about the Lindsay events was even remotely funny.

### What Was She Thinking?

More amusing, but for all the wrong reasons, *Jackass*-style, has been the still continuing Wentworth saga. Now, we gently had a go at *The Australian's* columnist Caroline Overington [in a Club Bloggery article a couple of weeks ago](#), when we asked whether there was anything but blind faith in John Howard's supposedly superior economic leadership behind her view that the interest rate rise was "[good news](#)" for the embattled PM.

Back then, we thought that Overington's performance on the campaign trail was simply pathetic - now, it seems more pathological. Once acclaimed for [her award-winning coverage of the Australian Wheat Board scandal](#), she is now destined to be remembered as a partisan hack desperately attempting to safeguard the last best hope of moderates in the Liberal Party, Malcolm Turnbull, from losing his own seat of Wentworth in last Saturday's election.

As has been widely reported (some of the stories made it as far as newspapers in [India](#) and [Pakistan](#)), Overington's antics first came to light when independent candidate for Wentworth (and one-time girlfriend of Labor's George Newhouse) Danielle Ecuyer revealed emails from Overington [that strongly lobbied Ecuyer to direct her preferences to Wentworth Liberal MP and Federal Minister for the Environment Malcolm Turnbull](#).

Though written in a chatty tone, the intent of those emails is unmistakable - and the hint that a preference deal which met with Overington's approval would increase Ecuyer's chances to find herself on the cover of *The Australian* is what led Ecuyer [to refer the whole matter to the Australian Electoral Commission](#) for an investigation of whether such promises constitute undue (and possibly illegal) interference with the political process.

Not content with Ecuyer, however, Overington also moved on to Newhouse himself, sending him a series of emails that appeared first to flirt with the Labor candidate, then (when that didn't work) descending rapidly towards threatening to have photographers cover every one of his steps in order to snap Newhouse in a less than appealing pose: "[Either you say yes to a photograph smiling and happy and out campaigning, or we stake you out at ... Bondi Junction, and get you looking like a cat caught in a trap, in your PJs. Your choice.](#)"

Overington's actions betray a belief that when backed up by *The Australian's* imprimatur, a columnist - however lightweight - may with impunity tempt and threaten candidates in order not only to get the story, but to try to affect political positioning and preference allocations. Despite - or even, because of - her fulsome denials, it's evident that, like mentor and friend Janet Albrechtsen, Overington desperately wants to be a player in the political scene of Sydney's leafier suburbs.

Again, the jocular defence was working overtime as the story broke - Overington herself responded to the first major stories about the affair on [Media Watch](#) and [Lateline](#) with an article in *The Australian*, titled "[Manipulating Polls? It's a Complete Joke](#)", which - true to form for the paper - attacked the messenger in the shape of *Media Watch's* producer Tim Palmer rather than showing any sense of introspection.

With more than just a hint of self-interest, another colourful columnist recently put in place by [Media Watch](#), the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Miranda Devine, [leapt to Overington's defence as well](#), predictably attacking the "louche left" of Australia for "missing its funny bone". As someone commented at *Larvatus Prodeo*, if that's true, then "[how come you just don't see leftish funny work swamped out by hilarious right-wing comedians at festivals all around the world?](#)" Miranda, when nobody other than you and Caroline is laughing, chances are that you're just not that funny...

*The Australian's* editor Chris Mitchell wasn't as forthcoming in his response to the controversy, choosing instead to redefine Overington's role from "journalist" to "[colour writer](#)" (the media equivalent of a footy club expressing 'full confidence' in their head coach). Mitchell's boss, Rupert Murdoch, even reserved the potential for [disciplinary action](#) over the affair for now.

### **Who's Laughing Now?**

Ultimately, the "just kidding" defence, and its almost inevitable echo of "not funny" from the electorate, point to a deeper malaise in the relations between politicians and professional commentariat on the one hand, and citizens and citizen journalists on the other. Over the past decade, it's become more and more evident that the former have lost respect for the other.

To be fair, citizens may be partly to blame for this - many have willingly accepted their depoliticisation and disenfranchisement, showing little interest in political scandals from Tampa to Iraq, in media affairs from cash for comments to the branch-stacking of the ABC board, for as long as interest rates remained low. Increasingly, a view of citizens as gullible masses to be governed (rather than as electors to be served) prevailed in the closely interwoven circles of those on the floor of parliament, and those in the press gallery above.

This was as evident in [the mainstream media's incredulous analysis of a year of opinion polls](#) showing the Howard government to have fallen severely out of favour with the electorate as it was in outgoing Health Minister Tony Abbott's now famous warning on *Lateline* [that voters were "sleepwalking" their way to the election "in a fit of absent-mindedness"](#). John Howard added another couple of such warnings just days ago: a change in government is "not like a Christmas present you didn't want and you can take it back at the Boxing Day sale", he patronised voters, and "[there's no such thing as a changeless change of government](#)". That, John, would seem to have been the point of this election.

The election result may help restore some of that respect for the independence and intelligence of the electorate - voters have declared clearly that they can no longer be taken for granted, and are ready to be won over by either side of power if presented with credible alternatives. Whether on the left or on the right, politicians and journalists would do well to maintain that respect, and lift their game.

### **Physical Comedy**

As the *7.30 Report's* Michael Brissenden put it on Monday last week, voters may not have been out there with baseball bats for the Howard government, but "[there were an awful lot of people waiting on the veranda for John Howard with a pair of comfortable old slippers and a rocking chair](#)" for his retirement. They may still need that bat, though, if only to defend themselves from journalistic has-beens.

Overington's latest foray into the news came once again for all the wrong reasons, when she ran into her unlikely nemesis George Newhouse at a voting booth on Saturday, sidled up to him for what appears to have been a short, but not at all jocular conversation, [and then reportedly gave him a good old whack across the face as a parting shot](#). (We're looking forward to seeing her explain that one away as part of a new physical comedy routine.)

This outburst followed [reports that Overington had been ringing bloggers who'd posted negative comments about her](#), requesting those posts to be taken down (and hinting at possible legal action). Strange behaviour for a journalist, but by now par for the course for this case - what, though, if the shoe was on the other foot, and *Media Watch's* Tim Palmer were to ask Overington to remove her attack on him from *The Australian's* Website? We'd never hear the end of it...

That this bizarre melodrama plays out against the backdrop of *The Australian's* [miraculous conversion](#) to [Ruddite supporters](#) in the wake of Labor's victory (and, perhaps more importantly, of [Rupert Murdoch's visit to Australia a couple of weeks ago](#)) only further highlights the isolation of Overington and her dwindling band of fellow travellers. As one user at *The Poll Bludger* [commented](#),

It's probably better just to ignore Caroline Overington. All of her recent articles have been nothing other than attempts at attention-seeking. She is deliberately going out of her way to try to wind up Labor voters, which is why she isn't even bothering to make any rational or reasoned arguments, just a heap of empty statements designed to provoke outrage.

'Colour writer' indeed. Fading fast.

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