

Difficult to cast house of sin in a good light



PETER COSTELLO

‘**T**his will be a different Parliament’ Rob Oakeshott claimed when he announced he would swing behind Labor and make Julia Gillard Prime Minister, again, after the 2010 election. “We believe in the ‘Sunshine Test.’” And Gillard responded: “So let’s draw back the curtains and let the sunshine in, let our Parliament be more open than it was before.”

The independents have long claimed that if only the Parliament were not controlled by members of any one political party it would operate on a higher plane. Likewise, feminists promised that as more women entered Parliament they would civilise the place and reduce confrontation in favour of co-operation.

Now we have the double – a female Prime Minister kept in office by independents. So does this mean the 43rd Parliament will be remembered as the Sunshine Parliament? Hardly.

More likely it will be remembered as the Sleaze Parliament. The Speaker cannot sit because he is dealing with allegations of travel rorts and sexual harassment.

Parliament’s most famous independent, Craig Thomson, wants the police to trawl through footage of brothel customers to find out who was impersonating him when escorts were paid for out of union funds.

And the stench of the Health Services Union is fouling wider and wider.

Craig Thomson has made much of the fact he is entitled to be presumed innocent and no one has the right to play judge, jury and executioner.

To prove this point, he used his speech on Monday to try, convict and sentence Tony Abbott over his handling of the issue, declaring he was not fit to sit as an MP in the House of Representatives.

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Last week I was asked to explain the Australian political situation to some very senior foreign business leaders. For the first time, I confess, I was not proud of what I was describing. Our politics today are at an extremely low ebb.

This is not to say there have not been scandals before. Take the events of September 1997, when in the space of a week three ministers were sacked or stood down over allegations of travel rorts. No one in the Labor Party worried too much about the “presumption of innocence” back then. The ministers were members of the Coalition and it brought the government to its knees. When allegations of travel rorts rebounded on to Labor’s senator Nick Sherry he engaged in an act of serious self-harm. Thankfully nothing as serious as that has happened during this furor.

The language of today is no more brutal or vituperative than in years gone past: go back and read the speeches of Billy Hughes or Jack Lang, which make modern debates look comparatively restrained. But the media coverage is more pervasive. Hughes and Lang didn’t have talk-back radio and television and 24-hour news programs. Blog sites and Twitter accounts – where anyone can make any allegation or post an insult about anyone – did not exist.

No, it is not the language. What has really poisoned our political debate is that after no one won the last election it was poseurs – such as Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott – who got to decide the outcome. And when those two former members of the National Party, who represent conservative electorates, decided to back Labor into office it led to the feeling that somehow the process had defied public opinion rather than reflected it. Since then, the government has shored up its numbers with a Liberal turncoat and Labor has paid hundreds of dollars in legal fees to defend Craig Thomson.

What makes the sleaze so bad is that the people under suspicion are the very people who prop up the government numbers. So a minority government protects conduct that would not be tolerated in any other workplace.

Oakeshott can’t really believe this “different” Parliament is a better one. He doesn’t need more sunlight to see that. Maybe he should just take off his sunglasses and open his eyes.

Peter Costello is a former federal treasurer.