

Opinion

How immoral, to hold the wrong views



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I've been feeling sorry for Belinda Neal. Neal, you will recall, is the Labor MP who let fly at a waiter when he asked her to move tables at Iguana Joe's a restaurant/night spot on the NSW Central Coast. "Don't you know who I am?" she demanded.

Soon all of Australia knew who she was. Kevin Rudd stepped in, reprimanded her and ordered her to undergo anger management counselling.

I've never been to this sort of counselling but I can imagine how it operates. A therapist gives you a tricky case and questions you on how to respond. The idea is to keep your anger under control.

Here's a case study for Neal. You are flying on your private jet when the flight attendant brings you the wrong meal. Do you (a) eat it anyway; (b) point out you ordered something else and ask for an alternative; or (c) shout at the flight attendant and reduce her to tears?

Neal should think carefully about this question. At one level the answer appears obvious. But there's a bit of precedent for answer (c). Some powerful people she doesn't want to alienate have adopted approach (c). Better not to show them up.

Which brings me to Craig Thomson. He's the Labor MP in the seat next door to Belinda Neal. Before Thomson was elected to Federal Parliament in 2007 he worked for the Health Services Union No. 1 Branch. Apparently a union credit card was used to pay for "escorts" in Sydney. Some people were pointing the finger at Thomson. He denies he was involved.

Thomson should think carefully about whether this is the best political approach. It is just possible that he could turn this incident into a big improvement in his polling figures.

Let's take another case study. You've visited an establishment offering sex-

ual titillation. Do you (a) deny being there; (b) call an identification parade to see whether anyone can recognise you; or (c) say you were too drunk to remember what you were doing and ring home to apologise?

The savvy political conclusion is answer (c). It shows you are one of the boys, humanises your image and should lead to a bounce in approval ratings.

There were periods when I suffered low approval ratings, but no one ever suggested this as the obvious solution.

I called my old press secretary last week to complain that he had never once advised me to boost my approval ratings with a couple of boozy hours in a lap-dance club. I asked: "Where were you when I needed good ideas?"

He answered: "(a) I was never drunk enough to think of it, (b) you were never drunk enough to go through with it, and (c) you're from the Liberal Party."

By that he meant that since journalists are predominantly pro-Labor you can't expect easy treatment on the other side of politics.

Thomson should take stock of his situation. It's not as if he is accused of doing something really bad - something like leaving the lights on during Earth Hour. I'll bet Thomson has all the right views on climate change, Labor's new workplace laws and, world poverty. So the rest, ladies and gentlemen, is bagatelle.

The modern view is that a person's private conduct is not nearly as important as a person's public morality. And that turns on having the right political views and making the right pronouncements.

Take climate change. The way the argument is being presented you can be for aggressive targets to cut emissions or you are for rising tides, mass drownings, increased heat-related deaths, the destruction of the planet and the death

of polar bears.

Characterising this as a moral question allows the high priests of emission targets to actually measure the morality of their opponents. Supporters of a 20 per cent cut are moral, 10 per cent morally inferior, supporters of 5 per cent are grossly immoral, and so on.

If anyone questions whether these targets will be met, if they will make a difference without the co-operation of major emitters, or what will happen to those who lose their jobs in industries affected, they can be dismissed as engaging in moral subterfuge. This is a moral argument, and such people are really in favour of destroying the planet.

While the postmodern world has lost faith in absolutes - rights and wrongs in relation to private behaviour - it has discovered absolutism about the views that are acceptable in modern political discourse. Take the wrong turn and you are not just mistaken, you are immoral. It's not that your views are immoral. You are immoral as a person for holding them.

By adopting the right views you get a wonderful release. There is not much you can do wrong at a personal level as long as you're in favour of a better planet.

Which brings me back to Belinda Neal. Why was she singled out for reprimand and counselling? It was not that she treated a waiter badly or lost her temper. The point is she was becoming a political nuisance who had to be distanced from the party leadership.

But she was unlucky with the timing. After recent events no backbencher will be ordered into anger management for yelling at a waiter.

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