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OPINION

Former first ladies unite to help clean-up toxic Canberra culture

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In the wake of the appalling revelations about sexual assault and misconduct in Canberra, there has been inspiration, too, with good people coming together, even from opposing political tribes, to try and fix it.

Emblematic of this are the wives of two former prime ministers, Lucy Turnbull and Therese Rein, uniting – with the likes of Brittany Higgins and other leading female staffers – to put their combined *oomph* behind some solid proposals. Together they have drafted and put their names to a submission to the review being conducted by Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins, with their own ideas on how to “reform the toxic culture that underpins the abuse, harassment, degradation and even assault of women in Parliament House, the workplace that should meet or exceed best practice for safety at work”.

Lucy Turnbull told me on Saturday that she and Therese Rein have been talking for the past few weeks.

“We are very concerned by everything we have read and heard about what has been happening at Parliament House to Brittany Higgins and other staffers. This must stop, ” she said.

“Whistleblowers must be protected and ministers held accountable and a body set up within Parliament to support all those who come forward.”

For Lucy Turnbull, it is a matter way beyond partisan politics.

“This is not something for finger-pointing at one side or another. It is has to be stopped everywhere, wherever it is found, and we must all come together on it.”

Therese Rein is with her on every step. “Lucy and I are in heated agreement that this is not about us,” the businesswoman told me. “It is about Parliament House being as safe a working place for women as it is for men. And it is not just about Parliament House. The veritable cascade of women who are saying ‘what happened to Brittany happened to me, too’ is overwhelming.

“It is the very opposite of antediluvian juvenile men in the 1950s bragging about notches on their bedposts. These are deep notches into the very hearts of those assaulted. We must act.”

As to what Malcolm Turnbull and Kevin Rudd think of their better halves combining, it was obvious it didn’t occur to either woman to ask. Not that the former-PMs would have had a problem with it but it simply wasn’t about them and certainly not about something as petty as partisan politics.

Bravo, Lucy and Therese, and everyone coming forward on this.

The hype was right

Told yers. You may recall that for the past three years or so your humble columnist has been raving – after seeing it several times in London and New York – about how brilliant the musical *Hamilton* is, and how exciting it was that it was coming to Sydney. As I write this I’m taking out my glad rags to go to the premiere at the Lyric Theatre on Saturday evening, but the early reports from the previews are already stunning.

[Hamilton’s leading men: (left to right), Marty Alix as John Laurens; Jason Arrow as Alexander Hamilton; Victory Ndukwe as the Marquis de Lafayette; Shaka Cook as Hercules Mulligan. CREDIT: DANIEL BOUD]

“We commenced previews last Wednesday,” Michael Cassell, the impresario behind the Australian tour, told me on Friday, “and I can tell you, I’ve never had an experience in the theatre quite like it. Our cast, crew and musicians are just phenomenal and have been met with the most electrifying and thunderous response from our audience. Jason Arrow, our Hamilton, literally had to wait what seemed like an eternity when he made his first entrance as the crowd reacted. That has continued and the audience have given a full standing ovation each night.”

The buzz I have heard back from people who’ve seen it confirms his view. It is a *killer* show and the Australian cast is every bit as good as the original.

Joke of the Week

BREAKING NEWS: The man who invented predictive text has died. His fun fails next monkey. May he rust in pus.

Tweet of the Week

“Remember, the real problem at Parliament House is unisex bathrooms.” –
Richard Hughes @NowhereRichard

Quote of the Week

“But the pattern here is that women are always the liars. Brittany Higgins, Sue Hickey, Christian Porter’s accuser ...” – Tracy Grimshaw, in her excoriating interview on Thursday evening with Scott Morrison.

“Unfortunately for you, I make the rules and you follow them.” – Queensland Liberal MP Andrew Laming on Facebook to a single mother in his electorate. Laming apologised once the remarks hit the public domain.

“I love the African notion of ‘ubuntu’. It means, ‘I am because we are’ – I can only be all I can be, if you are all you can be. It’s a very team-focused mentality.” – Liz Mills, the Sydney woman who has just coached the Kenya men’s basketball team to their best result in 24 years.

Liberal party 2016: “Same sex marriage will lead to people marrying inanimate objects.” Liberal party 2021: “I did not have sexual relations with that coffee table.” – The Chaser.

“The flooding we saw on the weekend wouldn’t have come within 4 metres of the museum entrance. Powerhouse Parramatta will be a very safe building for people to visit and for the collection to be exhibited.” – Peter Collins, president of the Powerhouse Trust, saying nothing to see here, folks, after a flood warning was issued last weekend for the ground floor of the four-level car park that’s to be demolished to make way for the museum, sparking renewed criticism around the contentious development.

“The lower parts of the Parramatta Powerhouse will go underwater ... that’s just the nature of the riverside location that has been chosen. Now it’s up to the state government to decide whether the risk is worth it – and that risk assessment has not been done.” – Independent Parramatta-based flood management consultant Steven Molino.

“I love you, I love the work you do, and the people you serve.” – Uncle Ivan Wellington, the first Aboriginal elder in Campbelltown to get his COVID-19 vaccine to Darryl Wright, the chief executive of the Tharawal Aboriginal Corporation, and the staff of its Aboriginal Medical Service after he got the jab.

“It makes me feel so gross and so sick and if this had happened in a park with a stranger and I’d somehow identified him and knew his name, I’m going to the police tomorrow and I would get him arrested. But because of all the weird party stuff and the pressures at the time and the hierarchy and whatever else, I felt like I couldn’t. And that’s a problem.” – Former parliamentary staffer Brittany Higgins to a colleague, played on *Four Corners*, explaining that she felt she had to stay quiet about allegedly being raped by a fellow staffer.

“I know there are plenty of women who work in this building today, whether they be members or senators, investors, shadow ministers, staff, journalists,

who say, ‘Why should I bother? Why should I bother? Why should I not just walk away?’ There has never been a more important time for women to stand in this place. I want to see more women in this place, I have done many things to get more women in this place and I intend to do more.” – Scott Morrison, waxing shocked at rape allegations, revelations of harassment and highly improper behaviour going on in the very heart of Australian democracy.

“Thanks for all you’re doing. I hope this brightens the place up a bit, even if it’s only black and white.” – A note from the “mysterious street artist ‘Banksy’,” who donated a painting to Southampton General Hospital in southern England in May, during the first wave of the pandemic, which has just sold at auction for \$30 million, which will be used to fund health organisations and charities across Britain.

“Is flood worse than fire or is fire worse than flood? I can now equivocally say they’re just as bad as each other – but different.” – Angela Stewart, who lives on the Hawkesbury River in Lower MacDonal and was planning to “tough it out” it with her husband, before changing their minds as the flood swallowed the bottom storey of their home. They and their three cats were safely evacuated. Last year’s bushfires came within 3 kilometres of their home.

“It’s shaping up to be a pretty pestilent season along the whole east coast. If it’s warm and moist, it’s highly likely we’ll get lots of mosquitoes.” – David Emery, a professor of veterinary parasitology at the University of Sydney, saying that residents across flood-hit parts of eastern Australia, including Sydney’s Hawkesbury-Nepean valley, are facing an “itchy, bitey and scratchy” stint as insect numbers are expected to explode in the wake of last week’s deluge.

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