

View from The Hill: When Australia's first law officer is in the dock of public opinion

Michelle Grattan- *The Conversation* - 10 November 2020
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It's quite a moment, when the country's first law officer is asked on his home town radio station, "So you don't think you're a sleazebag or womaniser or someone who's drunk in public too much now?"

Overnight, Christian Porter had been reduced from high-flying attorney-general to a man forced to publicly confront a nightmare episode of "This is Your Life" delivered by Monday's Four Corners.

"No, it's definitely not indicative of who I am now," he told interviewer Gareth Parker.

Parker did not resile from going to some of the worst of the confronting claims in the program. "Did you ever say you wouldn't date a woman who weighed over 50 kilograms and preferred that they had big breasts?"

"Absolutely not. I mean, like, give me a break."

But Porter – who's having to turn up on the House of Representatives frontbench all week under the eye of colleagues and opponents – was given no breaks in this long-distance grilling. His regular Perth 6PR spot became akin to a courtroom, with him in the dock.

First up: had he ever had an intimate relationship with a staffer?

Well, certainly not the staffer he'd been seen drinking with at Canberra's Public Bar in December 2017, in the (details disputed) incident that led to then-PM Malcolm Turnbull telling him to watch his ways.

Indeed, Porter said, the woman in question had categorically denied to Four Corners (which said she worked for another cabinet minister) the slant put on the story or that it indicated any relationship. But (unfortunately for him) her denial had been "off the record," he said. It was not reported.

Porter was lawyerly when quizzed about whether he'd ever had a relationship with any other staffer. He wasn't going to be pushed down by ways. "Is there another allegation?" he countered.

With the nose of the experienced prosecutor he once was, Porter smells political payback.

The program's biggest punch was delivered by Turnbull, with whom Porter had a major falling out just before the former PM lost the leadership.

In a heated dispute Turnbull argued the governor-general should refuse to commission Peter Dutton, if he won the leadership, because he might be constitutionally ineligible to sit in parliament. But Porter insisted Turnbull's suggested course would be "wrong in law" and threatened to repudiate his position if he advanced it publicly.

"I often suspected that there would be some consequences for that," Porter said in the 6PR interview.

"I don't think that Malcolm is a great fan of mine, I'd say that much," he told Parker, when asked whether he was suggesting Turnbull was motivated by revenge.

Porter's strategy is to own and regret his distant past – "I'm no orphan in looking back on things that I wrote and did 25-30 years ago that make me cringe" – but strongly contest the construction put on his more recent life.

He's threatened legal action, but his Tuesday tone suggested he's more likely to suck up the damage rather than take the distracting, expensive and risky course of going to a real court.

He and fellow cabinet minister Alan Tudge – whose affair with his then staffer the program exposed – retain the support of Scott Morrison.

Morrison relies on the "BBB" defence. That is, these incidents were Before the Bonk Ban – specifying no sex allowed between ministers and their staff – imposed by Turnbull early 2018 in response to the Barnaby Joyce affair.

Morrison was at the time, and is now, an enthusiastic supporter of the prohibition. He'd like to see it embraced by Labor, who'd "mocked" it when it was announced. (One of the government's many gripes about the Four Corner's program is that it didn't poke around to find Labor's dirty washing.)

"I take that code very seriously and my ministers are in no doubt about what my expectations are of them," Morrison told a news conference.

But please, can people keep the language more delicate? Terms matter to this PM, who once lectured the media against using "lockdown".

When minister Anne Ruston was asked (at their joint news conference on another matter) to reflect as a woman on whether the parliament house culture had become better or worse since the "bonk ban", Morrison interrupted her.

"How this ban is referred to I think is quite dismissive of the seriousness of the issue," he said.

"I would ask media to stop referring to it in that way. We took it very seriously and I think constantly referring to it in that way dismisses the seriousness of this issue, it's a very serious issue."

We can't know whether the Porter story will fade or there'll be some fresh spark.

Porter was asked if he could "go to bed tonight, comfortable in the knowledge that there isn't a woman out there who's going to come forward and give a truthful account of her interactions with Christian Porter that would further embarrass you or damage the government".

Porter said: "I haven't conducted myself in a way that I think would lead people to provide that sort of complaint about me".

Whether the story goes somewhere or nowhere, one thing seems clear. The hopes of 50-year old Porter – who switched to federal politics after an impressive state career – of ever reaching prime minister are in the mud.

In under an hour on Monday night, a red line was likely struck through his name on the list of future Liberal leadership prospects.