

The Crucifixion of Christine Nixon

“In Australia, a lone woman
is being crucified by the Press
at any given moment.”

Les Murray, A Deployment of Fashion 1997..

John Brumby, as Victoria Premier, wants it both ways, naturally: rejecting calls for Christine Nixon’s removal as chief executive of the Black Saturday reconstruction authority, yet agreeing with vitriolic remarks about her ‘mistakes’ on February 7th 2009. This is unworthy of him.

What did then-Commissioner Nixon do? On a day she was not rostered for duty she went in to the emergency centre to contribute to fire-fighting management; worked her office for a bit over an hour, returned to the centre, made arrangements for some briefings to ministers, and nicked off for tea at 5.30.

For reasons best known to counsel assisting the Royal Commission, Ms Nixon was cross-examined on her ‘need’ to leave at 5.30 – before the insanely out-of-control firestorm status was known – and accurately replied she had no such need. Hostile questioning from journalists after the public hearing had her admit the terrible truth: she had omitted to mention that she hadn’t cooked tea at home but slipped into a nearby pub with her husband and two friends for about an hour.

Did (dog-whistle: overweight and middle-aged) Commissioner Nixon get pissed? No. Did she party? Evidently not: the meal took about an hour. Did she take rest of the night off? No: she kept in touch from home. Had she shrugged off responsibility as police commissioner for responding to the firestorm? Well, no. Should she have waited another hour to listen to the ministerial briefing, knowing by that stage at least that deaths were likely? Why? What benefit, even in hindsight, would it have been, to hang about looking concerned, when there was nothing, absolutely nothing more she could possibly do? The full horror was not to be known until light on the following day.

The Royal Commission can’t even begin to pin blame to the first woman Chief Commissioner of Police for the widespread failure to predict the savagery of the firestorms, to save more people, or create or mend failed radio/telecommunications - all of this in others’ hands.

Christine Nixon’s only ‘mistake’ was to say that she ‘could have done better’ on Black Saturday. Everyone could have. No man would have said it.

Linguistics Professor Deborah Tannen’s research into the communication patterns of women and men (Working 9-5) proved that even at work men communicate as they have been socialised into building up status and social credit in the hierarchy they learned in the playground as boys. Women learn to establish and build relationships and commonalities which they, too, learned among their peers. Interrogated by a woman, even a tough, sometimes ruthless manager of operational police officers could slip into a reflective acknowledgment of fallibility.

Perhaps she was unnecessarily honest, too, in telling a journo where she had eaten tea that night, because women leaders' vulnerabilities make airborne news, and politicians who sniff the wind (better than the CFA did that horror night) will run before it.

The tongue is a little instrument, Commissioner, which does much harm. The Secretary of the Police Association –at war with the first woman Chief Commissioner of Police and first Commissioner who would neither accept nor turn a blind eye to bullying – was quick to strike more matches. Opposition politicians in an election year did strike poses and open their mouths to add more fuel. Blame splashed around, but not from all of the bushfire-affected survivors (notably, not from Kinglake.) Yet she is burning, burning.

Let us put it out. No firestorm of blame would be raging in Victorian papers or in Canberra nor would Christine Nixon herself be scorched by it, were she not a woman, a decent woman, a strong woman, a prominent woman and an ethically sound woman both of an age and with the experience to both possess a raging integrity of her own, and by her very being, to offer ruthless men a soft target.

Julia Baird wrote in Media Tarts, her book about Press treatment of women politicians –

“[W]hat drives a lot of the .. coverage . . . is a questioning of their humanity. Those with right-wing views, who are not seen as particularly compassionate, are portrayed as almost subhuman monsters, with grotesque features ripe for satire or caricature . . . Those seen as honest, decent and warm-hearted are canonised and showered with praise for being human, real, and like the rest of us . . . They are cheered for representing the politics of change. But then, when they show emotion, make mistakes or behave like the men in playing political hardball, they are fiercely castigated ... if they crack under the pressure, the ensuing criticism makes it clear we actually want them to be superhuman.’

Anyone who, as Ms Nixon did, takes the lead in the War Zone of policing is in exactly the same position.

Let us admit our own mistakes. One would be to blame ‘the media’ for it all, and I don’t. Our attitudes to strong women are grievously at fault. The other would be to fail to acknowledge that even saints are fully, not just femininely, humanly fallible. Christine Nixon’s flaw is a noble one: the learned law of all women, to accept personal responsibility.

Thank you, and goodnight.

Source: <http://moirarayner.com>