

The Intolerance of Tolerance in Australia: Tony Abbott's Head Butt Episode

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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"This was a violent and criminal act, nothing whatsoever to do with the point of view of those of us who favour a yes vote." – Senator George Brandis, Australian Attorney-General, Sep 22, 2017

It came, less out of the blue than out of the ether of the expected. "A 38 year old North Hobart man has been charged," went the note from the Tasmanian Police Force, "following an alleged incident on Hobart's waterfront yesterday afternoon." [1] Former Australian prime minister and conservative high priest Tony Abbott had received a Liverpool kiss, a head butt that had left him, by his own admission, a slightly swollen lip. "I just want to shake your hand and just went bang," came the description from a Hobart DJ, Astro 'Funknuckl' Labe.

Abbott's account on this directed "bang" was immediate. This had been the work of a pro same-sex advocate, an invert not merely in the sexual sense, but in the sense of political tolerance. Heads had replaced hearts – quite literally.

"Their slogan of 'love is love' is unfortunately shown in practice to be intolerance, not wanting people to be able to have their view." The reliably conservative Senator Eric Abetz also added his stubborn varnish, suggesting that the encounter was "yet again another example of the ugliness of the Yes campaign."

Abbott garnered little sympathy from various quarters. The critics, as they do with reliable promptness, came out with their pitchforks. The *New Matilda* site wondered if he was being economical with the account.

"What we do know is that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour, and on that front there are so many videos on YouTube of Tony Abbott lying". [2]

Writer John Birmingham felt solidarity with the man who sported a head that connected with Abbott's: "Je suis headbutt guy." [3] Tribal loyalties were being stirred, and violence was being embraced as a necessary symptom, axiomatic in any debate, if it could be called that, regarding Abbott and his views. Tolerance had been replaced by delight and Schadenfreude.

Others added their own versions, showing that this had become an argument without a distinction, a discussion without a purpose. What mattered was the application of unadorned violence, best reflected by the hashtag running its merry way through Twitter: "nut the

cunt". The brutish phrase had its origins in Labe's own roughly struck words, which had spawned a social media phenomenon:

"If I see an opportunity to improve my life and those around me by nutting Tony Abbot, I'm a pretty pragmatic guy."[4]

The social media feast swarmed with disputes about violence, its application, its necessity. The tolerant brigades had disappeared, and the revolutionary pugilists, behind the comfort of a tweet, were coming out. What was left was mere technique, reaction, and counter-attack.

"Abbott has a uni boxing blue," chirped Steven Trewin. "Disappointed in Tony that he did not punch the tosser hard in the face! He served it for his king butt."

Then came the next turn in the tale, another shift in the winds. Labe, it transpired, had attacked the former prime minister for different reasons. Abbott's own Liberal colleague, the Attorney-General George Brandis, poured the coldest of pours on the suggestion that this act had anything to do with the same-sex marriage debate.

"This man had absolutely nothing to do with those who advocated for a yes vote in the same-sex marriage postal survey, absolutely nothing."[5]

Abbott had the Tasmanian DJ seeing a haze of red rage, an instinctive chance. "It's just about Tony Abbott – the fucking worm that he is." Old, unalloyed "personal hatred", and his anarchism, was what sufficed to do violence. And the fact that he "didn't think it was an opportunity I'd get again."

And what of the same-sex sticker on his ticket as the ferocious act unfolded? Astro Labe was unconvinced. It was a case of coincidence, accident, a misalignment of the stars.

"It was purely because a friend of mine had walked past handing them out and had stuck one on my jacket."

The nature of this debate (if it qualifies as that) has had its inevitable pressures. Violence, not love, is the current running beneath notions of what will be changed by what can only be described as a fatuous survey. The tide is coming in, and the pantomime is unfolding.

Businesses are being made to come out in their own fashion. Sporting clubs that would otherwise be interested in the pursuit of sport have had a stab, with mixed results, at the whole issue of same-sex marriage, donning the rainbow, spouting the line. The very issue is becoming a fashion statement, with a serious undercurrent. The debate there is simple, unrefined. The default here can only be intolerance.

Astro Labe did reveal the sheer bankruptcy behind such nice-mannered efforts as controlling and punishing the one-punch on an intoxicated night out or restraining violence in the community with the nonsense of control. Australia, embrace yourself: the truth of simmering resentment will out.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

- [1] <https://www.facebook.com/Tas.Police/posts/1553633184716576>
- [2] <https://newmatilda.com/2017/09/22/is-tony-abbott-lying-about-getting-head-butted-for-marriage-equality/>
- [3] <https://twitter.com/JohnBirmingham/status/911143389361463297>
- [4] <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/sep/22/man-charged-over-allegedly-head-butting-tony-abbott>
- [5] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-22/astro-labe-charged-over-alleged-assault-of-tony-abbott/8975454>

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