

My child, how can I protect you?



Carly Cram Photography: Tree Fingers Carly Cram Photography

This piece was submitted by a local woman who signed the petition to remove the Rolf Harris mural from the Lighthouse Theatre in Warrnambool. I have kept her name anonymous, but want to thank her for her courage.

Last month I had a dream about Donald Trump. In this dream we were deep in conversation at a crowded function and I was trying to impress him with my intelligence. Mid-conversation, however, he leant across and grabbed me on the breast.

In shock, I pulled away and started shouting 'he grabbed my breast, he grabbed my breast'. Expecting the room to react with outrage, my calls were instead met with deathly silence, before everyone returned to what they were doing.

Business as usual.

I burst into tears and was led outside by my best friend and confidante where, with such weary sadness, I cried 'I'm just so tired of fighting.'

This dream encapsulated a lot for me. It summed up my lifelong battle with sexual assault and abuse. From fighting off men at the pub, to keeping secrets hidden for 15 years. From being told 'you shouldn't have let him do that to you', to my fight with PTSD, depression and anxiety. From the heartbreaking story of a friend who held her secret for another 20 years after being told she was 'making it up', to the deafening silence that followed after I screamed at a man at a crowded market for following me and relentlessly pinching my bum.

Two things had just happened around the time of my Trump dream. The #metoo campaign had gathered steam, and while I was interested and a little excited, I was largely cynical and reluctant to take part.

I wasn't convinced that putting myself out there and making myself vulnerable was going to change anything. After all, we have known for a long time now that **one third of all girls will be sexually assaulted by the time they are eighteen, but what steps have we made to address this?** What difference would this campaign make? And why should abused women have to lead the charge?

Around the same time, my eight year-old daughter was sexually assaulted. An older man on the street reached out and grabbed her on the vagina, right in front of me. He seemed to see her as some kind of sexual delight, and not as our gorgeous, creative and intelligent kid who embraced life with all her kind heart.

My heart broke for my daughter that day, and I still don't know if it will ever fully heal. While I knew the statistics, I still believed I held a powerful weapon with my past

experience and knowledge of sexual assault. I wanted so much to believe that my passion for protecting her from what I had to endure would be enough to get her through. If I educated her well, if I gave it to her straight and didn't hush it up or try to gloss over it, she would get through life unscathed.

It turns out I couldn't even get her to double figures.

The harsh reality of the pervasiveness of sexual assault this time brought me to my knees. In quiet moments to myself I sobbed so hard I didn't think I would ever stop. The injustice of growing up a female suddenly became very real, and very personal.

It was my response to the incident that plagued me afterwards. Because how did I respond? With silence.

I walked her calmly away and did not confront this man for fear of making it worse for my daughter. And in the days to come it dawned on me that this is what we have done as women. We have stayed silent, to keep the peace, for the families sake, for the community's sake, to make it in a man's world.

And in turn, silence has been internalised as some totem of virtue or stoicism in women. The more silent a woman in her pain, the stronger she is. Instead of voicing our outrage, we have used all our collective energy to heal the victims, to sit with them through their confusion, sadness and pain.

But while we have stayed silent, we have left a gaping hole in the ability to challenge men for their behaviour, or to challenge them to be leaders in the change we so desperately need.

Eventually it was a counsellor who helped me to see the tiny speck of positive in our experience. Carrying all the guilt in the world on my shoulders, she allowed me to see that the response we gave our daughter after her sexual assault could be vital in her recovery.

Immediately after it happened I took her to a safe place, gave her a big cuddle and told her that it was nothing about her, or her behaviour, that made him do that. I told her that it was his sick behaviour that was the problem, and that unfortunately stuff like that just happens sometimes, but that she will be ok.

I also told her that we were here for her any time she needed us. The psychologist assured me that our past history of openly communicating with our daughter since she was born, like talking about the hard stuff when it came up, and never letting silence linger, would ensure she knew she could approach us at any time.

Her words also reinforced what I had learnt from the fabulous Professor Caroline Taylor, who has spent years researching and working with children who had been through the court system for sexual abuse and assault.

While only a **tiny three percent of cases ever make it to conviction**, she found that the process, regardless of the outcome, could be a cathartic one for young people as long as they felt supported and that their story was heard by someone, be it a police officer, lawyer, or family member.

Indeed, the power of hearing a person's story and sharing their pain can never be underestimated. As a telephone counsellor, I cannot count the times people have said they just need someone to hear their pain, not solve their problems.

So while we chip away at a society that has allowed men too much privilege for too long, and while many of us will be faced with the cold hard fact that we cannot always protect our children no matter how hard we try, perhaps we can take a little comfort in knowing that responding to an abused child with listening, support and unconditional love can be hugely powerful, even if it is at the wrong and sad end of the sexual

assault spectrum.

Despite our incredibly painful experience, I am still increasingly hopeful for the future. I do feel a change in the air.

Since the #me too campaign, another sexual predator in Don Burke has been outed, and now allegations against Donald Trump are finally being taken seriously.

I have hope that our daughters will live and flourish in a time where a sexual predator who thinks that 'grabbing women on the pussy' is part and parcel of money and fame is not elected by men and women as the leader of the most powerful country on earth.

We need to keep reinforcing to women and girls that speaking up and speaking out is brave, and that silent stoicism, while once a coping technique, is no longer necessary.

And we need to meet this bravery with corresponding support and outrage. I have hope that if ever my daughter was to dream about being outraged by her sexual assault, the whole function room would stand up and shout 'ME TOO'.

Could we play our own Trump card?



US President Donald Trump rose to power largely on the back of shallow slogans and thin policies: could we see a similar ascension here? Image: Business Insider.

By Tom Waterwheel*

Australians seem to view the rise of Trumpist populism with bemusement and alarm.

The daily trainwreck of **Donald Trump** and his advisors keeps the political junky on high alert. As if the Trump Bull-in-a-China Shop was not entertaining enough, we now have puppet master **Steve Bannon**, the anti-intellectualist **Sean Spicer** and Dial-a-fact **Kellyanne Conway** sharing the burden of spreading hate, pseudo facts and fear around the globe.

Trump is no lone ranger. For the price of one, the US, and by extension the world, got Trump and his posse of war-mongering deadbeats, who now occupy the White House because of the collective brain-out of 63 million Americans. Most may by now regret this, but the race was run and won on November 8, 2016 and on that day, too many Americans put number one next to the man who unashamedly campaigned on lies, sexism, racism, war-mongering and plain dumb economics.

The question is: could it happen here?

Trump tapped into a nationwide attention deficit disorder. For whatever reason the punters en masse didn't take the effort to read politics beyond a 140 character tweet. Those of us left bewildered by what we have seen blame Facebook, Twitter, I'm a Celebrity get me out of here, the media etc..

None of that matters. Trump and Clinton faced an increasing number of voters who do not do policies. Instead, they want solutions, quick, easy and on a plate; and on that front Trump was their man.

Where Clinton had thoughtful and considered responses to the challenges facing the USA, Trump had solutions and a little abuse thrown in, 140-characters-or-less. Few of which made sense. But at least Joe Punter heard the solution with little effort. (And he is still at it).

In Australia, we have seen politicians tread down this same path. The 2013 election where Tony Abbott prevailed, was characterised by fear politics.

On the specific policy issues of asylum seekers and climate change, Abbott blazed a trail that Trump made a highway. Whenever a microphone is close, these 'leaders' simply repeated the mantra that progressive policies on asylum seekers and climate change will take jobs away from middle Australia/America.

Trump and Abbott on asylum seekers: "stop the boats", "build a wall", "stop the boats", "build a wall".

Trump and Abbott on climate change: "great big tax", "Chinese conspiracy", "great big tax", "Chinese conspiracy".

Abbott handed the baton to his neo-conservative colleagues across the Pacific, and run with it they did.

But as we witnessed, Abbott's ill-considered neo-con policies

did not wash with everyone in his party and his stay at the Lodge was cut short. Perhaps Trump's stay will be short too, however the US political system does not work as does ours, with leaders not so disposable.



Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, Pauline Hanson's political career has been resurrected. Image: Alchetron.

Our own redhead, **Pauline Hanson**, is our closest version of Trump and it is when we look to her appeal and increasing popularity that we see Trumpism alive and well in Australia.

What is telling about the Hanson effect, is that she, like Trump, appeals to a scattering of the disaffected across the political spectrum from the far right to the traditional working class left. She, like Trump, speaks to their frustrations, often to their yearning of the old days, when unskilled jobs were seemingly abundant and Australia was by and large a white, Christian society.

Fear is one of our greatest motivators and Pauline does fear well. Furthermore, times are tough for many, and as the USA has experienced over the last decade, the winds of global competition can be unforgiving, and we in Australia are now

starting to feel its effects.

In a connected world where capital moves freely across the globe, old stable economies such as Australia, have much to lose. To deal with the acceleration of change, be it capital inflows and outflows, refugees, climate change and so on, requires intelligent, considered responses.

We have seen little of such, indeed the short-term opinion poll obsession of our major political parties suggests the established political class are more focused on short-term survival over long-term intellectual policy, leaving the door ajar for the Prophets of Doom.

So here we are, mid 2017. The UK has lurched towards nationalism in an increasingly global world; the USA has fallen for anti-intellectualism in an ever more complex and sophisticated world; and the French, as did the Dutch, looked closely at following the far-right option.

This at a time when more than ever refugees are escaping poverty, war and political and religious persecution.



When unemployment goes up, so does the appeal of neo-conservative approaches to climate change and asylum

seekers. Image: FrumForum.

As it stands, one important ingredient is missing in Australia to cook up a Trump Stew: high and long-term unemployment.

Australia's unemployment rate is 5.9%. Australia is yet to swallow the bitter medicine of a changing world economy where jobs are replaced by robots, computers and machines and unskilled labour exported off shore.

Rest assured, however, it is coming and recent history demonstrates that Australian politicians offer little in the way of long term policies to enable Australia to adapt to an ever changing world. If Australia's economic fortunes nose dive and unemployment tilts up, a reactionary politician may be the sole beneficiary.

Our seat of Wannon doesn't follow national trends: its voters are unquestionably loyal to the conservatives. Wannon will go where the Liberals take them. If Canberra judges a hard right Trumpist is needed to lead the Coalition, then of course they could expect to count on the vote of the Wannon constituents to support them.

Having witnessed Trump in full flight, would we be wise enough to stand up and say no?

** Tom Waterwheel is the pseudonym of a local political observer and agitator who, because of the constraints of his day job, cannot write publicly under his own name.*