

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

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**THE SAUCY TALE OF HOW A BUNCH OF
DISENFRANCHISED PORNO FIENDS, SEX WORKERS,
STRIPPERS, GAYS, LESBIANS, FETISHISTS, CIVIL
LIBERTARIANS AND LIBERTINES CREATED A NEW
POLITICAL PARTY AND CONTESTED AN ELECTION.**

NEW

It's 11am

on a chilly Saturday morning two weeks before the federal election. I'm standing on a mountain on the outskirts of Canberra in between a group of happy clappy Christians and an ungodly collection of Australian Sex Party supporters. The former are expressing their dismay about an atheist occupying The Lodge, the latter staging a counter-protest against the Evangelicals.

Actually, 'counter-protest' is putting it too strongly. While the hundreds of faithful keep breaking into song, dancing around and waving 'No to Abortion and Euthanasia', 'Australia for Jesus' and 'Vote in a Christian Prime Minister' placards as Pastor Danny Nalliah harangues them into a righteous frenzy, the Sex Party crowd, numbering about 30, is standing around aimlessly.

Like many religious leaders, Nalliah, president of Catch the Fire Ministries, fancies himself as a political player. In 2004 he campaigned for a Senate seat as a candidate with the Family First Party. He was second on the ticket and missed out, but the man who was first – Steve Fielding – had better luck. After that disappointment, Nalliah formed something of a mutual admiration society with Peter Costello, meeting with him ahead of the 2007 election to "prepare" him for the Prime Ministership.

What kind of Australia would Nalliah like to see? Well, he's asked parishioners to petition the Lord to pull down "Satan's strongholds" (brothels, bottleshops, gambling dens, mosques, Buddhist and Hindu temples). When the Rudd government changed laws that discriminated against gay and lesbian couples, he sent out an email to his congregation equating homosexuality with pedophilia and incest. He also opined that Victoria's Black Saturday bushfires were payback from a vengeful God enraged by the number of abortions performed in Australia.

It should be acknowledged that Australia's Religious Right is not quite the fearsome political force its US counterpart is, and that Nalliah is on the extreme fringe of it. Nonetheless, a disproportionately large number of Australia's politicians are religious, and even those who aren't are wary of antagonising church leaders. It's in no small part due to the efforts of the Religious Right that

attempts to legalise euthanasia and gay marriage and introduce abortion on demand have floundered in this country. And it was the bizarre alliance between the Religious Right and feminists that led to Australia having some of the strictest censorship laws in the world, which make it an offence to sell X-rated material in any Australian state.

For a while it's looking like the believers have bested the libertines on Mount Ainslie, as they so frequently do a few kilometres away in Parliament House. Then a young prankster clad in boxer shorts and a plastic Viking hat sprints into the crowd of Nalliah's followers holding up a sandshoe with mock reverence and bellowing "You have come to the mountain to worship the shoe!" and "Blessed is the God of Nike!" The Christians pretend to ignore him, while the Sex Party crowd laugh it up. I can't make out Nalliah's face while all this is going on but I wonder to myself whether he's wondering to himself who the hell these Sex Party nutjobs are, and whether the mobilisation of the nation's previously politically disengaged perverts is a sure sign the End of Times is nigh.

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The Australian Sex Party was launched at the end of 2008, in the wake of Communications Minister Stephen Conroy announcing a plan to introduce mandatory internet filtering. The primary purpose of the proposed filter was to block child pornography sites, but its opponents argued that it would also have impacted on internet users' ability to access other websites, including those devoted to legal forms of porn. Whatever

their personal attitudes (both are socially conservative Christians), Conroy and his then leader Rudd no doubt did the electoral math and calculated that being seen to restrict access to porn on the internet would win more votes than it lost. But, in what history may come to record as the start of a seismic cultural shift, it didn't.

Apart from Family First's Steven Fielding, the Australian Christian Lobby, a few child protection groups, and prominent intellectual Clive Hamilton, no-one lined up to support Conroy. Anti-filter advocates protested in the streets, the blogosphere exploded with rage over the government presuming to censor the internet and a group of cyber-stirrers called Anonymous launched 'Operation Titstorm', flooding federal government websites with pornographic images. And longtime adult-industry lobbyists Robbie Swan and Fiona Patten decided to take a leaf out of their Christian foes' playbook and create a political party.

But surely mainstream Australians, the people who spent more than a decade voting for John Howard before transferring their affections to the equally staid Kevin Rudd, were enthusiastic about Something Being Done to clean up the cesspool of filth that is the internet? Well, a number of market research reports and academic studies over the past decade show that at least a third of all adult Australians admit to being consumers of porn. What's more, apart from being disproportionately (but by no means exclusively) male, those porn consumers are representative of the broader community – that is, they are Mainstream Australia.

Despite Conroy and Rudd's best efforts, the nation's supposedly socially conservative suburban heartland never demonstrated much enthusiasm for censoring the internet. By the time the election was called, even the ALP was distancing itself from the filter, announcing it would now only be introduced at some point in the distant future after an independent review was carried out. But by then, Conroy's plan to meddle with the nation's online porn stash had set in motion a chain of events that would have some extraordinary consequences.



An hour after the Mount Ainslie stand-off, I'm sitting in the kitchen of the lasciviously decorated 'Eros House' in one of Canberra's most genteel suburbs. It's Australian Sex Party HQ and the home of Robbie Swan and Fiona Patten, a couple who've spent the last two decades fighting against the influence figures such as Nalliah wield over members of the nation's political class.

Swan, a self-described product of the '70s counterculture who worked in media before drifting into a job as a lobbyist for adult video retailers in the late '80s, is explaining to me that while the internet filter was the catalyst for the Sex Party, it is to some extent the posthumous

handiwork of Don Chipp, the man who helped create and for years led the Australian Democrats after finding himself too liberal for the Liberals.

Shortly before his death in 2006, Chipp summoned his friends Swan and Patten and told them: "I know you want to start a political party, and the Democrats have had it, so you should do your own thing. I'll give you a few words of advice. The first thing is you've gotta give it a name that no-one forgets. And make sure to stay true to your core issues, which are censorship and personal freedom. In the years ahead, Labor and Liberal will desert that whole area because they're being increasingly infiltrated by church and morals groups and the Greens will probably go the same way as they get bigger and start to take on those kind of trappings. For the next 20 years Australia is going to need a really strong civil liberties party."

But creating a sex-focused political party from scratch turned out to be no simple task, even for experienced lobbyists such as Swan and Patten. For one thing, no-one had done anything like it before — at least, not with any resulting electoral success.

In 1991, Italian porn star la Ciciolina, having previously served one term in the Italian Parliament as part of the Radical Party, launched the Love Party, which advocated the legalisation of brothels and creation of "love parks". There was no voter love for the Love Party and it soon fizzled. Several publicity-hungry US porn stars have since followed in la Ciciolina's footsteps, running for office with policies such as making lap dances tax deductible or instituting 'Porn for Pistols' gun buy-back programs. And in 2005, John Ince, a lawyer and adult-shop owner, launched the Sex Party in British Columbia, Canada, proclaiming it "the world's first registered political party dedicated exclusively to sex-positive issues". Running on a platform of improving sex education and liberalising local indecency and prostitution laws, Ince's party contested provincial elections in 2005 and 2009 but garnered only a handful of votes.

"We researched this and there really wasn't anything out there," Swan says. "You had individuals like porn star Mary Carey who ran for governor of California, but no organised parties, no political movement. We started the Australian Sex Party focused on censorship issues but soon realised that you have to offer more than that. We're a personal freedom party — that's the thing that guides us. I think the average person joins the Sex Party because they are sick of the nanny state. People feel they can't

part without having to go and get a permit for it first these days."

The policy platform the Australian Sex Party has developed is essentially libertarian. It calls for: the implementation of a more relaxed censorship regime, including the abandonment of any plans to censor the internet; unambiguously legal abortion throughout Australia; the decriminalisation of all drugs; the legalisation of euthanasia; legal recognition

Clockwise from top: la Ciciolina, Fiona Patten, Marianne Leishman (Zahra Stardust), Sandy Gutman (Austen Tayshus) and Robbie Swan.



of same-sex marriages; more comprehensive sex education for children; the establishment of a royal commission into child sex abuse in religious organisations; and the listing of erectile dysfunction drugs such as Viagra and Cialis on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

Once the party's platform had been developed there was the small matter of finding people willing to risk public, potentially career-crippling ridicule by putting their hand up to be an Australian Sex Party candidate, funding a campaign with the kind of money mainstream political parties burn through in the space of a

few hours of prime-time TV ads, and convincing a sniggering media and bemused voters that the whole exercise wasn't some sort of elaborate, *Chaser*-style joke.

"I found it extremely difficult to get candidates," Swan confesses. "There was an adult shop owner up in a marginal seat in Queensland who'd run for the Democrats in the past, and was a seasoned campaigner, but when I asked him to run for us, he said, 'No, I can't, it would damage me too much.' I thought to myself, I can't believe this — even people in the sex industry don't want to know. I wanted to run candidates in every marginal seat but we couldn't find the people. We ended up with six Lower House and 15 Senate candidates. Sex worker advocates, a housewife, a gay adult shop owner, a few university students, a marketing guy, an airline pilot. Mainly young people who previously hadn't been involved in politics."

The Sex Party also had a joker in its pack of candidates.

Swan convinced his friend Sandy Gutman, a middle-aged performer famous for a 1983 hit comedy single, to take on Tony Abbott in the seat of Warringah.

"They wanted to have a high-profile candidate stand against Tony Abbott. It's very unlikely I'm going to knock him off, but just by standing against him and being able to express the views of the Sex Party has achieved a lot for the party in terms of notoriety and popularity," Gutman, who's better known by his stage name Austen Tayshus, tells me when I meet him a few days before the election.

In a campaign where rhetoric was dumbed down to focus-group-derived mush about 'moving forward' and 'real action', Gutman delivered many of the election's most memorable lines, calling for an Abbott-proof fence, claiming a vote for Tony Abbot was a vote for Mel Gibson and describing his opponent as George Pell in a suit.

Both Swan and Gutman readily admit the Austen Tayshus-Australian Sex Party partnership is, to no small extent, a publicity stunt designed to further the interests of both. "It's all part of the big picture, making people understand that I'm not just a run of the mill comic, it's not just about jokes, it's about something more, about having a satirical perspective on Australian culture," Gutman says.

But he then goes on to insist he's passionately committed to the party's values and has thrown himself into campaigning for it. "Don't get me wrong, mate. The values of the Sex Party are very much my values. I'm into progressive politics, libertarian policies. I believe that ▶

personal freedom is very important. I've done a bit of door knocking, done hundreds of interviews, spent hours on the phone with Robbie working on strategy and writing press releases. I spent yesterday handing out how to vote cards at Manly Corso and the reaction was unanimous — 'Austen, we're all going to vote for you. We want a bit of change down here.' It was mostly losers and loonies and out-of-work people and fuckheads and drug-fucked people.

"I think most Australians know fuck-all about the political spectrum, what it's about. I've learnt a lot and I'm in admiration of people who can put forward a view concisely and articulately. It's not an easy job. I've always voted Labor or Greens but this is something a bit more interesting. I'm

Patten's newly launched Sex Party. "It was everything I cared about but hadn't stumbled on directly before," she explains. Leishman soon found herself talked into contesting the Bradfield by-election caused by ex-Liberal leader Brendan Nelson quitting Parliament. She came in third, with 3.5 per cent of the vote. For the federal election she was at the top of the ticket for the Australian Sex Party's NSW senate candidates.

I ask for her take on a paradox that I've been unable to resolve. If sex assumes such central importance in so many people's lives, why does it have so little impact on their voting behaviour?

"People have this mirage that sex is private, that sex is not political and the government doesn't regulate it. Sex is something that affects

sentence of seven years' jail, for allegedly using illegally imported abortion drugs, RU 486 and misoprostol, to terminate a pregnancy. Her boyfriend Brennan faces a possible maximum sentence of three years, having been charged with the lesser offence of supplying drugs to procure an abortion.

"Gay and lesbian communities have been politicised for a long time because they've had to fight laws, including criminal laws, that oppressed them, but for straight people there has been this assumption that there is nothing political about sexuality," observes Professor Catharine Lumby, a prominent academic who's spent two decades researching and writing about Australians' sexual attitudes and behaviours.



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interested in shaking up society and making it a better place. [If elected] I wouldn't mind going into politics. This has been very rewarding. I've had a lovely time doing this with Robbie. Maybe we can do a TV show together in the future."



At first glance, Marianne Leishman, 27, is the kind of candidate any political party loves to have: attractive, personable, sporty, middle-class upbringing, Arts-Law degree from a prestigious uni, followed by a stint at a top-tier law firm. But Leishman has an alter ego — pole dancer Zahra Stardust.

"I started working in strip clubs when I was 20," the softly spoken Leishman tells me in between dainty sips of a fruit smoothie at a café in the heart of Sydney's latte belt. "Yes, I was a struggling uni student and it was good cash but it's never been about the money. I loved it. I'd found this amazing place for creativity where I could explore all these different personalities and dance vocabularies."

Despite her pedigree, Leishman insists that up until recently the thought of going into politics never crossed her mind. "I hate politicians. I never wanted to be one. I found the whole thing a little bit disgusting. You watch them in Question Time and they act like children and bully each other and I'm so not into any of that. I like to promote peace and love and make people feel good about themselves."

In the middle of last year, Leishman saw Fiona Patten speak at a debate about internet censorship held at NSW Parliament House. Afterwards the two got talking and Leishman volunteered to help out any way she could with

everybody in all aspects of their life and, whether they realise it or not, it is something that is very regulated. The family unit plays a huge role in political debates and when people talk about that, they're talking about the nuclear, heterosexual family. If you're heterosexual and married you can access all of these services because of your sexuality. I can't marry [my girlfriend] in this country. There's a debate about gay marriage, but for me that is just a first step, a conservative step. You still need to be male or female for that, which rules out trans and intersex people, and it's still a relationship that resembles heterosexual ones in that you have to be cohabitating, you have to have shared assets, you have to be monogamous.

"When Kevin Rudd got elected, I was thrilled. I was optimistic that it was going to be a new era, almost like the Whitlam era. So it was devastating that politics has taken such a swing to the Right again. There's a real frustration with the increasing conservatism of Australian politics and I think that if any time is right for a sex party, it's now."



That's a sentiment adult shop retailer Daryl Cohen and Cairns couple Tegan Leach and Sergie Brennan may well share. When the police raided Cohen's shop on Sydney's Oxford Street earlier this year they found five DVDs that were classified 'Refused Classification' because they depicted homosexual bondage and sado-masochistic acts. Cohen was sent to jail for three months. At the time of writing, Leach is about to go on trial, under a 111-year-old provision of the Queensland criminal code carrying a maximum

"But when you dig down, politicians are making decisions that pertain to sexuality. And there is a strong conservative element in society that is very vocal when it comes to wanting to impose their view of what is normal and morally right."

Lumby views the Australian Sex Party as a "serious party with serious policies" but predicts it will struggle. "Sex makes people nervous. I think it is a very Anglo thing — there is a deeply ingrained guilt about our bodies. Human sexuality is always messy — it is not good at obeying the rules. And to some extent people always struggle with that, and I'm not saying it is wrong for people to have those anxieties. There is a lot of confusion, often created by the media, caused by conflating separate issues about sex. The Sex Party is up against the idea that having sexually liberal attitudes somehow has something to do with condoning sexual assault or child abuse. Often people, such as Fiona Patten, who advocate sexually liberal attitudes are quite outspoken against the sexual abuse of children, but they're up against the idea that they're advocating 'anything goes'."

Another high-profile academic, Clive Hamilton, is rather less sanguine about the Australian Sex Party. Hamilton emerged out of the same '70s counterculture as Robbie Swan and has impeccable progressive credentials, having founded the left-leaning think tank The Australia Institute and run for federal parliament as a Greens candidate. But he's come to believe the libertarianism he championed in his youth has had a range of unforeseen and socially damaging consequences.

"The sexual revolution was necessary to destroy the oppressive sexual rules that kept women subordinate and deprived sex of much

of its inherent pleasure," he says. "But for all its necessity, the sexual revolution unleashed forces that have raged out of control, and its aspirations have been commercially co-opted. There are reports of children, some as young as five, sexually assaulting their schoolmates, by acting out practices they could only have envisioned through exposure to porn. Even 'respectable' corporations routinely present 10-year-old girls in erotic poses in their advertising. I don't have a problem with good healthy erotica but modern porn gravitates towards more and more extreme practices, often entailing more and more humiliation of and cruelty towards women. I can't understand why it follows that someone who supports policies such as gay marriage, abortion and euthanasia must therefore be in favour of the debasement of sex through the free availability of porn. How can anyone argue with a straight face, as the Sex Party does, that we need more access to sex in our pornified culture?"

For most of the last century, the rules around sex in Australia were straightforward. If you wanted it, you got married — to someone of the opposite sex. Of course, homosexuality, pornography, prostitution and abortion have always existed in some form in Australian society but up until relatively recently they were illegal and taboo. Since the sexual revolution kicked off in the late '60s, there has been a raging culture war between conservatives and libertarians over what is and isn't acceptable when it comes to sex. Most of the voting public has found itself marooned somewhere between the two camps, simultaneously grateful that the repression that benighted their grandparents' sex lives has disappeared but disturbed by the excesses of raunch culture, especially when they involve the sexualisation of those under the age of consent. The 2010 federal election was the first opportunity to gauge what proportion of the electorate believed their country should be taking a less Anglo and more Scandinavian approach to sexuality. The answer turned out to be: about one in 50.



It's eight days after the election and the Australian Sex Party's president and highest-profile candidate, Fiona Patten, is explaining to me why the Sex Party's campaign was an impressive success despite it failing to get her or any of her running mates elected.

She reveals that, to her surprise, the major players took them seriously from the get-go. "We were getting daily phone calls from Labor, the Greens, the Liberals and, of course, the other minor parties wanting our preferences. Even Family First approached us, though they denied it before then having to come out and admit it."

Patten's debate with Family First's Wendy Francis early in the campaign on Channel Seven's *Sunrise* program attracted a lot of attention, and

the press also lapped up the comely Leishman and the acerbic Gutman. Late in the campaign, funky ad agency Fnukey donated a free ad 'Jerk Choices' (a parody of the Coalition's Work Choices ad promoting the Sex Party's policies) that made it on to *The Gruen Transfer*. Sure, Patten concedes, a lot of the media attention her party received was superficial and salacious, but it did wonders for building name recognition.

"Just the fact that we've run an election, that more people know about us, that they saw us on a ballot paper and realised that we are not an April Fool's joke works for us. Even if they covered us just so they could make a boring political page more colourful, the media treated our issues seriously — while making as many double entendres as they could. And even when the tabloids and broadsheets weren't paying attention to us, you'd look online at blogs and Twitter and Facebook and people were discussing our policies."

That new media presence points to what may be the Australian Sex Party's greatest political advantage — demographics appear to be on its side. "Many people under 30 are probably quite happy to say, 'Yes I look at porn and there's nothing wrong with that,' where, if you're over 45, you're going to be a bit shy talking about what you get up to behind closed doors," Patten observes.

"With things like gay marriage, I'm sure the vast majority of young people would say 'Who cares?' It's interesting that it's only people over 30 describe themselves as civil libertarians. I don't think anyone under 30 thinks of themselves as a civil libertarian because they don't want the internet censored or they want to play computer games that the government has banned. That group of people have grown up with the notion that they would have the freedom to make their own decisions."

Patten hasn't conducted any research into where the Sex Party's support is coming from but she'd like to believe the party is attracting the previously disengaged rather than just hiving off

twentysomething libertarian-leftists from the ALP and Greens.

"I suspect we picked up a lot of people who would have just scrawled a big X across their ballot paper. We got a lot of comments on Facebook that our policies spoke to people in a way the other parties didn't. We had some wild-looking volunteers on election day — people from the fetish community — and I don't think there's been a party before that's allowed them to come out in their leathers on polling day. There was also a lot of support from the gay and lesbian community."

She mentions that the Greens, now a major force in Australian politics, got only 1.7 per cent of the vote in their first outing two decades ago. The Sex Party's senate vote ranged between 1.7-2.6 per cent in the states in which it ran candidates and reached 5 per cent in the Northern Territory.

This talk isn't just bravado. It's not uncommon for a minor party, thanks to preference deals, to get candidates elected with less votes than Patten's party got. The Sex Party's vote equalled that of Family First this election, and Family First got Steve Fielding elected to the Senate in 2004 after he received just 1.88 per cent of the vote.

Patten is upfront about the Sex Party having emerged out of, and being bankrolled by, EROS (her and Swan's adult industry association). But, she insists, it's taken on a life of its own and is far more than the front party for the porn industry critics claim it is.

She's exhausted from the campaign but already thinking ahead to upcoming state elections. "This election gave us momentum. We're starting to get organisations set up in every state and we can start to register state branches. I'm optimistic about the future. Maybe the Sex Party won't continue in its current form, maybe it will combine with other parties such as the Australian Democrats and the Secular Party. But Australia hasn't had a strong civil liberties party since the '70s and I think the time is right for us. I think we've started a movement." 



SEXUAL POLITICS

"Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac," former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once famously observed. He ought to have known — despite resembling a garden gnome he bedded many of the world's most lusted-after female celebrities in the '70s.

As the never-ending procession of political sex scandals indicate, political parties — not least those that trumpet family values — are often hotbeds of carnality. And the opportunity to hook up with ideologically simpatico sexual partners is one of the perks of political life.

So becoming a member of the Sex Party must be the equivalent of being invited to take up permanent residence in the Playboy Mansion, right? "I think most people would have been disappointed if that's what they were joining the party for," laughs Patten. "As with most people involved in a campaign, sex took a low priority in our lives. Sleep came first."

Swan is more encouraging. "In the beginning we did set up a contact forum that was meant to act as a dating site but we had to shut it down because it was getting confused with the main site. Labor got something similar, a social networking site. Obviously they don't say that you're going to get laid if you go on it, but with those kind of sites that's an option if that's what the people on them desire. We haven't had any branch meetings turn into swingers' parties but I can imagine that could end up happening. And I'd be totally comfortable with it."

