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# Yumi and Ben: the militarisation of Australia and the democratisation of hate

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It's unlikely the war hero would be fazed by Styne's comments, but the public was appalled. AAP/Martin Philbey/Australian War Memorial

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Last week the world became a very scary place for television host Yumi Styne when she quipped that Victoria Cross recipient Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith, looking buffed, ripped and tattooed in a public swimming pool, was “... going to dive down to the bottom of the pool to see if his brain [was] there.”

Historian Marilyn Lake could have told her she was treading very dangerous ground.

In a [2009 opinion piece in The Age](#), Lake questioned the way in which the Anzac legend had become white Australia's creation myth.

“To write what's wrong with Anzac today is to court the charge of treason,” they argued.

The piece was not well-received by some. “The fool of a woman *should* be charged with treason,” argued one commentator, adding she should “be quiet and be grateful”.

If Marilyn Lake was charged with treason, Yumi Styne is being charged with [apostasy](#).

And in 21st century Australia, punishment comes first in the form of the [withdrawal of corporate sponsorship](#).

## Does the punishment fit the crime?

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The defence of Roberts-Smith was immense. It has included a Facebook site [demanding The Circle be axed](#) and hundreds of apoplectic comments on the show's website.

The public reaction was startling – especially for a man who has killed other human beings under the heat of gunfire. Would such comments really unsettle him?

And it was not only vitriolic, and threatening. It was, as one correspondent put it to me “... blatantly and unashamedly racist, mysogistic and seemingly with some level of sustained coordination...” with the terms “ugly slut” and “half-caste bitch” representing relatively modest contributions.

The posters, disproportionately men, many with military and neo-conservative connections reflected a level of community and coordination. Strategies included “flooding”, and “targeting the sponsors”.

The more extreme posts called for nothing less than the termination of the show and the end of Yumi's career. Veteran journalist George Negus suffered relatively minor opprobrium for his quip regarding a “tough man's” capacity “in the sack”.

## **The military pedestal**

What is so sacred about this war hero that a careless quip can induce such moral panic and hysterical nationalism?

One commentator on the show's [Facebook site](#) posted with similar incredulity:

“Yumi made a comment about this gentleman's looks and how ripped his body was. She did not discredit the ADF, his heroic efforts or Australia's contribution to the war in Afghanistan, Iraq or anywhere else that we have a military presence. People really need to take a deep breath and get some perspective.”

The incident, and the commentary present evidence, particularly in the context other online debates, of a recuperative white nationalist Australian masculinity politics.

In January this year journalist Tory Shephard [wrote about men's rights extremists](#) in the article “I am angry white man hear me roar”. She described the paradoxical ways these groups compare “feminists, manginas, white knights and other agents of [misandry](#)” to clansmen, skinheads and neo-Nazis. Her article was swamped by rapacious hate posts.

## **A martial nation?**

I'd argue, from my research into online commentary over the past two years, that the reaction to Stynes' comments are part of the increasing militarisation of Australian society.

This militarisation, which is of course profoundly white Australian and masculine, has come to justify, indeed legitimise, the views of those who see "their" Australia under threat from "do-good lefties", "feminist conspirators" and the arrival of others by sea.

The other element is the the nature of online commentary.

Elements of the media have always pushed the racial and sexual envelope. Right wing neo-conservative journalist Andrew Bolt was recently successfully brought to account for his prejudicial reporting on Indigenous affairs.

But the result hasn't necessarily slowed enthusiasm for racialised commentary. In response to the incident, the Herald Sun used the front-page headline "Yumi So Sorry". This refers to Yu-Me So Solly. Me So Solly is the cartoon *The Simpsons* iconic character Krusty the Klown's favorite catchphrase to insult Asian-American people.

It seems that neo-conservative critics believe the gravity of Yumi's careless quip must be met with disproportionate, misogynist and racist sarcasm, through which this mainstream newspaper is complicit.

## **ADF not exempt from hate**

It's worth remembering that in the same week as Yumi made her comments, the Australian public was exposed to the racist, misogynist and homophobic banter of a military Facebook group.

This stark evidence of the culture of combatants came a day after the Chief of Army Lt General David Morrison addressed the Sydney Institute regarding improving cultural diversity in the ADF. Lt General Morrison's disgust at the commentary was well-regarded on this occasion.

## **Time to ditch the Anzac-worship**

Marilyn Lake's arguments about the cult of the Anzac have a lot of resonance in this remarkable incident.

The key premise of the Anzac legend is that nations and men are made in war. It is an idea that had currency a hundred years ago.

But is it not now time to to cast it aside?

Perhaps then we can have a reasonable debate about the place of the military in Australia without subjecting people to racist, misogynist and violent hatred.



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