

Baby, now it's even colder outside

By Janet Albrechtsen, *The Australian*, 22 December 2018

Serious media outlets are debating whether it is permissible to play a 74-year-old flirty song synonymous with Christmas. *Baby, It's Cold Outside* has been struck from some radio stations, dissected in *The New York Times* and discussed on Fox News and CNN.

It's not the first time *Baby, It's Cold Outside* has been critiqued. The difference is that, in 2018, more and more people are deadly serious about censoring a 1950s song they condemn as date rape to a musical score.

Have we gone bonkers? This is a bit of flirting between a woman who wants to say yes to a man who has the hots for her. But she teases him a little along the way to yes.

"I really can't stay," she sings. "Baby it's cold outside," he sings. "I gotta go away," she sings. "Baby it's cold outside," he sings.

Notice that she hasn't gone outside. She sings about a few deliberately lame excuses, then stays for "half a drink more".

"I ought to say no, no, no sir."

"Mind if I move in closer?"

She doesn't mind, staying for another drink, a cigarette, more. The couple sing "Baby, it's cold outside", leaving the rest to the 50s imagination. This is not some Harvey Weinstein-style Hollywood producer abusing his power with a young actress.

Nor is this Bill Cosby administering date-rape drugs to women. This is harmless, sexy, flirtatious fun. But according to today's clinical lexicon of sexual chemistry there is no room left for women or men to play hard to get. These days, baby, it's even colder inside.

Western liberal democracies surely are not in such a fine state of economic, social and cultural health that we have run out of more important issues to discuss. By all means, when peak progress arrives, let's revisit whether *Baby, It's Cold Outside* is a story of coercive sex and evil patriarchy.

The serious side to this is the rise of the new puritans. Not so long ago, a warning to staff about Christmas parties went something like this. Don't get too drunk. Don't insult the boss. And keep your hands to yourself. Most of us made it through to the new year, career intact, no basic commandment transgressed.

Today, dodging social disaster and reputational death is a much trickier equation. Especially for men. But it's not exactly peaches and cream for women either.

The new puritanism has put down deep roots in modern liberal societies, striking down a song, a book, a word or a gesture, just as readily as other religious zealots from Islam or Christianity might condemn an exposed ankle or premarital sex. The danger zone arises from the

convergence of the #MeToo movement, rising political correctness and the victimhood of identity politics.

Navigating this thorny troika of modernity requires a multi-volume set of instructions on how to make it through life, let alone end-of-year parties, without being crucified for sinning against some new commandment.

The first volume needs to set out rules about sex or, more accurately, any kind of interaction with the opposite sex. A generation of women is unwittingly drafting feminism's New Testament, where a touch on the shoulder, an awkward pick-up line, a bad joke, even a stare, become sins of sexual harassment. A night of bad sex attracts trial by social media, erotic paintings are removed from art galleries, strip clubs and grid girls are verboten too.

This new puritanism has taken hold at the highest levels, far beyond the unruly world of hashtags and wild social media platforms. A report last year by the Australian Human Rights Commission into sexual harassment on campus tried to pitch a story of a university rape culture. The report defined sexual harassment as staring or leering, suggestive comments or jokes, or intrusive questions about someone's private life or physical appearance. On this dodgy measure we are all victims, and perpetrators, of sexual harassment.

Yet federal Women's Minister Kelly O'Dwyer has charged the same politicised body to conduct yet another inquiry into sexual harassment, this time in the workplace, to report next year. It doesn't look as if 2019 will be the year we arrive at a more sensible understanding of sexual harassment either.

And this is the greatest tragedy of #MeToo. Serious issues, genuine sexual harassment and abuse, have been lumped in the same basket of grievances as a bad joke. Boorish behaviour is inevitable in a world made up of imperfect human beings, but not every episode warrants a hashtag for a new feminist crusade. In our rush to condemn sexism, we are also striking out sexuality, sexiness and fun.

The second volume to the new puritanism spreading across the West should list words, phrases and issues that must not be mentioned. A Victorian government bureaucracy has been busy this year demanding that workers use non-gendered pronouns. An MP from French President Emmanuel Macron's En Marche party tabled a language bill aimed at fining people for ridiculing an accent. In October, the European Court of Human Rights convicted a woman for calling Mohammed a pedophile. That the prophet married a six-year-old girl doesn't seem to rate as relevant for the new puritans.

This month, the British advertising watchdog decided to crack down on sexist stereotypes. Advertisements no longer will be allowed to depict men and women in gender-stereotypical roles. Why not let consumers decide what offends them? Because the new puritans do not trust people to think for themselves.

Last week, comedian Konstantin Kisin was due to perform at the University of London's School of African and Oriental Studies, at a gig organised by Unicef on Campus. He was asked to sign a behavioural agreement form that prohibited jokes that were not "respectful and kind" before he could perform. The form stated: "By signing this contract, you are agreeing to our no-tolerance policy with regards to racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia or anti-religion or anti-atheism."

The new censors don't trust an audience to decide what is or isn't funny. Kisin, who was born in the Soviet Union, chose free speech over a behavioural agreement form. Whether there is room for humour in a world of growing puritanism has become a serious question. And not just for comedians trying to make a living.

Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson attracted millions of followers this year because he speaks truth to the new power structures. "I've studied authoritarianism for a very long time — for 40 years — and they're started by people's attempts to control the ideological and linguistic territory," he told the BBC after refusing to use gender-neutral pronouns a few years ago. "There's no way I'm going to use words made up by people who are doing that — not a chance."

The third volume about the new puritans should address the nature of this modern zealotry. Writing about America's new religions in the *New York* magazine earlier this month, Andrew Sullivan noted: "Another commonality of the zealot then and now: humourlessness."

Just as the puritans of yesteryear abhorred swear words, the new puritans condemn new words, certain ideas and even gestures. They punish heretics who drift from the orthodoxy, usually by demanding they be sacked. Mocking a vegan in a private email is enough for the mob to strike.

This new puritanism is more zealous than previous versions. Words have been redefined as a form of violence to justify disproportionate censorship. Safe spaces are demanded for protection from certain words and ideas. Campus hotlines are set up to dob in transgressors.

And these modern-day sinners are hunted down and mobbed on social media, too.

Unlike most religions, the new zealotry makes no room for redemption. A few weeks ago, actor Kevin Hart was forced to step down as the host of next year's Oscars after social media hounds found homophobic tweets from a decade ago.

Hart had already apologised for them many times through the years. But it did not satiate the whirling dervishes who administer identity politics on behalf of every designated victim group. Hart was forced to step down as host and apologise to the LGBTI community. As Susan Fowler wrote in *The New York Times*: "In holding people accountable for their old views — even ones they realised were wrong and apologised for — we are setting standards that nobody can meet."

Sullivan is right that everyone has a religion, that we all seek out a way of life that provides meaning, and that growing secularism is no less religious. It has given rise to new forms of religions just as zealous as old established ones. From the cult of Donald Trump to the church of latter-day social justice activists, these new religions provide meaning to a secular people.

"A Christian is born again; an activist gets woke," writes Sullivan, who argues that we are wrong to think the collapse of Christianity has led to a decline in religion.

"It has merely led to religious impulses being expressed by political cults. Like almost all new cultish impulses, they see no boundary between politics and their religion ... They do not believe in the primacy of the individual, they believe the ends justify the means, they do not allow for doubt or reason, and their religious politics can brook no compromise."

With Christmas upon us, Sullivan's final point is worth pondering. These new religions threaten liberal democracy. They demonstrate that our liberal democracy has been sustained by a form of Christianity far more tolerant than the modern religions.

And on that sobering note about the redemptive power of Christianity, merry Christmas and happy new year. Especially to the Kentucky radio station that played *Baby, It's Cold Outside* for two hours straight last Sunday.

JANET ALBRECHTSEN

COLUMNIST

Janet Albrechtsen is an opinion columnist with The Australian. She has worked as a solicitor in commercial law, and attained a Doctorate of Juridical Studies from the University of Sydney.