

Cut Through, March 13, 2026: **Does power always corrupt in Australian politics?**

All timestamps are approximate

Crystal Andrews (00:00)

Hello and welcome to Cut Through, Crikey spin-free analysis of Australian news, politics and power. I'm your host, Crystal Andrews. And if you care about independent media as much as we do, please don't forget to subscribe to the podcast and share the show with your friends, anyone who you think would care about the topics that we talk about here. It all helps us to grow and keep getting our amazing work out there. So that is my request to everybody today.

Crystal Andrews (00:26)

For the meat of this episode, we are talking about something that I think a lot of listeners will have had similar conversations about with their friends, families, everybody in their circles. We are talking about the true nature of power and control in politics with someone who has spent a lot of time in very senior levels of government, Joe Tarnawsky Joe, welcome to Cut Through Today.

Jo Tarnawsky (00:48)

Thank you, Crystal. It was great to be with you.

Crystal Andrews (00:51)

Now, Jo, you have been writing a series about power and politics and leadership. And to give people a little bit of a flavor of, you know, the tone and the subjects of your columns that we've been publishing on, on Crikey. I'm going to just whip through some of the headlines that we have got up already. The first was swimming with narcissists, what power looks like up close, then why good people leave politics and what it costs us.

And the third piece, which has just gone up this week is power and silence, the strategy of saying nothing. Now, all of those links will be in the episode description as always, so that people can rate for themselves, which I absolutely encourage you to do. They are fantastic columns. But I think it's really important to underline here that the background to this series has really been your own experience. You've been a diplomat, a very senior member of the public service, including as chief of staff to deputy prime minister.

Crystal Andrews (01:46)

Richard Marles. So I think I would like to start there for our discussion today, and maybe just get an understanding from you of what it's actually like to work alongside and within power in the way that you have, you know, what does it mean to be performing as a diplomat, as a chief of staff, not only in the day to day, but to be in these rooms where there is so much power and how much you get to

direct or exert any of that power yourself.

Jo Tarnawsky (02:16)

Yeah, sure. Thanks, Crystal. It's a good question. ~

And I think there's a lot of ~ misconceptions out there about what some of these roles do. I the diplomats are classic example. There's a Netflix TV show and I'm asked all the time, is that what your life was like? ~ And I am somebody who, like many, you know, many people that are maybe listening have got degrees in political science and I did a master's of strategic studies. But I do think that there is ~ insights that you gain from lived experience. And so I've seen the system from a variety of different angles.

I've been a public servant, a diplomat, I've worked in the Governor-General's office, ~ and of course I've worked at Parliament House a couple of times actually. One when it was as part of a junior portfolio and then right in the centre of government as Chief of Staff to the Deputy Prime Minister. And so that's when I write what I write, it comes from ~ across all those perspectives. ~ And I guess to answer your question,

when it comes to how much power you have, you're up close enough, like when you look at sort of the, I mean, the role of a diplomat and the role of a chief of staff is two very different things. One is far more political than the other, for example, but they do definitely have some common lines. And so one of those is that you are ~ close enough to see power really working.

But you're not always in a position to control it. So formal authority always sits with the elected leaders, but there's an infrastructure that sits around that, which is always sort of buzzing, advisors, parties, public servants, ~ and then a whole range of stakeholders. And so you are part of that. particularly in that last position I was in, I was right, you know, I was in the room where it happened and I was with all the people that you see on television.

Crystal Andrews (03:50)

Mm.

Jo Tarnawsky (04:14)

on a first name basis and I got to see it in lived experience. And then of course, as some of your listeners may know, ~ I also got to experience how power works on the receiving end and have to sort of confront it. that was, and I obviously gained insights through that as well. So yeah, hopefully that answers your question. It's sort of, it's definitely part of the system, but you don't have the formal authority.

You see it up close, you see how power works, but you're not always in a position to be able to control it yourself.

Crystal Andrews (04:50)

Yeah, do you think that that is slightly different to how the general public understands those roles? Because, I mean, perhaps the crikey audience ~ follows politics a little bit more closely and maybe has a slightly better understanding. But I would think for a lot of the general public,

that might be kind of shocking to hear that you're right in there, you're up close, but you can't shape it as much as people might expect.

Jo Tarnawsky (05:15)

Absolutely. think crikey audience living in Canberra, ~ there's a certain literacy that comes with how government works that you don't necessarily find across all parts of Australia. So I know that when I started this series, in the first piece that I wrote, I started by saying that people, the amount of times I'm asked whether politicians are like what they are on television, and you have to kind of burst that bubble.

Now, some of the comments that came in were around, well, really, you're often asked about that. Well, to a crikey audience, maybe they wouldn't be asking the question and to a Canberra audience, maybe they wouldn't be asking the question. But yes, it is a very regular conversation that I have when I'm sort of traveling around Australia that ~ people's perceptions, and I mean, that's part of the performance art of a politician, right? They learn to present themselves in a certain way.

~ But behind the scenes, things can be very different.

Crystal Andrews (06:17)

Yeah, you know, and even saying that, as I sort of mentioned in the in the intro to the to the episode, hopefully it's not not offensive to you to say this. I don't think the thesis of your series is necessarily a new one.

the idea is out there that politics attracts a certain type of person who has a bit of an ego or who might have a bit of a thirst for power. And then even on the other side, that element of well, you know, good people go into politics with good intentions and strong principles. But it is the system itself that they have to play in. ~ And the need to maintain your own success that sees these people change throughout the process and sees them focus more on,

their own self-interest and maintaining and hoarding the power that they are able to gain through the process. In your view, what are the actual mechanics of that system? Because yeah, as I say, I think people understand that that is a part of it, but how is that actually working?

Jo Tarnawsky (07:15)

So to give you some of the background as to how and why I sort of wrote this, it's because I'm saying things, I mean, I've obviously got a background in international relations too. So I'm watching geopolitics play out in addition to what's happening in the national sphere. And, you know, to stop myself

being awake with all my thoughts at two o'clock in the morning, I felt it best to start writing. And so I started a sub stack and for the first few weeks, I think I only had three followers and I didn't really care because I was writing it for me. And, know, it's to get all this knowledge and insight just down somewhere. And then Crikey picked it up and said, hey, we like what you're doing and

we'd like to publish this. And so you're right in a way that it's not new if you go looking for it. But I think that we're sort of at a point of time where

Crystal Andrews (07:31)
you

Jo Tarnawsky (07:57)

I mean, in the conversations that I do have generally, people are frustrated. They're confused at times as to why the government is doing certain things or how things are playing out, why change won't happen, why reform is getting blocked. And so I think every now and again, it's good to have these conversations and to sort of have a more open discussion because perhaps it is something that you talk about around your dinner table or with your friends. But I don't necessarily think that in the

the sort of the, even the for-purpose sector, which is where I've got a lot of engagement, people are quite frustrated that they can't get reforms through or they have a nice meeting with a minister and they feel like they're understood and then nothing happens. And so for me, particularly when you're sort of watching the coalition fall apart, I think a healthy democracy ~ requires a strong opposition to hold a government to account. Doesn't really matter who's in power.

And you'll find that when I'm writing, I'm not focusing on an individual. I'm focusing on the system and the culture. Because it doesn't, you you can take one individual out, but the system and the culture remains. And so it's about understanding that. And I did feel a little bit bad at first, because after the first article was published in Crikey, one of the women's organizations that I have a little bit to do with sort of reached out to me. And I think they were quite depressed because it was news to them.

And they were like, have we just been wasting our time for the last five years? you know, is there any points? And I said, stick with it. This is the ripping the bandaid off to sort of show you behind the scenes of how it works. But as we go through the series, it's then about drawing that together because you have to understand what you're dealing with in order to make change and to be able to put your efforts into the right places. Otherwise, yes, you will be wasting your time and energy.

But it's not a, this is all hopeless and it's too big. It's about, let's look at how this works. Let's look at what drives decision makers, what the pressures are on people that you don't see. That might mean that when you're presenting them with what you think is very logical, and I think in that first article I used gambling reform as an example, why it is that that's not getting traction? What are the levers behind the scenes?

Crystal Andrews (10:09)
Mm.

Jo Tarnawsky (10:15)

that are pulling that in a certain direction. And of course, that's just one example. But as part of the series, it's around things like loyalty, alliances, the pressures that come from, yeah, all sorts of places, ambition, and what it looks like to be a good politician behind the scenes if you want to go up the ladder. ~ And so it's not necessarily the logic of your issue or your argument that's going to get somebody across the line.

Crystal Andrews (10:42)

we're gonna talk about the strategy of silence and how that enforces power. But if you could, give people a bit of a, top line on some of the other functions and tools of the system that are reinforcing this idea

what might some of those functions and elements be?

Jo Tarnawsky (11:00)

Well, ~ you know, yesterday when I wrote about silence, often we can see that as restraint and discipline.

But silence plays a really big function in power. There was an excellent article actually yesterday in The Guardian, which was sort of talking around ~ Albanese's swift move to back in the US actions in Iran. There's clearly some private thoughts amongst the factions, but there's literally a line in that article that says nobody wants to go on the record or say anything because they don't want to be seen as a troublemaker.

Crystal Andrews (11:28)

Hmm.

Jo Tarnawsky (11:36)

And silence is very effective in terms of ~ quietening dissent, ~ you know, and people sort of picking their battles because if they want to be seen as a team player, if they have ministerial ambitions, all of those things, they have to learn to adapt to the rules of the game. ~ And so it's things like that. And silence is seen as loyalty in that case.

So that's some of the levers. ~ There's certainly an art of performance, like I said, when people sort of see what they see on television and sort of think that's everything that's to it. ~ The first part also talked about the strong personalities that I think are part of politics. ~ And again, it's just being aware of it. A lot of people go in with very good intentions, whether they're advocates from the outside or whether they're looking to step into politics themselves.

but you really need to understand the system to survive. You don't need to become the system, that's sort of part of the next part that I'm about to write, but you certainly need to know the waters that you're wading in to be able to get any traction or success in what you're doing.

Crystal Andrews (12:49)

Yeah, it's great actually that you mentioned that Guardian piece because I've seen some chatter online that we seem to frustratingly have this pattern of every few months there is a story like that where it's unnamed sources within one party or the other sources within politics say that they are dissatisfied with

some policy or other, some decision or other, but we never hear who they are. We don't hear their criticisms in real time before a decision is made. And I think that becomes a real source of frustration for everybody. And it is not a transparent system. That's not part of a healthy democracy. is a quote in your article on silence that I just wanna read out, because I think it really, it stood out to me and I think exemplifies exactly what we're talking about.

You've written that silence is rarely criticized. It is rewarded. It discourages dissent and rewards manageability over truth. Ultimately, this does not produce stronger institutions. It produces more cautious ones and caution is not the same as integrity. I mean, I feel like that really hits the nail on the head. Like there are so many ways that we see silence ~ manifested within the system. And as you say, rewarded within the system from the media side, I think the strategy of

responding no comment to inquiries ~ saying that there's nothing further to add when journalists send in questions is incredibly frustrating and gets us no further than, you know, an official media release or an official announcement. The party and factional rules, which you've kind of touched on as well in this discussion, NDAs and gag notices as well is something that there has been really growing criticism of and how it keeps valid dissenting opinions and voices shut out of the debate.

But I do want to bring in something that is also a part of this and I think will be on the forefront of lot of people's minds this week, which is the National Anti-Corruption Commission. Everybody's talking about because of the Robo debt report that was released this week that seemed to, mean, Bernard Kean, our political editor wrote an article this week that said it went to extraordinary lengths to exonerate Scott Morrison. The reception of that report.

I think does sum up a lot of frustrations that the public has. expectation from the public certainly is that the NAC was promised to be an institution that would bring transparency. It would bring visibility. It would not be participating in this sort of ~ tendency for silence and for, you know, killing things. But that's not exactly what we've got.

How are you thinking those institutional bodies, even when they are intended to be holding the system to account, they're intended to be preventing these things from happening, they actually just end up wielding more of that same power. Like where does all that sit for you?

Jo Tarnawsky (15:38)

Yeah, it's really good question. mean, obviously the NAC story was breaking yesterday at the same time as my article was being published on silence and power, which actually seems, you know, quite fortuitous in a way. But ~ it's just one of many examples. I mean, the NAC is

something where the public had very high expectations that something would happen. So when the NAC came into existence, think something like 80 % of people actually wanted

an integrity commission or an anti-corruption commission. The states were well ahead of the Commonwealth. And I think on the back of the Morrison era, there was a huge appetite for it. So you saw it become a very big issue in the 2022 election, for example. And again, this is not just about one issue, but it's around a pattern and a system. Often there is a lot of fanfare after an announcement. The hard work is actually in the implementation.

Crystal Andrews (16:10)

Mm-hmm.

Jo Tarnawsky (16:35)

And often that'll be kicked down the line. And I think what we've seen is this is where people have kept the pressure on the NAC. It's the people calling to account and some very good crossbenchers calling to account things like conflicts of interest for the head of the NAC. Where are the robo debt outcomes? This agency was set up a huge fanfare at great public expense. ~

where it's received thousands of referrals, where are the outcomes? And particularly on the robo-debt matter, which had attracted so ~ much attention for very good reasons. People expected this is where that agency was going to step in and hold power to account. And so I think there is a great deal of frustration out there ~ because this is a good example where...

there's these sort of architectures set up and silence is used either to protect power, to protect institutions or to protect people. And transparency, I think, is one of the other frustrations with the NAC. know, sort of the amount of times I've sort of heard people talk about it going into a big black hole. ~ And I think transparency when you're in opposition is a great sort of battle cry.

once you're in government, it can be extremely inconvenient. And so we're seeing this not just in the NAC, we're seeing it through the Freedom of Information legislation that was tried to be sort of put through twice now, ~ and has actually received sufficient opposition not to get through. ~ But it's, you know, at least in the NAC, it's pushed, people have pushed it to at least act in some way. And to get an outcome. It's just that outcome now.

is also leading to dissatisfaction that it is not meeting what the public expected it to. There's also other examples though where the public aren't really aware of it. So one of the things I wrote about women's agenda actually a few weeks ago was around some of the set the standard follow on. So again, a lot of fanfare, was huge, you know, women's marches. This was great subject of public attention. Right now it's not getting a lot of attention at all.

Someone like myself obviously has a vested interest in sort of tracking how that is being implemented. And I've been quite outspoken about the fact that I don't think it meets what it was sold to the public to be, which was to help redress the power imbalance. And if you take one of the institutions, so I've spoken a lot about the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service, but

actually the one nobody's talking about that nobody pays attention to is the Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission.

~ That is the body that was set up to investigate misconduct in Parliament. I am very grateful I did not go down that path because the more that I have looked at it, the more I have realised that for very well-meaning people that are issuing complaints in there, the biggest outcome... Firstly, I haven't seen any public outcome at all.

The annual report last year didn't even, like it just said, well, it's been an operation less than a year. We don't need to report next year. can expect to hear the average length of time it took for an investigator to look at a matter. It's not the numbers of referrals. It's not the amount of investigations. It's not any outcomes. And then again, when we go back to the topic of silence, the biggest outcome I can see is that anybody who puts in a complaint to that investigative ~ commission,

They are issued with a confidentiality notice or a gag order as you might call it and the penalties for breaching that are up to six months jail or up to \$10,000 fine. Now if you've reported a politician and it actually gets accepted for investigation and it happens to go all the way through to the most severe penalties, that politician can be up for things like a written reprimand, professional develop,

professional training, actually the penalties for breaching a confidentiality notice for breaching the silence that protects power institutions and people is far greater than ~ the penalties that will be issued to the people themselves. so NAC is another example where I don't think it's met the public's expectations on ~ what it was sold to be.

Crystal Andrews (20:39)
my god.

mean, you just can't interpret that as anything other than protecting power, you know, setting up a system to, yeah, to be able to say, we're doing something here is an, you know, we are providing an avenue for people who feel that they have experienced something horrible within our parliamentary system, within the political system, within these halls of power, to have some recourse to have this looked at, to have this investigated, here you go, you know,

Here it is. But exactly as you say, when the penalties for those who are bringing forward the complaint are so much higher than they would be for someone who is being investigated or even say has been found to have done the wrong thing within that system, I think people would be, I think it would be very hard to interpret that any differently in any other way.

Jo Tarnawsky (21:40)
Okay. ~

Correct. But then the more cynical people, whether it comes to the IPSC or it comes to the NAC, would say that it's doing exactly what Power intended it to Power will always move to protect itself. That is sort of the dominant feature. And so again, you can look at the NAC as one issue, but it is one issue. If you look at the systems and patterns,

then you can, regardless of what issue you're engaging on or what reforms you're looking at, you need to be able to look at how that system might adapt. So there's the announcements. ~ How is it actually going to be implemented? What will it try to protect? There's sort of questions that you learn to ask because ultimately the system doesn't want to be disrupted.

The status quo is sort of what keeps them in power and keeps things going. And so it takes enormous forces and sustained pressure to really move the dial.

Crystal Andrews (22:59)

some of the feedback from crikey subscribers and readers to your point ~ is that your series is best describing the party system and indeed the major parties. And I think an example that often comes up is of the West Australian Senator Fatima Payman, how she was effectively silenced, frozen out, really pushed out of the party, we're being frank about it, for speaking up in a way that was against those party rules.

but actually in line with the party's own policy, very important to state that. mean, that's sort of like the clear example of how these things will freeze out somebody who is inclined to speak up and have those principles in favor of protecting the system itself and protecting the power. ~ So that I think was the takeaway for many readers, that that was more reflective of the party system and the major parties and that in their view, the...

independent MPs and senators and independent candidates in elections are kind of like the answer to that, the antidote to that, where we have these more principled savvy people who are standing alone and who are not beholden to these other loyalties and to other ambitions. But I'm curious as to what you think about, because as you say, this is a whole system issue and independence, while in different circumstances, are still part of that system.

Jo Tarnawsky (23:56)

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Crystal Andrews (24:23)

Do you think that they are the answer to these problems or where do sit with that?

Jo Tarnawsky (24:27)

So I do think that the rise of ~ independence represents a genuine shift in Australian politics. ~ And I think many people probably thought that we could even be in a minority government right now. What instead has happened is obviously there's been the collapse of the coalition and they're in a huge disarray. But people are then looking around

and looking for options. Many people feel frustrated by the major party system. So if you're a coalition voter, you're obviously looking at the state of things right now and probably in a state of despair. But I also know a lot of Labor voters that are not necessarily seeing what they thought they would see out of an Albanese government with a strong majority. And so people will naturally look for alternatives. And independents, the ones who are standing up holding the government to account,

sometimes articulating the values that people sort of feel are not being articulated by the major parties. And so they can see an avenue and they see hope, basically. Now I've got to be careful here because not all independents are the same by virtue of being ~ independents. It's a real mixed lolly bag. ~ But people are sort of looking for alternatives and some independents are actually providing that.

Crystal Andrews (25:45)
you

Jo Tarnawsky (25:51)

I I grew up in ~ New England, actually, when Tony Windsor was my representative. And so I actually grew up with a very good model of what I consider to be a community independent. He was very consultative. Now, this is the days before social media. And I remember he was, you know, very good at sort of platforming on certain issues. But if there was a big vote coming up, he would run an ad in the paper saying, this vote is coming up. Tell me what you want to tell me what you think. And

So he was originally in state government and ~ held the balance of power and was able to negotiate all sorts of things out of that. But people continued, his popularity continued through until he went to federal politics because people felt represented, they felt heard. Now, I guess with every pro there comes a con and ultimately when they're looking at power, it's a numbers game.

So that's where it becomes difficult for independents to because by very virtue of the fact that they're independence means, you know, they're not a major party. But that said, I think a lot of Australians are used to this to like to major party power system. I've worked all over the it's really common to have a coalition government.

of sort of that's brought together by a series of parties and that's normal for them. So I guess this point of time does allow Australia to reimagine what Australian politics can look at, like particularly as we sort of watch the fallout from the coalition and how that might land. There's a range of voters that are moving to one nation, their numbers are rising. We're clearly in a sort of a shock, bit like we are geopolitically.

But again, power will adapt to that. And so we've already seen, for example, the electoral reforms that have been pushed through. And I saw an article in the Saturday paper last week sort of speculating about whether the independents will have to actually form a party in order to

be able to survive from a funding basis. But again, there's probably smart ways that can be done. I know, like I live in the ACT now, David Pocock, he's an independent, he's actually a party. And why has he done that? It's because ~ to get a...

to get above the line on the Senate paper, he's had to form a party. Now, the other thing is when you see the independents stand up in the mural hall for the press conferences, they are usually flanked by others. Now, what I think is very lovely about that is it's not the same pack. You will see the composition change, ~ but they're rarely alone. And so ultimately power is a numbers game. So the independents do provide

some level of hope for people who feel that they don't see themselves anymore in a major party. But in order to power beyond just calling out the government to account, it is a numbers game, like I said. And so they will also need to adapt to that system if they are to be any kind of true alternative.

Crystal Andrews (28:52)

Do you think that it is possible for, you know, a coalition of independents? I mean, the example, I think the most ready example is of the quote unquote Teals, the community independence movement and the representation that they have in the House of Ramps.

Do you think that they'd be able to maintain their appeal as independents if they were to say go to an election under some sort of organized structure and say, you know, this is what we stand as together, maybe bring some others into the fold and have kind of an independent like party to get those numbers up? Or is that not something that you see potentially working given the current, you know, landscape that we have in Australia at the moment?

Jo Tarnawsky (29:41)

Look, anything's possible. I had a friend on the Hill who worked in one of the offices of the Teals, and I think she ended every text message with hashtag not a party. So there's quite a bit of pride that comes from the independents, right? ~ And I totally get that. But where there's a will, there's a way. I mean, we're creative people, right? ~ It's not a decision for me. I don't think necessarily, like I said, because not all independents stand on the same platform, but...

Where there are parallels, where there are some shared interests, it's not outside the realm of possibility that you could flag a number of things where they agree to agree on ~ and they can be independent. You know, it's not the same party discipline that you might see in the majors where they can't cross the floor on things and have their own voice, ~ but that they, you know, agree on certain things. It's a little bit like a deal, I guess, that

the government of the day might come to in order to get supply, where they're in a minority government, right? But a little bit, maybe a step more formal than that. But there would certainly be some independence that's shared views, say, on climate change action, transparency and integrity. Those seem to be sort of common themes. But then there might be things that they differ on because of where their electorate is at.

And so it wouldn't necessarily be universal. It's something that's really an issue for them, but it is a numbers game. And so it depends on what their ambition is and what their purpose is. Right now, they're doing a good job of sort of calling to account certain issues of government. But if they want to kind of take the next step, there will be at the very least that would need to happen.

And this funding, the way that the financing rules have been set up, I mean, I agree it will be very difficult. And I would imagine all of them are sort of thinking through their options.

Crystal Andrews (31:39)

Certainly where there's a will, there's a way. And I think it will be very interesting to see when the next, you know, a lot of elections rolls around how they, how they kind of adapt to that. And if we do see any creative solutions, Joe, if we can end on a hopeful note on what can seem like, kind of a hopeless conversation in points, or at least a frustrating conversation for, you know, the average punter for people who are following politics and who feel frustrated by the ways that they are seeing power protect itself.

and work only for itself in our political system. What is the takeaway? What would you like people to walk away from this series, understanding and how would you like this to energize them about how we actually can see, principles and governing for the benefit of the people win in this kind of, you know, what you call dangerous, dangerous waters.

Jo Tarnawsky (32:29)

Yeah, well, I think that's sort of the purpose of my series and next week I am going to make the shift into how we sort of bring some of these things together.

to create change. But I think at a very basic level, if we want better government, if we want a better democracy, if we want a better country, then we really need to stop sometimes and really understand how power works, not just how we wish it worked. And the takeaway for this week, I hope that people sort of ~ bring from the piece I've written is don't be silent. That's what power wants. Don't be silent.

Crystal Andrews (33:03)

Absolutely. something that we try to live by at at Crikey. I'm sure people won't be surprised to hear. Joe, it's been an absolute pleasure speaking to you today. Thank you so much for giving me some time and coming to talk through it all.

Jo Tarnawsky (33:16)

Thanks, Crystal. It's been great to chat with you.