

Nice blokes or smug thugs?

The Human Rights Commission's report *The Forgotten Children: National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention* was tabled in parliament two months ago. The 315-page report provided compelling first-hand evidence of the negative impact that prolonged immigration detention has on children's mental and physical health. The report also made 16 recommendations.

Since the report was tabled, there has been no substantive discussion in parliament about the report or its recommendations. Our Prime Minister has used all-too-common techniques to stifle debate – attack, shoot the messenger and then ignore the message. These silencing techniques have been effective – they have taken the focus away from an important issue that reflects on Australia's standing in the world community: children in detention and our obligations under international law.

Tony Abbott's aggressive behaviour towards the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Professor Gillian Triggs, has been named for what it was: bullying. No doubt, like me, other women have experienced this type of silencing behaviour. In response, Gillian Triggs remained composed and dignified. She is a role model for all of us at the receiving end of such attacks in both public and domestic places.

When Tony Abbott was accused of bullying Gillian Triggs, several colleagues defended him. They described him as a "good bloke". I don't know Tony Abbott but I know Tony Abbott Types (TATs). TATs are often described as "good blokes". They are men who attended an exclusive private boys' school. After school, they studied at a sandstone university, lived at an exclusive college and did the 'right' courses – law, commerce and medicine. Although many men get over their privileged upbringing, TATs do not.

TATs are men whose sheltered lives as white, private school-educated, professional heterosexuals make them blind to their privilege. They form a network by surrounding themselves with others who share their worldview. They have a toxic sense of entitlement and often say that feminism has "gone too far".

The upper end of town is filled with TATs. These men huddle together at exclusive clubs where their networking sustains their network. When they attend social functions, they often reminisce about their school and university days – a cricket game or a rowing regatta. The old school tie matters at the MCG's Long Room.

They do not respond respectfully to alternate views. Instead, they react aggressively. They see disagreement as combat they must win. They either attack people who disagree with them, or ignore them. Either way, they ruthlessly shut down dissent. TATs perceive those who disagree with them as enemies who must be silenced.

They use a range of tactics to quell opposition. They will interrupt, talk loudly and mock. They jeer and insult. They blame others. Recently our Prime Minister described the Opposition Leader as an “arsonist” and “the Dr Goebbels of economic policy”. They dismiss alternate views by describing them as “offensive” and “ridiculous”. All these tactics are used to avoid negotiation and compromise.

They shoot the messenger rather than listen to the message. Personal attacks are common not only in parliament but also in the Australian media. In *The Australian's* ‘Cut and Paste’ section and *The Saturday Paper's* ‘Gadfly’, ‘argumentum ad hominem’ replaces reasoned arguments.

TATs do not substantiate their views. They don't need to because they know they are right. They use rhetoric, slogans and dog whistles rather than evidence to support their views. The proposed government-funded ‘stop the boats’ telemovie has been described as “propaganda”. How can propaganda further informed debate?

If the evidence does not fit with their worldview, they will simply ignore the evidence. Statements such as “climate change is crap” and “coal is good for humanity” deny decades of academic research.

TATs do not apologise when they offend others – perhaps because they do not have the insight to know how offensive they can be. Scott Morrison refused to apologise to the Save the Children staff for besmirching their reputations. Instead, he brazenly attempted to justify his actions.

They are also vindictive. Cross a TAT and you will be punished. Soon after the recent failed spill motion, an outspoken supporter of Tony Abbott, Scott Buchholz, replaced Philip Ruddock as party whip. Philip Ruddock went quietly. Not so Gillian Triggs. Professor Triggs refused to resign. She continues to speak about the plight of children in detention.

I call on all of us who are victims or witnesses of bullying to similarly take a firm stand. The next time our views are attacked, dismissed or ridiculed, we should stay put and stay on message.

A TAT recently told me to “shut up” before abruptly leaving the room and slamming the door. He told me that my views are “offensive”. When I later received a hurtful email, I was told that the email was “only factual and honest”.

The next time I am on the receiving end of a TAT attack, I will ask him to “settle down”. When he responds aggressively to my views, I will substantiate my views. If he treats me dismissively, or attributes malicious motives, I will name his behaviour for what it is: a technique to negate my views.

Now that the tantrum towards Gillian Triggs has passed, it is time for our government to provide a substantive response to the Human Rights Commission’s report and its recommendations. If the issue of children in detention and Australia’s obligations under international law continue to be ignored, it will be at our peril.