Federal incivility
The Prime Minister and the federal Attorney General, Phillip Ruddock, have hand-balled the issue of same-sex marriages to the States and Territories but at the same time spat the dummy when the ACT took the initiative with legislation to allow same-sex civil marriages. John Howard predictably said, ‘The common law of this country is that marriage is a voluntary union for life for a man and a woman, to the exclusion of all others’ (The Age, 31 March 2006). ‘We’re not going to make civil celebrants available for these [same-sex ceremonies]’ Mr Ruddock in a fit of pique wrote to the ACT Chief Minister, Mr Jon Stanhope, threatening to intervene by enacting federal legislation to overturn the ACT initiatives, ostensibly on the grounds that they would reduce marriage between a man and a woman to the same status as other relationships. So? Mr Stanhope accused the feds of trampling on the rights of ACT residents and decided to establish separate celebrants for the ACT’s Civil Unions Bill. In Victoria Liberal MP Andrew Olexander, has said he will introduce legislation into the Victorian Parliament soon to allow same-sex civil unions in Victoria.

With this kind of federal ‘leadership’ the findings of a study released on 31 March 2006 that homophobia is having a startling effect on the mental health of lesbian and gay couples is hardly surprising. The study by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University found 90 per cent of same sex couples are reluctant to show public affection for their partners and 60 per cent have experienced verbal abuse. The study cohort was of 5500 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people with 75 per cent reporting past depression and nearly 50 per cent at least one episode of a major depressive episode. Drug use, verbal and physical abuse from partners and thoughts of suicide were also reported at a higher level.

Hold on until after the election
In Victoria it is an election year and issues such as same-sex marriages and decriminalisation of abortion have some pollies feeling nervous. The Premier, Steve Bracks, has said he will support decriminalisation of abortion but not until after the election.

Britney
The highly idealised life-size sculpture of Britney Spears happily giving birth on her knees and bum up on a bearskin rug with baby’s bonce just appearing has stirred all sides of the United States abortion debate. The gallery, which is displaying the sculpture, has received a heap of hate mail. The anti-abortionists have disliked the graphic nature of the work and pro-choice advocates have condemned the work’s anti-abortion message — hardly surprising given that the sculptor has titled the work ‘Monument to Pro-Life’. Most mothers would be more peeved by the look of serenity on the birthing mother’s face. It’s all so easy. Needless to say the sculptor is a male.

Cop it sweet
Sexual harassment laws in Australia are now 30 years old but sexual harassment in the workplace continues. Victoria’s Equal Opportunity Commission released research in April 2006 indicating, many women do not report harassment for fear of reprisal. In releasing the research Helen Szoke said, ‘it’s about time men got it clear in their heads that women do not come to work to be leered at, propositioned, intimidated and groped’ (The Australian, 6 April 2006).

Research by Sara Charlesworth from RMIT showed many women accepted sexual harassment as ‘just the way things are’ and many men indicated they were just being friendly. The fear of reprisal is valid given that the study showed many people who make complaints ended up losing their jobs. Dr Charlesworth said the ‘sexual harassment message was on the wane’ after hitting a peak in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Farting chair
And if that’s not enough, The Times (23 March 2006) has reported that the Deputy Head of a British school has taken action in employment discrimination because of, inter alia, a farting chair. Ms Sue Storer has told the Tribunal she was forced to sit in a chair that made flatulent noises every time she moved. This was obviously very embarrassing and Ms Storer accused the feds of trampling on the rights of ACT residents and decided to establish separate celebrants for the ACT’s Civil Unions Bill. In Victoria Liberal MP Andrew Olexander, has said he will introduce legislation into the Victorian Parliament soon to allow same-sex civil unions in Victoria.

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