

The row over shock jock Alan Jones and what will be displayed on the Sydney Opera House sails about The Everest horse race involves two sets of issues.

One is around whether it is appropriate to use this Sydney icon as an advertising hoarding.

The other is the appalling, but typical, behaviour of Jones and the weak, but probably not surprising, capitulation of NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian to the pressure of the racing industry, which had its arm strengthened by this bullying presenter from 2GB.

The details of the row are now familiar. Racing NSW wanted a full ad for The Everest's Tuesday barrier draw on the lit-up sails; the Opera House resisted, saying it would only show the jockeys' colours; Jones abused Opera House CEO Louise Herron on air on Friday; the Premier later that day overrode Herron and gave Racing NSW and Jones most of what was being demanded.

The broad question of ads on the Opera House seems to me less important than Jones' behaviour and the state government's abject falling into line with the demands made by Racing NSW.

Some people have no problem with the Opera House being used for advertising. They don't subscribe to the view that it's low rent to turn this World Heritage structure to commercial purposes, nor do they comprehend the fuss about having it as part of the promotion of a particular (mega rich) horse race - as distinct, say, from an Australian national team.

Labor frontbencher Anthony Albanese said on Friday that "people should chill out a bit. The fact is that this race is beamed around the world. People do associate Sydney with the Sydney Opera House".

On a unity ticket with "Albo", "ScoMo" doesn't understand "why people are getting so precious about it". For the man remembered for the "So where the bloody hell are you?" campaign, this is "just common sense".

“This is one of the biggest events of the year,” Morrison said on Sunday. “Why not put it on the biggest billboard Sydney has? These events generate massive economic opportunities for the state, for the city.”

There may be room for argument about the promotional issue but not about Jones’ interview.

The [full horror of that tirade](#) has to be heard to be believed - with its haranguing, denigration, abuse and threats.

Jones, with close personal connections to the racing industry, injected into it maximum nastiness and minimum civility. Herron probably should have told him to call back when he’d found his manners and hung up. But she didn’t.

It was of course Jones displaying one aspect of his trademark. He and others of his ilk use insult and aggression as part of their “brand”, whether in interviews or in commentary.

Over the years, Jones has got away with an extraordinary amount - although recently a court caught up with him when he and 2GB [lost a huge defamation case](#) over claims he made about the Wagner family being responsible for deaths in the 2011 Grantham floods.

Imre Salusinszky, who was press secretary to former NSW premier Mike Baird, has written about how the shock jocks and the tabloid media wield their power at NSW state level.

The Howard government felt it had to manage Jones as best it could (as does the present NSW government). There was a Howard staffer whose remit included dealing with the Jones demands and complaints.

I recall a minister who’d been in that government later telling me how he’d given in to Jones on a certain matter just to get him off his back (after checking with advisers that to do so wouldn’t create any harm).

Jones insulted Malcolm Turnbull when the latter was communication minister, but Turnbull fought back and then refused to go on air with him. Until the 2016 election campaign, that is - when then prime minister Turnbull felt he had to have a brief rapprochement with his bete noire.

By her action on Friday, Berejiklian reinforced the perception that the politicians are scared of a bully who rages from his studio pulpit.

But according to social researcher Rebecca Huntley, they have less to fear than often thought. "15 years of research and I haven't found Alan Jones to be that much more influential with voters than ABC radio or the SMH. He is only powerful because politicians think he is," she tweeted.

Berejiklian on Sunday defended the outcome, saying it was "at the back end of the decision-making process" - Racing NSW had earlier reportedly wanted to drape banners from the Harbour Bridge - and a "good compromise".

The NSW government claims that Friday's decision was not a reaction to Jones' diatribe but the culmination of negotiations that had been underway for some while.

Nevertheless, it represented the premier's cave-in to Racing NSW and came across as a victory for Jones' bullying.

Now that a discussion of "bullying" in various situations is the flavour of public debate, isn't it time that the media who run Jones' programs (2GB is owned by Fairfax) imposed some standards and the politicians who listen to him grew some spine?

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

View from The Hill: The uncivil Mr Jones

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