

Looking Good as Elite Leadership Behaviour and Feeling Good as Follower Behaviour.

LIE TO LOOK GOOD
Elite Business, Political and Social Leaders

<p>Know its false</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publicly promotes the claim despite private disbelief Performs tribal allegiance to retain status and access Privately resentful; vents in safe company Calculates the career cost of dissent and stays silent Treats the lie as a tax on professional life 	<p>Examples</p> <p><i>DEI mandates · climate alarmism · indigenous rights overreach · benefits of mass immigration · "what is a woman" · gender ideology in schools · ESG · Pope's "Islam is good"</i></p>
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LIE TO FEEL GOOD
General Public and Followers

<p>Believe its true</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopts the elite cue as moral instruction Experiences belief as evidence of own goodness Performs the rituals of belonging Pronouns, land acknowledgements, profile flags Polices peers who deviate aggressively Treats dissent as evidence of bad character 	<p>Examples</p> <p><i>Pride-flag profile pictures · acknowledgement-of-country recitation · "trust the science" · cancellation of dissenting friends · charitable performance signalling</i></p>
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See companion Comment, "The Meijer Chart Paradox", for the full framework.

P R O T H E A N I N S T I T U T E C O M M E N T
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The Emperor's 'Look-Good' Clothes

The progressive elite have cloaked themselves in lies, but the public are starting to notice.

Hans Christian Andersen published *The Emperor's New Clothes* in 1837. Two swindlers persuade a vain emperor that they can weave him a garment so fine it is invisible to anyone unfit for office. The emperor cannot see the cloth. Neither can his ministers. Neither can the crowd lining the streets for the procession. They all lie about its beauty anyway. Eventually a child in the crowd, having not yet learned which lies are required, says the words out loud. *He has nothing on*. The spell breaks.

We have not improved on Andersen's diagnosis. We have only changed what the elite are lying about.

The cloth is no longer "fitness for office." It is "kindness," "tolerance," "inclusion," "settled science," "lived experience," "the right side of history." And it is not pride that keeps the courtiers admiring it. It is fear. Fear of being expelled from the procession and the greed for the rewards of inclusion. Fear of losing the salary, the title, the social standing, the dinner-party invitations. The minister who today refuses to define the word "woman" is not protecting his self-image as a man fit for office. He is protecting his job.

This Comment is about the people walking ahead of him, the people walking beside him, and the people standing in the crowd. It is also about the children — increasingly numerous, increasingly

loud — who have decided that the cost of being expelled from the procession is finally lower than the cost of continuing to admire what they can plainly see is not there.

1. The Parade Currently in Procession

Two days before this Comment was published in a Senate Estimates committee, Senator Michaelia Cash asked a question that, twenty years ago, would not have been asked outside a kindergarten.

What is a woman?

Hugh de Kretser, the Australian Human Rights Commissioner answered: “an adult female human, and includes a transgender woman.” He referred Senator Cash to a Federal Court ruling as the basis. He did not refer to biology, anatomy, chromosomes, or the ordinary meaning of the word used by every Australian outside that hearing room. The court ruling is the only place where the contradiction can survive contact with reality.

A few minutes later, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner Dr Anna Cody asserted that biological men require protection from discrimination on the basis of potential pregnancy.

Watch the hearing back. Nobody in the room laughs. The press gallery does not laugh. The staff do not laugh. But Senator Cash — herself a sitting Senator, herself someone whose career depends on being able to read the room — is asking the questions in a particular tone. She is not asking because she wants the answers. She is asking because she knows that putting the answers on the parliamentary record is what eventually breaks the spell. The Senator is calling these career bureaucrats naked.

This is happening in every English-speaking democracy at once. In the United States, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, asked at her Supreme Court confirmation hearing in March 2022 to define “woman,” replied: “I’m not a biologist.” She is not, of course, a biologist. She is also a fifty-one-year-old woman who has used the word in conversation her entire life and was appointed to the Supreme Court *because* she was a woman. The answer was deliberately evasive, made because the political cost of honesty was higher than the cost of looking ridiculous in front of the United States Senate.

In the United Kingdom, the same question has been put repeatedly to senior Labour figures since 2022, eliciting the same range of evasions, until in April 2025 the UK Supreme Court ruled that the word “woman” in equality legislation refers to biological sex — at which point a remarkable number of Labour MPs suddenly recovered the ability to define the word.

In Canada, in 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau interrupted a woman at a town hall to correct her use of “mankind” to “peoplekind,” then later pretended the moment was intended as joke that no one at the time or since has recognised as such.

In every case, the same shape. A senior official, asked an obvious question, gives an answer that no one in the room believes — themselves included — because the alternative is to be expelled from the procession.

2. The Critical Observation: The Two Layers of Dishonesty

The thing the parade conceals — and the thing it cannot conceal forever — is that two quite different people are walking in it.

The first kind is the Commissioner. The Commissioner is not stupid. She knows what a woman is, she knows what pregnancy is, and she knows that the statements she made in Estimates testimony

are ridiculous. She is making them because she believes her role now requires it. Her performance is not under duress, its mercenary and willing. She is lying specifically for the power, status, and access that come with looking good in front of the audience that confers those things on her. *She is lying to look good.*

The second kind is the person on Facebook who shares the clip approvingly and wears ‘trans friendly’ badges. The friend on Facebook is not stupid either. She is repeating a phrase that the right kind of people are repeating, and the act of repeating it is the act of belonging to the right tribe. When the Commissioner says trans women can be discriminated against on the basis of potential pregnancy, the person on Facebook does not absorb the proposition. She absorbs the tribal password. Repeating it correctly is what makes her one of the good people. *She is lying to feel good.*

These are not the same act. The first is performance for the power that comes with conformity. The second is sincere belonging-performance, experienced from inside as virtue. The first knows they are lying and resents the cost. The second does not experience herself as lying at all. The two layers hold each other up. The Commissioner provides the moral instruction. The friend provides the moral consensus. Each is the other’s evidence that what they are saying must be true.

3. What It Looks Like to Be the Emperor

For an extended look at what it is like to walk the parade as the emperor, no recent example outperforms the former opposition leader in the Australian state of Victoria, John Pesutto.

In March 2023, his former colleague Liberal MP Moira Deeming attended a women’s rights rally on the steps of Parliament House in Melbourne. The rally was interrupted by a small group of protesters whom the media described as neo-Nazi. The organisers had publicly disavowed any association with them before the event, in writing. Mrs Deeming and her colleagues condemned the protesters at the time and afterwards.

Mr Pesutto, then Leader of the Opposition, could have defended his colleague — acknowledged the disavowal, condemned the protesters on her behalf. Instead he chose *Lie to Look Good*. He cast Mrs Deeming as Nazi and moved to expel her from the party.

He defamed Mrs Deeming on five separate occasions across media interviews and a formal expulsion motion. The party room voted 19–11 to suspend her in March 2023; she was expelled from the parliamentary party room in May 2023 after signalling she would sue, moving to the crossbench as an Independent Liberal. The party, press and colleagues kept admiring Mr Pesuttos robes to look and feel good.

Then the part that converts this from political mistake into textbook elite Look-Good lie. *Before* the defamation case against Mrs Deeming even went to trial, Mr Pesutto settled separate defamation claims brought by two other women associated with the rally — Kellie-Jay Keen and Angie Jones. In those settlements he formally conceded that Keen and Jones were not Nazis, did not associate with them, and abhorred them. He continued the case against Mrs Deeming anyway, because turning back would have meant admitting he was naked.

In December 2024, the Federal Court dismissed his defences of public interest, honest opinion, common law and qualified privilege, and contextual truth. Mr Pesutto had knowingly lied to defame Mrs Deeming, and the court and the public now knew he was naked.

The spell broke immediately. Fifteen days after Justice O’Callaghan’s judgment, the same parliamentary Liberal Party that had voted 19–11 to suspend Mrs Deeming met again — and did

two things at the same meeting. They removed Mr Pesutto from the leadership. And they readmitted Mrs Deeming to the parliamentary party room. The colleagues who had voted to expel her had needed only the cover of an officially-confirmed naked emperor to reverse themselves. They had known the whole time. They had been waiting for permission.

The most devastating moment in *The Emperor's New Clothes* is not the child speaking. It is the emperor's own private realisation, as the procession continues and the laughter rises, that everyone else had known for some time. That is the moment Mr Pesutto experienced in late 2024. It is also the moment every elite figure currently walking the look-good parade will eventually experience if they don't quietly walk back from their naked parade.

4. Other Parades Currently in Procession

Once you have the framework, you see it everywhere — and crucially, in each case the same pattern: the emperor in question privately knew the cloth was not there but continued with the parade anyway.

In 1999, the climate scientist Phil Jones, then director of the University of East Anglia's Climatic Research Unit, wrote a private email — leaked a decade later as part of what came to be known as Climategate — describing the use of “Mike's Nature trick” to “hide the decline” in temperature data. The scientists involved knew the data showed declining temperatures in the modern period. That decline contradicted the public-facing message, so they hid it and the line was made to continue upward. The public-facing message required a tidy line. The cloth was admired for over a decade before the email was leaked, though the trick had been exposed by investigative climatologists for some time. By then the message had been embedded in policy across every Western government.

In February 2020, Anthony Fauci convened a conference call with leading virologists, on which several privately raised the likelihood that SARS-CoV-2 had escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The same scientists, weeks later, co-authored the Proximal Origin paper publicly dismissing the lab-leak hypothesis as conspiracy. The CIA's scientific analysts, repeatedly, between 2021 and 2023, assessed lab leak as the most likely origin; the conclusions were softened and buried. In 2024, Dr David Morens — Dr Fauci's senior adviser — was indicted for using his personal email account to evade Freedom of Information requests on COVID-origins communications. The men running the public health response to a pandemic killing millions knew lab leak was likely. They said so to each other in private. They engineered the public-facing position to deny what they privately accepted, and they used personal email accounts to keep the engineering hidden from the public they were notionally serving. Every step was a deliberate Look-Good performance — to the press, to the funding committees, to the geopolitical sensitivities of a Chinese ally.

In 2013, in the apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis wrote that "authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Quran are opposed to every form of violence." The claim is remarkable on its face. The Bishop of Rome is not an authority on the Quran. Muslim scholars, the founding Imams, and the actual practitioners of contemporary political Islam across Sunni and Shia traditions are. A substantial number of them — including most of the world's terrorist organisations — cite chapter and verse in the Quran and the Hadith as direct authority for violence against unbelievers, apostates, and rival sects. Muhammad himself led armed campaigns. The "proper reading" the Pope invokes is not contested by Western apologists; it is contested by the credentialed Islamic authorities whose tradition he is pronouncing on. Meanwhile the Vatican has direct, documented, daily knowledge of Christian persecution by Islamic actors — in Egypt, Iraq,

Syria, Nigeria, Pakistan. In April 2026, on a visit to Algeria, the Pope described Islam as "a religion of peace we can learn from." The statement was made because the role of the Bishop of Rome in the contemporary West is, in part, to perform a particular kind of inter-religious goodwill — and the cost of departing from the performance is higher than the cost of being seen to contradict both the testimony of one's own persecuted clergy and the credentialed interpreters of the tradition he is pronouncing on.

And then there is the progressive-left wealth performance. Senator Bernie Sanders has denounced landlords, billionaires, and the wealthy, while owning three houses and flying on private jets. Former Speaker Nancy Pelosi owns many properties and a stock portfolio worth between \$200 million and \$400 million. Senator Elizabeth Warren spent her career as a Harvard Law professor on a \$400,000-plus annual salary while representing herself as the working-class indigenous American candidate. Senator Chuck Schumer, who has spent his career excoriating the influence of money in politics accepts more from Wall Street than almost any other Senator. Collectively, the most prominent progressive politicians of the last quarter-century own dozens of properties and billions of dollars in assets. They know what they own. Their voters know what they own and everyone pretends it doesn't exist.

And notice what this example reveals that the others do not. The followers do not need leaked emails or congressional investigations to know about the wealth of the politicians who denounce wealth. The facts are on Wikipedia and in the news. The Feel-Good believer has access to the contradicting information and chooses not to integrate it, because integrating it would mean leaving the tribe or questioning the elite motivations. The follower is not a victim of misinformation. The follower is an active participant in maintaining the consensus. Why that choosing-not-to-see operates, and what it would take to interrupt it, is the subject of a forthcoming brief.

In each case the same structure. An elite figure says something they know is a lie and the followers absorb the statement as moral instruction and repeat it sincerely. The two layers maintain the appearance of a consensus.

5. The Spell Breaking, Currently in Slow Motion

The reason the public are starting to notice is not that the public has become smarter. It is that the cost-benefit arithmetic of admiring the naked emperor has shifted. More to the point: the volume of jeers and snickers from the crowd has been steadily growing, particularly thanks to Musk's ownership of X.

In January 2025, within weeks of the second Trump inauguration, Meta eliminated its DEI programmes. Mark Zuckerberg gave an interview describing the corporate culture as needing more "masculine energy." In December 2024, Amazon began removing DEI roles and language from internal communications. Toyota, McDonald's, Walmart, John Deere, Harley-Davidson, Tractor Supply — each, in the space of a few months, quietly retreated from positions they had spent years loudly defending.

None of these institutions experienced a moral awakening. They experienced the social cost of continuing to admire the naked emperor rising above the cost of dropping it. The procession was no longer cheap. The crowd was no longer admiring in silence. Some of them were openly laughing. The customers, the shareholders, the employees, the new administration — each constituency that had previously kept its head down began, one after the other, to say the obvious thing.

The political version of the same cascade has been running in parallel. The British public, watching successive Conservative governments fail to deliver what conservative voters elected them to deliver — and watching the Labour government that replaced them sustain the same cloth-admiring performances — have shifted en masse to Reform UK. At the May 2026 local elections, Reform gained over 600 council seats and won control of councils that had been Conservative or Labour for generations; the Conservatives lost nearly 300 seats; over a third of 2024 Tory voters have defected. The polling shows a Reform plurality in any election held today. In the United States, the same dynamic produced the Trump coalition — a working-class realignment that the Republican establishment did not produce, did not authorise, and did not want. In Australia, the same dynamic has produced sustained support for One Nation and One Nation-adjacent figures, and is currently producing the breakdown of the Liberal-National Coalition’s monopoly on right-of-centre politics that the Pesutto affair so visibly accelerated. The Australian voter watching the Senate Estimates exchange of two days ago does not need to read this Comment to know what they are watching. They already know.

This is what Václav Havel described from the Czechoslovak side in 1978: the greengrocer who puts the regime’s slogan in his shop window does not believe the slogan, and knows his neighbours do not believe it, and the neighbours know he knows. The whole performance is sustained by the fact that no individual greengrocer can afford to be the first to take the sign down. Until one does. Then another. Then the regime, which had appeared monolithic on Monday, is gone by Friday.

The parades currently in procession will end the same way. The Look-Good cell of the corrected framework is structurally brittle, because no one in it believes it. The Feel-Good cell is more durable in the short run — sincere belief is harder to dislodge than performance — but it is parasitic on the Look-Good cell. When the elite cue is withdrawn, the mass conviction it manufactured decays within years, because reality contact erodes it faster than self-reinforcement can rebuild it.

The two layers respond to different interventions — the elite layer needs permission to stop, the followers cannot be reasoned out of beliefs they did not reason themselves into and can only be deprived of the cue that sustains them. The mechanisms of giving the elite permission, and of interrupting the willful ignorance of the follower, are the subject of two forthcoming briefs.

For this Comment, the diagnostic is enough.

The question for any reader who has been watching the parade is simple. Which processions are you watching now? Which cloths are you being told to admire? Which colleagues, friends, public officials, archbishops, executives are walking ahead of you in robes that no one in the crowd can see? And will you be the child that calls it out?

About Prothean Institute

The Prothean Institute is an independent research organisation applying behavioural science, civilisational theory, and institutional design to questions of politics, culture, and social order. Its work proceeds from a single premise: that durable institutions must produce good outcomes from self-interested people, not depend on the supply of virtuous ones. The archive of what works — recovered, examined, and set out plainly — is the Institute’s standing project.

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Author: James Ilos | Prothean Institute | protheaninstitute.com