

# Talk like a Man

Photography: Quentin Jones. Grooming: Stephanie Tatu



Shooting the breeze (from left) Barnaby Joyce, Ian Roberts, Leo Barry, Mark Rivett, Akmal Saleh and Volker Krohn.

*What does it mean to be male today? Is it about being the breadwinner, a hero on the football field, the mate others can rely upon or something even less tangible? Libbi Gorr sat down with a composer, a psychotherapist, a comedian, a politician and two sports stars to find out.*

### The panel

Barnaby Joyce, Queensland National Party Senator, is 38, married with four daughters and, as he shares the balance of power in the Senate, occasionally causes the Prime Minister grief.

Ian Roberts, 40, is a former rugby league international player turned NIDA-trained actor who won legions of fans on *Dancing With The Stars* for moving like a block of flats. He is single and has no children.

Leo Barry, 28, became the premiership star of the Sydney Swans when he beat the pack to a game-saving mark in the AFL grand final. He is Catholic and married with two children.

Mark Rivett, 50, is a composer, surfer and grandfather of one. He has been divorced since the mid-'80s and is happily in a two-and-a-half-year relationship but says he prefers to live alone so time, not space, is shared.

Akmal Saleh, whose name is often mispronounced and misspelled, called himself Peter so he could work in RSL clubs. The 40-year-old Egyptian-born comedian is married with no children.

Volker Krohn, 46, is a psychotherapist and director of the Hoffman Centre Australia, which specialises in providing intensive psycho-dynamic, behavioural, family and existential psychotherapy. A ladies' man in retirement, he is married with three stepchildren. →



## “In our culture, what it is to be a man is so governed by the Christian faith.”

Ian Roberts

**Gorr: Talking about being men – is it a worthwhile conversation, Barnaby?**

**Joyce:** As long as you try to give some definition of what should be aspired to as a bloke in society and not be embarrassed. Simple things like getting respect back into it, a bit of chivalry into how a man treats a woman. That's an important subject. And how men treat other blokes and how they work within themselves. My whole life was growing up with blokes. When you grow up with blokes all the time, you're always seeing in them what you like and what you don't like. What you think makes a decent, strong human being and what you look at as a lesser characteristic. And you guys playing footy would see it all the time. You know, the person on the field who you could rely on and the person who you couldn't. And I think the person who you could rely on was, for me, the more manly, the person who you think, “Well, that would have hurt.”

**Gorr: Does any of that resonate with you, Ian?**

**Roberts:** I've had such a long career experiencing all the subtleties of discrimination as a gay man [in 1995, Roberts became the first Australian football player to come out]. As far as I'm concerned, you're born with a penis and testicles. That's as much qualification [for being a man] as you're ever going to have.

**Saleh:** My wife earns most of the money and she takes care of the finances because I'm completely bad with money. And if we get into a fight with some thugs, she looks after that. She'll back you up in a blue, too. It's whatever works for you.

**Krohn:** I think there's something to be discussed about the inner man that has a lot to do with the mentorship we received from our own fathers. I had a father who never shared anything with me. He was kind of there but not there. And I think a lot of men suffer from lack of mentorship. And they don't know any more what it means to be a man.

**Joyce:** It starts from what you physically are and goes on from there. If you are stronger, you must show strength in the relationship. It is the man's role to drive ahead and attain a goal and an objective.

**Saleh:** What's the woman's objective in this picture, then?

**Joyce:** Well, I think the woman's objective is also fundamentally determined by a physiological role. They are the primary nurturer. If you take that role away from the woman and give it to the man, I don't think the child grows up in the same arrangements.

**Krohn:** There's a certain entitlement men carry in the way they are in the world. You say, “I can do whatever I want,” I know a lot of women who don't feel like that.

**Joyce:** I don't mind if my wife is a spray painter but I will respect the fact that she's a woman and she'll respect the fact that I'm a man. It just makes it easy



Clockwise from top left Ian Roberts, Barnaby Joyce and Mark Rivett.

for a relationship to go along. Otherwise you're both pursuing one role and everyone is leaving another role all alone. I think that, ultimately, you can't explain man without explaining woman.

**Roberts:** All this conversation is based around a husband and wife and kids and we're never going to move forward in society if you think purely in those terms. Forget the gender and think, “Am I really happy with the way I am living my life and communicating with other people?” In our culture, what it is to be a man is so governed by the Christian faith.

**Krohn:** That's important. The viewpoint of defining man through relationships with women just leaves out a big percentage of the Australian populace.

**Rivett:** Relationships aren't everything. Know yourself as an individual – that's crucial – then contemplate gluing yourself to something or someone else.

**Joyce:** Look, if you put a young girl and a young boy on a desert island, I bet if you came back

in 25 years' time, apart from the fact they'd be boofing each other crazy...

**Rivett:** You saw *Blue Lagoon*, too?

[Uproarious laughter]

**Joyce:** They would be in a certain role-play there, with absolutely no external forces. I stand by that. You can't define a man without defining a woman. Otherwise you're talking about human beings.

**Roberts:** That's ridiculous. You didn't say two people on an island. What about two women? Or two men? You just placed their genders upon them then. First and foremost, I claim to be a human being before I claim to be a man. If you're not happy with yourself, believe me, someone else can't make you happy.

**Gorr: Leo, at the footy club, does [Sydney Swans coach] Paul Roos give life lessons as to your role as a man in society?**

**Barry:** I think being a professional sportsman, you are seen as a role model. You're put on a pedestal sometimes and you've certainly got to act in →



a correct manner in society. One of the biggest things for us is the fact that over 50 per cent of our members are women.

**Krohn:** All my girlfriends say they like the eye candy.

**Roberts:** Now he feels degraded.

**Saleh:** Don't degrade me! Don't degrade me!

**Barry:** Just like a piece of meat, running around on show. [Hearty laughter]

**Roberts:** I suppose with me being an openly gay person, it's a very different thing and it kind of holds a mirror up to society.

**Saleh:** How tough was it to be openly gay in an environment like rugby league? Tough decision.

**Krohn:** Very courageous.

**Roberts:** I don't think people should be thanked and congratulated for the truth. All the aspirations in sport I had, I did it 10 times over. And I was so miserable. I kind of realised, "Whose expectations were they?" They weren't mine; they were placed upon me and I accepted. Why is a sportsperson a role model? We worry so much about what people think about us.

**Barry:** Everyone has their own perception of what it is to be a man. My father is a good, honest, open man and he's worked his arse off his whole life to provide for his family and his six kids. He's a farmer. I certainly aspire to be like him but he has obviously never lived in the city. Maybe the exposure I've had playing league football and the people you meet, that bit certainly changes your perspective. He's probably never met a gay person. I like to think I'm very open and certainly accept people, whether male, female, whoever they are and what they stand for.

**Gorr: So a question for all of you – monogamy. Something not said to be a natural male state.**

**Barry:** It wasn't until I met my wife that I found true love and that's an ongoing roller-coaster. I've got two little boys. Only got married a couple of years ago, too. I'm a good Catholic boy.

**Gorr: You have traditional values?**

**Barry:** Had to do the right thing.

**Joyce:** That's the spirit.

**Rivett:** I think monogamy is a natural male state.

## “As teenagers, it's in our indoctrination as men that we have to go out there and slay a few dragons, test our metal.”

Volker Krohn

That's one of the huge misconceptions about men. In private situations I've found, anthropologically, women are just as horny and liable to sleep with many different partners as men are.

**Saleh:** Women are more likely to stay faithful than men because, biologically, men are always looking to inseminate. They want to reproduce.

**Joyce:** I agree with the biological part there and hopefully that never goes. But once you've got another thing that comes into the equation called children, you have a duty that goes beyond your own personal aspirations of being free and easy with the whole world. If you lose control of that biological drive, it'll take over and you'll destroy your family.

**Krohn:** You're talking about emotional commitment, serving something bigger than yourself.

**Rivett:** There's type A and type B. Type A's essentially monogamous and faithful and type B isn't. And type B probably never will be.

**Joyce:** I think everybody is a bit of an A and a bit of a B and how you act is about your own self-control.

**Roberts:** What you're talking about now is what it is to be in a loving relationship. Negotiations go on before that. What's wrong with a woman sleeping with 100 guys a week?

**Gorr: It would hurt. But you're saying that this discussion is influenced by religion and morals.**

**Roberts:** Very much. It's what you decide between yourself if you're single or within the confines of a loving relationship.

**Joyce:** Go anywhere and there is a belief structure to bring a sense of order and cohesion. If I do what my carnal desires are, if that becomes a primary drive in my life...

**Gorr: Then Bill Heffernan is in trouble!**

**Joyce:** And if everybody did it, there would be absolute pandemonium.

**Gorr: What would you say is the most stupid male thing that you did in your youth?**

**Joyce:** How long are you here for? Especially around adolescence, trying to prove yourself among your peers, you can do some absolutely ludicrous things that make your flesh creep later on.

**Krohn:** As teenagers, it's very much in our indoctrination as men that we have to go out there and slay a few dragons, test our metal.

**Roberts:** Be 10 feet tall and bulletproof.

## “Women are more likely to stay faithful because, biologically, men are always looking to inseminate.”

Akmal Saleh

**Krohn:** We think we're immortal.

**Rivett:** More so your mates think you are. They're saying, "We're all immortal" and you go, "Yes, we're all immortal."

**Joyce:** You try to become what they place upon you.

**Roberts:** And yet you and your mates are all thinking the same thing.

**Rivett:** Yeah: "They're all men. I'm not."

**Gorr: So what is mateship?**

**Joyce:** Mateship is two blokes who tolerate each other's faults and failings. If you're truly a mate, you will put yourself in a position of, "I'll go in to bat for this person if something goes wrong."

**Barry:** It's the basis of my workplace. That's my ethos and the way our whole club is run.

**Rivett:** I think we have a relationship with the word mate. You can say mate as in, "Mate, just great to see you." Or, "Maaaaaaate!"

**Roberts:** Just like the word f---. "F---!" Aggressive. Or affectionate: "You're a lovely little f---er."

**Barry:** I think it's to describe someone if you've forgotten their name.

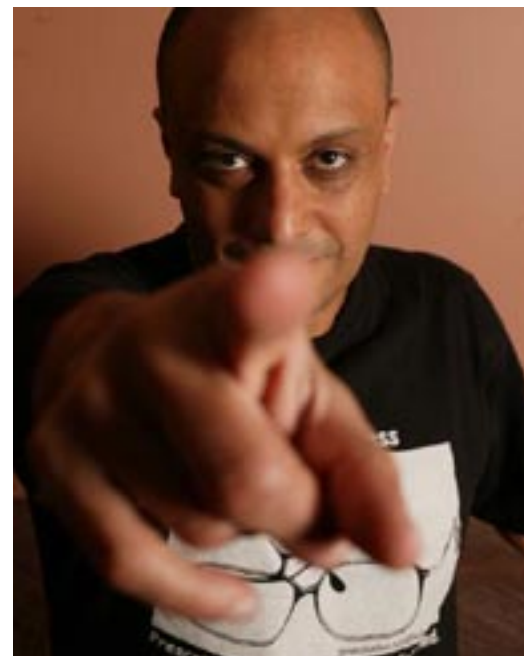
**Gorr: What don't women understand about men?**

**Joyce:** They've got to allow a man to be a man. If a bloke goes out to have a few beers with mates, he's not destroying the world or ending world peace. He's going out to have a few beers with his mates and later on, he's going to come back. If you try to knock that out, he'll take frustration from out there into the house.

**Barry:** I'll get you to talk to my wife because I missed out on a footy trip last week. We had a little boy in September so I would have been divorced if I'd gone. [Barnaby Joyce leaves to fly to Queensland.]

**All:** Bye, mate!

**Barry:** What was his name again? [Laughter] →





## “Being a professional sportsman, you’re seen as a role model. You’ve got to act in a correct manner in society.”

Leo Barry

**Rivett:** Back to what we could learn about men, I think there’s merit in having your own places and your own space and doing your own things and then getting together. This doesn’t apply to women only – it could apply to everybody. People should not always expect a relationship to go to a logical conclusion of marriage, living in the same house, sharing all the same things and being part of everything together.

**Krohn:** Women can be creative just by giving birth to a child, which a man can never do. So they have to find a way they can be creative in the world. They need a bit of space. Now I also know that sometimes women experience that as a form of rejection. So they go into their own emotional child. They close down and the hag comes out, rather than Aphrodite. That’s scary for the man. Men are so dependent on the goodwill of women.

**Rivett:** It’s the three stages of sex in a relationship. There’s anywhere sex, when you have sex anywhere. There’s bedroom sex, when the relationship settles

down, stage two. And then there’s hall sex, stage three: you pass each other in the hall and the person says, “F--- you,” and the other says, “F--- you, too.”

**Gorr: Are you there yet, Leo?**

**Barry:** You’re picking on a bit of a soft spot there. My wife’s just had a little boy. I’m not even in the hallway at the moment. But we’re working on it, we’re talking about it and it’s going to happen.

[Supportive laughter]

**Rivett:** The amazing thing is how much of this discussion about being a man involves discussion about relationships, rather than individuals.

**Gorr: Let’s talk personally, then. Ian, when did you think you became a man?**

**Roberts:** Don’t ask me what it was like when I discovered I was a man. You only watch yourself age in pictures. In my brain, I’m still an eight-year-old. You only become old when you forget what it is to play in the true sense of the word. Acting changed my life. As a 38-year-old man, I would go downstage and play unremorsefully, unapologetically and people enjoy it.

**Gorr: Akmal? When did you think you were a man?**

**Saleh:** Probably the first time I had sex. I went to all-boy schools. I didn't have any female teachers and I had no sisters. So it was really unclear until that happened. And when that happens, you go, "Oh, OK, this is good. I should try this again soon."

**Krohn:** How old were you when you first got laid?

**Saleh:** Fourteen.

**Krohn:** I was 15. I was totally freaked out about making the woman pregnant.

**Saleh:** I was, too.

**Krohn:** It wasn't a good experience. I didn't feel like a man; I felt freaked out.

**Saleh:** I've got the Christian thing in my family. So there's guilt as well. I freaked out for months thinking, "Oh my God, I'm going to get her pregnant; I'm going to have to marry her and I don't even like her."

**Roberts:** That's what it is. That's what it feels like to be a man. Guilt and freaked out in the true sense. I mean that with all my heart.

**Barry:** Guilt, like you are worried about your actions?

**Saleh:** Always feeling like you're doing the wrong thing.

**Rivett:** I agree. Despite popular belief, I suffer from guilt and being freaked out.

**Roberts:** And you have to be something all the time. When you're a kid, you have aspirations to be this or do that: "I want to be in a \$150,000 bracket."

**Saleh:** Constantly achieve.

**Rivett:** It gets down to fear of failure. Men are very freaked out by failure.

**Saleh:** I read an interview with Woody Allen. Someone said to him, "A lot of your films just don't do well." And he said, "That's fine." Because in his opinion, some of the great people have had more failures than successes and what stops us being great is that macho thing where you can't fail, you can't look weak.

**Rivett:** In the United States, people are much more willing to start a company, fail, pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start again. In Australia, your absolute greatest fear is appearing to be a bit of a dickhead. Like your business going under.

**Saleh:** Far more men commit suicide than women. [Between 1993 and 2003, four times as many men as women committed suicide, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.]

**Krohn:** Culturally, women are more inclined to become vulnerable and talk things through.

**Rivett:** We talk through our actions. And then if you err as, say, [former NSW opposition leader] John Brogden did [when he propositioned two female journalists and made a racial slur], well, I can imagine his wife saying, "I'm here for you and the baby," and that sort of thing and I can imagine him thinking, "It's not enough; it's not doing it for me." That's a very male thing. And I can relate to that.

**Roberts:** That's a sad reflection on us, isn't it? What we value as success.

**Krohn:** It's that shame. Society is very shame-based.

**Saleh:** Where does the shame come from?

**Krohn:** As children we need a relatively consistent flow of unconditional love. When we were sad, we needed our parents to say, "Well, you're sad and that's OK." If I'm afraid, I need to recognise I'm afraid. We're learning to ask for help.

**Gorr: How best describes what man you think you are or aspire to be?**

**Krohn:** The first thing that came to me was lovingness – towards myself as well as others.

**Rivett:** A mate of mine says there's boy's psychology and man's psychology. And you need to point out to boys around about puberty what man psychology is. What it is to remain calm, to not have to explode and throw tantrums. To deal with things as a man.

**Saleh:** Am I a boy or a man? I'm lucky enough to have been a boy as long as I can; with what I do, it's a plus. You see people who are just ground down by life – they become older. I know people in their 20s who feel older than me.

**Rivett:** I felt older in my 20s than I do now. It wasn't until I got to 30 that I felt, "What's that all about?" And I think that's when you do start to be honest. You go, "F--- it. This is what I am and before I can move on, I have to just come clean and vomit up all this stuff I'm harbouring here." You move on and I think that happens around the age of 28 to 30 so watch out, Leo. ●