

# Swearing in an era of falling standards



Gordon Ramsay

Graham Kennedy

Cee-Lo Green



Main picture: RAY STRANGE

**MY WORD:** Senator Stephen Conroy and, inset, some entertainers who have tested the public perception of bad language.

WHEN Senator Stephen Conroy dropped the F-bomb on live TV this week, the nation sat up and took notice - but for all the wrong reasons.

The political point the Federal Communications Minister was attempting to make was lost in a media storm of controversy over the fact the gaffe happened minutes before a children's program was about to air on the ABC.

The public broadcaster's switchboard was instantly flooded with complaints and, even though the senator immediately corrected his colourful language - which was made during a spirited debate at the National Press Club - the damage was done.

It's certainly not the first time we've heard that calibre of cussing on the TV, but it was the danger a young impressionable audience could be exposed to the offending word which attracted the most issue.

For many, the senator's slip has breached a new frontier.

Social analyst David Chalke told *The Advertiser* that while the incidence of swearing - not just in media



Entertainment editor **JESSICA LEO** looks at how the boundaries that once surrounded swearing and bad language are breaking down

but in our everyday lives has increased - the events of this week hit a raw nerve.

"People may put it (swearing) in the society has gone to hell in a handbasket category ... it's like any other form of rudeness - it seems to be on the rise.

"(But) you hear Conroy saying it and you think for God's sake - he's supposed to be a minister for the crown," Mr Chalke said.

Swearing itself is as old as the English language but throughout the ages we've managed to confine it to certain situations - now, the fear is the boundaries have been broken.

"I think the thing we as a society need to do is realise there's a place and time ... for example, not in front of your mother," Mr Chalke said.

"In that way that's where the media has a role to play.

You're not seeing it on the six o'clock news - that's where people like Conroy need to be condemned ... you need to be setting an example."

Mr Chalke added that while swearing tended to be tolerated more these days, there was no evidence that it was more accepted.

However, recent reports released by both the Australian Communications and Media Authority and Free TV show that on the small screen it's not our biggest gripe - sex and nudity attracts far more ire than swear words peppered throughout a program.

Psychologist Dr Darryl Cross said popular culture had perpetuated this desensitisation to swearing - once it was the big taboo, now sex and nudity are the new blue.

"In a sense we keep lowering the bar," Dr Cross said.

"That shows the slide in acceptance for swearing - if

you had done that survey 20 years ago swearing would have been the top of the list - nudity and sexuality wouldn't have been on the list.

"If you see it written, if you see it on the screen or see some of your friends or family use it suddenly, implicit in that is the permission you can use that as well," he said.

But it hasn't always been that way. In 1975, Graham Kennedy imitated a crow call, saying "faaaaaark", and the then Australian Broadcasting Tribunal banned him from live television. Nowadays, *The Footy Show* has a weekly segment centred on a fictional academy called FARK, an acronym of Fossil's Academy of Reliable Kicking, complete with a hall of fame shortened to FARKHOF.

It's been a gradual but all pervasive shift - in 1999 *Sex and the City* crashed through

what many saw to be the final frontier, with a female character using the C-word.

Then, just two years later an episode of *South Park* titled *It Hit The Fan* courted controversy as sh\*\* was uttered 162 times within the half hour. Not long after, the barriers were really broken down with the overnight success of foul-mouthed chef Gordon Ramsay.

But it's not confined to the small screen either - lyrics have long been peppered with profanity, particularly in certain genres, but this year Cee-Lo Green's *F\*\*\* You* became a mainstream hit and while a censored version christened *Forget You* was broadcast for the most part, the damage had been done.

However, we must not forget curse words do have a purpose, according to University of Adelaide senior media lecturer Dr Rob Cover.

"Swearing can serve a few different functions in entertainment media: to emphasise a point, to present a recognisable character or stereotype or to show the gravity of a situation," Dr Cover said.