

Case study 7

Are the families of politicians entitled to privacy?

Case A: Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke appears on television and talks about proposed new laws against drug suppliers. He breaks down and cries when talking about what drugs do to people, young people in particular. Hawke's wife, Hazel, is left to reveal later that one of their daughters is suffering from a drug problem.

Case B: The *Sunday Telegraph* headlines its front page 'Senator's Tragedy' with a sub-heading 'Son, 19, Dies After Two Years of Hell'. The story details how Senator John Button, then Opposition leader in the Senate, had lost a two-year battle to save his teenage son from the grip of heroin. David Button died of an overdose. The paper quotes 'close friends' about the family's anguish and the 'senator's feelings of helplessness, knowing that his career in federal politics kept him away from home for long periods'. While much of the story concerns Senator Button's anguish, and that of the family, it centres around the death of his son (Lynch 1982).

Here are two cases where the story hinges on a relative, not the person in the public position of accountability. Had they not had such prominent close relatives, it is unlikely the two people concerned (a daughter and a son) would have received such wide media coverage. Generally, the mass media ignores the private lives of politicians (and other prominent figures) unless the story can be linked in some way to their public life, as in the Andrew Bartlett and Cheryl Kernot/Gareth Evans cases discussed above. In the case of politicians that usually means it having some affect on their political activities.

Invading privacy doesn't seem to bother the 'downmarket' weekly tabloids and magazines. who thrive on scandal about the families of the rich and famous. Obviously there's a difference when the information becomes public, and the husband (or wife) discusses it with the media, but in the cases above, the politicians sought no public notoriety for their children.

Issues and questions raised by case study 7

- 1 Is the son/daughter/wife/husband of a prominent person entitled to any privacy?
- 2 When is the private life of a relative of a prominent person no longer private?
- 3 How prominent does the person need to be?
- 4 The son of the local country Mayor is picked up on a drink-driving charge. Your paper has a policy of not necessarily reporting every charge heard in the local Magistrate's Court. The police prosecutor mentions in court that the accused is a member of a prominent local family, without making the direct connection to the Mayor. Would you report the case?
- 5 If you do, how much would you disclose?
- 6 Would you identify the offender as the son of the Mayor?
- 7 What if it was the son of a municipal Mayor in a big capital city?
- 8 What if it was the daughter of your editor or owner?
- 9 What if the son or daughter of the Prime Minister was charged with drink-driving after a night out with some friends from university?
- 10 Is there a scale of prominence?

Bibliography:

Lynch, Paul. 1982. 'Senator's Tragedy.' *The Sunday Telegraph*, 6 June, 1.