

⁶ For a comprehensive account in support of the validity and soundness of the argument for the PGC, see Deryck Beyleveld, *The Dialectical Necessity of Morality: An Analysis and Defense of Alan Gewirth's Argument to the Principle of Generic Consistency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

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My Own Private Parliament: Media Ethics, Gender, Popular Culture and the Kernot-Evans Affair

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1. Introduction

According to Steve Murphy, former press secretary to ex-state premier Jeff Kennett, it is natural human curiosity that causes voters to wonder “ ‘Are they one of us? I wonder what his wife’s like?’ ” (Kissane et al., 2002). I am inclined to disagree that there is anything humanly natural about such curiosity—a sort of curiosity about politicians’ private and domestic lives that changes historically. Rather, such curiosity is better seen as a product of the media operations of the public sphere, involving a range of gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions: Whose private lives are made public, how much of those lives will be made public, and what sorts of publicity will be given to the private? And, more importantly, the mediasphere produces the very questions around what it is that we might consider private, too private and how we extend a set of ethics to consider and take into account the privacy of the public figure and, ultimately, how we make sense of historical dichotomies such as public-private, politician-entertainer, political news-entertainment.

In 2002, Cheryl Kernot, a former parliamentary leader of a minor political party (who had defected to the Australian Labor Party in 1997, amid controversy), released her autobiography, purporting to be a tell-all account of the difficulties she faced as a minor politician and then as a woman in the ALP. Soon after the autobiography’s release, senior political journalist Laurie Oakes made public a statement that Kernot had neglected in her autobiography to provide the essential information that at the time of her defection she had been having a private, sexual relationship with the married Gareth Evans, a senior figure in the ALP. Oakes backed up this statement several days later with evidence drawn from intercepted e-mails. Although a very brief scandal, lasting only a few days, it received considerable attention among press figures, journalists, academics, those both approving and opposed to the release of the private information of the sexual relationship. Notable was the diversity of ethical positions taken by several public figures and by members of the general public.

I am interested here in the ways by which we construct various sets of ethical statements around media use of that which constitutes the private, and how those statements have been played out in terms of the Kernot-Evans affair. There are three sets of statements I want to discuss here. Firstly, the ethical suggestion that something like the Kernot and Evans affair deserved not to be aired, due to the limited effect it had on the public or the political arena in Australia, and operating under various understandings of the public-private dichotomy. A second set of statements draws on a range of feminist positions that point out the ways in which media players have produced a certain type of clichéd reporting about women politicians that focuses on their private and domestic lives in ways by which men in political capacities are not interrogated. Finally, the construction of such debates and ethical rhetoric in terms of a contemporary notion of popular culture and postmodern flux effects the ways in which the political is constructed as serious or important in public sphere reporting. Under this perspective, it is suggested that parliamentary politics in Australia might be viewed as just another popular culture entertainment akin to the probing and confessional Reality TV products such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*.

Much of the public reaction to the Kernot-Evans affair has been about the issue of privacy, but it has not made a wholesale examination of how the scandal bears on the public-private divide. Rather it has been a stereotype, a cliché, a rehearsed stock response to scandal. Neither were holding public office at the time, it would be unlikely to affect their political careers, as they had none. This makes it an interesting case study, since it is less a case than a repetition of examples that have gone before.

2. Politicians and Privacy: Ethical Models in Question

While a seemingly tired area, I am not yet convinced that the questions of what constitutes the public-private divide, and of the ethical protection of the privacy of celebrities, noted persons and public officials have been fully exhausted. Important in scholarship around media ethics and privacy is to avoid the tendency by which policies and ethical statements or positions are developed and imposed on particular media scandals, cases of breached privacy, and declarations of information for the public good. Rather, it benefits the dialogues around ethics and the rhetoric of privacy invasion to see the case of a scandal, such as the brief Kernot-Evans affair, as being involved in a powerful dynamic between theories of ethics and media praxis, and to note that ethics of privacy invasion are not merely exchanged between philosophers (theory) and journalists (praxis) but occur in the context of a wider public sphere. Such a context notates the diverse range of positions held by members of the public who, as audience to the scandal, must be understood in a more active light than merely consumers or recipients of information or gossip.

What besets debates around media ethics, politicians' gender, and issues of privacy are a range of binaries that govern our thinking around this issue by reducing analysis into simple, reductive, and dichotomous terms. Some of the binaries that

come into play in the Kernot-Evans case are these: public-private, information-sensationalism, public officials and non-officials, tabloid-mainstream, male politician-female politician. Where binaries come to serve particular ideological interests is, frequently, in the assimilation of two sets of binaries, linking two reductive ways of thinking. For example, an older patriarchal ideology links the binary masculine-feminine with civilised-natural or, in very simplistic discourses, mind-body. From a more critical perspective, this has the effect of producing not only a fixed and dichotomous understanding of gender, but provides our cultural thinking of those genders with certain attributes that obscure one gender from power, legitimacy, authority, or rationality in public sphere debate.

I will write here of several of the binaries, but the most significant is the public-private divide as it continues to govern debates on media ethics, even as it is put into question by media scandals and by journalists who either disregard the alleged potency of the divide, or who blur the valency of its terms. Various sets of feminist theorisation and rhetoric, as well as popular culture reading positions, put the commonsense view of the public-private distinction into question, and I shall come to this below. However, in much writing on media ethics, a modern principle of the public-private division is restated and reinstalled. In an important analysis by Candace Gauthier (2002), there are three broad media ethical positions on the invasion of privacy by news media, journalists, and tabloid media writers. The first of these is based on Kantian principles, whereby invading privacy is understood to treat a person as a thing or a means by interfering with their rational choice to keep certain information private (pp. 28-29). Such a view precludes the invasions of privacy of public figures. In the specific case of politicians, Gauthier suggests that the key ethical questions involve the audience's need to know, on the basis of how important the private information of politicians might be to rational choices. Gauthier's second model is a liberal position, asserting J.S. Mill's utilitarian posture. For Mill, the harms and benefits of any action must be identified in order to determine the rightness or wrongness of the action, where wrong is understood as greater harms outweighing any expected benefits (p. 24). Finally, Gauthier identifies what she calls the Power Transfer model, in which privacy is seen as control over who has access to information about an individual, that privacy affords a personal power against institutions, and that, on the other side of the coin, the release of private information of political officials is justified by virtue of its use in transferring power from a potent figure to the public (pp. 26, 27, 32).

Under the Kantian system of media ethics in which Kernot's choice to keep things private is considered ethical, the title of her book, *Speaking for Myself Again*, reflects such a position, by making the statement that she is in control of information about herself as a rational being. Under such an ethical paradigm, for Oakes to broadcast the information Kernot had chosen to keep private must be considered reprehensible at worst, a breach at best. However, if we consider how the private-public divide comes to be interrogated through Oakes' very action, the same ethical principle suggests that her omission leaves out an important detail in her autobiographical construction of self (Myself). He not only invades her privacy, but calls privacy into question: The private affair is a central factor in selfhood;

in order to be a fully-articulated rational self, that aspect is not inseparable from her public construction of self. The public-private divide is, of course, made more dubious and fluid through the questions around why he need select this particular material she chose to keep private over, say, her habits in the garden, or whether or not she cleans her oven on a regular basis. What constitutes private against public under a Kantian system is put into question by being graded into different sorts of private information.

In the case of a liberal utilitarian ethics, it would appear that this is the major ethical position informing Laurie Oakes' release of the information that Cheryl Kernot and Gareth Evans had an intimate relationship at the time of her defection to the ALP. An invasion of privacy, here, and release of the findings of that invasion are 'justified when the public actually needs this information for political or other important life choices' (Gauthier, 2002, p. 24). For Oakes, the broadcasting of this material was justified on the basis that Kernot had written a book omitting a central fact (Wilmoth, 2002). Such a central fact was not only a historical secret that had profound effects on a political landscape—the then leader of the ALP, Mr Kim Beazley, stated publicly he would not have entertained her defection if he had known of the affair (*The Age*, July 10, 2002)—but one that, if kept secret, would have permitted the ALP to remain (slightly) more popular with the electorate than it otherwise did once the secret relationship was revealed (Nicholson, 2002). Although neither Kernot nor Evans were any longer key players in the party—at least not in public—the revelation of this private detail might indeed be considered a responsibility to an electorate that had made specific decisions on the basis of Kernot's defection, and a perception that ALP leadership was able to keep its own house in order through awareness of all factors that might relate to an issue as important as a party defection. Where this ethical position reinstalls the public-private divide is in the shoring up of the affair as something that was private but should have been public. In other words it was an omission that was relegated to the private but, in Oakes' view, must cross the divide for the good of the public and the electorate. This position is best exemplified by the words of the former senior federal politician and founder of the Australian Democrats, Don Chipp, who praised the release of the private affair, and stated: 'For heavens sake, you have the parliament of Australia passing laws that affect every Australian' (Hudson, 2002). The justification for the ethical release of this information is not merely that it was information that should be public for the public good, but that it was a profoundly private situation that had the potential to affect the operations of a public institution. Under this same utilitarian model, but from a different angle, is the view that the release of this information was indeed not in the best interests of the public. According to journalist Brendan Nicholson, the Kernot-Evans revelations are directly damaging to a political party already suffering the fallout from publicity on internal power squabbles. As he puts it, there is a 'fear that news of the secret relationship between two senior Labor figures, and Kernot's criticism, will further slow the party's progress' (Nicholson, 2002). This statement criticises not the relationship itself or the fact that it remained hidden, but the ethical utility of outing the relationship.

Finally, the role of power and power transference in the broadcasting of the private affair is complex and multiple. From one perspective, Kernot's autobiography was about power—the power to present a particular image of herself and justification of her political actions through the careful release of specific and exact instances of privacy as they directed her public persona. That is, of course, what a political biography is all about—the ability to make influential opinion as well as hold influential private positions in post-electoral life depends heavily on the production of a public persona. If there is nothing revealed, however meticulously, that has not already entered the public sphere, the news media and the archives, then there is little point in a biographical account. Oakes' decision to broadcast this information might be seen as ethical under this model, in that it offered a rebalance of the power position Kernot had forged in her own account. She had made the claim that she was telling the whole truth (Wilmoth, 2002), and when that claim proved false, the ethical position is that she had abused her position of power via autobiography, and that power abuse must be redressed through power transferral.

The point here is that the above three ethical models by which to analyse the Kernot-Evans affair fail to interrogate the public-private binary distinction in full; although they locate ethical concerns at the point of the blurring of the boundary between the two, the operations of these ethical questions is to determine whether or not a media event belongs on one side of the boundary of the other. All three positions result in showing that these are difficult determinations, but they leave the binary intact. Indeed, despite putting into question the ideas of what might conventionally be considered public or private in the life of a politician, the questions serve to reinforce the binary. Such a binary is a significant ideological node, a point in a set of beliefs and practices governing the ways in which we think about politicians and privacy in this case. As with most ideological factors, the less rigorous the attempt to question its logical underpinnings, the more surreptitiously it is restored and naturalised. My aim here is not to undo the public-private dichotomy altogether, but to suggest that there are alternative cultural factors that come into play in how we might understand the public-private division as it underpins the ethical questions surrounding the release of this information. One that is worth mentioning, because it refracts the Kernot-Evans scandal quite neatly, is brought forward in a recent critique on the semiotics of privacy by theorist Susan Gal. According to Gal (2002), the public-private distinction is not only correlative, thus never providing stable 'spheres of activity, or even types of interaction' (p. 80), but can perhaps better be understood as a 'fractal distinction', by which she means the public-private is a pattern that occurs repeatedly within each of the two terms, and multiply within those divisions also (p. 81). As Gal puts it:

Whatever the local, historically specific content of the dichotomy, the distinction between public and private can be reproduced repeatedly by projecting it onto narrower contexts or broader ones. or, it can be projected onto different social 'objects'—activities, identities, institutions, spaces and interactions—that can be further categorized into private and public parts. Then, through recursivity (and recalibration),

each of these parts can be recategorized again, by the same public/private distinction. It is crucial that such calibrations are always relative positions and not properties liminated on the persons, objects, or spaces concerned. (p. 81).

This analysis of the distinction suggests that rather than attempting to use ethical approaches to determine what should or should not belong in the public sphere thus leaving the distinction intact, or rather than accepting the distinction as blurred and thus requiring case-by-case analysis, we are subject to two new, productive possibilities.

The first is that an increased ethical complexity can be applied to the attempts to locate the scandalous information in terms of the public-private distinction. Rather than looking at the public discussion of the ethics of the situation—in which different reporters, commentators and critics weighed in on the debate surrounding Oakes' release of the e-mails—as a public debate of continuing disagreement over the location of the information as public or private, the disagreements can be viewed as disagreements around the location of the information as public or private within multiple, geometrically complex, fractal distinctions.

For example, when we consider the fact that the scandal emerges as a result of Kernot's failure to disclose her sexual relationship in her biography, we see a particular fractal deployment of the public-private binary. Like most political biographies, hers was about shifting a bulk of private information, including private thoughts, feelings, reactions, and motivations into the public realm. It is this that has throughout much of the latter 20th Century made political biographies bestsellers among an audience interested in the politician's own take on the events for which they are known and remembered. However, in Kernot's case, despite purporting to give a whole-truth picture, she kept certain information private. That, under the ethical models described above—and particularly under the Kantian and Power Transfer models—is her prerogative. One way of looking at this, then, is as a bulk of private information and rhetoric on her motivations and reactions to political life in the ALP that is available for the shift to public discourse, but of which some of that remains private: a privacy within a private realm. In that sense, an ethical model might suggest that this information was not rightly private because it was sexual or romantic in nature and therefore inappropriate for the public sphere, but rightly private because the person with responsible control over that information viewed it as fractally private within the private information she was making available to the public. As another competing opinion, we have the retrospective statement made by former ALP leader, Kim Beazley, who claimed not to have known about the affair, and suggested that if he had, he would not have entertained Kernot's defection to the party he was leading (*The Age*, 10 July, 2002).

What these facts suggest to us are several different uses of the private. Kernot's sexual behaviour may well be a private issue in terms of the public-private divide where that divide is about politicians' political spin and media-savvy self-presentation in the public sphere. At the same time, the same information was

public in the sense that party figures knew, parliamentary journalists knew, others knew (Crabb, 2002). What the public is being asked to believe is that while many people in a particular private sphere had this information as public, the leader did not know. The opportunity afforded us through a fractal understanding of public and private is to see the party room or the party political as one sort of private or public (communal) in which we locate the people for whom particular sets of information are public or private (personal) (Fiske, 1996, p. 246). Or to see a distinction between private and secret within private. Where is a line to be drawn, then, between privacy and secrecy? If the information was neither secret nor public, it belongs in—and was indeed relegated to—a particular space of public within the private realm of party or political or parliamentary circle knowledge. What this amounts to is an ethical insight into the public-private dichotomy in the case of politicians: What is public in the sense of being available in the mediasphere for public consumption is different from what is made public within a lesser public sphere such as a party-room. The emphasis on the ethical position from the politicians' point of view is merely in terms of self-representation and public image, not event. Where this leads in terms of brokering a method of ethical analysis is down a path too complex for our purposes here, but worthy of further investigation.

The second productive possibility that such a complexification of the public-private binary allows is found in the fact that different approaches to the question of the ethical rightness or wrongness of the release of private information will multiply and polysemically depend on the discursive angle by which we come to view the case. What I mean by this is that a more rigorous set of ethics—inasmuch as it may lead to greater undecidability—can be encountered by examining the meanings of the public-private distinction in its manifold and internal complexity, its fractal nature. This is to avoid leaving the distinction determined while the labelling of particular sorts of information as private-public is interrogated. For the instance of the breach of privacy for Cheryl Kernot, we are invited by virtue of two factors (at least) to reconsider the efficacy of the public-private distinction: the first, through considerations of gender: not only by virtue of Kernot being a woman politician, but through the historical associations of public-private categorisations with theories of gender; the second, through postmodern cultural perspectives of the scandal's readership as a popular culture one, in which the distinction between news and entertainment is, itself, in flux. Both of these contribute not only to a dispersal of the public-private dichotomy, but tie in neatly with the conception of the binary as fractal: In deploying different, contestatory discourses alongside the scandal and its reportage, we find various levels of privacy within privacy, and public within private.

3. Gender Discourses, Privacy and Politics

Gareth Evans received very little media coverage when Laurie Oakes revealed his affair with Kernot. Statements that never quite make it into print, but that circulate nevertheless through other sets of mediated communication, such as the narratives of gossip, rumour, innuendo and coffee-table chatter (as entries into the public sphere where it proves larger than the mediasphere), suggest that many

male politicians, including some serving concurrently with Kernot, were also having affairs that would—if revealed—be no less scandalous than the Kernot-Evans case. Much focus and reporting on women politicians continues to draw in that which conventionally is relegated to the private in ways that serve frequently to demean women politicians as women, and in ways by which male politicians are rarely surveilled. As Joshua Gamson (2001) has put it, ‘contemporary sex scandals are shocking less for the sexual behaviors involved than for the ways they replay stock female roles that enlightened societies often claim to have outgrown’ (p. 158).

One gendered reading of this case is less complex than the other, and it relies on the notion of particular hierarchies of credibility, which structure news sources such that spokesmen emerge as what Stuart Hall (1978) refers to as primary definers of topics (p. 58). In the situation of women politicians, the focus on the influence of the private, domestic realm is seen as one that is grounded in a patriarchal hierarchy of credibility, in which male primary definers come to define and reinforce, on the basis of patriarchal notions of credibility, what it is that might, could, or should be reported on women politicians. A sociological survey of news reportage might well reveal not only the ways in which these topics on women politicians come to be decided, but the ways in which such topics are relegated to particular journalists—frequently women—who, to further reinforce these definitions and credibilities, are more usually given stories relating to domestic or non-public political issues, reinforcing what has been identified as the patriarchal nature of media production systems (Dines & Humez, 1995, p. xix).

Such a position was strongly stated in the Kernot-Evans case by a number of commentators. For example, as the chairwoman of the Victorian Law Reform Commission, Professor Marcia Neave, put it: ‘I don’t believe a private matter of this kind should be aired . . . I believe there is no likelihood a man would have been treated in the same way as Cheryl’ (Wilmoth, 2002). Similarly, Anne Manne referred to the Kernot-Evans case as one of double-standards: ‘The real question is why with Kernot the media break the rules they keep for Canberra political blokes—that their sex and private lives are off limits.’ (Wilmoth, 2002). There is a discernible double-standard at play, in this analysis, although it should be noted that it is not universally applied to all women politicians—Margaret Thatcher, for example, was not plagued by political scandals involving various levels of disclosure of her private life and subsequent media research is less interested in the construction of her ‘private self’ and more in the relationship between ideology and execution of policy (Ellis, 1998, p. 170).

A more rigorous reading from this perspective would suggest that there is more at play than misogyny, sexism, and patriarchal sensibilities—whether conscious or not—in the operations of news media and news-dissemination practices. In the operations of ideology, one of the effective ways in which a stereotype or a reductive set of statements about a category of person is reinforced and, indeed, naturalised is through the assimilation of one binary with another. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) has pointed out, categories and oppressions of gender have structuring force for ideologies:

[W]e have now learned as feminist readers that dichotomies in a given text of culture as opposed to nature, public as opposed to private, mind as opposed to body, activity as opposed to passivity, etc. etc., are, under particular pressures of culture and history, likely places to look for implicit allegories of the relations of men to women; more that to fail to analyze such nominally ungendered constructs in gender terms can itself be a gravely tendentious move in the gender politics of reading. (p. 34)

Where the binaries masculine-feminine, male-female, and public-private are thus assimilated, we find an ideological concord in which women politicians are, not by conspiracy nor open misogyny, connected with the private in a way in which male politicians are not. Clearly, this has always depended on historical and local conditions—some women politicians have been targeted in ways other women politicians have not. Where we do find such targeting, however, it is frequently in connection with the sexual, where the sexual has been pre-determined as private. A sex scandal involving women is, on the one hand, considered part of an ideologically natural order, and on the other, ironically, a scandal determined to be of such magnitude that it deserves widespread public dissemination.

Comments by Anne Manne, as cited above, fit as much into this second-level gendered scenario as does this statement she was reported to have made:

Kernot is seen as the quintessential female—messy, emotional, not in command of herself, a victim of her sexuality. Kernot, the argument goes, left the Democrats not because she had political ideas and objectives of her own, but because she was under the power of a man. (Wilmoth, 2002).

Such a position suggests that what is conventionally relegated to the private for men by virtue of being considered irrelevant to their political decisions is more relevant to women, and therefore should be made available to the public sphere in order to further examine the decisions of women politicians. More so, the notion that she was under the power of a man suggests that the private sphere is repeated here through a patriarchal norm—if Kernot had a sexual relationship with a male politician, she was deemed to be under his power. In terms of the privacy invasion, then, the ethical position that is evoked in revealing the affair is not merely one of sexual scandal, but a question of Kernot’s ability to perform in public as a result of power relations occurring in the private. The same norms that condition a pre-contemporary understanding of the private relations between men and women is drawn into the public sphere to suggest that Kernot’s independence as a rational political being and public figure is to be questioned, due to a patriarchal power relationship.

Such gender-discursive positions as I have outlined them here do not necessarily put into question the public-private dichotomy as such. Rather, it continues the public-private distinction in such a way as to provide little value in determining an ethical position on the revelation of the affair. The private realm, equated with womanhood (Rooney, 2002, p. 141) and with notions of “true love” (Belsey, 1994, p. 74) is differentiated from the public sphere as the realm

of governance and statehood by those supporters of Kernot as I have cited them above. The objection, then, that they are offering is not one so much that questions the ethics of drawing this information into the public, but the actions of a journalist in examining how Kernot organises, determines, and conducts her private life. By corollary, the ethical question is more broadly one that interrogates how and why journalists judge women's private conduct in ways in which male politicians are not so questioned, as if a male politician is somehow more capable of maintaining that public-private distinction than women, who are thereby accused of letting their private wrongs (though more rarely their private rights) spill into their public and official capacities.

Where the above gendered position invokes certain liberal-feminist positions in order to articulate a sense of unfairness, whether through conscious misogyny or ideology, by suggesting that women politicians and their privacy are treated differently from the ways in which men are given their privacy, the public-private distinction remains in place, and the ethical questions revolve only around (a) privacy invasions determined by gender and (b) privacy invasions justified by means of spurious judgments on women's private conduct. A second, broad, gender-based critique of the debates around the Kernot-Evans affair is made possible by drawing on a slightly different feminist set of theories—noting that while liberal-feminisms of bourgeois equality are the most popular in public rhetoric, radical feminist and post-modern feminist understandings can often provide even stronger critical positions by putting into question such basic assumptions as, in this case, the logical constitutions of gender and privacy.

The question of gender-based relevancy returns here, but one of the arguments that can be made through alternative feminist positions is that the binary that allows male politicians to have a certain protection over their privacy, should not necessarily be considered the ideal by which women politicians' privacy invasions have been measured and condemned. The sort of position I have in mind here is, in some ways, the reverse of the first gender-based argument: Rather than thinking in terms of male politicians as public figures with protections against invasions of privacy while women have—unethically—not been so protected, it might prove that a stronger ethical position is invoked in seeing the realm of the private as that which does, indeed, strongly influence the individual decisions of politicians and public officials, regardless of gender. Such maxims as 'the personal is political', that circulated first in feminist cultural rhetoric but have more recently transferred into the public sphere suggest that there might well be important reasons by which the domestic, the private and secret enter the public sphere. Indeed, as John D'Emilio (1992) put it, such focus on 'the private world' in recent history has led to the transformation of topics such as marriage, fertility, sexuality into 'political issues and into questions of power and control, resistance and struggle' (p. 97).

The effect of such a critique is not merely to open questions about where we draw the boundary between private and public, nor only about how any form of boundary will operate. Rather, it questions also the valency of the very notions of private and public, puts them into their historical and cultural perspectives, and suggests that current understandings of public-private by which ethical

determinations are made are replications not only of a bourgeois ideological system but a phallogocentric one as well (if the two can be separated at all). In other words, what the Kernot case opens up is the question as to why not value the contribution her private sexual life makes to her public and official responsibilities as legislator? If her political transition from minor party to ALP was influenced by her sexual relationships, then why not say so? And, further, why not examine the role of the privately sexual and the sexually private for all male politicians? By suggesting that no clear separability between the sexual (or otherwise private or secret) and public responsibilities can ever be determined, either broadly as social injunction or specifically case-by-case, we politicise that which is conventionally considered the private. At the same time, we come to see how certain private activities are, on the one hand, influential in public sphere activity and thus more than valid to report and, on the other, traditionally valued differently (sexual affair as irresponsible; traditional family life as acceptable) whereby an unethical valuation of private activities has been used to determine what can and should be brought into the public realm. For Laurie Oakes to reveal this information is, then, an important contribution to public sphere understandings of the factors that may affect politicians' decision-making processes. On the other hand, it remains an inappropriate action in the sense that a sexual relationship should not be considered any more influential than, say, the Prime Minister and another, rival politician sharing gardening tips or having children in the same school.

4. Big B(r)other: Privacy, Politicians and Popular Culture

A further approach that must be taken into account in an attempt to determine ethical positions on the privacy of politicians in contemporary Western media cultures is motivated once again by putting into question the value of any sort of boundary (stable or blurred) between the public and the private. An approach that takes into account the ways in which discourses of privacy are conditioned by postmodern popular culture forms suggests not only that the public-private dichotomy is in question, but that the distinction itself is now far beyond us. By post-modern popular culture, I am talking about various conditions of entertainment production in contemporary media forms, constituted in the culture of contemporary late capitalism (Jameson, 1985). I am emphasising here the role of (media) consumption over (media) production, grounded in a notion of simulacra—where the media spectacle is taken to be more real than the banality of the real—and in which the differentiation between news (journalism, reporting) and entertainment have effectively been effaced along with the elitist distinction between high-art and the popular (Storey, 1993, p. 8).

What I want to suggest here is that questions around the ethics of privacy invasions of politicians can no longer be separated off, as it were, from the processes by which audiences read or use contemporary media texts. This has implications not only for the ways in which we view media texts, but for the ways in which we come to understand the distinction between public and private which, similarly, is effaced.

Journalism is, of course, never wholly distinct from entertainment (Dahlgren, 1992, p.16). Entertainment has, sometimes, been used as a justification for a breach

of privacy, on the basis that 'the public is interested in knowing—not that there is a public interest in knowing, but just that most people would like to know and would derive some pleasure from knowing' (Archard, 1998, p. 90). When gossip comes to be seen to constitute news (Kiernan, 1998, p. xiii), the spectatorship of political news is to be understood as being about pleasure, rather than information. This is the same pleasure-seeking that drives the high popularity of 'Reality TV' programs, particularly Big Brother, Survivor, and replicant versions of these, many of which have not only a television presence, but Web sites, fansites, discussion boards, and newspaper commentary, all of which are means by which to distribute information on contestants that would conventionally be relegated as private; and would conventionally be considered offensive if released about persons who had not entered such a program or competition.

However, as Gauthier has suggested, what sets politicians apart from entertainers, celebrities, and others whose private lives are routinely made public 'is the fact that they [politicians] are responsible for public policy, and for elected officials, the fact that they must be chosen by the majority of voters' (Gauthier, 2002, p. 30). What commentary on the ethics of the Kernot-Evans revelations has lacked is a discussion of the role, place, and public perception of parliament as an institution in our contemporary culture. Such perspectives allow us to take what could loosely be called an anarchist perspective: one that displaces the centrality of contemporary liberal-democratic forms of parliament and government office as having any natural or just role in the structuring of legislation, discourse, policy, identity, and power relations. Such a point suggests that governmental figures either should not have, or no longer have, a position of respect or note or responsibility that is different from other entertainers.

Why, then, should audiences be expected to respond to questions of privacy any differently from the ways in which we might ordinarily respond to the same spectacle of revelation and titillation from contestants on Big Brother or Survivor? This is a period in which we speak of public complacency over issues of governance and politics, in which political officials speak of minimal government and withdraw from management of various traditional social and economic authority, and in which we often publicly recognise that policy initiatives are likely to ostensibly effect our everyday lives in ways that are less visible than our viewing of a Reality TV program or other entertainment. The institution of public office with its specific sorts of protections on that which is determined as private is no longer to be seen as distinct from the questions of privacy around entertainers who have just as much (or as little) ostensible effect on our day-to-day lives. In that sense, the ethical sensibilities around the Kernot-Evans revelations have little justification for protection when considered from a broad, cultural audience perspective: They were an entertainment as much as any other Reality TV project. There is no reason to suggest that audience members who might, under one ethical paradigm, need information to make informed voting decisions, do not or should not take pleasure in the acquisition of that information. The very nature of what we have traditionally considered private—the sexual, the familial, that information that the figure decides not to disclose—is up for grabs, not by virtue of whatever

political import the information might have, as that may have little or no bearing from an audience perspective, but on the basis that the information might provide an audience with pleasure.

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