

Tekst 8

NEW STATESMAN

How politicians killed privacy

1 **A**re there now no limits to intrusion into the private lives of public figures? That Margaret Cook²⁾ should wish, whether as therapy or revenge, to dish the dirt on the Foreign Secretary is entirely understandable, as even her former husband seems to accept. Whether a leading publishing house, as well as our highest circulation Sunday broadsheet, should print such intimate memoirs is quite another matter. Once, politicians could rely on a decent lapse of time before their worst indiscretions were made public, so that they could lick any wounds away from the media glare. In retirement, even in opposition, the victim can retreat to some secret hideaway for a few days, until the fuss dies down. In office, he must face cameras, Commons and colleagues, knowing that the audience will have at least part of its mind on his sexual performance and drinking habits. Most of the inside political gossip of the interwar years (fairly innocuous, by present standards) remained unrevealed until the 1960s, when diaries such as those by Harold Nicolson and "Chips" Channon were published. Now, a minister is hardly inside a chauffeur-driven car before the inevitable biography is published. Politics has become showbusiness – just as royalty and sport did – and it is hard to see why anyone involved should, for reasons other than loyalty and honour, decline to perform. Charlie Whelan, for example, could earn far more for publishing intimate memoirs of Treasury ministers than he could ever hope to get as Gordon Brown's spin-doctor. Disgrace may itself prove to be a good career move, turning a politician into an overnight media star, as David Mellor and the Hamiltons found.

2 In three important senses, democratic politicians have only themselves to blame. First, they have turned politics into questions of lifestyle and personality. Candidates frequently use pictures of their spouses and children in their election literature, trying to project themselves as happy family men and women; they can hardly then complain if the press then reports that voters have been sold a false prospectus. It is all very well for Tony Blair to demand that we focus on the issues and policies, rather than on personalities. But when it came to the Bernie Ecclestone affair, and the suspicions about why Formula One motor-racing had been exempted from a tobacco advertising ban, it was the Prime Minister who, in effect, invited us to ignore the evidence and instead to trust his integrity. Image indeed has become central to modern politics not just in the packaging of policies, but also in the presentation of politicians, who are advised to lower their voices, change their hairstyles, adopt a more caring tone, and so on. The public may well think it is entitled to a glimpse of the person behind the image.

3 55 Second, since Cecil Parkinson resigned in the Sara Keays affair, the major parties have implicitly accepted press interest in private lives. It was, after all, a telephone call from Downing Street, warning of press revelations, that accelerated the collapse of the Cook marriage. Even if Mr Blair's press



spokesman did not issue an ultimatum – choose between your wife and your mistress – that was exactly the choice that, according to precedent, Mr Cook faced.

4 65 Third, politicians presume to prescribe other people's behaviour more and more. This is a point of particular importance to the left because, to some degree, it is a consequence of a larger public sector. If the state pours billions of pounds into education, it may reasonably insist that parents do their bit towards ensuring that tax-payers' money is spent efficiently – by getting their children to bed early, for example, or by not taking family holidays in term-time. If a health service is financed from the public purse, politicians may advise that we shall all get better value if we smoke less, drink less and exercise more. This indeed is one of the foundations of new Labour philosophy, which contends that rights must be accompanied by responsibilities, and which is most clearly illustrated in this week's announcement of a pilot scheme under which all benefit claimants, including the disabled, must attend "single gateway" interviews. A bit of finger-wagging and hectoring is inseparable from a state that provides more than minimum services. But the more politicians indulge themselves in this respect, the more they lay themselves open to scrutiny of their own lives.

5 It would be absurd to defend Margaret Cook's revelations on such grounds – if anything, the Foreign Secretary is less censorious of other people's behaviour than most politicians. The point, however, is that the boundary between private and public is more blurred than those who call for privacy laws usually acknowledge, and that politicians are largely responsible for the blurring.

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Margaret Cook wrote a book about the breakdown of her marriage to Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

■ Tekst 8 How politicians killed privacy

- 1p **25** ■ What criticism is implied in lines 1–9 ('Are ... matter.')
- Criticism of
- A Margaret Cook's personal vendetta.
 - B the current fashion of people throwing their private matters out into the open.
 - C the lack of respect for privacy shown by the publishing world.
- 1p **26** ■ Which word could be added after 'In office,' (line 15)?
- A after all,
 - B for that matter,
 - C however,
 - D therefore,
- 1p **27** □ Leg uit wat hier moet worden verstaan onder 'a false prospectus' (regel 41).
- 1p **28** ■ Which of the following does paragraph 2 focus on?
- Nowadays,
- A a politician's image serves to help advertise his policies.
 - B both reason and emotion play an important role in political decision-making.
 - C people depend on politicians' integrity to point the way to moral responsibility.
 - D politicians no longer have to hide the fact that they have a personality of their own.
- 'the major parties have implicitly accepted press interest in private lives' (lines 56–57)
- 1p **29** ■ How does paragraph 3 illustrate this statement?
- A The Prime Minister stood by and allowed the press to discredit Mr Cook.
 - B The Prime Minister took action when the media were on to Mr Cook's private troubles.
 - C The Prime Minister used press reports to remove Mr Cook from office.
- 1p **30** ■ With which of the following could 'If a ... more.' (lines 73–76) also begin?
- A However, if a health service...
 - B Instead, if a health service...
 - C Likewise, if a health service...
- 'A bit of finger-wagging and hectoring' (regels 82–83)
- 1p **31** □ Wie houden zich hiermee bezig en op welk verschijnsel doelt de schrijver?
- 1p **32** ■ Which of the following statements is true for paragraph 5?
- A It criticises Margaret Cook's action for its disregard of personal privacy.
 - B It summarises the writer's point of view with regard to politicians and privacy.
 - C It warns politicians to shield their private lives from publicity.