

# Dangerous liaisons

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IN 1973, in an interview with *The New York Times*, Henry Kissinger explained how a short, fat and — let's face it — not terribly good looking man like him always managed to have glamorous women on his arm: "Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac," the US secretary of state said.

What worked for Kissinger has worked for countless powerful men before and since.

Many women find proximity to political power alluring. So men who, were they accountants or bricklayers, would not attract a second glance, are able, as presidents, premiers or ministers, to attract young and beautiful companions.

But the powerful men have been slow to catch on that the rules have changed and that such relationships can now be hazardous for a politician's career.

The intrinsic inequality of these relationships makes them emotionally and politically precarious. The woman invariably needs to confide in (boast to?) someone. And if that someone turns out to be a treacherous Linda Tripp, then the politician, in this case president Bill Clinton, is suddenly in big trouble.

Or, after the initial flush of attraction and intrigue, the woman might start to feel used and exploited. The relationship can go nowhere and usually the politician is the one who ends it, leaving his former paramour feeling bitter and vengeful.

Once the dumped girlfriend might have licked her wounds in private. But these days of everyone wanting their 15 minutes of fame, she's likely to tell all.

Once the media might have shied away from reporting the tawdry details of these affairs. Not any more. They might frame the stories within pious debates about whether a politician's sex life is anyone's business but his family's, but they nevertheless are willing to report all, and sometimes to pay good money for a first-hand account.

Just this year we have had 26-year-old Kate Neill reveal to Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* details of the affair that ended the ministerial career of 53-year-old former NSW health minister John Della Bosca. And, now, Michelle Chantelois on television, telling us how South Australian Premier Mike Rann "had me" on his office desk.

There are some interesting similarities in the two stories (apart from the hardly surprising detail that several of the sexual encounters were alleged to have taken place in the politicians' offices).

Both women seemed naively offended that their lovers were egomaniacs. Della Bosca was "extremely egocentric", complained Neill.

“Mike Rann used me to stroke his own ego and pride,” Chantelois said. Hey, these guys are politicians. And middle-aged. And no doubt getting off on the fact they could attract younger women. Of course it was all about them. And both women now feel entitled to offer political opinions about their former lovers.

Della Bosca would make a terrible premier, Neill has said, long after the affair was over, and Della Bosca had retired to the backbench and reconciled with his wife.

“I don’t think [Rann] should be premier,” Chantelois said, because he acted shabbily towards her. But if these relationships were consensual, as both women say they were, and neither woman was an employee who might be construed to have been exploited or harassed, there really aren’t any grounds for saying these men are unfit for office — unless it can be established that their public duties were compromised by their private conduct.

Neill has alleged that Della Bosca cancelled government business to be with her. He has denied this, but he resigned so it was never tested. Rann categorically denies there was a relationship and therefore the point is moot as to whether he has breached his public duties.

“The allegations are totally and absolutely untrue,” he said after Chantelois made her claims. “I have not had sex with her.”

Furthermore, the television interview was “based on malice, it was deliberately designed to do me damage both personally and professionally”. He plans to sue Channel Seven, he says.

What is at issue now is whether Rann is lying and, if he is, whether that makes him unfit for office.

Chantelois’ account of how Rann supposedly coached her to lie to her husband, how he tricked his own wife into ringing the Chantelois household so her husband’s worries would be assuaged, and several of the other details have at least a superficial verisimilitude to them. But, at the same time, there are some glaring gaps. Why, if the affair ended in late 2005, did Chantelois wait four years before going public?

She said on television “money is not the issue”, but she nevertheless accepted a fee from Channel Seven and *New Idea*.

And why did Channel Seven, which had its chief political reporter do what should be a local Adelaide story, not insist on corroboration?

This is classic “he said, she said” and in such circumstances it will generally be the powerful man who prevails. But at a price.

The days of Henry Kissinger are over and now it is lose-lose. The young women will be hurt, but the man will be tainted, and in politics that is a stain that can never be washed away.

Anne Summers’ latest book, *The Lost Mother*, is published by Melbourne University Press.