

## Abbott's tale is grubbier than it seems

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Deceit helped Tony Abbott link the rediscovery of his son with the abortion crusade, writes Anne Summers.

Has Tony Abbott's media manipulation of the story of his reunion with the son he gave up for adoption 27 years ago irrevocably altered the terms of the debate on abortion? Judging by the comments I have been hearing all week, a lot of people think so. And many of them are angry and dispirited by what they see as the cynical exploitation for political gain of matters that ought best to have remained private.

The Health Minister says the first words his son said to him were, "Thanks for having me". For someone who has spent months successfully putting abortion back onto the political agenda, such words must have seemed heaven-sent. "It was a great relief," Abbott writes in *The Bulletin* this week, "that my son's attitude was not resentment at being given up for adoption but gratitude at being given his chance at life."

Despite the search for his natural parents being initiated by his son, Abbott is now able to claim the moral high ground on abortion in a way that was not possible previously. This is not ideology, he can now argue, this is a life saved. By implication, everyone can do what he did. How much has this increased the degree of difficulty for pro-choicers who want to maintain the status quo on abortion?

The Sunday before last, just a week before the story about Abbott and his son became public on Channel Nine news, I attended a screening of *Vera Drake*, the moving Mike Leigh film about the backyard abortionist with a heart of gold who is ultimately imprisoned for "helping" women in trouble. As the film ended, there was the sound of sobs and snuffles but there was something else, too: a discernible anger that we might be forced to return to the days of illegal and dangerous abortion. As the lights came up, you could hear Abbott's name reverberate around the cinema. People, mostly women, were cursing him.

Many still are, but now they feel the need to be a little more circumspect. All week we have been watching the incredible, and indeed incredibly moving, story of the young Canberra ABC sound recordist who turns out to be the natural son of the minister he sometimes wired up for press conferences. Often, they were just metres away from each other, never knowing they were related. Now the truth is out, and all week Abbott has been baring his soul on the subject of loss and grief and the unexpected joy of having been reunited with the son he never expected to meet.

Abbott has become a sympathetic figure. He has confessed to being an inadequate partner to his pregnant girlfriend. He's even admitted, to the ABC's Kerry O'Brien, that he was "a pretty ordinary helpmate to my wife" when, years later, she had her first baby. He has traipsed through the TV channels, self-deprecatingly shrugging his shoulders, charmingly admitting that he was "callow" and expressing gratitude that he now has a second chance to do the fatherly thing for his adult son.

The subtext in all this, of course, is that none of this would be happening if Abbott and his girlfriend, Kathy Donnelly, had chosen abortion back in 1977 instead of giving the baby up for adoption. And, of course, who would not agree when we look at lovely, laid-back Daniel O'Connor, a nice bloke whom many people cheered when they learnt that his first reaction upon learning the identity of his father was to swear.

But this is not the point. Not all adoption stories have such seemingly happy endings, and not all women who find themselves with unwanted pregnancies feel able to have the baby and then give it away. Real life is not as rosy as this week's Mills and Boon-like media saga would have us believe. Even in Abbott's case, the truth is much harsher than he would have us know. The real story of the week was how Abbott managed the media to ensure the story got out with a spin that made him look good - and gave a big leg-up to his mission to end abortion in Australia.

Abbott has characterised what happened in 1977 as being the mutual choice of a couple of Catholic teenagers who were too immature to marry. The reality was somewhat different. Abbott has admitted he was "callow" (I think he meant callous) in going on a planned holiday just after they learnt Donnelly was pregnant. What he has not said was that Donnelly wanted him to marry her, that he refused and, as result, even though she was seven months pregnant, she dumped him.

The whole story is recounted in considerable depth and with a great deal of sensitivity to all parties in this week's *Bulletin*. A Walkley-award winning journalist, Julie-Anne Davies, got a tip some weeks ago about Abbott being reunited with his son. She approached Abbott, who confirmed it but asked her to hold off publishing the story in order to give him time to talk to relevant people. The magazine could have run the story last week but agreed to Abbott's request. He then betrayed them.

Last Sunday afternoon, just after Davies had filed her story, Abbott rang his good friend Piers Ackerman, columnist for *The Daily Telegraph*, and alerted him to the fact that *The Bulletin* was running the story on Wednesday. Late that afternoon Donnelly rang Davies, extremely upset, to say she'd had a call from Ackerman. Abbott has told *The Bulletin* he had no idea Ackerman would run with the story the next day; he was reminded by *The Bulletin* of the deal they had and claims to have rung Ackerman a second time and also to have spoken to his editor, Campbell Reid, and asked them not to publish the story.

Once *The Bulletin* realised it was in danger of being gazumped, it gave stablemate Channel Nine a heads-up and dropped enough of Davies's story onto the magazine's website to be able to claim it as their scoop.

The next morning, readers of News Ltd papers around the country enjoyed the unusual treat of a folksy front-page story from Ackerman - his first page one since 2001 - the spin on which set the tone for the radio and television frenzy that followed. The story stressed the "Thank you for having me", the supposedly mutual decision to adopt and the extraordinary coincidence of Abbott's son working in Parliament House. It was a heartwarming and feelgood rendition of a story that was told with somewhat more complexity in *The Bulletin*.

But on Monday, while *The Bulletin* was still writing headlines and laying out its package of stories, Abbott was doing the media rounds transforming himself in the public eye from political head-kicker into father of the year.

Abbott pleaded for people not to use his son in the abortion debate, thus making the link himself. He did not have to say this. He did not have to say anything. He could have claimed it was a private matter and refused to talk to the media. He did not.

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