
Media Darlings and Falling Stars: Celebrity and the Reporting of Political Leaders

Kathie Muir

University of Adelaide

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Abstract

The combined influences of three current trends in news reporting: tabloidization, personalisation, and the commercial pressures of competing for declining audiences, together with the increasingly mediated nature of politics, has had a marked change on the way politics is performed and reported in most Western democracies. Whilst leaders such as Prime Minister Blair and former President Clinton are seen as skilled exponents of celebrity politics, for others the personalisation of politics can detract from media assessments of them as 'serious' politicians. This is a particular risk for women leaders. Using the example of the short-lived leadership Natasha Stott Despoja of the Australian Democrats, who was seen, for a while, as a master of image politics and achieved the status of a minor political celebrity, this paper explores the degree to which image-conscious politicians are vulnerable to attacks by political commentators and political rivals for valuing style over substance.

Introduction¹

The phenomenon of female political leaders remains a novelty in many western democracies and thus an object of media fascination. The persistent representation of women political leaders as an anomaly and as notable for their difference more than for their policies, experience or performance, poses particular challenges for women leaders. Combined with current tabloid trends in news reporting such as personalisation, the emphasis on the visual spectacle and on the personal lives of public figures, particularly celebrities, women leaders can be at risk of not having their political performance reported seriously (Ross 2002; Sparks 2000). Using the example of Natasha Stott Despoja, leader of the Australian Democrats² from 2001 to 2002, who was seen, for a while, as a master of image politics, this paper explores the degree to which image-conscious politicians, particularly women, are

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vulnerable to attacks by political commentators and political rivals for valuing style over substance. The paper focuses in particular on media reports that criticised Stott Despoja for being too concerned with her own image. These reports are taken from the period of her leadership of the Australian Democrats in 2001 and 2002. Whilst the reporting of Stott Despoja prior to her election as party leader had been predominantly (but by no means universally) characterised by reports that demonstrated a fascination with her appearance, youth and media skills, once she was elected party leader the balance shifted to a far more critical tone. This was particularly noticeable after the 2001 election. This paper concentrates on reports that best demonstrate the ways in which gender, style, youth and media awareness were deployed as criticisms of her capacity and suitability to lead the party. It questions whether the celebrity turn in politics may perhaps make, particularly minor celebrity politicians, more vulnerable to political attack or attack through the media.

Natasha Stott Despoja: packaging the leader as star

Natasha Stott Despoja was first appointed in 1995, at age 26, to the Australian Senate to fill a casual vacancy for the Australian Democrats. She was elected Deputy Leader of the Australian Democrats in 1997 and as Leader on April 7 2001.³ She resigned on August 21 2002, after being undermined by members of her own party and receiving some virulent attacks in the press. During the period prior to her election as leader, Stott Despoja had received an unusual amount of media attention for a minor party Senator. Her physical attractiveness, her youth, her personal style, her articulate and intelligent presentation and her willingness to engage with the media were key factors in the media interest in her career from its inception. Indeed, her media profile and high public appeal were key factors in her election to the leadership. Her tastes in popular music, in film and television, and her familiarity with youth lifestyle choices and issues led to her being characterised (not entirely favourably) as the voice and face of Generation X. This characterisation was also cemented by her official role as the Democrats spokesperson on youth. Stott Despoja was fully aware of the potential of popular, as opposed to traditional, news media for reaching voters who were turned off by contemporary politics. She was committed to being personally accessible and to making politics more accessible to those who felt disenfranchised by traditional politics and the factional system that dominated major Australian political parties. She was reportedly passionate about this as a cause: 'Natasha Stott Despoja is a woman in love with an idea: to make politics more palatable for Generations X and Y' wrote Greg Callaghan in the *Australian* (Callaghan 1996). Indeed, she explored various means to reach these segments of the electorate, including creating a chatty, personalised and image-rich web site, participating in interviews and make-overs in women's magazines and in various popular television and radio shows. These strategies built a cult of personality around Stott Despoja and

contributed to her very high approval rating but also triggered criticisms that she was more interested in her image than serious policy content.

The media profile of Stott Despoja can be connected to several trends in the interplay between the media and the performance of politics. Doris Graber's research on United States media consumption shows the extent to which Generation X and younger viewers are moving away from newspapers and traditional forms of news (Graber 2001). Newspaper circulations in most western countries are falling and audiences for prime-time television news are also falling (Brand et al. 2001; Underwood 2001). As traditional coverage of politics no longer 'rates' highly, increasingly competitive economic pressures experienced by media organisations leads them to adopt formats, content and production values that are proven to attract audiences, particularly the much sought after youth sector (Della Carpini and Williams 2001, 167; Meyer 2002; Underwood 2001). Politicians (and their increasing numbers of media advisers) seeking coverage for their party's policies and their own electoral success are increasingly aware of the value of non-traditional media coverage. They are aware of the potential to attract media interest if they can present as 'different' in some way and if they can create an interesting visual angle to a story. Politicians such as Stott Despoja who are willing and able to connect with different sectors of the electorate are increasingly valuable.

Developing creative strategies of media engagement are central to political success in the era of mediated politics but they are especially important for backbenchers, and for minor parties and their politicians who otherwise struggle to rate as newsworthy and to achieve recognition. The requirements of contemporary media, especially television's need for news to be entertaining, have transformed the nature and shape of contemporary politics (Altheide and Snow 1991; Grattan 1998; Meyer 2002). Print media, too, is operating in an increasingly competitive environment and experiencing declining audiences. One of the responses of many so-called 'quality' or broadsheet newspapers has been to reduce the extent of their coverage of political and 'hard' news and to adopt some of the characteristics formerly associated with tabloid reporting.⁴ Such characteristics, sometimes referred to as a development of 'tabloidization', include sensationalised headlines, personalised stories, a focus on celebrity, increased attention to the private lives of public figures, and increased focus on the visual (Sparks 2000; Turner 1999, 71-85).

Such developments have arguably produced a demand for politicians to perform in the form of thirty-second sound bites, to participate in fresh and folksy photo opportunities and to design media events. Politicians, together with their media advisers, strive to produce themselves in this way to maximize their media exposure and also to minimise the extent to which their policies and actions are subjected to close scrutiny. As Graeme Turner observes: 'it is in their [politicians] interests to be as cooperative as possible to maintain a continuing relationship'

with the media (2004, 36). However, there are risks attached to these strategies and these risks are central to the tensions surrounding Stott Despoja's election to the Democrats leadership and her resignation just sixteen months later.

As Joshua Gamson has observed, 'celebrity is a primary contemporary means to power, privilege, and mobility' (1994, 186). Not only do audiences recognise this but they admire a 'celebrity's capacity to achieve, maintain, and manage a public image: if fame is power, the capacity to achieve it is an even greater one' (Ibid, 186). This works not only for celebrities who achieve fame through the entertainment industries but equally so for political celebrities from the mega-stars, such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, to the minor or transient luminaries such as Natasha Stott Despoja. Audiences and voters are fascinated with the transformation they see occurring before them, wondering how much power political celebrities will win, speculating how long these political stars will hold their place on the pedestal, and what will bring them crashing down. The making and un-making of political celebrities is both a spectator and participative sport in which voters have a key role, not only through the ballot box but also increasingly through opinion polling, talk-back radio and other mechanisms such as vote lines in which audiences can ring or text their views to media outlets on the appeal of politicians and their views on particular issues (Ibid).

Politicians and their media staff are acutely aware of the potent, albeit fickle, appeal of celebrity and the value of the powerfully appealing image. Whilst many politicians agree to participate in a range of media stunts certain requests ring alarm bells particularly for women politicians who are often acutely aware of the costs of trivialising or sexualised media reporting. In a book she wrote about her experiences as media adviser to Stott Despoja, Alison Rogers records the launch of the Australian Democrat's environment policy on a tropical Barrier Reef beach during the 2001 election campaign, an event which illustrates this dilemma well. Rogers, Stott Despoja and Queensland Senator Andrew Bartlett, the Party's environment spokesperson, had with them several media representatives including a journalist and photographer from the national Murdoch owned, *Australian* newspaper. Rogers (2004) provides a fascinating insight into the negotiations over the photo opportunity that would increase the chances of the policy being covered in the media. The media coverage generated by the launch did lead to criticisms of Stott Despoja for 'cavorting' on a beach in her 'bikini' and playing up to the cameras.⁵

The *Australian* journalist [and] photographer were keen to get a picture of Natasha in the water in her bathers to accompany the story. Natasha was horrified. She was not going to be photographed in her bathers, she did not want to appear as a pin-up girl, and I was to make absolutely sure it didn't happen. After some tense negotiating we had her in the water with only her

head showing above the waterline and with a snorkel and mask on top of her head.

Then the cameraman wanted a shot of her walking along the beach in her bathers. No way. Once again we had to work out something that was going to give them the pictures that they wanted without her appearing as a beach babe... We could hardly bring the media out to a beautiful place on the Barrier reef and expect them to run a yarn without letting them take photos of Natasha in the water or in some way associating her with the water. The *Australian* photographer put it bluntly: if he didn't get a good picture, the story was much less likely to run. (Ibid, 109-10)

This kind of mediation of politics is intrinsically linked to the processes Graeme Turner (2004) calls 'celebrisation'. Celebrities help sell media products, news and gossip about celebrities is essential to the sale of newspapers, magazines, television programs. This goes for political celebrities, too, and is part of the logic that is contributing to the increasing mediation of contemporary politics. Celebrities attract audiences, as Turner explains: '[c]elebrity gossip dominates the mass magazine market ... and it has changed the content of television news' (2004, 46). As these processes have changed the content of television and print news, so too have they influenced the way politicians and their media strategists attempt to manage public relations and media images. Karen Ross and Annabelle Sreberny refer to this as 'the tyranny of telegeney' (2000, 88). This escalating role of public relations, image management and spin in shaping contemporary politics have been well-documented (by amongst others, Bennet and Entmann 2001; Corner 2003; Della Carpini and Williams 2001; Grattan 1998; Meyer 2002; Street 2003; and Young 2004).

One of the key issues to do with personalisation of news reporting, as Colin Sparks points out, centres on the question of the ways in which 'individual personalities are used and the ways in which they illuminate, or obscure, more general social issues' (2000, 26). Personalisation can reduce politicians (particularly women or those from minority groups) to stereotypes of difference and otherness, thus confirming the norm of politics as grey, boring, heterosexual and male. The ways in which 'politics has become... a performance art in which considerations of style, presentation and marketing are equal to, if not greater in importance than, content and substance' creates particular dilemmas for women politicians (McNair 1995, 189). Women, particularly women in public life, have always struggled to be judged on their performance, their achievements and their substance rather than their appearance. The increasing focus on the personal lives and presentational style of politicians means that for women 'their sex is always on display' (Ross and Sreberny 2000, 88).

The media logic that produces politics as 'boring' seeks out politicians who present human faces, are younger, cooler, sexier, more colourful or less guarded than the

usual. This logic places value on politicians who exemplify visible difference, such as the first woman or first Aboriginal to lead a party, the youngest leader, someone who can be produced or framed in media logic as an exceptional candidate, one who breaks through barriers. Pippa Norris aptly described this emphasis on women's difference as providing 'a splash of color in the photo-op[portunity]' (1996, 149). The emphasis on politicians as celebrities and on personalities and human interest angles to news stories, that is both characteristic of tabloid reporting and an influence on nearly all styles of news reporting, works together with the traditional framing of women politicians as 'different' from the masculine norm to limit the range of ways in which women leaders are represented. The relentless media need for an appealing and 'different' photograph and the focus on the personal is both a boon and a curse for women politicians.⁶ Their difference will generally gain them attention but it is nearly always framed around their gender difference.

Natasha Stott Despoja's performance of political competencies

Natasha Stott Despoja performed a particular set of political competencies, both as Democrats Leader and Deputy Leader, which differ in significant ways to the usual models of political leaders. In common with many leaders, she was articulate, assured and knowledgeable about a wide range of policy issues. However, she was also competent in contemporary popular culture fields such as music and entertainment, she understood youth issues and spoke about them as a peer, or recent peer rather than as a concerned parent which is the tone adopted by many political leaders. She performed conviction politics extremely well. In this her credibility was assisted by the status of her party, the Democrats had held the balance of power in the Senate since 1983 and their slogan had been 'keeping the bastards honest'⁷. Her own record on refusing to vote with her Party in support of the Goods and Services Tax in 1999 was seen as both principled and popular, for the GST was deeply unpopular. The decision of then Democrats leader, Meg Lees, to make a deal with the Howard government to support the legislation has been widely assessed as a strategic mistake that has cost the party dear in terms of public support and trust (Baird 2004). Many media reports at the time portrayed Stott Despoja's stance as petulant, immature, spoilt, including through headlines such as 'Suicide Blonde' and cartoons of her as a baby sucking a dummy. The editorials in the mainstream press strongly supported the GST but to many in the electorate her actions were close to heroic.⁸ Also relevant to her status as a conviction politician was her passion for contemporary issues close to the experiences of young voters, including her opposition to raises in University fees and support for issues such as abortion, and maternity leave (she unsuccessfully introduced a Private Member's Bill for paid maternity leave in 2002). Stott Despoja was also a proud feminist performing an assertive, articulate and competent femininity that embodied the valuable contribution that young women could make to public life.

She was acutely aware of her responsibilities as a role model for other young women and how her successes or failures might impact upon their future opportunities.

Stott Despoja performed competently as a politician across a wide variety of venues including in the traditional 'sphere of political institutions and processes' such as the Senate and behind the scenes in Senate committee work and in her internal party work (Corner 2003, 72). She also performed in the sphere of 'public and popular' particularly through what Corner (Ibid, 77) calls 'interactive performance', the mutual negotiation over photo-opportunities, the granting of interviews and so on. In addition, she performed extensively in the entertainment-based media, which Corner distinguishes as a separate mode of performance. Stott Despoja was good media talent and had a very high appeal to the youth demographic. As noted earlier, her decision to appear on such shows was at least in part due to their appeal to the key groups of constituents, women and young people, who were crucial to the Democrats' electoral success and were at the same time least likely to engage with traditional news media. Media attention had established her as a minor political celebrity well before she was elected Deputy-Leader of the Democrats and it grew from that time. Her presence in this sphere came to symbolise, for some viewers, the possibility of a different kind of politics to the traditional, and some would say moribund, two-party system. Her celebrity status was in part, associated with that symbolic possibility of transformation. It was celebrity status achieved through an iconic mediation of the political self that the media facilitated (Ibid). Indeed, the media actively courted Stott Despoja's participation, aware that her popularity would swell their ratings.

John Street (2003, drawing on the work of P. David Marshall 1997) writes about the process whereby politicians come to symbolise more than mere politics for audiences/people through the 'affective functions' of these relationships. Stott Despoja did provoke an emotional response, particularly with sections of the audience/people who were exasperated with and cynical about pragmatic politics. Her achievement of political leadership signified particular possibilities for change and worked on an emotional or cultural level that was outside of the boundaries of traditional politics. This is, arguably, one of the reasons that her public appeal was resented and mocked by some of the senior press gallery and political journalists. Her public standing was not founded on the opinion of political journalists of her merit. Instead it was based on her popular appeal to certain sections of the electorate and her enormously high national recognition factor.⁹

Many of the qualities and characteristics that were Stott Despoja's distinguishing characteristics lay outside traditional masculine definitions and practice of politics. Previous female leaders of political parties in Australia and the state and federal level were conventional, middle-aged women who were also mothers.¹⁰ Their

images were strongly associated with a matter-of-fact competence and a conservative feminine style of dress, which in several cases was condemned as 'frumpy'. Their sexuality was underplayed and their difference was represented more as that associated with 'life experience' than that of style. Natasha, young, single, blonde, petite and attractive was seen as courting attention through unconventional or fashionable presentational means. Examples include the hype over her wearing of Doc Martens shoes, her make-over photos in women's magazine *Cleo* in a designer silk evening dress (that were widely reproduced in the daily press), her launch of Democrat election t-shirts designed by funky Australian surfwear brand Mambo, and the beat-up over photos of her on a Cairns beach at the launch of the Democrats' environment policy wearing cargo pants and a halter-neck crop-top (see discussion above). Indeed, whether she did strategically court attention through her fashion choices or not, the media were fascinated with her image and its powerful contrast to politics-as-usual, particularly during the 2001 election campaign that was dominated by grim, boring security and economic issues. Stott Despoja could be seen as a captive of her difference and her celebrity status, *unable* to perform politics-as-usual even when she might have thought it strategic to do so. Not only did the media not pay attention to the *content* of the Democrats' policies (largely due to the fact that as a minor party they would have no chance to implement them), but they were not interested in other Democrat politicians even the Deputy-Leader Aden Ridgeway, the first Indigenous Australian to hold a party leadership position. Media demand for colourful and interesting images and a personal angle to political stories framed the reporting of the Australian Democrats and their leader as much as any conscious decisions taken by Stott Despoja and her media advisers.

The paper now turns to a discussion of specific examples of the reporting of Stott Despoja's leadership of the Democrats to explore the ways in which style was opposed to substance in discussions of her performance and achievements. In particular, it explores the ways this opposition became a definitive characteristic of *her* leadership despite it being an element now present in the political performances of all leaders.

'Star candidate', 'beguiling clothes horse', or 'in your face blonde'? Media assessments of Stott Despoja's leadership

Reports of Stott Despoja's election as Democrats leader in April 2001, from the 2001 election campaign (October to November 2001) and then from the period leading up to her resignation as leader in 2002 (June to August 2002) provide insights into the ways in which celebrity and style were variously deployed by media commentators and political opponents, in their praise, criticism or commentary on Stott Despoja's leadership term.

Australian Labor Party backbencher (later to become leader), Mark Latham, attacked Stott Despoja at the time of her election for her 'celebrity' profile, accusing her of being 'more interested in celebrity politics than policy substance.'¹¹ Writing in a column in the national *Financial Review* newspaper he said of her website and its links to sites such as the 'Ultimate Natasha' site and the NSD fan club that: '[n]ever before has Australian public life encountered egoism and self-promotion of this kind' (Latham 2001).

Former Democrats leader Cheryl Kernot, however, writing in the *Australian* newspaper argued that the fact that under the Stott Despoja and Aden Ridgeway's leadership 'celebrity has equal billing with policy' was a *major asset* for her former party, especially for wooing the votes of younger voters.

These are people who, have been weaned on *Sesame Street* and graduated to *Good News Week* and *Ally McBeal*, now prefer celebrity and humour to boring suits arguing about old politics.

These are the voters who identify vicariously with political celebrities, because they have been utterly turned off by the way politics is currently conducted and by its failure to engage them on the issues of the day...

Talk about the dream team for the symbolism of a generation and jaded older idealists: power-sharing by women (and young ones at that), reconciliation, post-school education, the environment, animal welfare and the challenges of new technology such as gene technology and the consequences of that for 21st century ethics. (Kernot 2001)

Stott Despoja was asked about the representations of herself as a political celebrity and media manipulator by a number of media commentators, who themselves participated in this construction. On the day Stott Despoja was elected Democrats leader Australian Broadcasting Commission television current affairs journalist, Tony Jones, asked her if she manipulated the media through her sex-appeal. It was a question that ignored the media's own pursuit of Stott Despoja because of her visual appeal, her gender, age and stylistic difference from the majority of Australian politicians.

TONY JONES: You once wrote that manipulation of the media by women is to get your voices heard. Does that include sex appeal, for example?

SENATOR NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA: No, I think that people have viewed me over the years as more a novelty, a combination of being the youngest ever woman to get into Parliament and being accessible through different media, whether it's through 'Lateline', writing for the 'Australasian Science Journal' or whether it's appearing on 'Good News Week'. I think my detractors find it more interesting to talk about celebrity.

Ordinary Australians recognise that this is a way to get through the political message.

I don't engage in any kind of debate or discussion or involvement in any medium that involves compromising my policies or ideals but I do engage in those media that enable me to promote the core Democrat principles and philosophies. (Lateline 2001)

The on-air introduction to this story provides an even more revealing example of the way the two categories of celebrity style and substance are opposed as being mutually exclusive. It reads:

The ascension of Natasha Stott Despoja has renewed debate about the very fundamentals of political life in this country. For some, with her celebrity persona, she's the kind of politician who can engage young people — get them back into the political process. If that's true, Senator Stott Despoja could lead a new style of politics where traditional notions of right versus left are meaningless. On the other hand, her critics claim she's simply style over substance, devoid of real policies and the leader of a party that will never be in government. Who's right? (Lateline 2001)

Sixteen months later when Stott Despoja was forced to resign her party's leadership these constructs, together with the familiar frame of prominent female leader falling from the pedestal, were even more prevalent in framing media discussions of her term as leader. Writing around the time of her resignation senior political journalist for the tabloid *Daily Telegraph* and president of the Canberra Parliamentary Press Gallery, Malcolm Farr (2002) assessed her performance in the following way:

Everyone seemed to adore Natasha Stott Despoja. The popular TV panel shows had standing invitations for her to appear. Photographers thanked the lens gods that they had a presentable politician to shoot.

At universities the students delighted in having someone roughly their own age and political temperament running a party. She was perky, pert and progressive.

Everybody adored her. Until, that is, it came to actually voting for the Australian Democrats she led...

Allan Ramsey, another senior, influential political journalist, totally dismissed Stott Despoja's capacities building his critique around her femininity and her media profile. Writing in the broadsheet newspaper *Sydney Morning Herald* in June 2002, during the Democrats leadership tensions that shortly afterwards led to her resignation, he accused Stott Despoja of making 'a spectacle of herself', and of being a 'media-created political misfit'. He also compared her with tennis player Anna Kournikova arguing 'each is a beguiling clothes horse with minimum talent

in what they do for a living' (Ramsay 2002a). A month later Ramsay again dismissed her as a mere 'flibbertigibbet leader [with] personal ambitions that exceed her competence but not her ego', as 'insecure', and as a 'young in your face blonde' (Ramsay 2002b).

The attacks by senior political journalists some of whom, such as Ramsay and Farr, are respected members of the Australian parliamentary Press Gallery, demonstrate the deep tensions between mediated politics and traditional political reporting. Political leaders and leadership contenders are increasingly (although not universally) expected to have celebrity appeal, to perform for cameras and produce sound bites on demand. However, celebrity, and in particular political celebrity, is fickle and both audiences and media commentators can withdraw support without notice.

As Turner argues 'the ambiguous and ambivalent discursive formations within which celebrities must define themselves make it hard, simply, to take them seriously in this context. ...the danger for the politicians who visibly "celebritises" their self-representation is that they won't be taken seriously' (2004, 134). This was exactly the fate of Stott Despoja. She was accused of being vain, image-obsessed, of having a monstrous ego, of being spoilt and petulant. She was reduced to the celebrity representations the media had beseeched her to participate in.

After walking into the Senate in Doc Martens – a symbol of middle-class youth rebellion – Stott Despoja soon became as famous for her appearances on frivolous television shows like *Good News Week* as she was for any policy position...

It was a persona that critics used against her – it was said she was all style and no substance, especially when the cult of celebrity engulfed her always-on-show love life. (Atkins 2002, *Courier Mail*)

Stott Despoja's skilful engagement with the media, particularly her appeal to the youth demographic, together with her visible difference from the traditional face/s of politics led to widespread media interest. In turn this led to a very high public recognition of her and to a high public approval particularly amongst women and young people. Her success in merging politics and popular culture, which led to her being accorded the status of a minor political celebrity, however, also made her vulnerable to criticisms of narcissism. The media logic that demands politicians engage in populist and style politics also, in this case, positioned style and substance as binary opposites. Stott Despoja was framed as that desirable 'spot of colour' but was then not allowed to perform – or not credited with performing – any other political competencies, her media appeal became a limitation.

The media did not have to frame Stott Despoja in this way, nor did Stott Despoja perform a populist style of leadership continuously, despite what some critics claimed. In the lead-up to the 2001 election 'Stott Despoja did 32 policy launches, 38 set-piece speeches and more than 80 media conferences and interviews' (Seccombe 2001). In these ways, she made a serious and significant contribution to public debate and to policy development. In the Australian Senate she was a hard-working contributor to debate and drafted a number of significant pieces of legislation including on stem-cell research and maternity leave.

Thomas Meyer argues that politicians can only 'control the media by submitting to them' bowing to the 'ineluctable pressure to stage manage political events' (2002, 53). This suggests that political interests and media interests are complementary. However, the reporting of Natasha Stott Despoja's term as leader of the Australian Democrats provides a key example of the ways in which media interests may diverge from political interests. It also demonstrates one of the limitations to the agency that politicians have in such a deal, particularly those who are aspiring to power rather than those, such as U.S. President Bill Clinton or U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair, who have both the authority of world-power leadership together with high popular appeal.

As exemplified through Stott Despoja's career, politicians' capacity to manage their media image and political events is both tenuous and fragile and can easily be destabilised by political opponents, including those within their own party, and by the media itself. Furthermore, the 'media can deny their own logic by deconstructing the self-presentations of political actors in a way that serves media interests' (Ibid, 58). Eventually the deconstruction of Natasha Stott Despoja's leadership and image became more newsworthy to certain sections of the media than her 'star' qualities were. This transformation was triggered by the tensions within her own party, which quite literally self-destructed as supporters of the previous leader, Meg Lees, waged a campaign to discredit Stott-Despoja.¹² They deployed her celebrity status, public and media appeal as weapons against her, opposing celebrity against credibility and style against substance.

As the careers of several other female Australian politicians demonstrate there is a strong pattern that women politicians are placed on pedestals and then torn down. Some have described it as the 'golden-girl syndrome' (Else-Mitchell 2000) others as the 'pedestal-effect' arguing that when women fall the media treat them more harshly (van Acker 2002). Former West Australian Premier, Carmen Lawrence has described it as the 'Madonna-Whore' syndrome (Wallace 1995). It is arguable that these patterns would be less influential if celebrity politics were not so firmly entrenched as the dominant form of contemporary political performance and reporting.

Characteristics of tabloidization such as the focus on the personal, the emphasis on the visual, the relentless pursuit of the photo-opportunity or spectacular media event, and the audience appeal of celebrity all contribute to the pressure on politicians to conform to media demands. At the same time politicians try to manage their own representations in ways that are favourable to both their parties and their own leadership credentials. Whilst many traditional political news reporters may profess to despise these trends, their editors, their colleagues, and frequently they, themselves, participate in these practices despite at the same time condemning certain politicians who try to use them for political advantage.

Conclusion

As Jon Simons observes, the very same political elites who lament the “dumbing down” of politics such that personalities prevail over politics and style over substance’ (2003, 183), themselves pursue tabloid media approval. Australian Prime Minister Howard’s favourite newspaper is the Murdoch-owned tabloid Sydney *Daily Telegraph* and he frequently releases new policies, or defends existing ones, through its pages and on the country’s highest rating talk radio program rather than through the traditional means of press conferences. Every time Howard poses with the Australian troops, at a war memorial, or with a victorious Australian Olympic team he engages with style politics (Greenfield and Williams 2001). Likewise, when the ALP leader Mark Latham chose to be introduced by his glamorous wife at the ALP policy launch in the lead-up to the 2004 election, he engaged in style – and celebrity – politics. The participation in these media events by the leaders of Australia’s two major political parties did not diminish their creditability with the majority of political journalists. However, for Natasha Stott-Despoja the ‘style over substance’ mantra was deployed in increasingly disparaging fashion to undermine her and eventually contributing to force her resignation. Her engagement in style politics was purported to be evidence of a monstrous ego that expressed itself through narcissism, promoting herself over the party. The Stott Despoja case has some specific features: most notably that the party was rent with bitter feuding over the leadership with both the former leader, Meg Lees, and her supporters, unable to accept her defeat or to move on for the good of the party. Their participation in a campaign of leaks both to the mainstream media and on-line political gossip newsletter Crikey.com was a central factor in the way Stott Despoja was pilloried in the press. However, a key group of senior political journalists, several of whom were influential members of the press gallery, promoted these criticisms. Their adoption of the same terms and their deployment of them in ways that diminished Stott Despoja’s standing and achievements gave both oxygen and authority to the actions of the disgruntled Lees supporters.

In common with most contemporary political leaders Stott Despoja did engage in style politics, and to a degree her engagement was very successful. Her recognition

as leader was high, she remains one of the most individually popular members of the Senate, and her image as a conviction politician has not been destroyed. Her record in drafting legislation and in other Senate business is not widely known, nor is it compared to senators from other parties. The crippling factor in the media coverage of Stott Despoja's leadership was the way celebrity style and politics were opposed as mutually exclusive categories in a way that signals danger for other young, and particularly, *female* politicians. To engage with celebrity politics, or to develop the status of a political celebrity, is to place oneself at risk of inviting the phenomenon of tearing down the tall poppies, participating in the demolition of the reputation of a celebrity. This scenario is particularly perilous for women politicians, as not only are they still seen as 'other' to the realm of politics, but gendered representational conventions conflate the presumed opposition of political style and substance together with that which associates women with emotional rather than rational realms. These representational conventions are further complicated by the pedestal factor, which has a particular history in Australian politics. Australia has seen several female political leaders encumbered with unrealistic public and media expectations, only to be strongly condemned when they have failed to live up to these impossibly high standards. Natasha Stott Despoja was one of several prominent and capable women to experience such mediated attacks. In her case the attacks focussed upon her age, her gender and her performance of celebrity politics as one of her political strategies.

Notes

¹ I would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution of my research assistant Rowena Harper in collecting and processing media reports of Natasha Stott Despoja's leadership of the Australian Democrats and of the University of Adelaide research grant that enabled me to employ her.

² The Democrats are a minor party that held the balance of power in the Australian Senate, alone or in combination with Greens, independents and other minor parties, throughout the most of the 1980s, and the 1990s, and until the 2004 federal election.

³ In early 2001, fearing the Democrats would lose senate seats in the upcoming federal election as a result of Meg Lees' highly unpopular decision to support the Government's Goods and Services Tax legislation in 1999, rank-and-file members petitioned for a leadership election. They also pressured Stott Despoja to run as a candidate against existing leader Meg Lees. In 1997 Stott Despoja had refused to stand for the leader's position arguing she needed more experience and was elected Deputy instead. Members and supporters argued she now had to challenge for the good of the Party. She did challenge Lees, and won the contest with 69% of the vote, but Lees and her supporters regarded it as an act of betrayal. The Democrats did lose votes and one senate seat the 2001 election, which was dominated by security issues. Most commentators believe they lost less votes with Stott Despoja

as leader than they would have had if Lees remained as leader and that the electorate 'punished' them for their role in passing the GST. Stott Despoja's public attribution of the loss of votes to the decision by Lees to pass the GST was a key factor in Lees and her supporters' campaign to discredit Stott Despoja's leadership.

⁴ The dimensions and effects of tabloidization across media forms and in different countries are seen as varied and are contested. See for example Hartley (1996), Sparks (2000), Turner (1999, 71-85).

⁵ For discussion of this reportage see Baird (2004), and Muir (2001).

⁶ See Baird 2004; Henderson 1998; Muir 2000; Ross 2002; Ross and Sreberny 2000; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996; Sreberny and van Zoonen 2000; van Zoonen 2001; Vavrus 2002.

⁷ Here the terms 'bastards' is used to refer to the other, traditional political parties. The slogan was designed to appeal to electors dissatisfied with the control of the two parties over the political system. There are three major Australian political parties but because the National Party traditionally forms a coalition with the Liberal Party in government against the opposition Australian Labor Party the effect is that of a two-party system.

⁸ For a discussion of reporting of Stott Despoja's decision see Baird (2004).

⁹ In some ways there are similarities with the way Stott Despoja was attacked by journalists for her image-based political style and the way populist and maverick right-wing politician Pauline Hanson was attacked (Deutchman and Ellison 1999). Hanson, however, had no claims to political competence, her only legitimacy was the fact that she represented an unheard section of the Australian electorate.

¹⁰ For example Joan Kirner, Labor Premier of Victoria; Carmen Lawrence, Labor Premier of Western Australia, and subsequently federal member for Freemantle, and National President of the ALP; Janine Haines, leader of the Australian Democrats; Cheryl Kernot leader of the Australian Democrats, then Labor Member of Parliament; Meg Lees, Leader of Democrats. Although Lees was divorced and Lawrence was single, in common with the other women listed both were mothers. As recently as January 2005 when the Australian Labor Party held a leadership ballot, there was widespread media discussion over the fact that one contender, Julia Gillard was single and childless and that Australia was 'not ready' for a single female federal leader of a major party.

¹¹ Latham's attack on Stott Despoja is particularly ironic considering how when he became Labor leader in 2003 his leadership was characterised by carefully stage-managed photo-opportunities of him portraying himself as the 'new father' in order to appeal to certain segments of the electorate and to provide visual evidence of his own difference from Prime Minister John Howard. Latham was subsequently attacked for the attention he gave to image politics and emotional issues rather than to core economic issues such as Labor's credentials as economic managers. For a discussion of Latham's image management techniques and in particular his strategic performance of the new father persona see Muir (2005).

¹² At the 2004 election the Australian Democrats' representation was reduced to four senators and they lost their official party status (and the resources which accompanies such status).

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