



THE HILL TIMES

THIRTEENTH YEAR, NO. 670

CANADA'S POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT NEWSWEEKLY

8



OP-ED

Premiers should never drive

Just one more reason to be a passenger

By ALLAN BONNER

Late one night in a political campaign, I was in the passenger seat of a car driven by a politician who would soon be in the Cabinet. We happened upon former prime minister John Turner who was out for a walk. My candidate friend flashed the lights, tooted the horn and pulled over to say hello. I rolled down my window so the two old friends could exchange greetings. Mr. Turner's eyes lit up. The former PM's thrust his finger, arm and head through my window, across the front of the car and into the face of my politician friend who was driving.

He admonished, "You shouldn't be driving. If I were running against you I'd smash into your car and claim you were drunk and hit me."

Good advice. It's a shame B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell wasn't there to hear it.

Politicians and public figures have long known the rules. John Turner himself was asked questions about his drinking. He replied that he "likes a party" but his work was not affected.

But the rules change? For U.S. presidential candidate Gary Hart an extra-marital affair ended his campaign. But president Bill Clinton confidence ratings went up after revelations about his affairs.

There is speculation that all hold public figures up to a higher level of scrutiny than ordinary people, in part to com-

pensate for the fact that we live in an amoral society. For those who think "amoral" is exaggeration, take a look at homelessness, abuse of children and hunger. Some years the sale of illegal drugs exceeds the profits of some auto makers. Then there are the recent headlines about executive excess and stock market hyping.

And now, Gordon Campbell has had too much to drink. He has had too much to drink because there is a history of alcoholism in his family, which contributed to his father's suicide. He has had too much to drink because he is a public figure subject to more scrutiny than you or I. Worst of all, he has had too much to drink because he then got into a car and drove.

Those are the public and private rules that Gordon Campbell broke. And he knew the rules.

Other rules were broken in Hawaii too. Mr. Campbell had his three martinis and glasses of wine in the home of his friend Fred Latremouille. Fred is a smart and successful media personality in Vancouver, an intense media town. More than 30 years ago, Fred was causing a stir as a disc jockey. He's had success in commercials, TV hosting and interviewing. A highlight of my short broadcasting career was replacing Fred one summer on CBC-TV's supper hour news. He's seen people skewered in the media, skewered a few himself,

and knows better than to serve a friend and public figure three martinis and wine before letting him drive home. Had Mr. Campbell hit someone with his car, both he and Fred could have been liable. There's lots of blame to go around.

But what is to be done? I agree with the work of MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), who have helped radically change attitudes toward this dangerous activity and turn those who do drink and drive into social pariahs.

But should Mr. Campbell be hounded from office? Will that serve a higher social purpose? I think not. If we banish all who drink to excess from positions of responsibility, there will be few journalists, politicians, musicians and business people left standing. Even if we only hound those who drink and drive, we'll lose too many. MADD needs to keep up the pressure to make drinking and driving a completely intolerable activity, and grounds for losing one's licence. But B.C. voters didn't elect Gordon Campbell on a temperance ticket. B.C. is entitled to the premier it elected to deal with a range of policy issues that don't involve alcohol.

Certainly Mr. Campbell's actions speak to a lack of judgment. But, again, there would be few leaders left in positions of authority if all, with occasional bad judgment, were ousted.

The rule in crisis manage-

ment is that the punishment must have a weight and temperature that exceeds the offence.

"I'm sorry" doesn't make up for drunk driving.

Mr. Campbell may be suffering from a serious disease—alcoholism, which some members of his family do. There is no more reason to hound him from office than if he had a hair lip, club foot or diabetes. He should have begun his news conference by taking the drivers' licence out of his wallet and cutting it up with scissors. He should have cited his family history and pledged two things: to get professional help and to never drive again while Premier. He should also help MADD do their valuable work. He might just end up being an extremely effective force against the very thing that could bring his downfall. But he has to act quickly to seize and maintain the initiative.

John Turner was right. Driving even when sober is dangerous for a politician, and Gordon Campbell now has one more reason to be just a passenger.

Former Vancouver broadcaster Allan Bonner, now a consultant in Toronto, has counselled six Canadian premiers and 25 Cabinet ministers. He is the author of several books on crisis management and communication, the latest of which is from the Briston House Press, and due out in a few weeks.