

A few choice words from a harmful and sexist angle

May 17, 2007



The PM misjudged the popular response to a mother and child, writes Melanie La'Brooy.

I SAID a very bad word on Tuesday and I said it quite loudly. It was in response to the report that Sydney newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* had run a front-page photo of baby "Catherine", the infant left at the entrance to the psychiatric wing of Dandenong Hospital early on Sunday with the headline "How Could She".

Sydney has always had a shock-jock tabloid culture that Melbourne has never wholeheartedly embraced. For example, the *Telegraph's* sister paper, *The Herald Sun*, ran the same photo but chose the caption "Where's my Mum?", which was simultaneously more sensitive and grammatical.

It would have been easy to write off the offensive headline as just another crudity from the same media culture that generated Alan Jones, but then our Prime Minister, sensing an opportunity to play his favourite game of Battler Empathy, came out with the following extraordinary defence of the newspaper. "I feel for the mother, I feel for the baby, I feel for the woman's family, but fair go to the *Tele*. After all, that is the natural reaction. You go out in the street and talk to ordinary people — that's what they would say, 'How could you abandon a little baby?' "

Well actually no, John, that's not what they're saying. The ordinary people are too busy ringing up the hospital to donate money and clothes and gifts to Catherine. They're behaving with compassion and generosity instead of casting judgements without having the facts.

Julie Webber, spokeswoman for the Royal Children's Hospital, said: "We are being inundated with calls from the public wishing to provide clothing and other things ... We haven't had any calls that are critical of the mother. They have expressed concern over her health and hope she is soon reunited with her baby."

So let's see. That means the only people publicly criticising the mother are the Prime Minister and an interstate newspaper. At a time when considerable resources are being put into finding the mother, the sort of negative publicity that *The Daily Telegraph* and the Prime Minister have conspired to create is guaranteed to send her running even further for cover.

The newspaper's editor, David Penberthy, has also rejected the suggestion that his paper's headline targeted the mother. "I've got kids. The people who are working on it (the newspaper) include a number of women who've got kids. It wasn't like: 'What can we do to vilify this woman?'"

Oh really? So why didn't the headline read "How Could They?". Because not once have I heard anyone mention the father.

Leaving aside IVF and allegations involving Boris Becker and a turkey baster, most pregnancies begin with a male and a female having sex. Yet nine months later, when a baby is left at a hospital, barely do we hear the word "parents" in the media. Instead it's the mother who cops it.

It was understandable that the immediate coverage focused on finding the mother, because there were obvious concerns for her health, both physical and mental. But now that a media and political storm has been generated, where is the father in all this? Re-read John Howard's comment above. He expresses sympathy for the baby, the mother, even the mother's family. But the father? Not a mention.

This is exactly the same criticism that I make of Tony Abbott when he runs around the country saying



Cross and crescent

The Religious Write Could Muslim suggestions for a dialogue with Christians break the tension?

[To laugh or not to laugh?](#) [Previous](#) | [Next](#)

TODAY'S TOP 10 ARTICLES

1. [Tram crash injures six](#)
2. [Dead boy's mother 'struggled': family](#)
3. [15 warnings ignored](#)
4. [Press club tries to wriggle out of furore](#)
5. [Water level alert looms as dams look damned](#)
6. [McEnroe interrupts Scud comeback](#)
7. [Jouster dies in freak Time Team accident](#)
8. [Doctor pleads guilty to 14 rape, assault charges](#)
9. [Sudanese 'dropped in strange land'](#)
10. [Adulterers make Anglicans' sexual misconduct register](#)

+ [More most viewed articles](#)

Featured advertisers

INTERESTED IN THIS TOPIC?

News Store Alert will keep you informed. [Find out more](#)

NEWS BY EMAIL

Get free news emails from theage.com.au. [Sign-up now](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

things like: "The problem with the Australian practice of abortion is that an objectively grave matter has been reduced to a question of the mother's convenience." Once again, no mention of the fathers. No doubt all the men out there who had a little something to do with those unwanted pregnancies will be greatly inconvenienced by not becoming fathers at 15.

Penberthy further defended his headline, claiming "you look at that photograph and instinctively, the first thing that you think of ... (is) How on earth could you get to a point where you do something that is so massively contrary to human instinct?"

Let's assume that it was the mother and not someone else who left the baby at the hospital door. She wrapped her child in towels, providing the baby with what warmth she could. She left Catherine where she knew she would be found quickly and cared for. Everything she did was in accordance not just with human but maternal instinct.

I hope desperately that the mother is found soon and given the care she needs. I also hope that the father is found or comes forward and is asked his opinion on what role he is to play in his child's life.

One final thing. Rupert Murdoch, the owner of the *Telegraph*, has an approximate net worth of \$6.7 billion. Ask Rupe to shell out for a sub-editor, will ya, Penberthy? If you must be obnoxious, then at least attempt to be literate. Your stupid headline should have had a question mark.

Melanie La'Brooy's new novel is *Serendipity*.



When you see news happening: SMS/MMS: 0406 THE AGE (0406 843 243), or us. [More](#)

[Subscribe to The Age for your chance to win a trip to Italy and southern France with Peregrine!](#)

SPONSORED LINKS

Other related coverage

- [PM defends tabloid's baby coverage](#)
- [Abandoned baby headline sparks row](#)
- [Flood of gifts for abandoned baby](#)
- [Anger at PM's defence of tabloid baby treatment](#)

[NATIONAL](#) | [WORLD](#) | [OPINION](#) | [BUSINESS](#) | [TECHNOLOGY](#) | [SPORT](#) | [ENTERTAINMENT](#)

[CLASSIFIEDS](#) [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Cars](#) | [Dating](#) | [Place A Classified Ad](#)

[Sitemap](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Privacy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Conditions](#) | [Member Agreement](#) |

Copyright © 2007. The Age Company Ltd.

FairfaxDigital