

Painful fallout of political privilege

For the children of our elected leaders, life in public exacts a terrible toll



By NICOLETTE BURKE

Tad and Willie Lincoln lived more than a century before glossy magazines and tabloid TV shows began chronicling the every move of politicians' children. But they were the original bad boys of politics — epitomising the trials children of leaders faced when growing up in the spotlight.

While their father Abraham was busy fighting the American Civil War and ending slavery, Tad and Willie ran amok in the White House. They kept two goats, Nanny and Nanko, to which they used to attach chairs, creating makeshift carts to ride through the official residence.

One account had the goats carting a group of street urchins through the building when they busted into a tea party being held by the First Lady in the East Room. The guests, a group of very proper ladies from Boston, were forced to leap out of the way of the goat-sled.

As an entrepreneurial 11-year-old, Tad even set up a "toll booth" made from a broom handle outside the Oval Office, and — unbeknown to the President — charged all visitors a nickel to meet him.

Psychologists say children of politicians or prominent parents tend to either become rebellious and react against their parents, or become ardent advocates of their parents' beliefs. While the Lincolns were teenage scamps, the Australian experience has been more tragic.

This week, Tiffany Fahey, the 27-year-old daughter of former NSW premier John Fahey, died in a car accident. The mother-of-two had faced personal difficulties dating back to her teenage years, when she abruptly left private eastern suburbs school Kincoppal-Rose Bay.

Fahey was a senior government minister elevated to premier in June 1992, the year the then-13-year-old was sent to boarding school.

Her mother Colleen said her daughter cried non-stop.

"The school was quite worried because they'd never seen anyone take so long to settle," Mrs Fahey said at the time.

"The first six months nearly killed me because we put Tiffany into boarding school and she was so dreadfully homesick and virtually cried for six months non-stop.



Daddy's girl... John Fahey with daughter Tiffany in 1993 and (right) the scene of her fatal crash this week



"She's fine now. She has her moments and at times she's a bit resentful, but I think overall she's settled down pretty well. She's been a country kid all her life. Now she likes the bright city lights."

Tiffany finished her schooling at Chevalier College, near the family's home in Bowral. Karl Savimaki, 28, who was a close school friend in their senior years, says she was "bubbly and a lot of fun" — and was very close to her family.

"She was very friendly, got along with everyone. I was very shocked when I heard about the accident," says Savimaki, now a Perth DJ. "She used to come to the rugby and watch us play. I went with her to her debutante ball in 1996."

Savimaki says she did not speak much at school about the difficulties of growing up in the spotlight.

"We didn't really talk about it," he says. "The last thing she probably wanted to talk about was her famous father. But they got on really well. They were very close."

"I'm sure there were tough times — what child doesn't have tough times with their parents?"

After graduating, Tiffany studied nursing and had two children, Campbell, 5, and Amber, 8. But personal troubles meant they were left in the care of their grandparents for the past four years.

Fahey admitted his daughter had some problems, and had been "trying to find herself in so many ways".

Her troubled life is not isolated — many Australian politicians have seen their children self-destruct under the pressure of growing up as the son or daughter of an identity.

The daughters of former prime minister Bob Hawke, Rosslyn and Susan, both had drug problems that

became public during his time in office. Rosslyn had a heroin problem, while Susan faced court over the use and cultivation of marijuana in 1982. At the time, Hawke wept at a press conference talking about Rosslyn's addiction.

"You don't cease to be a husband, you don't cease to be a father, and my children and my wife have the right to be protected in this matter," Hawke said.

Former NSW Premier Barrie Unsworth lost son Anthony to heroin, as did former federal MP John Button, whose son David died of an overdose in 1982.

The son of former federal Labor Senator Brenda Gibbs and her husband, former Queensland MP Bob Gibbs, also died from a heroin overdose in 1996.

The children of politicians have also been in trouble with the law on other counts. Prime Minister John Howard's son Tim lost his licence for six months when caught drink-driving around the corner from Kirribilli House.

Former prime minister Paul Keating's son Patrick — who was once named in *Cleo's* most eligible bachelor list — was suspended from Canberra Grammar school for alcohol-related antics.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush's twin daughters Jenna and Barbara were caught trying to buy margaritas at a Mexican restaurant in Texas using fake IDs when they were

19 — two years under the legal drinking age. Jenna faced a \$100 fine and was ordered to perform 36 hours of community service, while Barbara received a citation for underage drinking.

When British PM Tony Blair's son Euan was 16, he was found drunk and passed out in Leicester Square, after a night carousing with his friends, celebrating the end of high school exams.

A year later, the BBC reported Euan and another friend fought off a gang of 10 youths who were trying to mug them.

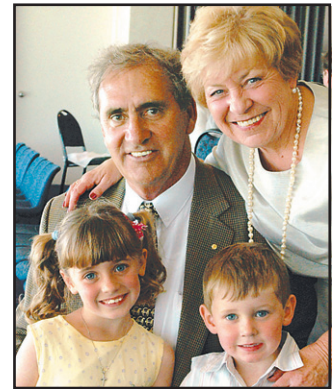
Just this year, Euan was treated in a Barbados hospital for a stomach complaint, with unnamed sources linking it with alcohol.

"Experience tells us the children of politicians don't usually follow their parents into parliament," Federal Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing Christopher Pyne says. "And that probably tells us something."

Treasurer Peter Costello recently said there were certain challenges for children of politicians.

"I imagine it is quite hard, but the way I look at it is that it is the slings and arrows of life, isn't it?" he said.

His son Sebastian, 19, said: "He's away a lot but I don't think I've had a bad life. I don't resent him. I don't sit in the dark and stab my teddy bear or set fire to my sheets."



Care... the Faheys will look after young Amber and Campbell

Faheys in the age of guardians

John and Colleen Fahey face the prospect of raising their two grandchildren after the death of their daughter, Tiffany. But they are not alone — 22,500 grandparents in Australia are sole carers of their grandchildren.

Centrelink says the main reasons grandparents step into the parenting role is because of the death or disability of the parent, imprisonment, substance abuse or child neglect, abuse or abandonment.

The ex-premier and his wife have been looking after their daughter Tiffany's children Campbell, 5, and Amber, 8, for the past few years.

But it is not an easy path. Research shows grandparents have tighter budgets, fewer goals and opportunities — and as they age, failing physical health makes being a full-time carer a difficult option.

The Council on the Ageing (COTA) confirms the number of grandparents acting as the primary carer for their grandchildren is on the rise, and impacts on ageing carers.

COTA says grandparents may have to postpone retirement and continue working to support their new family unit, remortgage their home or move back into a bigger home and shelve retirement plans such as travel.

The children may also have special needs because of their unsettled lives and may require counselling or access to special education.

A recent study from the University of California found that grandparent carers were often left in poverty while they tried to look after their grandchildren.

Fahey is unlikely to have financial woes (he is entitled to a parliamentary pension because of his political service), but has had health problems, retiring from politics in 2001 while battling lung cancer.

The Federal Government has begun to recognise the role grandparents play as carers by making family assistance and family tax benefits available in some cases. But lobby groups are calling for grandparent carers to be put on par with foster carers in terms of benefits. The grandparent allowance is about a third of the foster carers' payment.

The plight of grandparents as carers came to the fore earlier this year, when it was revealed that under the new welfare rules, they would be treated like single mothers, and forced to look for work to continue claiming a benefit.

After a Government backbench revolt, Employment Minister Kevin Andrews has allowed an exemption for those grandparents. Labor has committed to consulting with grandparents to find better ways to support them, should it win next year's election.

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Brave faces... despite some tough times, John, Colleen, Tiffany and Melanie Fahey were close-knit

