

**Headline:** Sex, lies, leadership: An inevitable threesome?

**Source:** *The Straits Times*, pA21

**Date:** 9 January 2013

# Sex, lies, leadership: An inevitable threesome?

By **JONATHAN MARSHALL**  
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

**S**EX scandals were the undoing of a remarkable number of Singaporeans last year. Leaders were exposed, shamed and removed from office; the public lost the benefit of those leaders' contributions to society; and future public officers are nervous to go forward with their career plans for high office.

Can Singapore as a society afford to deprive itself of these capable leaders?

Core to the argument against tolerating infidelity is that leaders, by definition, carry significant influence. If they fail to act with integrity in private, they may not be trustworthy in their work.

Societies generally cut corporate leaders some slack as their realm of influence is typically limited to the corporate world. Also, the state would have difficulty implementing any penalties for their infidelities.

However, public leaders are in the public eye. They naturally become role models for communities. According to this argument, they should be held to higher standards. Citizens should use their power, as the people who pay their salaries, to remove them from their jobs if they fail.

But in fact, views on the acceptability of private foibles of individuals vary by country, gender, and some biological factors.

In Saudi Arabia, a woman caught being unfaithful may face the death penalty. Between 59 per cent and 80 per cent of Anglo-Saxons claim that adultery is "always wrong".

But Europeans, especially the French and Italians, are relatively blase. When former French president Francois Mitterrand died, both his wife and his mistress attended the public funeral. In some parts of Africa, infidelity is so normal that the children who result are publicly accepted as belonging to their biological parents.

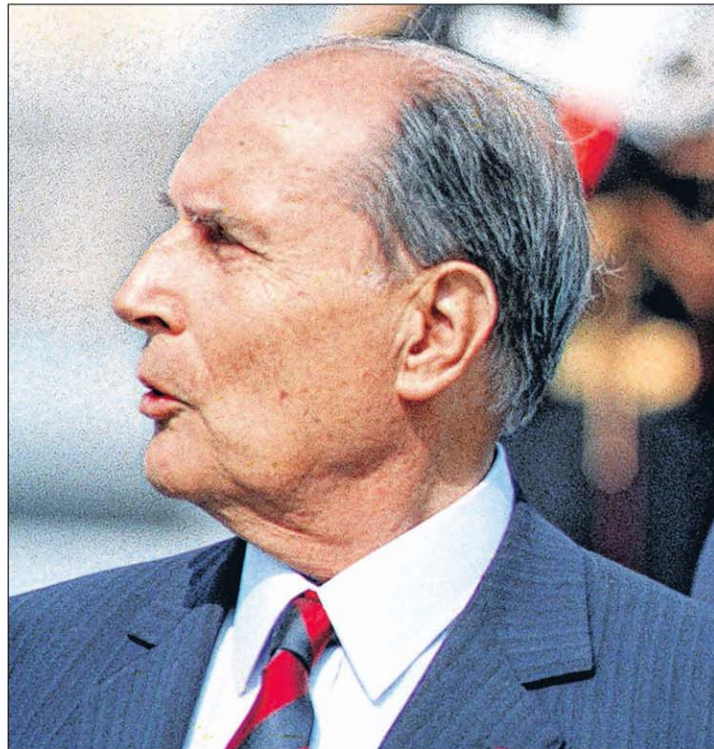
Rates of infidelity are hard to determine as survey respondents typically under-report when asked embarrassing questions about extra-marital sex.

Based on a large, international study by condom manufacturer Durex, an average 22 per cent of married people are unfaithful at some point. Singapore is below average, at 17 per cent.

Biology plays a part in determining who will lead, who will be unfaithful to whom and when. Testosterone, the principal male sex hormone, is related to leadership, libido and the number of lifetime sexual partners. Men with higher testosterone levels are more likely to seek positions of leadership, have stronger libidos and have more sexual partners – regardless of their marital status.

Women are much more likely to be unfaithful when they are ovulating – the period when they are most likely to conceive – than at other times in their menstrual cycle. While ovulating, they are likely to pursue healthy, virile, hunky men. At other times, they are more interested in men with wealth and power and who can provide security.

In a simple study on this point, women were asked to rate the desirability of men shown in a stack of photos. They were given fictitious information on each man's salary and job title. Women were



Europeans are generally quite blase about the private foibles of individuals. When former French president Francois Mitterrand (left) died, both his wife and his mistress attended the public funeral. Popular former US president John F. Kennedy was also guilty of being unfaithful. PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS

**If other societies had chastised their leaders as we in Singapore in 2012 have done, they would have lost Martin Luther King Jr., the leader of the movement to end racial discrimination in the US; Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China; Thomas Jefferson, John F. Kennedy, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, favourite US presidents; and Mohandas Gandhi, preeminent leader of Indian nationalism in British-ruled India, who shared his bed with multiple young women – whom he claimed not to touch; and thousands of others.**

considerably more likely to find the men desirable when they were told the men held powerful, high-paying jobs.

That effect was not found when genders were reversed. Men tended to rate women's desirability on their appearance, not financial or occupational information.

Evolutionary psychologists explain that women experience an unconscious pressure to look for healthy men to be the biological fathers of their children – hence the desire for hunks when ovulating.

But they seek rich, powerful, leader-types after conception so that their children will be raised with security and influence.

Men, by contrast, have an evolutionary pressure to spread their genes as much as possible, and so are inclined towards women who

are fertile, that is, healthy, and young. They are less concerned with security, ongoing relations or their partners' status in society.

If other societies had chastised their leaders as we in Singapore in 2012 have done, they would have lost Martin Luther King Jr., the leader of the movement to end racial discrimination in the US; Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China; Thomas Jefferson, John F. Kennedy and Franklin D. Roosevelt, favourite US presidents; and Mohandas Gandhi, pre-eminent leader of Indian nationalism in British-ruled India, who shared his bed with multiple young women – whom he claimed not to touch; and thousands of others.

While there are not many not-

ed public female leaders who are believed to have been unfaithful, it is surely a matter of time before that changes.

As a child, I lived in France at the time when president Valery Giscard d'Estaing had an affair with a dancer. He was so consumed by it that when terrorists took French diplomats hostage in Holland, Mr Giscard was not involved in directing the situation as he was "unavailable".

For four days no French newspaper reported his indiscretion. When a satirical weekly wrote a mocking article about the president's conduct, both major national newspapers immediately responded with scathing pieces about the inappropriateness of reporting on the personal life of a president.

Personally, I find Mr Giscard's negligence egregious. And I do not for a moment condone the old-fashioned tolerance of workplace sexual harassment as being "just what boys get up to". As a psychologist and university faculty member who teaches leadership, I have seen the incredible damage sexual misconduct can do to families and work environments. However, we have something to learn from the French.

Former Speaker of Parliament Michael Palmer, and Workers' Party MP Yaw Shin Leong have left their political offices due to scandals. Others may be considering leaving public service early for fear that they will soon be discovered. And many aspiring public leaders that I train are concerned that the lack of privacy in high office will be too much to tolerate.

Can we afford to deprive ourselves of their leadership? I suggest, no. Paradoxically, in our attempt to improve our society by cleansing it of corruption, we have gone too far. Overly condemning leaders who, like a large portion of the population have faults in their personal lives, deprives us of their potential contribution to our society.

The writer is assistant professor of leadership studies at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, the National University of Singapore.