



What's in a name?

Warren Kinsella

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It's not a little thing, not at all. Children receive the names of their fathers, I think, because it legitimizes our relationship. Lacking wombs or umbilical cords, suspecting that we can never hope to equal the physical bond between a child and a mother, we give our surnames to our children. We insist on it, actually.

The experts, like U.S. political theorist and author Jacqueline Stevens, are surprised that anyone would be surprised by that. "Surnames: it's all about compensating for men's inability to give birth," Stevens remarked to Salon a few years ago. "The surname remains the only way of showing legitimacy."

"[It's] especially important if women are keeping their own last names...it may ignite that old anxiety."

Ironically enough, the latest manifestation of surname anxiety does not have its origins in the male of the species. In Canada, disquietude about things like patrilineal naming has been overtaken by women -- women journalists, mainly -- fretting about what Stephen Harper's wife calls herself.

Stephen Harper's wife is named Laureen, and she has been variously identified in the media as Laureen Teskey, Laureen Harper and Laureen Teskey Harper. I am willing to wager that the Prime Minister does not care what surname his wife favours. The same cannot be said of some Canadian journalists.

Following a 180-word Canadian Press dispatch in January, which sourcelessly proclaimed that Laureen "has let it be known she now goes by the name of Laureen Harper," quite a few commentators fired up their computers and dusted off scandalized adjectives. The debate has been raging for weeks.

In the May issue of *Chatelaine*, writer Rona Maynard offers up only the most recent unfavourable sermon on the surname blame game. "I had high hopes for Laureen Teskey," writes Maynard, only to have said hopes cruelly dashed by the Canadian Press wire story. "The whole affair exasperates and disappoints me." The culprit? Maynard suspects "anxious mutterings in Harper's inner circle."

Ah, yes. Can't you just picture the first anxious meeting of Cabinet and senior staff in the Prime Minister's Office? Mutterers one of them: "Forget about our election platform, our troops in Afghanistan, or even the looming terrorist threat, folks! Someone needs to speak to the Boss about getting Laureen to change her surname!"

It gets worse, or better, depending upon one's point of view. Writing for The Globe and Mail in January, in a column titled "Laureen, we hardly knew ye," Erika Ritter lamented Mrs. Harper's decision, and wistfully recalled the enduring courage of Joe Clark's wife, Maureen McTeer, who never called herself Maureen Clark. "You will have to forgive...some of us relics of the Maureen McTeer generation, if we act a bit disappointed in you," the relic informed the Prime Minister's wife, who was doubtlessly crushed by a complete stranger's expression of disappointment.

"Not to get all nostalgic, Laureen, but I remember as a newlywed in the 1970s suddenly deciding to change my name back, because I felt that in taking my husband's, I had somehow disappeared."

"Disappeared." Yes, that is what she wrote. Never to be outdone in any media churlishness contest going, the Toronto Star's editorial board happily joined the pile-on with a snarky piece titled "Laureen's name game." Queried the Star: "Why, after 15 years of marriage (her second, by the way), would she suddenly transform herself from ballsy biker chick to demure 'wife of'?"

"Ballsy biker chick." Yes, you read that one right, too. But the Star's paragons of feminist rectitude were not finished yet. Why would Laureen change her name? Because, they surmised, the Harpers belong to something called the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Canada, whose Web site the Star's crack investigative team eagerly studied. Declared they: "We were not encouraged by what we found there."

What is not "encouraging" -- at all -- is that Laureen Teskey/Harper/Teskey Harper's personal decision has become, and remained, a subject for national debate and not a few petty insults, too. It's the Harpers' business, quite frankly. It's not the nation's business.

My own spouse, who is beautiful and also smarter than I could ever hope to be, was somehow persuaded to marry me in Quebec, where women must legally change their surnames if they wish to adopt their husband's. So she has kept her maiden name, although the statisticians tell us that more women are assuming their husband's surnames than was the case in the 1980s and 1990s. Big flippin' deal.

Like most of the men that I know, I don't care what my wife calls herself, as long as I can look up 100 times a day, and still see that she is there. For Stephen Harper, I suspect, the same holds true.

When you marry well, the little things don't matter so much anymore. Someone should tell the Star.

Warren Kinsella blogs for the Post and at www.warrenkinsella.com.

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