

Australia: Media promotes vigilantism and “bush justice”

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With sickening regularity the capitalist media pounces on social and personal tragedies for the sole purpose of advancing its reactionary social and political agenda. This is particularly so when the tragedies result from horrible crimes such as child abuse, rape or serial killings that are bound to arouse general revulsion and can produce, among traumatised victims and their distraught families, the desire for personal revenge and extreme forms of retribution.

Under such conditions, the media leaps into the fray, attacking legal norms, “lenient” judgements and actively encouraging forms of behavior long rejected as incompatible with the functioning of civilised society. Vigilantism and the culture of personal payback, though not necessarily openly advocated, are given a barely-disguised thumbs-up. The purpose is to undermine any semblance of progressive and critical thought and, at the same time, boost circulation.

Last month, the media honed in on recent events arising from the shocking rape of a nine year-old girl by 52-year-old Terrence Allan Ellis. The crime was committed some 12 months ago in the tiny town of Meringur, west of Mildura in the south-eastern state of Victoria and Ellis is currently serving a jail sentence.

On October 1, just after his sentencing, Ellis’s house was, by all accounts, deliberately set on fire and 40 people from around the Meringur district gathered to watch. The crowd was reportedly ecstatic as the house burned.

What was the media’s response? Rupert Murdoch’s tabloid the *Daily Telegraph* gleefully frontpaged the event and its journalist Nicolette Casella wrote approvingly: “This is how a small town dealt with a pedophile in their midst—they burned his house to the ground to make sure he can never return.”

“The girl [the victim] and her father were among 16

residents and at least two dozen spectators who drank beer and cheered as they watched the home go up in flames on Sunday,” Casella wrote. She then quoted the father, who had clearly been further distressed by the ordeal of the recent trial, describe the reaction of his daughter to the fire: “The joy lit up her face, knowing that we were about to see the final event of it.”

The description is both saddening and disturbing. A young child has been severely traumatised by a brutal act. Casella does not care to elaborate how the drunken scene could possibly contribute to her recovery, or that of her family. Professionals in the field maintain that personal acts of revenge do not heal psychological wounds or provide “closure”.

For the young girl in Meringur the healing process will require long-term professional counselling and the ongoing support of her family and friends. But such considerations are of no concern to the *Daily Telegraph* or Casella. Interestingly they make no criticism of the paltry amount of government compensation awarded to victims of violent crimes—a contemptuous \$7,000.

Articles in other newspapers were similar. Murdoch’s national flagship the *Australian* trumpeted: “Pedophile fire prompts town joy” and reporter Pdraic Murphy wrote: “Armed with Eskies [coolers containing beer], the residents of the Victorian town of Meringur danced and drank beer as they watched flames engulf the home of Terrence Allan Ellis last Sunday night. For the town’s tiny population of 16, this was the type of justice the legal system couldn’t deliver, and they wanted to celebrate.”

Murphy goes even further, suggesting that physical violence may have been in order: “By the time police arrested Ellis, he was lucky locals had not already taken matters into their own hands”.

The *Herald Sun* headlined “Joy as rapist’s house

burns” and its journalists Shannon McRae and Matthew Schulz declared: “A fire that razed the home of a convicted pedophile has been labelled ‘bush justice’ by the residents of a tiny town”. An unnamed local was approvingly cited describing Ellis as a “parasite and a waste of space”.

Eight years earlier, the residents of Meringur demonstrated a high degree of humanity towards Ellis, helping him out when he arrived in the town as a vagrant. One of the motivations behind the media coverage was to utilise Ellis’s crime to demonstrate that rendering assistance to the less fortunate is a waste of time.

Aimed at further fuelling passions, sections of the media also deliberately distorted some of the facts of the case. For example, one media outlet reported that Ellis was a serial sex offender when this is not the case. While he had a string of convictions dating back to 1972, police confirmed none was for a sex-related offence and most were related to alcohol and driving breaches. Ellis had lived in the town for eight years without, it seems, committing any major offence until the time he attacked the young girl.

For the most part, the media did not bother to refer to the evidence of mitigating circumstances that emerged at the trial, pointing to Ellis’s alcoholism and unstable mental state. One psychiatric report revealed that he had been brought up in a highly dysfunctional family, had suffered from chronic alcohol dependence since childhood and heroin abuse from middle age.

Another report, which described Ellis as having “a dull intellectual capacity” said: “The alcoholism screening test was indicative of classical symptoms of abuse bordering on rank alcoholism, and personality testing revealed a distressed, disturbed emotionality with depression, anxiety, paranoid fears and social introversion/withdrawal.” It went on: “Clearly his unprecedented offending occurred in the context of chronic alcoholism in combination with a prescribed medication regime which would have obviously impaired his judgement.”

Perhaps if Ellis had received the treatment he so obviously needed earlier in life it is highly likely the tragic event of 12 months ago might never have happened.

Rehabilitation and assistance programs for drug and alcohol dependency, together with programs to assist the

mentally ill, have been systematically dismantled over the last 20 years by Liberal and Labor governments alike, at both state and federal levels.

It is now extremely difficult for drug addicts or alcoholics to gain admission to detoxification centres. Many have either closed altogether or had the number of beds drastically reduced because of government funding cuts. Institutions for the mentally ill have been closed down and mentally ill people, many of whom require supervised medication, have been cast onto the streets to fend for themselves.

Significantly, the destruction of such essential, life-saving programs has been egged on by the media, with Murdoch’s stable leading the pack.



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