

Bill Henson case dropped but Australia's "moral guardians" demand harsher censorship laws

Richard Phillips
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New South Wales police announced on Friday that no child abuse or pornography charges would be laid against internationally-acclaimed photographer Bill Henson or the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. The decision to drop the case was taken in the face of universal condemnation by Australia's arts community and wide sections of the population over the censorship of Henson's exhibition and the seizure of his work on May 23.

NSW police decided not to press charges after receiving legal advice from the Director of Public Prosecutions and following an Australian Federal Police announcement that Henson photographs owned by the National Gallery of Australia did not breach the law.

The decision also followed a ruling by Australia's censorship board—the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC)—that the exhibition photograph that sparked the anti-Henson witch-hunt was “mild” and “not sexualised to any degree”. It was given a Parental Guidance (PG) classification.

A PG rating is given purely as an advisory guide for parents. Disney's latest movie, *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, for example, has a PG classification.

Henson said he was humbled by “the depth of support” he had received over the past weeks and recognised that much of it “came from the desire of many people to voice their commitment to more general principles”.

The photographer went on to state that “existing laws, having been rigorously tested, still provide a framework in which debate and expression of ideas can occur”.

That Henson is not being prosecuted will not end the right-wing campaign now being led by Hetty Johnson, a so-called anti-child abuse advocate, and an alliance of right-wing demagogues and Christian moralists. An outraged Johnson told the media on Friday that the police announcement was a “green light for the commercial sexual exploitation of our children”, and an “absolute disgrace”. She demanded more repressive censorship laws.

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“This debate is fundamentally around two major issues. It is a contest between those defending the historical rights and freedoms of the Arts and those who defend today's rights and freedoms of our young. One cannot be achieved without the sacrifice of the other.” In other words, anything defined as child abuse or pornographic by Johnson and her allies should be suppressed and its creators prosecuted.

Henson is not the only target. Those artists and others who publicly opposed the police censorship of his photographs are now considered fair game and denounced as elitist, cowardly, encouraging pedophiles and undermining core moral values.

This theme—a perennial favorite of right-wing ideologues the world over—has been hammered out in a series of chilling op-ed comments over the past two weeks by *Sydney Morning Herald* columnists Paul Sheehan, Miranda Devine and Gerard Henderson.

On May 26, Sheehan wrote that although he regarded Henson as a “fine artist” the “electric jolt of public unease he has received in recent days is justified” because “pederasts and child sexexploiters have had a dream run in our society”.

Sheehan then insisted, without providing a shred of evidence, that there was a “subculture of pedophilia among gays”. Another major problem, he continued, was that members of the artistic community were cowards on all the important moral issues. Society's ability to deal with child abuse and other serious social problems was being prevented by “privacy laws, artistic licence, freedom of expression, Aboriginal rights”.

The political implication of these allegations is clear: the only way to stop sexual abuse of children is to dispense with the aforementioned democratic rights.

Sheehan's reactionary ruminations were further elaborated by Miranda Devine in a May 29 comment entitled “Artistic crowd the real philistines”. A perhaps more accurate title

would be: “Why a police-state is required to defend Christian values and save the poor”.

Devine, the key initiator of the anti-Henson campaign, began her column by hypocritically claiming to have been “shocked” at the sight of police seizing Henson photographs.

No one wanted to live in a police-state, she declared, but the suppression of democratic rights was a necessary “last resort” when society was suffering from “communal moral ambiguity” and “failing to enforce its own standards”. This state of affairs, she continued, was caused by “the relentless normalisation of the abnormal, the annihilation of taboos and the persecution of traditional moral guardians”. No explanation was provided about who these “traditional moral guardians” were or how they were being persecuted.

Devine, who is reportedly paid \$250,000 a year by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, declared that the “ultimate example” of social decay was in remote Aboriginal communities. This was where, she insisted, “the social norms we take for granted, such as the love of a mother for her child, have collapsed. So you get the Northern Territory intervention, where basic civil rights have been overruled, with the bipartisan support of Federal Parliament, for the greater good of protecting babies and children from violence, sexual abuse and criminal neglect.”

Nor was this “breakdown”, Devine insisted, confined to Aboriginal people, but had “hit the white underclass in every city”.

Devine conveniently omits any mention of the fact that the social problems afflicting Aboriginal communities have been caused, not by Aborigines or by “welfare”, but by two centuries of unrelenting racial oppression, government neglect and unemployment. Devine’s right-wing tirade simply repeats the arguments used by former Prime Minister John Howard to justify last year’s Northern Territory police/military intervention.

Her claim that the intervention, which is now being extended by the Rudd Labor government, was aimed at the “greater good of protecting babies” from violence and sexual abuse is completely false. Its real purpose is to slash welfare, break up remote Aboriginal communities and make it easier for the government and its big-business allies to secure control of mineral-rich land and other lucrative resources.

Devine’s targeting of the “white underclass” also dovetails with Rudd government moves to extend welfare cuts and other attacks on democratic rights and basic living standards to non-indigenous people throughout Australia.

On June 1, Sheehan published another comment—this time attacking a NSW judge, who had regularly heard child sexual abuse cases and had written to the *Herald* demanding

an apology over the journalist’s slanderous claim that “homosexuals” supported a “pedophile subculture”. Sheehan disingenuously claimed that his comment was an “accident”, refused to apologise and then suggested that the judge was incapable of “rigorous impartiality” on issues involving gay culture.

The next day, Gerard Henderson devoted his op-ed column to a berating of all those artists, writers, musicians and others who had signed the “Open Letter” calling on the Labor government to oppose the police censorship of Henson. Henderson, a former speech writer for Howard, put forward no position on the police closure of Henson’s exhibition and the seizure of his photographs but rebuked the signers as “irresponsible” and “mindless” for warning that these sorts of police measures had dangerous parallels with the attacks on freedom of expression carried out by fascist regimes.

The continuing barrage of right-wing invective from Sydney’s so-called “small-l” liberal newspaper is a warning that the attack on Henson and other artists will not subside. It also demonstrates the direct connection between the assault on freedom of artistic expression and the jobs, living standards and basic rights of all working people, indigenous and non-indigenous alike.

Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and NSW state Labor Premier Morris Iemma have played a central role in encouraging this campaign. As the initial witch-hunt of Bill Henson was getting underway, both men publicly condemned the photographer’s work. Informed on Friday that the Henson photograph he had previously described as “absolutely revolting” had now been given a PG rating, Rudd retorted: “I’ve been asked many times since then, ‘Have I changed my view?’... I have not changed my view one bit.”

Likewise on Friday, Iemma publicly congratulated the police over their “investigations” and declared: “My personal opinion remains clear: these photographs crossed the line and were inappropriate.”



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