

Some people just want blood

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Letter from Peter Weygers

I am astonished that the well-educated readership of the POST has produced so many letters from readers who fail to recognise that the three young men, wrongfully convicted of the murder of Phillip Walsham, have been correctly exonerated by the Court of Appeal.

There are two main themes in the letters. The men kicked Mr Walsham so they must have killed him, or even if they didn't kill him, they deserve to stay in jail for kicking him, because he somehow died later.

The letter writers don't care how Mr Walsham died, and they don't want to read the evidence. They just want these men to be blamed for the death.

Perhaps the reason for these illogical and disturbing reactions can be found in the revealing comments on the criminal legal process by Tom Percy QC ("Devastated parents slam 'farcical justice system'", POST, 14/7).

Mr Percy points out that most people, especially relatives, believe a charged person to be guilty of the crime from the moment police lay charges, or even have a suspicion.

When they are later found not guilty, relatives and many members of the public are unable to accept this verdict, even in the face of overwhelming evidence.

The technical term is cognitive dissonance. This is the difficulty the human brain experiences in adjusting to new information.

Evidently, even among POST readers, some brains are simply unable to take in new evidence.

Mr Percy says relatives of victims attend court not with the idea of seeing justice done, but to make sure the charged person goes to jail.

Like most in the community the relatives think: "If the police say the person did it, there must be something in it."

The phenomenon is worse in high-profile murders such as the Walsham and Claremont serial killer cases.

The police feed leaks to favoured compliant reporters; charged persons are paraded before the television cameras, and the police media unit pumps out statements that lead the public to believe the charged person is guilty.

The grieving families are shown constantly on television calling for the heads of the charged men who the police have strongly implied are responsible.

The public wants the person who has come under police notice to go to jail to make the relatives feel better. The presumption of innocence, the heart of our criminal justice system, is forgotten.

The jury pool is drawn from a public that devours all this prejudice through our media.

What chance does such a charged but innocent person have of getting a fair jury trial, even with directions from the judge to ignore publicity?

It is no wonder that the court system is clogged when just two recent miscarriages of justice, the Rory Christie and Walsham cases, have wasted a total of 31 weeks of Supreme Court time, not to mention the crippling costs involved.

How many more innocent people have to be convicted before we get a filtering system that works, one that stops obviously hopeless cases getting to trial?

My sympathy is with Mr and Mrs Walsham for the loss of their son. But abusing the exonerated men and calling for them to be sent back to jail will not bring him back.

The appeal judges emphatically found the three men not guilty. They said: "The verdicts of guilty are unreasonable and cannot be supported on the evidence."

That is the end of it. That is the new reality.

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