

Australia: Labor government backs witch-hunting of photographer Bill Henson

Richard Phillips
26 May 2008

Click here to download this article in PDF format.

In a major assault on basic democratic rights, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his New South Wales state counterpart have backed the police seizure of photographs by internationally-acclaimed Australian artist/photographer Bill Henson from a Sydney art gallery.

Police raided the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery twice, on May 22, just before an exhibition of Henson's work was about to open, and the following day took possession of 20 photographs and associated promotional material. Members of the NSW police Child Protection, Sex Crimes and Child Exploitation Internet squads were involved.

Henson and the gallery owners are now being threatened with prosecution under the federal Crimes Act and state child pornography laws. If charges are laid, they will constitute a gross violation of freedom of artistic expression, and must be vigorously opposed by artists, students and all working people. Henson's photographs, with their ethereal and sensitive depiction of young adolescents—sometimes naked—are not remotely pornographic.

Bill Henson, 52, is widely regarded as the country's most significant artist/photographer. His works appear in major art galleries in Europe and North America, including the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Guggenheim in New York, and he was Australia's official representative at the 1995 Venice Biennale, the most important event on the international contemporary arts calendar.

In 2005 more than 115,000 people viewed a major retrospective of his work presented at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). The NGV, which has two of the photographs from the exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery on reserve, describes Henson's work as part of a "humanistic tradition" which has "explored the body at all ages and in all its forms". Collections of his work are also held at the National Gallery of Australia and the High Court of Australia, both in Canberra.

The vendetta against Henson was initiated last week by right-wing *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Miranda Devine who, in response to a review of Henson's exhibition being published in the same edition of the paper, wrote a piece attempting to link Henson to the sexualisation of children. Devine was well aware of the response this would produce—and it was not long in coming. Sydney's radio shock-jocks and Hetty Johnson from Braveheart, a child sexual assault advocacy group, leapt into the fray. Their campaign was given legs, however, by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and NSW Labor Premier Morris Iemma, who both went out of their way to endorse it. Neither had seen the exhibition.

Less than 24 hours after the initial raid, Rudd appeared on the Nine Network's morning television program denouncing Henson's photographs as "absolutely revolting". "I really have a problem with

this," he declared. "Whatever the artistic view of the merits of that sort of stuff—frankly, I don't think there are any—just allow kids to be kids."

Iemma, who was in China, made a special call from that country to attack Henson's work. "I find it offensive and disgusting," he said. "I don't understand why parents would agree to allow their kids to be photographed like this."

Not to be outdone, federal Liberal Party leader Brendan Nelson declared that the photographs violated "Australian values" and that pictures of naked children were pornographic and it was "time for us to take a stand".

A few hours after these remarks, police released an official statement indicating that charges would be laid and that Victorian state police would be interviewing one of the girls photographed and the parents of other children who appear in Henson's photographs.

On Friday the *Daily Telegraph*, Murdoch's Sydney tabloid, editorialised that the police seizure of the photographs was a "victory for decency". On Sunday, former antiwar rock musician and now federal Labor Arts Minister Peter Garrett declared that while artists had the "right to challenge and confront audiences they also have a responsibility to operate within the law." In other words, the police, politicians and the courts should dictate what artists can or cannot produce.

The Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery has reported it has received a number of violent and threatening phone calls, including some left on the gallery's telephone machine threatening to "burn the building down".

Rudd's attack on Henson has been angrily denounced by shocked gallery owners, curators, art critics, musicians, playwrights and filmmakers in letters to the press, and in internet chat rooms and blogs.

Many describe Labor's reaction as "hysterical" and a throw-back to pre-1970s Australia, when hundreds of books, films and art works were banned by censorship authorities. A leading Sydney gallery owner decided to hang an image from Henson's 1992-1993 "Untitled" series in his gallery's front window to protest the censorship. The picture is displayed next to an Arthur Boyd nude, "to remind people that nudes have inspired artists for centuries".

Australian Chamber Orchestra director and violinist Richard Tognetti, who collaborated with Henson on a concert tour that included the photographer's work, told the *Australian* newspaper: "I think it's most unfortunate that the prime minister's first overt comments [since his election in November last year] about culture have been to say it's revolting."

Michael Gow, a well-known playwright and artistic director of the Queensland Theatre Company, denounced Rudd in a letter to the

Sydney Morning Herald, declaring that the prime minister's description of Henson's work as "absolutely disgusting" was unacceptable.

"The Prime Minister who invited us to Canberra has questioned the abilities and credentials of a major Australian artist.... I regret attending the [Labor government's] 2020 Summit and invite others who attended to join me in protesting the treatment of Bill Henson over the last few days."

Gow said that other delegates to the Creative Australia forum at the recent summit were preparing a letter attacking Rudd's response and demanding that he explain the difference between art and pornography.

Leading Melbourne gallery owner Anna Schwartz told the *Age* newspaper it was a "dark day for Australian culture [and]... an indictment of a culture when an artist of the integrity and stature of Bill Henson isn't free to show his work." "The issue doesn't lie with Bill Henson and his work," she said, "it lies elsewhere in the culture, with other imagery and other behaviour. He is being used as a scapegoat."

Judy Annear, senior curator of photography at the Art Gallery of NSW, said: "Bill's work isn't the problem here, it's just a convenient kind of whipping boy at this particular moment in time.... To take cheap shots at artists won't change whatever the problems are in our social fabric."

While many are outraged at Labor's vicious attack on Henson, the witch-hunt is part of an escalating bi-partisan political assault on the democratic right to freedom of expression.

The seizure of Henson's photographs follows the suppression last week of a daily newspaper produced by journalism students from the University of Technology (UTS) reporting on the Sydney Writers' Festival. Festival organisers withheld the newspaper because it dared to criticise Premier Iemma and Planning Minister Frank Sartor. The newspaper, which is paid for by UTS, not the festival, provides students with the opportunity to gain journalistic experience.

Earlier this month, an exhibition of photos, poems and articles at the Leichhardt municipal library about conditions of life for Palestinian people in Hebron was shut down following a visit by the NSW police anti-terror squad. Leichhardt council has a partnership program with Hebron and the *Al-Nakba (Catastrophe)* exhibition was organised by the Friends of Hebron community group. Library staff said they felt intimidated by the police. Rather than challenging this assault on democratic rights, the Labor-controlled council decided to close the exhibition down.

Some commentators have attempted to justify Rudd and Iemma's attacks by claiming they have been made in response to popular concerns about the sexual abuse of children. *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic John MacDonald, for example, declared in a Saturday opinion piece that Australian politicians had been "dragged into" the "moral panic" over Henson. "When the mob bays for blood the emperors point their thumbs to the ground," McDonald wrote.

This turns reality on its head. Far from "reacting" to mass sentiment, the Labor leadership has been in the forefront of attempts to whip it up. And far from a "mob baying for blood" the demands for censorship emanate from a tiny, but extremely vocal, minority of right-wing ideologues. Labor has consistently accommodated to their demands, lining up in opposition with the former Howard government on so-called moral questions, while state Labor governments have given the green-light to censorship measures.

In 2003, the US film *Ken Park* was banned from being screened at

the Sydney Film Festival, the first time a film had been blocked by government authorities at the event since 1969. In January 2006 Victorian police seized *Proudly unAustralian*, an art work of a burnt and tattered Australian flag, from a Melbourne gallery. The piece was displayed on a billboard above the gallery. Police waited until the premises were unattended and then climbed into a neighbouring building and confiscated the art work.

During last year's election campaign, Rudd attempted to outflank Howard in a censorship bidding war. In a special web broadcast organised by the right-wing Australian Christian Lobby on August 9, Rudd endorsed Howard's discriminatory anti-gay marriage laws and promised he would introduce repressive internet censorship measures if elected.

Labor's "concerns" about the rights and welfare of children are bogus. Neither Rudd nor his Liberal counterpart have any interest in examining or overcoming the complex social problems that give rise to the sexual abuse of children. This would, after all, involve challenging the transnational media corporations, the advertising industry and the profit system itself, all of which bear responsibility for the systematic exploitation of children and today's generally debased cultural climate.

There is a well-known political adage—for every government measure there are always two reasons: the good reason and the real reason. The real agenda behind the Labor government's response to Henson's photographs is two-fold: to create a diversion from the growing social crisis afflicting masses of ordinary people and to cultivate a base of social support for Labor's increasingly regressive social policies.

The Howard government's Northern Territory intervention into Aboriginal communities—now being continued and extended by Labor—is a case in point. Accompanied by a hysterical media campaign, and under the banner of protecting Aboriginal children from rampant sexual abuse, the intervention has ridden roughshod over basic democratic rights in more than 73 "prescribed" communities. Its real purpose is to slash welfare benefits and other social supports, drive people from their homes and create a new cheap labor force for the mining and tourism industries.

The implementation of such an agenda in every sphere of social life requires the cultivation of a certain atmosphere—of hysteria, suspicion and fear—and the suppression of critical thought. Central to this is the move to censor works of art and to intimidate the artists who produce them. The witch-hunting of Bill Henson constitutes both a continuation of previous attacks and a warning of what is to come.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact