

Art, Police & The Suburbs

may 30 2008

Dear Prime Minister, I have advocated your leadership of the Labour Party for many years. Like you, I live by Christian values, or try to. I worked locally for your election victory and on election night I eagerly anticipated a new, principled and enlightened national direction. Your precipitate judgment on Bill Henson's adolescent nude photographs as "revolting" suggests the process of achieving this direction has yet to commence.

This is a media-driven issue. That is what the media does and should do. But it is not a matter for police or political interest and, most certainly (as legal ambiguity over the soundness of mooted charges suggests), it is not an issue of pornography. Perhaps the host gallery was naïve in posting a promotional image on the internet. Perhaps. But that is a different issue and it is not the only Gallery in the world to promote controversial material. That is what galleries do, and should do, and today's strong support for the artist from the adolescent's parents makes its own statement.

The media were always going to approach you promptly on this and the difficulties of delivering an immediate live response on a contentious issue are understood. But it would now be appropriate to redress the damage caused by a genuinely held but, frankly, emotive remark which has delivered an imprimatur for other agendas. We now see the results, which a more considered response may have mitigated. As with the previous Prime Minister's tacit endorsement of the Hanson position early in his tenure, many respond readily to reactionary leadership signals and the consequences can be ugly. The Nazi book burnings were born in contrived moral outrage. In the 21st century, do we really want police raiding art galleries around Australia, confiscating artworks? I believe they have more important work to do and I imagine they would mostly agree.

A conciliatory statement to the effect that despite your personal indifference Henson's work represents unequivocal artistic merit, and that his career must not be jeopardised by a witch hunt or unfounded judicial action which would be likely to fail, would go a long way towards achieving this. The "debate" has become unseemly and risks damage to the artist, artistic freedom and the nation. It needs to be decisively concluded and that would be easy to do in a measured, dignified way which could enhance your leadership. If we do need a real debate, this is not it. And in a wider sense, the residue of zealous suburban values which can still divide us, retarding social growth, needs to be addressed for once and for all. You are in a position to do both and I hope you will. That's why I voted for you.

Yours etc

footnote: on june 2 2008, Bill Henson's photographs received a 'G-General' classification from the Classification Board. A Board Member stated on ABC Radio that images reproduced by news media contained no pornographic content. Shortly afterwards, the police announced that no charges would be laid and confiscated Henson works were returned to galleries.