

The Cardinal Can Do No Wrong: George Pell's Defenders

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The powerful have always had defenders. Power seeps into the system, corrupts, controls and, ultimately, assumes an authority that does wonders to destroy an appraisal of fairness. To be there is to assume that matters are natural, a habit. As David Hume made clear, such an instance creates the basis of error: because it has been accepted for generations and through precedent does not make it a law or an acceptable practice.

To be fair is, in a sense, to relinquish the advantages of power and accept the levelling nature of balance. To be fair is to understand power as a danger. For the highest cleric in the Catholic Church to receive a formal conviction in terms of historical child abuse is an example of bringing a certain power to account.

"He did have in his mind," [observed](#) the County Court's chief judge Peter Kidd in the pre-sentence hearing, "some sense of impunity."

The Pell conviction is also an example of defenders running to barricades in the name of protection, hoping that faith prevails over evidence, belief over the allegedly crude advances of the secular realm. As that philosopher of revolution Frantz Fanon appositely noted, those holders of a strong core belief, when "presented with evidence that works against that belief" repel what is placed before them. Cognitive dissonance must be avoided.

The issue for some of Pell's defenders is not one of finding justice but its impossibility for those who see a being beyond capture, and past conduct beyond censure. Forget the victims and what the convicted person did to them. Some other ploy is at work.

Guy Rundle got [heavy](#) at *Crikey*, claiming that the conviction of Pell had to be a significant moment in the culture wars.

"The full court press by Bolt, Henderson, Akerman, Devine et al marked them off pretty decisively from the parliamentary wing of the right (with the rule-proving exception of Craig Kelly), who were quick to ring-fence Pell from what remains of their politics."

This has assumed fabulous contortions. To know a man is to presume an all-conquering, wilting innocence, pushing evidentiary findings to the outer limits. No legal system could possibly corrupt this personalised sense of he of certain cloth of Church; to have met a creature in garb, even not necessarily believing him, is to acknowledge a person as beyond guilt.

The matter must, therefore, be far more fundamental, a big picture plot as to why Pell must suffer. It might be the vengeful in search of a sacrificial lamb, the Cardinal's conviction as a rite for purification. It might be the Church in search of a cleansing alibi. It is not possible to claim that Pell is guilty, [shouts](#) reactionary columnist Miranda Devine, because no jury could possibly claim to be unbiased. Would that problem be alleviated by a jury of other peers, priests, maybe?

Devine, herself a Catholic, has never been shy to suggest a conspiracy. There is always something else at work. In 2017, she claimed in an off-the-edge [tweet](#) that Victoria's Police Chief Graham Ashton was "desperate or a distraction from the crime epidemic he's incapable of stopping". Catholics, she suggested in the language of sectarian fear, were being hunted.

Andrew Bolt, who holds court at Sky News and *The Herald Sun*, similarly cannot fathom what has been done to the fallen cleric, and assumes that self-opinion can become canonical.

"Declaration: I have met Pell perhaps five times in my life and I like him," [admitted](#) the one-dimensional polemicist. "I am not Catholic or even a Christian. He is a scapegoat, not a child abuser. In my opinion."

The opinion caveat is important for Bolt. Having landed in hot water previously for not clarifying that his opinion as just that, the Federal Court [gave him](#) a good wrapping over the knuckles for what was, at its core, shoddy journalism on "White Aboriginals". But on this occasion, the self-proclaimed rabblouser felt he was on to something.

"Cardinal George Pell has been falsely convicted of sexually abusing two boys in their early teens. That's my opinion, based on the overwhelming evidence."

Not that Bolt actually saw the evidence or was exposed to it, but he is nonetheless content suggesting that the victims' reluctance to initially report the abuse (has he any understanding of Church history?), and the business of the room where the abuse was said to have taken place, suggested innocence. Furthermore, "the man I know seems not just incapable of such abuse, but so intelligent and cautious that he would never risk his brilliant career and good name on such a mad assault in such a public place." Bolt, ever the purveyor of the shallow view and ignorant formulation of human nature. Perhaps he suggests that the cleric was simply too intelligent to have been genuinely caught?

A dangerous twilight zone has developed. The critics have shown, in searing fashion, that they do not believe that guilt could ever be associated with certain figures of office. In this sense, they betray a posh-boy, aristocratic perversion: people of a certain class can never wrong; people of some groups (African migrants, for instance) always do. Kill, maim, rape and maul, yes, but never assume that any code, criminal or otherwise, applies to certain members.

This is entertaining if teasing idiocy. The very people who believe in necessary rules assume that these should be selectively applied. There have always been pleasant, decent murderers, but thinking otherwise changes it. There are entertaining child abusers of high standing, and thinking them charming and ambitious makes abuse improbable. There are

bon vivant genocidal maniacs, dressed well and hoping for a historical kill, and thinking them good company turns them into miraculous innocents.

Such conduct, including [messages of support](#) from former Australian Prime Ministers John Howard and Tony Abbott, brings to mind the good character references, and beliefs, of the recently canonised Mother Teresa (now St. Teresa of Calcutta), who kept good company with the dictatorial likes of Jean-Claude Duvalier of Haiti, and swindling millionaires such as Charles Keating. The latter, an anti-pornographic crusader of frothing fanaticism, liked talking about God and family values even as he perpetrated financial fraud with sociopathic enthusiasm. The Saint simply believed they were incapable of crime. For some, that is all that matters, and laws should be best forgotten.

The process will have to run its course and the cardinal's run of the legal system is far from over. Pell's defence team will no doubt be reassessing the evidence with forensic aptitude, and point out errors or doubts. But that does not discredit a verdict arrived at through formal processes in the presence of a jury and a well summing up by the judge. The danger in such doubting circumstances is that those good souls who are duly selected to serve on a panel of peers are deemed, if not expendable, then dangerous to the health of the defendant.

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