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OPINION 11

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Australia's most-read columnist

EXTREME GET-PELL PREJUDICE EXPOSED

SOMEONE must pay for the jailing of the innocent George Pell. Call an inquiry into Victoria's police.

Consider this damning statistic: Victoria Police has charged Pell 26 times for child sex abuse, but failed every single time.

Every one of those charges was so far-fetched or so weak that it was dropped or ultimately dismissed — although not until Pell had spent a year in jail.

The force's final failure came last Tuesday, when the High Court unanimously threw out Pell's ludicrous conviction for somehow raping two boys at once in a wide-open room at exactly the time it was most likely to be full of people.

Imagine police trying 26 times to nail you, and failing every time because the charges were so stupid.

Wouldn't you suspect they had it in for you?

But police chief commissioner Graham Ashton last week denied his force had a "get-Pell" agenda, telling 3AW: "What a joke. We don't run vendettas against people." His police worked "without fear or favour".

Really? For years it's looked to me as if his force actually regarded Pell with extreme prejudice.

Ashton himself, when a deputy commissioner, claimed at a parliamentary inquiry that the Melbourne Catholic diocese which Pell then ran had not referred a single complaint of sexual abuse to police. This was not true.

Then, in 2015, months after Ashton became commissioner, his force made an extraordinary public appeal. It urged "victims" to come forward if they'd been abused at Melbourne's St Patrick's Cathedral between 1996 and 2001 — precisely when Pell was archbishop there.

This suggested that police already assumed — without proof — that Pell was probably a child abuser, and all they had to do was find his "victims".

It also suggested they were inclined to believe anyone who did

then accuse Pell was indeed a true "victim". Police seemed not to be investigating a crime, but trying to nail Pell. What's more, their public appeal — and a string of anti-Pell leaks to the media — was likely to inspire false memories in some people — that Pell must be the monster they imagined, suspected or believed had once abused them. His face would be put on their trauma. To others, it may have seemed an invitation to compensation. Whatever, it worked, especially with the ABC whipping up a get-Pell frenzy.

Police produced nine "victims", and charged Pell with 26 offences. But these ranged from the highly improbable to the impossibly bizarre.

Pell was even charged with anally raping a boy for three minutes in a cinema, with the boy screaming on his lap.

Pardon? Which abuser would be so brazenly careless of being seen? Who in that cinema would not have noticed?

Police also charged Pell with taking this same boy several more times from his children's home — St Joseph's — to rape him, once on an altar, and once so badly that the boy's foster mother took him to a doctor. But the police didn't just charge Pell with crimes which seemed literally incredible.

They also failed to investigate properly, as if they assumed Pell's guilt was self-evident.

Take that boy Pell supposedly took out of St Joseph's.

In fact, the boy no longer lived at St Joseph's that year. Pell never worked there. The film they allegedly saw at the cinema wasn't screened that year, and neither the boy's foster mother nor doctor could recall him having anal injuries. Why did police not check more closely?

Or take one of the four charges the High Court dismissed — that Pell, walking down a corridor of his Cathedral after Mass with Father Brendan Egan by his side, and 50 choristers around him, suddenly

pushed one boy against a wall and gave his testicles a hard squeeze.

That was extremely improbable.

Yet police charged Pell without bothering to interview a single witness, not even Father Egan.

Asked in court why not, the investigating sergeant was dismissive: "Because I didn't."

Call an inquiry into Victoria Police. Now.



ABC GUILTY AS SIN OF CARDINAL ERRORS

THE ABC has officially denied the truth: it led a witch hunt to destroy Cardinal George Pell. ABC editorial director

Craig McMurtrie defended it after the High Court last week cleared Pell of his ludicrous conviction for raping two teenagers at once.

"Language thrown around ... about 'prejudice' and a 'witch-hunt' against George Pell seems to ignore the first principles of journalism and the facts," McMurtrie protested.

Rubbish. The ABC united behind reporter Louise Milligan as she seemed to peddle multiple allegations against Pell so weak that all were dropped by prosecutors or overturned by the High Court.

McMurtrie didn't mention that. Instead, he boasts: "It was the ABC's Louise Milligan who met the former choirboy at the centre of the now quashed case against Cardinal Pell and it was Milligan who found and interviewed the family of the second alleged victim." But he doesn't mention a critical weakness in these allegations, which should have warned off the ABC: that second "alleged victim" told his mother he hadn't been abused at all. Nor did the ABC do what I consider basic reporting that would have revealed that all the anti-Pell allegations it promoted were improbable.

None even checked whether Pell and his "victims" in the cathedral could have been at the scene of the alleged crime — the open change room in which the rapes supposedly occurred — at the only time it was empty. I did and reported the answer was no. This was the key in the High Court acquitting Pell.

Instead, Milligan (and the ABC) just seemed to take the word of the lone accuser, despite overwhelming evidence that his allegations were baseless. She did the same with other "victims", including another key anti-Pell accuser, who later admitted he'd told a lie because he was having a "melt-down" when he spoke to her, thanks in part to drugs and drink. McMurtrie also misrepresents the High Court's findings to make the choirboy still seem a witness of truth: "The High Court was largely silent on the veracity of the key witness."

Wrong. All seven judges considered his allegations so implausible that they threw them out.

Finally, McMurtrie ignores how the ABC prepared for this acquittal — by publishing days earlier a fake claim that it had found "new" Pell accusers.

If this is the ABC's best defence, it's as guilty as sin.

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