

# Dumb act in wrong place at worst time



Phillip O'Neill

YOU would not want to be fronting a magistrate in England at the moment. A parade of offenders has been dragged before the courts following the street riots and looting in English cities over the past fortnight. The sentences have been severe.

On Thursday last week the English newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* reported one case this way:

"A college student with no criminal record was jailed for six months on Thursday for stealing a £3.50 case of bottled water during a night of rioting.

Nicolas Robinson, 23, of Borough, south-east London, carried out the "opportunistic" theft at a Lidl supermarket in Brixton as he walked home from his girlfriend's house.

Robinson threw away the water and ran when he was confronted by police but was arrested and quickly admitted what he had done.

His solicitor told Camberwell Magistrates' Court [that Robinson] had "got caught up in the moment" and was "incredibly ashamed".

But District Judge Alan Baldwin said the background of "serious public disorder" was an aggravating feature.

Members of Robinson's family in the public gallery gasped with disbelief as the judge told him he would be going to prison.

It's a chilling story, one that sends shivers down the spine of every parent.

One dumb act, without thinking, no malice, no intended harm, and a young man takes a huge hit to his life as British authorities unleash the power of their criminal justice system.

If this were a NSW court, there'd be a fair chance the young man would now be in prison in Cessnock or at St Heliers near Muswellbrook. Cessnock sleeps about 250 minimum security prisoners. It also houses about 100 maximum security inmates, about half of whom are awaiting trial.

St Heliers has about 280 prisoners, all minimum security.

There are only men in these jails.



WEIGHTY SENTENCE: A young man is now paying a very high price for a minor offence.

In prison he would witness violence at levels not encountered anywhere on the streets. The rate of prisoner offences heard by correctional centre managers in NSW is 97 per 100 inmates. Typical are offences against good order, fighting, assault or abusive behaviour. But more than 20 per cent of offences are drugs related.

With no prior imprisonment, the young man would serve out his full term, with any reduction for good behaviour unlikely. After his release, there would be a 25 per cent chance that he would be convicted of another offence within two years and return to jail.

And if he did serve a second sentence, there would then be a 42 per cent chance he would return to jail within two years of release.

These are statistics from the NSW Department of Corrective Services.

If, however, our young man was Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, then his life chances would be something different again. His

chances of being a student at a university would be four times worse than if he were non-indigenous. But his chances of going to jail would be 13 times higher than his non-indigenous peers. And the chances of a second jail stint would be nearly 75 per cent.

If our young man was in a Hunter Valley jail, then his parents could only visit him on weekends. They wouldn't have to book, just register at reception and show photo ID. Only four persons could be in their party. They could take up to \$30 in coins to buy snacks from vending machines. They could take in a pack of unopened cigarettes for smoking, but none could be left behind for the inmate.

But they could take and leave new underwear and socks and deposit up to \$100 at the visits office for buy-ups from the jail store, although at inflated prices.

The inmate could enrol in a course or two, like basic literacy or numeracy, or a selection of NSW

TAFE courses. And, yes, as a university student, he might be able to arrange to continue his course by distance learning.

If he was a young woman - indigenous or non-indigenous, it doesn't matter - then he would be less likely to come into contact with the police and the courts in the first place, let alone end up in jail. The average daily prison population in NSW last year was around 17,600 and only 2700 of these were women.

But we all know women aren't as evil as men. And that they don't fight, steal, break and enter, sexually assault, drink drive, and abuse the police as much as men.

Or grab a bottle of water, like a fool, on the way home from a girlfriend's house through a riot on the high street.

Professor Phillip O'Neill is the director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

# Dark times give way to season of growth

Help is at hand for those struggling to cope with loss, writes Benita Tait.

OUR landscape is currently dotted with wattle blooms springing forth, and we are witness to the strength of their regeneration, often after enduring elements that have threatened to destroy them.

In much the same way communities across our country and overseas have needed to rebuild after the disasters experienced in the past year.

As people have struggled with the loss of loved ones, their homes, and the sense of security and safety, they can often find little to hope for in the future.

Through remembering and acknowledging the losses our communities have experienced over

the past year, Grief Awareness Week, which began yesterday, aims to rebuild hope in communities and promote resilience and healing after disaster.

Good Grief Ltd, an initiative of the Sisters of St Joseph, is an Australian-owned not-for-profit organisation that has been helping to rebuild hope and promote resilience and healing through its program Stormbirds Growing Through Natural Disaster.

Developed in 2009, Stormbirds is educational, encouraging young people to value who they are and the particular story they have. The program emphasises the important role of storytelling as a means of acknowledging loss, of managing the feelings associated with the loss and of moving forward in hope.

Committed to relieving suffering and bringing hope to people affected by change, loss and grief,

Good Grief is best known for its primary program, Seasons for Growth. Established with funding from the Mary MacKillop Foundation in 1996, the Seasons for Growth program has reached more than 150,000 children and young people, as well as thousands of adults, in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Ireland and Peru.

Like the Seasons for Growth program, Stormbirds is dedicated to the spirit of St Mary MacKillop, a woman for all Australians, who lived by the principle "never see a need without trying to do something about it." These two programs are based on the belief that children and adolescents need the opportunity to examine how change and loss have affected their lives. The programs provide an opportunity for each participant to integrate the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes to manage change and loss.

This takes place within an atmosphere of "like-to-like" peer support.

Feedback from participants in the Seasons for Growth program indicates that they find themselves growing in confidence and trust through the acknowledgement and support they receive from others in the group.

In the same way the Stormbirds program helps participants to move forward with hope and increased resilience.

In the Hunter, Seasons for Growth is co-ordinated through funding from the Catholic Schools Office and the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle.

Benita Tait is the Seasons for Growth in the Hunter co-ordinator. Article submitted by the Hunter Churches Media Association.



## Spilling over

News of a second industrial incident at Orica had opinions divided on our website between those angered by the breach and others accusing the media of a beat-up.

OK, so it rained yesterday and Orica were caught out. Hopefully that's all it was. Why were they operating with no storage capacity though? Surely they realized they were in the middle of a PR disaster and that this would make things worse. My doubts about the safety of that plant are now major concerns. If they can't handle stormwater then why are they allowed to make explosives!

Amanda

What shocked me the most about this article is they are allowed to put ANY arsenic in the Hunter River, not that they went over the limit.

leahkf

Once again another media beat-up is taking place. Maybe the headline should have read "Orica exceeds its disposal limit" as the way you have wrote it makes it sound like they never dispose of waste products in the river when you know that is just not the case. They didn't "SPILL" anything, they just exceeded their limit by 0.017 MGL. What is the Herald's ideal here? To close down a vital cog in the coalmining industry and make hundreds of people unemployed? Without Orica what will the coalmines in the Hunter Valley use? Imports?

Timmo

How many times a year do they dump in the Hunter river and never say a word!!

AkTim

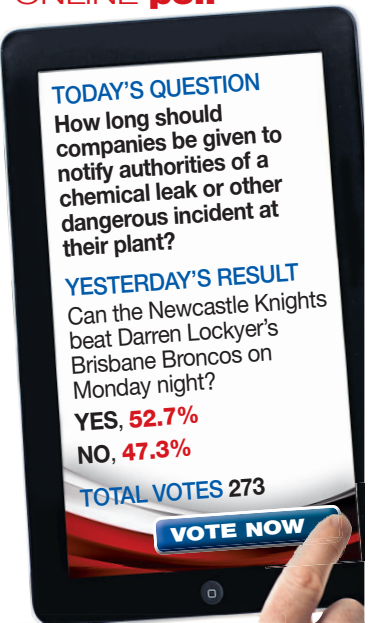
Oh everyone just wake up and stop scaremongering, Newcastle is an industrial town. Are people actually aware that Orica do make explosives destined for our Hunter Valley mines without which they could not operate, they are not a cheese factory for goodness sake.

Flogging a dead horse

How can this be allowed, people eat fish, swim, arsenic doesn't break down!

Peter

## ONLINE poll



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