

The Sorrow of Michael Chamberlain.

For The New Daily.

Comparison with some unbearable Beckett tragedy comes to mind.

Not yet a week ago Michael Chamberlain was rushed to Gosford Hospital suffering massive blood loss, tended by family and visited by close friends, his malady evasive, now attributed to a swift leukaemia. He died with son Reagan and daughter Zahra alongside, without his second wife Ingrid, who was disabled by a fierce stroke about a decade ago, paralysed, for whom Michael was the prime carer.

He was exposed to our curiosity as the first target of rumours that his daughter, the infant Azaria, was murdered, not scavenged from the family tent by dingoes in August 1980. Then a Pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, he was said to have slaughtered the infant at the top of Ayers Rock, to atone for the sins of the world, or because she was a Devil's Child, or because she was disabled, or because she was not to be allowed surgery to repair an injury. This rumour was suspended when tourists came forward who had dandled the live babe on a seat below the Rock when she was said to be decapitated high above.

In the dark of early morning at the Rock, Pastor Michael addressed the assembled searchers, the camping tourists in their exhausted and saddened hundreds, to thank them for their efforts and to give, as a comfort, his belief that Azaria is now safe in the hands of Jesus, an aberration of his true belief, which allows the dead will rise and join Jesus at the Second Coming, which they all await. He attributed this liturgical lapse to an intensity of emotion. Many about him were also in tears and embraced him. This was the one point in time when everyone here clearly understood the terrible event: dingoes had made off with a baby. Chief Ranger Derek Roff, now in charge of the search, had weeks ago warned his department of the danger, but ignored. The rangers, the blacktrackers, the police, the volunteers were all of the one clear understanding.

Rumours began the next day.

By the time of inquest, four months later, some newsrooms had managed to put rumours into print or to broadcast by asking the Chamberlains if they knew they were said to have murdered their baby and inviting comment. Coroner Denis Barritt, onetime policeman turned lawyer, was disturbed by antagonisms of public opinion. Groups sat in the gallery waiting to heckle the Chamberlains. He cleared the building after a phoned threat to bomb the Chamberlains in the courtroom. He invited a news camera to broadcast his finding into the living rooms of the nation, not to be edited. He found that a dingo had scavenged away the babe and she was dead. He apologised to the Chamberlains for the unforgivable national mood. On camera he criticised government departments, including Parks, for ignoring the danger of attack.

Michael Chamberlain's response was relief; their persecution was finally over. Now they could all go home.

While they were happily at home, a now depleted family of parents with two boys, departments of government were working to repair their own standing. Secretly the law department convened Operation Ochre, briefed to find evidence of murder by one or other parent. The baby's recovered swaddling was shown to pathologists in several states, but none would offer an opinion the babe was slaughtered by human hand. Better luck with pathologists attached to Scotland Yard whose examinations showed bloodstains caused by decapitation and a bloodied human handprint on the singlet. Tactics now called for renewed public suspicion, using information leaks to preferred journalists, to whom an investigator might then refuse to confirm or deny truth in the rumour, often by the same officer who had arranged the leak. Ignition of public suspicion was spontaneous.

Asked by investigators to supply the family Torana for examination, Michael produced it at the police station, and read in the morning News that the vehicle was 'compulsorily confiscated for testing.' Newshounds shared their gossip with the streets: The car was awash with blood.

So to fulfilling public expectation: In secret, the law department moved to quash the Barritt Finding, in secret Barritt was removed as Coroner because he would not agree to secrecy from one of the parties, in secret Justice Toohey ordered the Inquest reopened, television crews were alerted so able to film notification to the Chamberlain of new investigations, by helicopters overhead. The drama, as a blockbuster, was on air. After their conviction, parties were held all over town.

Infamously, the laboratory testing of blood and blood patterns leading to convictions for homicide were found by the Morling Commission of Inquiry to be either faked or simply preposterous. Lindy Chamberlain left gaol after three years and both were exonerated.

Michael, after losing his daughter Azaria, then suffering his wrongful conviction, lost his wife to gaol, then lost his marriage, wife Ingrid was stricken, intelligent but immobile, and he lost his calling as a Pastor, but remained an agent of pastoral care, gave his life over to activism against persecution, to education, teaching in Indigenous schools and elsewhere, took a PhD in Education, and wrote histories.

He was sorely treated by callous and self-serving agencies of governance and by us, his public, shamefully. He deserves our apology. If we are moving away from a wave of ignorance and malice, toward sympathy and outrage, we will become a better society for the change.

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