

**ABC NEWS**

## Former NSW police minister Mike Gallacher dismisses claim he 'kowtowed' to American millionaire whose brother died in Sydney

Lateline / By Emma Alberici

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Scott Johnson's family believes he was murdered in a gay hate crime. (Supplied: NSW Police)

Former New South Wales police minister Mike Gallacher has admitted that he met the family of an American man who died in Sydney in 1988 on two or three occasions in an effort to help them seek justice but did not "kowtow" to them as claimed by a senior police officer.

Mr Gallacher claimed that it was not unusual for him to meet with the families of victims of crime.

In an exclusive interview with Lateline, he dismissed the senior police officer's claims that the former police minister was unduly influenced by millionaire American entrepreneur, Steve Johnson whose brother Scott Johnson was found dead at the bottom of a cliff at Manly.

This week, a third inquest was ordered into the death of Scott Johnson.

It is understood the only other time a third inquest has been called into a single death in Australia has been surrounding the death of Azaria Chamberlain.

The first inquest in 1989 found that Scott Johnson had taken his own life but his family was convinced from the start that he would never have killed himself.

They are now adamant that he was murdered in a gay-hate crime.

On Monday, Detective Chief Inspector Pamela Young from the Unsolved Homicide Squad told Lateline that after a two-year investigation, dubbed Strikeforce Macnamir, police had found no evidence to support a murder finding.

She said, in her opinion, the case was most likely a suicide given Scott Johnson had previously discussed his intentions to kill himself by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge.

The previous suicide attempt had occurred three years previously when he was in the United States.

He told his ex-partner that he had been wracked with guilt after being unfaithful to him.

The area where Mr Johnson's body was found was known to be a gay beat where men met to have casual sex.

His body was found naked and his clothes were folded neatly at the cliff tops.

In his statement to police, Scott's partner of four years Michael Noone said: "This is what I find really strange about being told that his clothes were neatly folded on that cliff, because he was not capable of being neat and tidy. He was really messy. He wasn't neat and tidy".

Scott Johnson died in the year after the \$3 million Grim Reaper advertising campaign attempted to raise public awareness about what was considered then the AIDS epidemic.

Mr Noone told police that contracting AIDS was an overwhelming concern for both he and Scott because there was still little understanding about how it was contracted.

Mr Noone confirmed to police that both he and Scott had engaged in casual sex outside the relationship which might explain why Scott had been visiting a gay beat when he died. But he did not agree with the Johnson family that murder was the most likely explanation.

"You can have an accident at a beat. You can suicide at a beat. You can go there seeking sex with somebody and be so full with remorse afterwards, or disgust, that you can then suicide ... these all seem to me to be possible explanations," he said.

After a two-year investigation by Strikeforce Macnamir, only one former act of violence was found to have been reported at North Head involving one man stabbing another.



Mike Gallacher speaks with Emma Alberici (*Emma Alberici*)

The perpetrator of that crime was found to have a mental illness and was convicted of the crime.

After almost 30 years, two coronial inquests, countless media calls for information and a \$100,000 reward, no victim of a gay-hate crime has come forward to say they were attacked on the cliff tops where Scott Johnson's body was found.

## **Detective says Gallacher gave priority to Johnson family**

DCI Young said, as police minister, Mr Gallacher had given priority to the Johnson family above all of the other 700 cases before the Unsolved Homicide Squad.

Martha Jabour, who heads up the Victims of Homicide Support Group, told Lateline that other victims felt "aggrieved" that Mr Gallacher had given so much attention to the Johnson family.

"It's abnormal in the extreme" for a police minister to call a meeting between senior police and the victim's family, she said.

She said she did not know of one other case where Mr Gallacher as minister had granted a meeting to another grieving family.

Mr Gallacher said the then-treasurer Mike Baird had also referred the matter to police for consideration given Scott died in his electorate.

Mr Gallacher denied any impropriety and said he had definitely not been influenced by the Johnson family connections to America's Kennedy family.

He said he had no idea the Kennedys had made representations to the NSW Government on the Johnson family's behalf.

More recently, US senator and thought to be aspiring presidential Nominee Elizabeth Warren wrote to the American Ambassador John Berry reminding him that the Kennedys were interested in the case and asking that "a consular officer be present at the hearing in order to support Steve Johnson".

Mr Gallacher admitted to Lateline that while he had met the Johnson family on "two or three" occasions, he had not similarly granted a meeting to the families of the three Aboriginal children who were murdered in Bowraville in 1990/1.

He said he did though meet them when he was in Opposition.

"I've done it as shadow minister and I've done it as minister. It's always been my objective to make sure the wellbeing of family members and people [who] have been victims of crime is looked after, and that's exactly what I've afforded them," Mr Gallacher said.

## **Gallacher denies allegation he and staffers went outside protocol**



DCI Young said she understood Mr Gallacher had called both the Johnson family and her commander, and arranged a meeting during which she was directed to give priority to a reinvestigation of the Johnson matter.

She told Lateline that the minister at the time had acted inappropriately by treating the Johnson case differently to the 700 other cases before the Unsolved Homicide Unit.

She said she felt his conduct was "absolutely improper, and wrong on every level in relation to homicide investigations," adding that "victims are equal, it was very wrong".

DCI Young said Mr Gallacher and his staffers went outside protocol and routine and arranged meetings with Steve Johnson, who has spent more than \$1 million privately investigating his brother's death.

But Mr Gallacher has denied the allegation, describing it as "misconceived".

"There was never a direction given to police and I vehemently deny that allegation in the strongest possible terms," he told Lateline on Tuesday.

Martha Jabour told Lateline the attention the former police minister gave Steve Johnson was "abnormal in the extreme" and said she agreed wholeheartedly with DCI Young.

She also said other victims' families would feel aggrieved by the attention given to Steve Johnson.

"There are so many family members that get no attention whatsoever and when I asked about the reasons why, I was told the minister had the Unsolved Homicide Unit bogged down in two inquiries - this was one of them," she said.

Steve Johnson said he had no idea what DCI Young meant when she accused him of having too much influence over Mr Galacher.

"I'm not sure what she means by that. I think from the very beginning when we first met Pamela Young when Minister Gallacher at the time offered the \$100,000 reward. I had spent 10 straight years asking for an investigation, I hired my own private investigator, we submitted information about the violence that had been going on in the Northern Beaches right at the time that Scott died ... other victims, other gangs and perpetrators. And the police ignored every one of our requests".

Steve Johnson told Lateline that it was his campaigning that helped secure a second inquest into his brother's death.

"In 2011 Magistrate Jerram finally took a close look at our materials and ordered the police to review it," he said.

"That's what occasioned the 2012 inquest."

### **Australian Story: Scott Johnson**

DCI Young told Lateline that the former police minister had met with Steve Johnson and encouraged him to participate in media.

"Steve Johnson arrived with very high expectations about finding that Scott had been murdered," she said.

"My role is to help them see that that might not always be possible if there's not the evidence there. But I did see the former police minister encourage and invite him (Steve Johnson) to do more media and to go along the lines of not representing all the facts of the matter in the media."

The then-police minister was not the only parliamentarian who met with Steve Johnson.

Mr Gallacher told Lateline that Mr Baird and Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore had made representations on behalf of Steve Johnson.

John Agius SC representing the Johnson family told Lateline that he had written to counsel assisting the Police Commissioner at the coroner's inquest to formally ask Pamela Young to retract her public statements about the case.

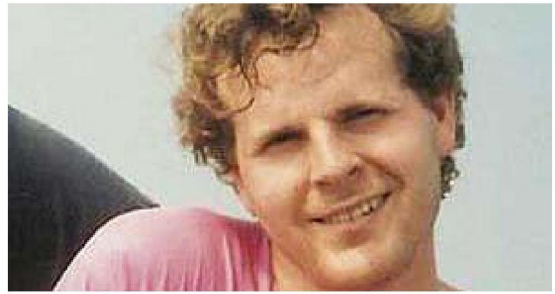
He also asked that she be removed from the case and replaced with someone more senior.

Mr Agius has also asked for an apology from police.

The Johnson family has again asked for anyone with information about the gay beat operating at North Head in Manly in the late 80s and early 90s to come forward.

On Monday, NSW coroner Michael Barnes ordered a third inquest into Scott Johnson's death.

At the second inquest, deputy state coroner Carmel Forbes said she was unable to determine whether Scott took his own life, was involved in an accident or was pushed.



[The search for the truth of what happened to Scott Johnson brought together a wealthy internet pioneer, and international super sleuth and the NSW Police Cold Case Unit.](#)