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## It's time to re-investigate all the potential gay hate crimes from the 1980s and '90s

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The extraordinary claims [made on Lateline this week](#) by Detective Chief Inspector Pamela Young regarding former police minister Mike Gallacher supposedly "kowtowing" to Scott Johnson's wealthy family could appear to some – myself included – a deliberate and cynical attempt to distract the public from the real issues.

Equally extraordinary – and equally as offensive – were Young's statements which effectively dismissed the level of homophobia that existed at that time. One incidence of homophobia by a police officer at Manly involved in the case? Really? Please.



The last family photo of Scott Johnson, who died in 1988. NSW POLICE

The facts are that there are dozens of deaths and hundreds of bashings of men in and around beats between 1985 and 1995 that remain unresolved. During this time gay men lived in an atmosphere of extraordinary fear.

Scott's death happened at a time when to be homophobic was normalised, accepted and in some situations encouraged in Australian culture. Sydney, particularly, was experiencing an epidemic of gay hate crimes, expressed through violent and incredibly brutal bashings and murders. Compounding this was the fear and panic around the emergence of HIV/AIDS and the notion that, for some in our community, gay men were vectors of disease and "going to die anyway".



Steve Johnson, brother of Scott Johnson, outside Glebe Coroner's Court. NICK MOIR

Homosexuality was only decriminalised in NSW in 1984, and many members of my community were still scared of government authorities, most notably NSW Police (think Mardi Gras 1978). This level of social exclusion, targeted hate and social disenfranchisement plays out in multiple visible and hidden ways – including in some criminal justice outcomes.

You only have to hear the stories of many of our older gay citizens – fortunate enough to have survived through these concurrent epidemics – to understand what a frightening time this was.

That significant issues remain unresolved in this and many other cases has been recognised by the NSW Coroner – outside of police or political interference – should be praised; as should the family's persistence and the leadership of many others that got us to this point.

However, there is an important question for many other families – and that is, does this one inquest go far enough? The answer can only be no.

Just as previously unjust laws have been reviewed and overturned as understanding of sexual diversity and homophobia widens within our society, so too is there an argument for every assault or "suicide" of a male, at or near a known gay beat in Sydney during this time to be considered a potential gay hate crime and evidence reviewed.

To not do so delivers a disservice to the vastly improved policing practice of today, and the strength of the current relationship between the gay community and the NSW Police Force.

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Justice and recognition of crimes perpetrated on men based on their sexuality is important, not only for the families involved, but for our entire community.

Distraction and obfuscation are tactics that can suggest defensiveness. Let's hope that all involved in the Inquest fully explore the issues, and shine a light on all possibilities, free from self-preservation and in the name of justice.

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