

## Interview: Former NSW Police Minister Mike Gallacher

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Interview: Former NSW Police Minister Mike Gallacher - Lateline (abc.net.au)

*Former NSW Police Minister Mike Gallacher responds to claims by a Detective Chief Inspector that he 'kowtowed' to the wealthy family of a man who plunged to his death from a cliff.*

### Transcript

EMMA ALBERICI, PRESENTER (“EA”)

PAMELA YOUNG, HOMICIDE SQUAD, UNSOLVED HOMICIDE TEAM, NSW POLICE (“MG”)

MIKE GALLACHER, FMR NSW POLICE MINISTER (“MG”)

**EA** Last night we brought you the story of what's understood to be the first time a coroner in New South Wales has ordered a third inquest into the death of one person.

Scott Johnson was a young American who plunged from a cliff at Sydney's North Head in 1988.

Our coverage included an exclusive interview with Detective Chief Inspector Pamela Young, who led a two-year investigation into the death. She accused the former NSW police minister, Michael Gallacher, of giving the case priority over others and "kowtowing" to the dead man's brother, Steve Johnson, who is a wealthy and well-connected businessman.

**MG** “I saw a lot of what I would describe as kowtowing by the minister and his staffers to Steve Johnson in particular. I was amazed and incredulous. I didn't understand. I was quite confused. I wasn't understanding what was happening.

Absolutely improper, wrong on every level, in relation to homicide investigations. Victims are equal. It was very wrong.”

**EA** Mike Gallacher is no longer police minister. He resigned from the NSW Cabinet after allegations before the Independent Commission Against Corruption that he was involved in soliciting illegal donations.

We invited him on the program to respond to that interview with Pamela Young.

Mike Gallacher, welcome to Lateline.

**MG** Emma, hello.

**EA** Tell us about your relationship with the Johnson family?

**MG** I met the Johnson family in early 2013, following a request from them to meet me. I understand that they were given advice by Police Media to make contact with my office to meet myself and my staff.

**EA** How many times have you met them since then?

**MG** Probably two: two times at most, two to three times at most.

**EA** Is that unusual: for you to meet the family of a victim of a crime two or three times...

**MG** No, generally if people...

- EA** ...as a minister for police?
- MG** No, if people request to come and see me. I've done it as shadow minister and I've done it as minister. It's always been my objective to make sure that the wellbeing of family members and people who have been victims of crime are looked after. And that's exactly what I've afforded them: no different than I've afforded anyone else who's requested it.
- EA** Are you aware of any other member of the NSW Parliament meeting the Johnson family?
- MG** I understand a number of members have written to me, so I assume that they've met with them. But I don't know in which context or what the degree of the meetings have been.
- EA** So you know other members of the Parliament who - and politicians - who've made representations on behalf of the Johnson family?
- MG** Yes.
- EA** Can you tell us who they are?
- MG** Clover Moore, I think was - had recently left Parliament at the time, was obviously the Lord Mayor of Sydney. And the former treasurer, now Premier, Mike Baird, also made representations as the local Member for Manly, based on these concerns coming from his local electorate.
- EA** Concerns about the police investigation?
- MG** Ah, concerns that had been raised with him in relation to the need to ensure that family concerns - the Johnsons' concerns - were being properly aired.
- EA** On the 12th of February, the morning after an episode of the ABC's Australian Story profiled the case of Scott Johnson, you called a meeting between the Johnson family and the Unsolved Homicide Unit of the NSW Police, which was led by Detective Chief Inspector Pamela Young, who appeared on our program last night. Why was that meeting called?
- MG** Look, that meeting had been in the wind for about a week or so and it was felt...
- EA** You knew the Australian Story episode was about to air?
- MG** I knew that it was about to air. There'd been a request from the NSW Police Force prior to that for me to participate in a reward announcement, which was in the dying hours before the Australian Story was aired on the ABC.
- EA** As a result of that meeting you held with Detective Chief Inspector Pamela Young and the Johnson family, you directed that a taskforce be set up to re-investigate the case - which is an enormous leap from being an unsolved, the unsolved homicide caseload, and then going to re-investigation. It took preference over all the other 700 unsolved homicides. Why?
- MG** Well, apart from all of that, that allegation is totally incorrect. I saw that it was aired yesterday. It's misconceived.

**EA** So a re-investigation was not ordered on that day?

**MG** No. The, er... a glance...

**EA** EMMA ALBERICI: Can I just read- can I just, so that we're completely clear: In the report to the coroner that went to the coroner yesterday, I'll just read you this. It says that the Office of the Police and Emergency Services Minister - yourself - contacted the Detective Superintendent Michael Willing, the commander of the Homicide Squad.

Commander Willing was informed that the Minister had agreed to meet the Johnson family later that today. Commander Willing was asked to provide the position of the Homicide Squad in the matter.

A decision was made based on that call - with you - to have the Unsolved Homicide Team commence a re-investigation and Strike Force Macnamir was formed for this purpose.

**MG** Well, that doesn't keep pace with the documentation from the NSW Police Force prior to the meeting in fact taking place. There is documentation available to the police and an examination of their records would reveal that their own files show that such an inquiry was already underway before I met the Johnsons.

**EA** An inquiry at the Unsolved Homicide Unit is always the situation, as I understand it, when it's referred after an open finding by a coroner. But going that next step of a full reinvestigation and launching a strike force is a completely different matter?

**MG** I can assure you: at no stage did I make any demands upon anyone to force an inquiry upon the NSW Police Force. It was a request from the Johnsons that an opportunity to sit down with the police face-to-face in my presence, to actually look at the evidence.

And that's what I did and that's what I would do every other day if a family member needs that assistance, to be assured that their concerns are being taken seriously. And that's what I thought had happened.

**EA** We contacted Martha Jabour of the Victims of Homicide Support Group and she said it was abnormal in the extreme for a next of kin of a homicide victim to be granted an audience with the Police Minister?

**MG** Well, I mean that is completely incorrect.

**EA** She said other victims would feel aggrieved by the attention given to the Johnson family.

**MG** Well, that may well be Martha's view but when I'm told that a request is made as a result of discussions that the Johnsons have had with Police Media to make contact with my office, also following representations...

**EA** Do you normally take directions from Police Media?

**MG** No, no. But we look at the case. We look at the application by people wanting to speak to someone in Government. And that's what I see my role as the minister is to assist people in

- the public domain when they have concerns. Not to direct police: there was never a direction given to police and I vehemently deny that allegation in the strongest possible terms.
- EA** Martha Jabour also said to Lateline that "Mike Gallacher, the police minister at the time, was not very victim-friendly"?
- MG** Well, Martha and I have known each other for a long, long time. I don't intend to go down the path of talking about our relationship.
- EA** She represent a quite a number of victims and, I guess, the reason I'm making this point is that...
- MG** But we all do as members of Parliament, when victims come to us. Victims are seeking help and we represent them, as I did with the Bowraville families. I represented them. And when I sat down with police and spoke to them about the Bowraville children's murders, back in 1990, no-one complained about it then.
- EA** Well, these were three Aboriginal children who died at Bowraville in 1990-91. That's been unresolved for 23 years, that particular case. Have those families ever managed to get a meeting with you?
- MG** Yes, they have. In Opposition they did and in Government I sat down with the senior investigator in relation to the Bowraville murders.
- EA** No, did you, did you sit down with the family?
- MG** I did in Opposition sit down with the family.
- EA** Did you sit down with the families of the Bowraville murders when you were police minister?
- MG** No, I did not.
- EA** Why not?
- MG** Because I took it upon myself to sit down with the investigators to find out where the investigators felt that I could support them and that's exactly what I did.
- EA** Well, those families have told Lateline through their representatives that they've been trying to get a meeting for 23 years. Their cases are murder. It's well known they're murder. Scott Johnson's case has not been determined to be a murder.
- MG** Well, the fact is: I have met, as I said, in Opposition with members of the family from the North coast, as I have met with members of the family of the Johnson matter.
- But I again make the point that I don't discriminate. If requests were made to me as minister and I believed that there was something that I could do to assist them, to facilitate a better understanding of a police methodology or a decision, then I would do it and I did it.
- EA** Did you make inquiries to determine whether the police investigation was incompetent or flawed in any way?

**MG** I spoke to senior police in relation to that matter, in relation to the investigation. And I felt that, following the 2012 matter or decision by the coroner and the subsequent submissions that were made to me by the family, that there was going to be, I think, for the best interests of the family but, indeed, the wider community interested in this matter an opportunity to speak with the police directly with the family in relation to the evidence of the information intelligence that the family had gleaned.

**EA** Were you persuaded by representations by the Kennedy family in the US? Steve Johnson is, of course, a multi-millionaire internet pioneer businessman. Were you persuaded by the fact that he has connections to the Kennedy family?

**MG** You asked me if I'd been persuaded by representations made by the Kennedy family. I don't know anyone in the Kennedy family.

**EA** I know we're told by the Johnson family that the Kennedy family had made representations on their behalf to the NSW Government?

**MG** I've got no recollection of those.

**EA** And just finally, I have to ask the question: has the Johnson family donated money through your office to the Liberal Party or through any other mechanism to the Liberal Party?

**MG** Not as far as I'm aware. They most certainly haven't donated to me. Not that I'm aware and we haven't even had a cup of coffee.

**EA** Thank you very much for your time.

**MG** Thank you.

**EA** And tonight we've spoken to senior counsel John Aegis, who represents the Johnson family. He's written to the Police Commissioner of NSW on behalf of the Johnsons, calling for Detective Chief Inspector Pamela Young to be removed from the case and replaced with someone more senior.

They've also asked for a formal apology from Police for DCI Young's comments giving her opinion on the evidence and for her to retract her statements.

**Author**

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