

**Submission  
No 92**

## **COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES**

**Name:** Miss Philippa Morris  
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Partially  
Confidential

## Grocery shopping in Moree 2024

This is a snapshot of one event that I experienced in Moree. Outside Woolworth's four recently painted, bright green parking bays are reserved for customers collecting pre-paid orders. It took about a week for patrons to start ignoring the signs, I was an early adopter of the practice and owing to slight elevation of the bays, I had a ringside view of what followed my purchase of cat food and milk.

Three girls walked past me, I knew they were school pupils by the impossibly brief and revealing shorts that form the basis of state school uniforms. I didn't see their shirts from the front, but three little maids from school they were not. Perhaps it is the wisdom of hindsight that makes me recall two in front, well-spaced, wingman behind and an air of menace or purpose.

I watched them into the main parking area, where the first bay was occupied by a car, the second was empty and the third contained a dark coloured hatchback that may have been 4WD. A competent stocky woman wearing a beige uniform shirt with logo and jeans walked around the front of this third vehicle, which is curious in itself because the kerb and uneven bark chip covered surface are awkward to negotiate. The girls approached, standing a head taller than she did – or standing on the kerb. Words were spoken. I tried to place the relationship – parole officer, supervisor – each idea swiftly dismissed. More words; perhaps a scuffle had already developed. The passenger side door opened, beige shirt got between the door and what had become her assailants. I ran across (did I - I think I did) as the girls grabbed their victim, dragged her towards the parked car and slammed her face into the rear passenger side door with a dreadful efficiency.

Having moved to intervene I realised that this was 'not their first rodeo' as the saying goes, and anyway what would I do with my handbag? I ran back into Woolworths where the security man had vanished from his invariable post beside the trolleys, and shouted for the staff to get someone out there fast. When I returned beige shirt was back on her feet, blood pouring from her face and the girls had strolled away. According to my memory one even tossed her hair as they glanced back at the onlookers.

Shop staff arrived with cloths to staunch the woman's bleeding face, there was blood on the side of the other vehicle and clumps of hair on the ground. The victim did not want to call the police, but we did anyway, each enduring a five minute interrogation about the exact location and street address of the only Woolworths carpark within a two hundred kilometre radius. Were the assailants armed and so on, by which time the police, summoned by direct line from within the store, had arrived. I offered the junior and more fearful of the constables my contact details, which led to the inevitable demand, "Date of birth?" I never heard another word, despite calling the station a couple of days later to confirm they had my correct telephone number. I could almost hear the number not being recorded and no details being passed to the investigating officer.

Strands and snippets came to hand over the next few days; the girls had been apprehended (they hadn't exactly fled) but "were out by the morning". The victim's niece had been in the passenger seat, it was a playground dispute. Some playground. The victim's nose was broken, she was hospitalised, or at any rate taken to the hospital. She was in all night. Reluctance to involve the police came from fear of retribution. The niece is regularly locked into classrooms at school to protect her from attacks. I spoke with the security guard who had indeed been 'on a break', and whose duties do not extend to the carpark. I felt a bit awful that he had travelled all the way from the sub-continent to witness such behaviour. The manager knew what had happened, and security camera records had been handed to police.

The book Sapiens came to mind as I drove home along with narratives of calm and rational progression to a better world defined by technology, and Steven Pinker's assertion that the world is becoming less violent. Technology is indeed present, telephones, security cameras and the rest, but there is little discussion of that impulse to aggression that is never far below the human surface. These girls' great-great grandfathers probably served in two world wars and to all appearances were more integrated into society than are their descendants.

I wonder what tales they took home that night, if indeed they had homes, "stuck up bitch, she had it coming", "got what she deserved", or how parents and guardians reacted. They probably don't know the word affray. The story that the audience took home is easier to describe because I heard it; "all they'll get is a slap on the wrist", "should be locked up", "what is the world coming to", "social media". There was not a word about the onlookers' collective failure to protect the victim, or that inaction is itself an action.

An almost magnificent contempt for social norms shows just how much structures are slipping away and the social contract we once lived by seems to be withering. In years spent in what was then a fairly lawless NT, I never saw anything like it. By bizarre coincidence, exactly at the moment I was standing in the carpark calling the police (12<sup>th</sup> March at 6.23pm), a press release was issued by the ABC explaining proposed new laws for young offenders and suitable concern being expressed by experts about the detrimental effects of laws that will lead to an increase in imprisonment. Experts are not in the least bit concerned about victims; I can name at least a dozen acquaintances who have suffered violence, threats or property destruction in the past year. The question of whether governments are keeping their part of the social contract, keeps giving me back a resounding 'no'.

In the short term crime may be reduced by incarcerating serial offenders, but assessments of cause depend on the speaker's underlying political viewpoint – bad parenting, 'intergenerational trauma', lack of discipline, social media and inadequate punishment. Widely circulate local security camera footage shows a group of what are described as 'kids' armed with stolen golf clubs (I even know who owned the clubs) attempting to bludgeon their way into a house. They very nearly succeeded, but something disturbed them as one climbed through a smashed window. The householder was armed with a very heavy vase, which has less reach than a golf club, and if the gang got through only a pre-emptive strike could have succeeded. I never thought that I would hear a grandparent discussing the need to deliver a potentially lethal blow to a child in order to save himself and his wife. The word 'kid' implies innocence, these juveniles were armed, dangerous and wreaking havoc. The Indigenous people I have known and worked with across the years were often careless of life, but not vindictive or cruel. This is different.

Witnessing that event in Woolworth's car park has altered me. By instinct I belong to the "don't lock 'em up" side of politics, but these young criminals should not be roaming the streets, they are more akin to gangs from Argentinian favelas than misguided children. An interview with local victims ██████████ was shown on commercial television. I have known ██████████ as a shop assistant extraordinaire ever since I came to Moree, and since retiring she volunteers in charity stores. During the interview ██████████ wore what a poet once described as the refugee's "thousand-mile stare". You see the same in military veterans. The ██████████ don't have a big house and everything showed years of hard work and frugality that allowed them a modest and peaceful retirement, until that peace was abruptly shattered by a brutal attack. I know others who have been assaulted, and although ██████████ was already dying, an attack helped him over the edge. He didn't live for long and probably didn't want to either. Who has taught these children that a pair of octogenarians, someone's aunt, a sick old man or a business owner are natural enemies to do with what they will? This didn't come out of nowhere. It is a couple of years now since I broke up

an altercation close to the town centre (something I probably wouldn't do today) in which a dozen primary age children were savagely beating one of their own. At dusk on a school day in winter, they were shipwrecked in their own town; a moment from Lord of the Flies, too fearful to go back to their houses, yet in danger from themselves.

Of course, a policeman's lot is not a happy one, and the law conspicuously fails to make punishments fit the crime. In dealing with domestic violence and child abuse, police are often forced to act as on-call social workers with guns and not much training. Nonetheless, more than once I have heard that police are the least-worst of the authorities to deal with, "you knows where you is with the cops" one woman said, and identified policemen as less prone to making moral judgements than are social services. The police also do sterling work through the PCYC, and screens are set up in public parks to provide summer's evening entertainment for children. When they get it wrong, of course, the police get it diabolically wrong and lives are lost. The utterly hostile, futuristic design and layout of public areas in the Moree Police Station sadly points to a sinister future of the maintenance of public order.

The criminal justice system is a mish-mash of half discarded antediluvian philosophies that allow long sentences as a deterrent, 'to pay a debt to society', for vengeance, as a warning to others, or to keep addicts and the mentally ill off the street, without there being any evidence of success. The time elapsed between crime and punishment is often ridiculously long, and young offenders at the time of sentencing are in quite a different frame of mind and age to the time of offending. People are still locked up for non-payment of fines, and too many of the mentally ill in prisons should be provided with asylum elsewhere. To lock anyone into a tiny cell, often shared with another person, for up to twenty-three hours a day because of staff shortages, deny them exercise and useful activity, and feed them inadequately is a form of torture for which governments should be liable. The popular mind does not differentiate between punishment, revenge, rehabilitation, reform, correction and remand in the prison system. In remand inmates endure the worst form of incarceration, without having been found guilty of a crime, and minors suffer even more. If correctional services are correcting, can we please see the evidence.

The litany of general injustice against the poor is long indeed, and the poorest of the poor are indigenous. Inadequate housing was first identified by Elkins in 1938 – small, badly insulated, intended for nuclear families with at least one working parent and children at school, they have always been woefully unsuitable for extended, unemployed families whose children have been suspended. I heard a story from Toomelah of a newish house whose front had been partly removed so a car could be brought in to work on it, when the real problem is the lack of sheltered working or recreation space around these dwellings. These people are also more likely than the rest of us to be living with chronic physical and mental illness, and drug use. Within the Moree Plains Shire there is little doubt that the shire has operated subliminal discrimination against the poor parts of the town and villages for many years, by not maintaining streets, not planting trees and so on. Anyone who doubts this should look at the avenue of trees at the eastern edge of Moree. This avenue seems to celebrate the rugby grounds, whilst stopping well short of Stanley Village.

The mechanics of poverty prove ever harder to navigate for everybody, poverty increasingly requires computer access, mobile telephones, on line banking, the ability to choose telephone and electricity plans, and goodness knows what else. Jumping on line is not that easy. Whilst economists seem to believe that unemployment rates of up to 3-5% are a necessity, governments work hard to make life as miserable as possible for the 5%, especially those who have no realistic chance of ever finding employment. Poverty and homelessness make people unreliable because they are so time

consuming, and despite almost every job requiring the ability to read and write, literacy rates are falling.

Decisions over many years by state governments have a very direct impact on social stability in the town – from the building of commission homes here in the 1970s, apparently to remove trouble makers from Redfern and Gosford, to the closure of the railways and timber mill that provided significant employment, and a recent decision to mothball the larger high school campus and cram all the pupils into one close to the town centre, with minimal recreation space and temporary classrooms.

It is impossible not to mention Aboriginal exceptionalism; non-Indigenous poverty is too often considered to be a personal failing, where Indigenous people are victims of ‘systemic racism’, ‘intergenerational trauma’ and similar. Aboriginal history has been massively rewritten in the past two decades, encouraging a myth of pre-contact Nirvana, along with a culture of blame for what happened since, whilst totally ignoring the complexities and nuances of history. Indeed, the attitude of some educated people of European ancestry is akin to fetishism, simultaneously keeping Indigenous people apart and putting them on a pedestal. If Indigenous people are to be lifted out of poverty, in our intensely hierarchical society, who will take their place at the bottom of the ladder?

Then we have programs, as fickle as the wind; introduced by one government and abandoned by the next regardless of whether they succeed. There is keen competition amongst NGOs deliver them and experts wax fat and virtuous upon their funding; it is little wonder that recipients feel jaded and confused. Programs are mostly band aids anyway, . There is a lot of talk in town about the number of programs, and “where does all that money go”, but much expenditure is window dressing that fails to address the problems of extreme wealth that lead to extreme poverty.

In the end no amount of money can buy a moral compass, a problem that is increasingly evident throughout modern society. The financial inequality which means that a CEO might be paid more in three months than a poor person may ‘take home’ in their lifetime, is only the tip of the iceberg. A young person who starts with nothing today, is unlikely ever to achieve financial security, so why bother with trying?