



LETTER

FROM

EPHESUS

Dear St Paul

Diana Simmonds

Sometimes, when rage or disbelief threatens to engulf, it helps to sit down and write a letter to or about the object of one's fury. It can be very cathartic - especially if you don't send the letter. Something like:

Dear St Paul, no doubt I'm not the first to tell you this, nor will I be the last, but you have a lot to answer for, you misanthropic, old, dead creep. And I'm glad you're dead, make no mistake about that. It's just rather a shame that some of your followers aren't pushing up the daisies with you. Yrs truly, etc, etc....

If this notelette seems uncommonly harsh, take a look around. There is something very rum going on in the scheme of things. For instance, when a man like Archbishop David Penman of Melbourne dies at 53, while Fred Nile appears to be flourishing in the hatred and ignorance with which he surrounds himself.

And while on the subject of Nile and ignorance, what is it about Australian politics that has attracted such a moronic breed of candidate to seek public office? We have, on the one hand, an elected representative who believes not only that Australia's economic ills are God's retribution for Sydney's Mardi Gras but also that you can catch AIDS from a dunny seat. Just a little further north, we have Queensland, which is governed by many people who swung down from the same clump of trees and who would be in dire straits if required to sit the HSC.

These are people who can be sincerely indignant about charges of corruption and malpractice, because not only

can they not explain the doctrine of the separation of powers (they've never heard of it) but also, it goes against everything they thought they entered parliament for: to help themselves and their little mates. Their doctrine of powers is true blue mateship left out in the sun so long it's mutated into something very smelly. And no matter, dear pedants, that strictly speaking the doctrine doesn't apply under the Westminster system, the point is that political theory has no place in Queensland politics and neither has democracy.

Any remaining hope that the Queensland Nationals could be persuaded to try it was lost with the dumping of Ahern and Fitzgerald. And if persuasion - ironically a keystone of democracy - has failed, then if every Queensland needs a miracle, it's now. No point in looking to St Paul, though. But hist! Is this Prince Valiant riding up? No, it's Wayne Goss and the fair lady Goss, for whom even Sallyanne Atkinson has said she would vote. Let us all join hands and try to contact the living....

Meanwhile, back at the rage and disbelief front - which is where we started - what **did** happen to democracy? A fair go? Basic human rights and all that other stuff we take for granted? As we go about our daily lives, most of us wouldn't stop for a moment to consider our right to a fair trial, including the presumption of innocence until proven guilty beyond all reasonable doubt. We don't think about it because (with exceptions) we haven't committed murder, rape or violent robbery.

Unfortunately this would not necessarily prevent any of us from being arrested for such crimes, then thrown to the media to have our lives irretrievably torn apart before somebody says, "Whoops, sorry. Made a bit of a blunder here, folks. Actually the evidence is ... um ... not exactly cast-iron irrefutable as ... er ... previously stated, but more like ... ah ... total crap".

Except, of course, the last two words would be concealed in paragraphs of self-justifying gobbledygook. But never mind: the media simply pack up and head off to the next sensational revelation of horrible crime.

But what of the ex-horrible criminal - you? So lately a monster, now simply a casualty of the hour. How do you go back to work, home, friends, the pub, after being plastered across the nation's consciousness labelled murderer/rapist? How will they look at you? How will you cope? Will you still have a job? Friends? Family? Life? It might be OK, but it might not.

"There's no smoke without fire," a neighbourhood sage will whisper, and other wise heads will nod as they appraise you, discreetly, before closing heads to restoke that same fire with the hybrid slanders that will haunt you for years. "You're right!" you might yell at them. "There is no smoke without fire! But I didn't start it. I'm just the mug who got held over the flames and I'm the one who's been burned."

And if you think it couldn't happen to you, think again. Of course it could. Think about Lindy Chamberlain or Harry Blackburn, tried and convicted before they ever got anywhere near a court room. Think about John Friedrichs, the "death truckie" or Tim Anderson, consumed and spat out by forces that make ravening dingoes look benign. A media pack bent on a colourful story, not black and white facts; a public accustomed to blood, thrills and catharsis; administrations desperate for credibility and kudos in the face of a history of ineptitude and stupidity - these three social powers come together to overthrow reason and the course of justice. In their place, we get mob rule.

Perhaps that's what really should be spelled out by the doctrine of the separation of powers: keeping apart the media, the public and the law-enforcement industry. In harness on the wrong road, their energy is quite evil. Humanity loses out to sensation and anybody who accidentally falls foul of it is lost - trapped in the spotlight and shot down, no questions asked, like so many worthless bunnies.

So what happened to our right to innocence, to proof beyond reasonable doubt? And why has the Day of Judgement been accelerated and pre-empted? What's going on around here?

Dear St Paul ... I write to you from the sewer of the Pacific....