But so what? Criticising Hinch is like shooting a sitting duck. It's obvious. The only question worth asking is, does it matter?

When it comes to law and order I would argue that it does matter. It matters because Hinch is just an extreme example of a widespread problem - the problem of the symbiotic relationship between the media and politicians, and the way this relationship influences public policy. And public policy, of course, affects the lives of ordinary people in drastic and far-reaching ways.

An analysis of Hinch's crusading stance on issues like child abuse and drug trafficking provides a nasty illustration of how journalists can devastate the lives of individuals and promote attitudes and policies which can cause suffering to countless others. The plight of alleged drug traffickers in Malaysian prisons is a classic case in point.

Hinch is such an extreme case it is easy to be outraged and critical of his doubtful ethics. But let's face it, Hinch is hardly the only journalist who reiterates lazy-minded cliches with scant regard for their repercussions on the lives of powerless people. The culture of mass media journalism is fostering the 'Hinch' within us all.

NSW recently provided a glaring example of how 'media cliché' is read for 'public opinion' by politicians. The superintendent of Sydney's Minda Juvenile Detention Centre, Terry Halloran, was forced to take leave pending an inquiry into the escape of a boy who was allowed out jogging with the superintendent's dog. Now that's a story!

The Minister for Family and Community Services, Virginia Chadwick, was interviewed on Mike Carlton's show on Sydney radio 2GB. Mike was in full flight. Minda was "the government holiday camp". The escape was a "situation comedy" and "high farce". The staff must think they are running "Outward Bound".

According to Mike, a lot of "bleeding heart social workers and wimps ... think they know best" and "heads should roll".

How does the minister react? "I know how you feel, Mike, and how the people in the community must feel because that is precisely what happened to me when I got the phone call to tell me," says Virginia. The minister eagerly asserts that she is aware of community feeling and that is why the superintendent and another staff member involved "are no longer here ... despite their long years of service". If the superintendent can't justify his actions "he'll be down to the CES I presume." Both Mike and Virginia were reinforcing popular misconceptions which, presumably, they both know to be incorrect.

Hinch's messianic sermons about crime and punishment are just an acute symptom of a widespread media problem.

Julie McCrossin.