

# A GOOD OUTCOME

*Lessons should be learned from the Henson affair*

AFTER a regrettable period of moral panic, the Bill Henson affair appears to have been resolved in an appropriate and welcome manner. The threat of criminal charges has been withdrawn, and the photographer is again free to show his work.

But there are lessons for everyone involved. The next time child-abuse campaigner Hetty Johnston takes a dislike to some public exhibit, Ms Johnston and the authorities should think twice about the appropriate response.

Sending officers into art galleries to seize pictures only serves to make the police look foolish. From Ms Johnston's perspective, it has been shown to be entirely counter-productive.

Had Henson's exhibition at Sydney's Roslyn Oxley9 gallery gone ahead, it would have been seen by perhaps a few hundred people. The raid gave Henson a new national audience. His most contentious pictures — of naked children — have now been viewed by millions. If the goal was to protect these children, it backfired spectacularly.

For the police, the Henson raid should leave them with an earnest desire to avoid being roped in to future quests to preserve public morals.

The question of whether an exhibit in an art gallery attracts liability as pornography does not depend on subjective assessments by community activists or police. It is a complicated question of law that is generally influenced by context and intent.

The decision not to press charges suggests that the police who closed the

Henson exhibition failed to grasp the extent of the legal burden they faced.

But the end of the affair does not automatically validate the praise for those photographs that has emerged from sections of the arts community. Reasonable people differ strongly about their artistic merit — and both sides of the debate have every right to express their views. Kevin Rudd, for example, is perfectly entitled to describe them as “absolutely revolting”.

Those in the arts community who have called for the Prime Minister to recant have failed to perceive their own inconsistency. They defend Henson's right to freedom of expression while criticising Mr Rudd when he exercises the same right. A balanced assessment of Henson's work demands that the photographer and his critics be accorded the same right to freedom of expression. This, after all, is what the debate is all about.

It is entirely consistent to condemn the forced closure of the Henson exhibition while disagreeing strongly with the photographer's use of naked children. Henson and the arts community need to understand that pictures such as these will always cause widespread unease, even when taken with parental consent.

Those with most to learn from this affair appear to be those regional galleries that removed Henson's works from display after the raid in Sydney. Their actions provide a hint of what might have followed had the pornography charges gone ahead.

Weekend Australian, 7-8 June 2008, p.18