

Prisoners of a nation's prejudices

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There are similarities in how Australia reacted to the Chamberlain and Corby cases, writes Anne Summers.

IT WAS probably inevitable that Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton would make contact with Schapelle Corby. After all, Australia's two most celebrated women of crime have a lot of experiences in common. "Seeing your verdict and the reaction to it made me feel like I had been kicked all over again," Chamberlain-Creighton wrote to Corby in her Bali prison last week. "My heart bleeds for you."

Chamberlain-Creighton knows what she's talking about. Until Corby, no other Australian woman had endured the national spotlight in quite the same pitiless way. It changed her and it will change Corby. But it should also tell us something about ourselves and why we as a nation are so willing to insinuate our anxieties and insecurities into the stories of these hapless women.

Chamberlain-Creighton and Corby have been the vehicles for an extraordinary national fixation, generating heated and polarising debate, inflaming passions, igniting fanciful rumours and sickening jokes, and creating levels of hysteria, including an astonishing media frenzy, that seem quite bizarre when you consider that both cases involved previously unremarkable young women who became infamous for being charged with crimes they both denied committing.

In both cases, the nation stopped and turned its eyes to the television to learn from live broadcasts what fate the courts had decided for these women.

Such attention and reaction was unparalleled before 1980, when nine-week-old Azaria Chamberlain disappeared from an Uluru campsite and her mother's words, "The dingo's got my baby", reverberated around the nation.

Corby was just five when the 34-year-old Lindy Chamberlain was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour for the murder of her baby daughter. She was probably still too young to take much notice when, 3½ years later, an emaciated Lindy emerged from Darwin prison, vindicated by the discovery, almost six years after Azaria's death, of the missing matinee jacket. Subsequently, her conviction was quashed and she received a million-dollar-plus compensation by the Northern Territory government.

Corby, convicted by an Indonesian court of smuggling 4.1 kilograms of marijuana into Bali and sentenced to 20 years' jail, can only hope for a similar outcome. She, like Chamberlain-Creighton, has steadfastly maintained her innocence. Like Chamberlain-Creighton, she has pointed to an unknown perpetrator of the crime for which she has been convicted.

As with Chamberlain-Creighton, the country has taken sides and developed a highly opinionated attitude towards the proceedings in the Bali courtroom.

Twenty-five years ago the chatter and the rumours were pretty much confined to personal conversations. Dinner parties were the scene of impassioned arguments and the swapping of dingo jokes. Today, the instant communications of the internet have given Corby's situation an even greater currency. Her website is an organising tool that Chamberlain-Creighton's supporters could never have imagined.

Even there, the passions have run so high that the webmaster has had to intervene: "This is a support site," he said in a recent post. "Keep the hate speech and threatening language under control."

But what explains this extraordinary fascination with Corby? In Chamberlain's case, the allure of the story was almost allegorical, given the possibility of infanticide, the legendary desert location and the presence of the despised dingo, the Chamberlains' unusual religion and the persistent rumours that the baby was dressed in black and her name meant "sacrifice in the wilderness". Popular suspicion was fuelled by Chamberlain's refusal to cry and by her bizarre behaviour that of her husband as the court case rolled on.

But where is the appeal with a young drug-smuggler? Even a pretty one with such a cinematic sense of appropriate courtroom behaviour would not normally engage the population the way the unfolding Corby case has. A clue is the location. I wonder if the same furies would have been unleashed had she been arrested in, say, Kuala Lumpur or Hanoi. Bali occupies a unique place in the Australian experience and, thus, in our imagination. Bali is a tropical paradise that has served as a national balm, its gentle friendly people ministering to us when we need to escape our aggressive and stressful lives. We go to Bali to chill out, or we used to.

The Bali bombing put paid to all that. Since then we have looked to Bali with ambiguity, if not outright hostility. Corby's trial has galvanised the feelings of fury and grief the bombing gave rise to and has, in a sense, provided a channel for our anger. This was evident in the rage expressed by those who compared Corby's 20-year sentence with the so-called "mastermind of the Bali bombing's" 2½ years.

Previously, the people of Indonesia, of Bali in particular, were not blamed for what happened. Now many Australians have turned on them with a savagery that is quite shocking.

"Hope the next wave wipes the lot of them out," says blogger "Steve" on the Corby website. "I hope you idiots don't expect any help from the Australian Army next time someone drops a bomb on your sorry head," writes another. Various bloggers suggest breaking diplomatic relations, sending in the SAS "to rescue Schapelle" and, of course, boycotting Bali. In a posting that is representative of much of the sentiment expressed on the internet, "Richo" writes on another website: "I call upon all Australians to boycott travelling to Bali and stop funding these Monkeys locking up and bombing young Aussies."

It is almost as if Corby has come to embody those vibrant young Australians who died in the blast. She is at least alive, but her face now looks despairingly from behind bars, grim evidence that Bali is not just about beaches, braiding and booze.

Prison will change her, as it changed Chamberlain-Creighton, but Corby's story has become much bigger than just the facts of her case. Regardless of what happens to Corby, she has served a national need for catharsis and retribution. She can never escape this.

Chamberlain-Creighton knows what its like to be the lifelong prisoner of a nation's predilections and prejudices. No wonder her heart bleeds for Corby.