

Bill Rea ? Mob should not decide justice

There are times when I think I'm just as bad as the Toronto Sun when it comes to publicizing Paul Bernardo. Every time he, or his former wife Karla Homolka appear in the news, I seem to have something to write about it. My wife and I are in the habit of waking up every morning in time for the 7 a.m. news, and such was the case last Wednesday. ?Mark my words,? I said to Beth in the moments waiting for the news to come on. ?Either Karla Homolka, Paul Bernardo or both will be on the front page of the Sun today.?

As usual, I was absolutely right (I wouldn't have even mentioned it had I been wrong). Karla was on the front, but a nice, sappy copy of one of Paul and Karla's wedding photo was on page 3. The Sun will run pictures of these two because the people in charge there know they help sell newspapers. Nothing wrong with that.

Homolka was back in the news last week because it was discovered that she and her three children are living in a Montreal suburb, under a new name. According to the accounts that I have read, residents of the neighbourhood are not too pleased. I don't have children, and I wouldn't be very happy at the thought of having someone like that as a neighbour, so I could understand the extra concern that would be felt by parents.

One the other hand, what exactly can be done about it?
Did you pick your neighbours?
Actually, in a manner of speaking, I did, sort of.

Beth and I moved into her late mother's house about a year ago, just down the road from her brother. I had no serious problems moving next to my brother-in-law, and somewhat to my astonishment, he hasn't moved.

But the fact is, when we move into an area, we're pretty well stuck with who else lives there. And people come and go, and as our neighbours change, we have little control over that.

And who among us would want such control. Certainly none of us would want it exercised against us.

There might be some who complain the municipality should exercise some control over who gets in. But I did not apply to move to Caledon. The house was there, I had an interest in it, so Beth and I moved. We made no application, there was no vote taken at Town council. The only reason the mayor would have known I was moving in was strictly because I might have mentioned it. None of us would go along with seeking the approval of anyone before moving into a neighbourhood.

Homolka expects the same rights.

It would be different if she were a fugitive from justice, but that is not the case. She is a convicted felon, but there are lots of them around, and as long as they don't reoffend, we learn to get by with them in our midst.

Karla took part in some repulsive acts, but she also went to prison for them. She was sentenced to 12 years for her crimes, which involved the deaths of three young ladies, including her sister.

There were many, myself included, who believed her sentence was too light. But it was what was arrived at after considerable negotiation, and the whole thing was approved by a very learned judge.

And even if the sentence was light, I don't think anyone thought she would serve the whole 12 years. We all figured parole would come into play, or some form of early release. Such was not the case. She did the whole 12 years without remission.

What this all comes down to is society, through the legal system, called her to account for her crimes, set a price to be paid, and she paid it in full.

As repugnant as it might be for some, the fact is our legal system says Homolka now has the right to move on with her life. Is society prepared to permit it?

Is it possible she might seriously reoffend some day? Anything is possible. But it's been more than 20 years since these crimes were committed, and Karla has been out of prison for about 11 years. Considering the way the media keeps track of her, I would expect there would be lots of headlines if there was evidence she had got even a little out of line.

She is not the only convicted felon who's facing a hard time in her efforts to get on with her life.

During the last couple of weeks, it was reported that the California state parole board voted to free Leslie Van Houten. Van Houten was a devout follower of Charles Manson. While she wasn't involved in the killings that took place in 1969 at the home of Sharon Tate, she was an active and enthusiastic participant the following night when Leno and Rosemary LaBianca were brutally murdered. She was convicted and sentenced to die, but that was reduced to life after California abolished the death penalty. There were complications involving her original trial, such as her lawyer disappearing (the theory, never proved, is the lawyer was bumped off by Manson's followers), so she was put on trial again. That resulted in a hung jury. Her third trial ended in a conviction, which explains why she's still in prison.

For years, it has been said that of all the murderers in the Manson family who are locked up, Van Houten had the best chance of getting parole, and it looks like that day could be getting close. But there is a complication.

According to what I've read, the matter still has to be reviewed by the parole board's legal team. No problem there. It sounds like a simple matter of sober second thought. But then the whole thing has to be approved by California's governor, and Jerry Brown has already shot down a Manson family member's bid for parole.

That's the part I have a problem with.

Elected officials should and do establish policy, including when convicted killers are allowed to leave custody. But when it comes to implementing that policy, they should step back and let people who are trained to call such shots do their job.

The only issue that should be on the table when it comes to deciding if Van Houten should be released is which move is in the best service of justice. If you put it on the desk of an elected official, then the question of how many votes are involved comes into play. I don't know if Leslie Van Houten should be set free. On the one side, she has shown remorse for her actions, her prison record has been exemplary and she's had more than 45 years to reflect on the wrong she did. On the other hand, two innocent people she never met before that night lie in their graves, partly because of her. Incidentally, members of the LaBianca family have spoken out against her release. Were I in their position, I would probably do the same.

Again, the question is will society permit it?

I hate the thought of a judicial system that caters to the will of a mob.

