

# THE SATURDAY PAPER

NEWS  
MAR 21, 2015

## Inside men's rights groups

The world of men's rights activism is an echo chamber of private resentments, violent misogyny and permanent victimhood.



MARTIN MCKENZIE-MURRAY

YOU ARE READING

1 / 3

FREE ARTICLES THIS WEEK

Subscribe from \$29

**S**elling his beloved possession was hard, but there would be a profitable future in which to buy others. Right now he needed capital investment. "Business first, pleasure second," he always said. So Mario Abbotto sold his MG sports car and bought three Marshall amps. Then he shed his Sicilian name, changing it by deed poll. Now he was John Abbott, brash music impresario.

It was 1970. Abbott had purchased a small music rehearsal and recording studio in South Melbourne, and moved in upstairs with his fiancée. For years the business grew, hosting local bands including his own rock group, Stance. By 1978 they had outgrown the place, and Abbott looked to expand. In the inner northern suburb of Brunswick, Abbott found an empty ice factory built in 1936. "I had a sensation about it," he tells me. The place was essentially a giant fridge, insulated with cork lining in the floors, ceiling and walls. Perfect for refrigeration – but also for the rehearsal and recording of music. "We built 11 studios, and I put in different

offices, too. One for sales, for example.”

In 1980 the Dane Centre opened, and over the next decade was variously occupied by Billy Thorpe, Gerry and the Pacemakers, John Farnham and Hall & Oates. “INXS once, too,” Abbott says. Up to 100 bands a year would rehearse there, occasionally taking advantage of the two recording studios. By now Abbott and his fiancée had wed, at a ceremony in Queensland. “We had Jaguars,” Abbott says of the day. “It was costly, but fun. My wife looked magnificent.” They took their honeymoon in the Whitsundays. By 1982 they had two children.

---

## “Adultery destroys the family just as surely as cancer destroys the body”

---

But in 1990 Abbott’s life changed forever. As he puts it, “disaster struck”. His wife left him for their roof plumber. It sent the pious Abbott into a spin. Convinced his wife’s departure was a poisonous and cosmic sin, the Dane Centre would for the next decade also serve as a de facto headquarters for his vigilante men’s rights group, the Blackshirts.

In addition to entrepreneur, Abbott now saw himself as preacher and political guerilla, policing the moral gaudiness of his society and declaring, “From small resources we will pound them with massive fists.”

“Adultery destroys the family just as surely as cancer destroys the body,” he tells me.

### Different rationales

Men’s rights groups aren’t new, but the internet has cohered and amplified their voices. Some cite American Warren Farrell as the modern father of the movement, a feminist apostate who in 1993 published something of a bible – *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men Are the Disposable Sex*. Farrell argued that gender discrimination exists, but its most abject victim is men. As proof, he cited the higher suicide rate, the fact that men are more likely to be assaulted or murdered, and the spiritually diminishing toil of traditional male labour. Farrell condemned a society that glibly demands male sacrifice but is unwilling to gratefully recognise it.

It is something passionately echoed to me by B.R. Merrick, an American columnist for *A Voice for Men*, a website established by Paul Elam in 2009 that annually traffics millions of hits. Merrick provides a shopping list of grievances in support of Farrell’s diagnosis. “We live in a world where men have a shorter life expectancy,” Merrick says. “Where men are imprisoned far more often and for longer. Where men are far more likely to die on the job. Where men

hold almost exclusively the top 10 deadliest jobs in the world. Where less men graduate from school. Where there are less men in the workforce. Where battered men can find no shelter. Where the homeless are composed almost entirely of men. Where there is lots of government money for female-specific health concerns and virtually none for men. Where men are laughed at as imbeciles or sneered at as villains throughout entertainment.”

It is difficult – nay, impossible – to succinctly present the philosophy of men's rights activists, because there doesn't appear to be a centre. Rather, it's a jumble of resentments – some lofty but most deeply personal and idiosyncratic.

Farrell's diagnosis is more economic, and in reading the literature and online forums I detected strains of anti-capitalism. Namely, that capitalism engenders a large and squalid class of male labourers, milks the profits for elites and leaves the workers with empty mouths and broken backs. That women might be blamed for these circumstances seems an odd non sequitur – and ignores the female-heavy sweatshop industries of developing countries, for example – but the argument maintains that male bondage is enforced by gender roles and female ungratefulness. Men are shackled by class, capitalism and historical expectations.

Contradictions abound. A popular book among men's rights activists – American ones, at least – is Ayn Rand's hymn to hyper-capitalism, *Atlas Shrugged*. The book is a beautiful tonic for the men confused and contemptuous of a culture intent on diluting their masculinity with confession and feelings, even if the protagonist and author are female. In online forums, men debate the text excitedly and dream of the restoration of their potency.

Others tremble before the sexual allure of women, a mystical power, maliciously dispensed. There is an imbalance here, the men scream, when the sight of an exposed thigh can subdue a man's mind and spark ruinous fantasies. “Cleavage power,” Elam calls it, and laments that there is no reciprocal power for men.

A corollary of this imbalance, goes the argument, is the jungle of sexual consent. Not for these men a simple premise, negotiable with decency and common sense, but a rigged game designed to entrap them. For this reason there is a generation of blokes falsely accused and convicted of rape, they say, the large numbers elided by political correctness.

Another significant part of the men's rights movement is preoccupied by the perceived prejudice of the family courts. It's a grievance usually secured by personal experience.

Dr Greg Canning – one of Australia's most prominent men's rights activists and a writer for *Voice for Men* – is such a man. We spoke this week, and he told me his preferred designation was “father's rights”.

“My work in this area probably stemmed from a difficult divorce,” he says. “I was falsely accused of domestic violence. It gave her an upper hand in the divorce proceedings. This was 12 or 13 years ago. You could say it was a personal revelation. Feminism ideology is about making women independent from men, but at the sake of the children. And I found the Family Court to be biased. There is no equal share of children. And family law is controlled by the issue of domestic violence, which is a serious issue but it’s trivialised by its false use in situations like mine.”

## **Blackshirts violence**

Through vigilantism and terror – or clever guerilla tactics, as John Abbott had it – the Blackshirts would restore the sanctity of the family. Avowedly homophobic and hateful of the Family Court, Abbott also believed in capital punishment for adulterers – a sin, he says, mostly committed by women. Disturbed and heartbroken men would gravitate to Abbott, testifying to the sinfulness of their wives or the wretchedness of the courts. And he would respond. Gathering his men, they pulled on their black shirts, black pants, gloves, sunglasses and balaclavas, and achieved an unpleasant evocation of the Italian fascists. Twenty minutes before they arrived at their “demonstration” – most often the front lawn or driveway of a woman – they would notify police and media.

Then they would gather at the destination, sometimes with child-sized coffins, symbolising the destruction wrought on children by divorce or adultery, and distribute pamphlets around the neighbourhood outlining the alleged moral trespass they were picketing.

“Our first demonstration,” Abbott tells me, “was actually against a man. This ferret had been having it off with his best mate’s wife. It was 1990. And he didn’t like it.”

When I first speak with Abbott, he is softly spoken, polite, even folksy. There’s a gentleness. But he rhapsodises about his achievements immodestly, as if weaving a heroic origin myth. He takes pleasure in it, recalling fine details and dropping names.

It is when we reach 1990 – and the disaster – that the anger and brittleness emerge. His inflection changes. He enters the register of the righteous preacher.

“Marriage has a practical foundation,” he tells me. “You’re fusing yourself into the family. Like atoms and molecules fuse. It’s profound. And children are born into that fusion. Marriage isn’t a licence to have sex or obtain chattel, it’s synonymous with children. It’s not about the adults. Children are for life, not weekends, and they deserve that family.”

Abbott liked to tell the media or anyone who’d listen that he commanded 300 men. But this

week he tells me that the number was simply a code, a reference to the 300 Spartans who defended the pass of Thermopylae in 480BC against a vastly larger Persian army. It is a comically aggrandising reference but not the only one he'll make.

"The actual numbers are unimportant," he tells me. "It's what we did. We were phantom. There was no way of tracking us. In and out of the shadows. We were always the minor force, so we had to adopt guerilla tactics. That was our modus operandi. I didn't have the most disciplined army, I admit, but we had codes. We tried not to use the same group twice. We didn't allow the person we were avenging to join us, to protect them against prosecution.

"It was important the men didn't know too much. Even as we were getting into the van, they didn't know where we were going. They wouldn't know until we got there. But they trusted me implicitly. Even to this day. The success of each operation meant our ranks swelled. You know how it is, everyone loves success."

Abbott became an eccentric father figure to broken men, and a subject of the wrath of police, judges and the Victorian attorney-general – not to mention of the victims of his campaigns. But he seemed to revel in the notoriety. He continued unabashed, eventually concentrating on protesting before the Family Court. The "demonstrations" went on for years until Abbott's conviction for stalking in 2004.

As we speak, Abbott keeps circling back to the importance of family and his principle of the fusion of marriage for the benefit of children. "I will protect the family with anything it takes, just as our predecessors did. This generation thinks it's advanced, but it's not. When you destroy the family, you destroy the nation. And divorce and adultery destroy families."

For most of our conversation I am quiet, interrupting rarely. Here I can't help but make one bald interjection. "You say that divorce destroys children," I remark, "but wouldn't, you know, the execution of a child's mum for adultery destroy them a lot more?"

The unapologetic fundamentalism of Abbott – fanaticism disguised as rectitude – has gradually numbed me. His verbosity, and its irritating street-preacher rhythms, is dispiriting.

After some confused mumbling, Abbott replies: "Well, each case would be different. But the crimes in my case are extensive. Property taken, my children taken. This wouldn't even happen to murderers. So calculate the damage – what is the appropriate punishment?"

## Online hatred

To wade through the misogyny in some online forums is difficult. It is dizzy hatred. Uncontrolled, uninformed, ugly. Women are variously dismissed as witches, inveterate con

artists, entrapment specialists, or worse – all cloaked in the auspices of feminism.

In response to a British story about the systemic rape of girls in Rotherham, one man wrote: “This is what happens when you spew hatred at fathers and remove them from their daughters lives. Tough.” Or, from a website called Manbook: “We would ask you women to respect our rights as you wish your rights to be respected. If you are unwilling to respect our right to freedom of association do not expect men to respect your right to life. Ok?”

In these two comments, rape and murder are deemed suitable punishments for custodial battles or the “infiltration” of women on male-only websites. I’ve cherry-picked here, but you could spend many dismal weeks trawling through the madness. There is a surfeit.

To read this is to detect a vast spectrum of hopelessly unresolved personal issues. A girlfriend or wife leaves, and suddenly all women are treacherous vipers. A woman declines a proposition, and hence all of mankind is emasculated by feminine machination. One senses a vast number of men stoking private resentments, transforming them into global perceptions and a permanent state of victimhood. It is by turns pathetic and pitiful.

But B. R. Merrick tells me he has never encountered any of it. “An enormous amount of vitriol? I probably haven’t been to those websites. What I see in comments at various sites has more to do with anger and hurt. You must remember that a lot of these men have had their lives destroyed in family court. There are bound to be harsh words.”

Then there is the rhetorical militancy of *A Voice for Men* author Paul Elam himself – or his actual inducements of violence, depending on whom you speak to. Last year, Elam nominated October as a “Bash a Violent Bitch Month”, suggesting men who are abused by women should not merely “subdue them, or deliver an open-handed pop on the face to get them to settle down. I mean literally grab them by the hair and smack their face against the wall till the smugness of beating on someone because you know they won’t fight back drains from their nose with a few million red corpuscles.”

The typical defence of this language is that it is satire, tactical provocation – of argument, not violence – or a counterpoint to feminist militancy. When I put Elam’s quote to Merrick, he writes back, “Anyone who thinks, after reading Elam’s words, that he advocates for any violent solutions must also think that Jonathan Swift was in favour of eating children.”

I read Elam’s words to Greg Canning also, and he responds that Elam doesn’t literally mean it. Even though Elam had, of course, said “literally”. “It’s done to grab attention,” Canning tells me. “You have to see it in context. I know Paul personally. It’s satire. His heart is in the right place. But yes, sometimes I disagree with his rhetoric. But we need the attention. It’s

strategic. I categorically deny there's any intent for violence. I certainly don't want any violent confrontation with anybody."

But the context Canning speaks of involves hordes of angry and bitter men who aren't likely to interpret Elam's language as Swiftian cheek. Far from it.

## Conversion therapy

Disturbance seems to be the key for recruitment for men's rights activists. In Abbott's case it was his wife's departure; in Canning's, a messy divorce. I do not mean to conflate the two men – both responded in different ways.

For Merrick, growing up in a strict Mormon household, it was the trauma of undergoing conversion therapy, a series of treatments designed to "cure" him of his homosexuality. Merrick underwent this in the 1990s, by which time the "treatment" had at least abandoned its use of electroshock therapy, or revulsion techniques whereby vomiting is induced when the patient is shown gay pornography.

"I was not tortured," Merrick tells me. "Instead, we spent a great deal of time on family issues and talked about the lack of male bonding in my personal life. The premise of change may have been pointless, but it introduced me to the idea of exploring masculinity. Since I consider myself a masculine entity, the idea of finding out more about myself was intriguing.

"Ultimately the therapy was a waste of time as I now believe it is premised on many wrong ideas about men and masculinity. After reparative therapy I had simply given up on the idea of having a relationship with a woman, but I still believed in the church. Finally I stopped believing altogether and was able to fully accept myself as I am. Mormonism is about a constant drive to perfection. Now I am free to be imperfect and figure things out for myself."

For all of the misogyny, rage and stubborn victimhood, men's rights remains a large and confusing church, and to condescend to all of the pain behind it is a perfect way to fossilise resentments. Canning is not wrong to suggest that the seriousness of domestic violence is sometimes trivialised by vexatious accusations in legal battles. That intervention orders are being used as swords rather than shields in courts is a problem lamented to me personally by a number of lawyers.

But Abbott's and Canning's contention is also that custody proceedings are unfairly inclined towards women. This suspicion is grounded personally, obviously, but also historically. In more patriarchal times, where women stayed at home and men worked, courts would offer custody to the primary caregiver, most often by default the mother. But men's rights groups

say that we have never outgrown this and the courts are still overwhelmingly against men.

“I don't think the courts are biased at all,” family lawyer Marlene Ebejer tells me. “Courts decide on the basis of what's best for the child. That's all. I represent both men and women, and I can tell you the court decides on an even keel. If the father is a decent person, they'll get access and ample time. No question.

“And similarly, I've acted for mothers who have lost access to their children because they have been irresponsible. Perhaps this resentment is historical. There was a time when mothers were seen as the natural caregivers. But that time has gone. We recognise roles differently.”

## **Domestic violence rates**

Another grievance stems from our popular discussions about domestic or family violence. Canning argues that we have unfairly reduced the phenomenon to “violence against women” ignoring the abuse committed against men. “There's an agenda here,” Canning tells me. “I don't think feminists are generally interested in helping the problem. Sure, the majority of domestic violence is against women – but 51 per cent is a majority. The majority of violence is mutual. There's a large body of research on domestic violence and it suggests most of the time it's reciprocal. I can tell you that one man every 10 days dies in domestic situations. But men are excluded from services to help them.”

Here's what we know: more men than women are murdered and assaulted each year. More men kill themselves. But how, why and where this violence happens differs for the genders, and seems to confirm the wisdom of gender-specific frameworks to understand it. For men, they are much more likely to be killed or assaulted by a stranger or loose acquaintance. For women, it's the opposite: most of the time they are killed or assaulted at home by someone they love. The dynamic is different, but there's a common denominator: men.

As for numbers, they vary. With all forms of domestic abuse, we cannot accurately estimate what is not reported. There well may be scores of men ashamed to go to police. But the numbers on reported domestic violence depict a stark picture: in the most recent statistical publication, Victoria Police put the number of male domestic violence victims at 15 per cent. Most – not all – of the research undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology asserts that an overwhelming amount of the violence is directed at women, by men.

The US Justice Department estimates that three women and one man are killed daily in domestic settings, while 85 per cent of abuse victims are female – the same number for Australian victims.

Men's rights activists are frustrated, sometimes moved to apoplexy, by discussions of violence against women. They angrily call up radio stations and demand to know why they're ignoring male suicide, for instance. It's a tired argument: that because we're talking about X we must be maliciously indifferent to Y. It is, of course, a nonsense.

Beyondblue has been producing national, male-tailored campaigns on depression for years – few urinals these days haven't carried their posters – and the spate of so-called “one-punch deaths” against men in Sydney triggered blanket media coverage and legislative change, even though the deaths – obscene as they were – were statistically irrelevant.

And yet, what of those 15 per cent of domestic violence victims? We rarely discuss them. They have become forgotten, swamped by cultural wars and statistical insignificance. How can you reject Canning's insistence that we consider them? Still, we know that about one woman a week is killed by her partner or former partner – nothing comes close for men. In fact, the cases of women killing male partners are extremely rare.

Canning's claim that every 10 days a man dies in a domestic situation can only mean that a man dies in a residential location, most often at the hands of an acquaintance. Intimate partner homicides remain steadfastly, and overwhelmingly, perpetrated by men on women. When we say this, we are not callously dismissing violence against men. One case needn't be made at the expense of the other.

## **"Why is your empathy so gender specific?"**

Greg Canning speaks to me from home. His medical clinic is shut for the day after he received threats. “I've copped a lot of abuse for speaking out,” he says. “There have been smear campaigns against me. Stuff like, I'm a misogynist, that women should boycott my clinic. I've paid a price and you can get a bit tired of it.”

Canning tells me that the ABC panel show *Q&A* recently asked him on for a special on domestic violence, but his current wife warned him against it. “It'll take an emotional toll,” she told me, and she's probably right.”

For now, the men's rights group members are a vociferous minority. Not mainstream, but increasingly hard to dismiss as fringe. They have established a copycat version of the domestic violence prevention group White Ribbon's website, and pen furious letters to public leaders on the issue. Open letters are published online. Canning recently wrote about Australian of the Year Rosie Batty, “Why is your empathy so gender specific?... Why have you and Natasha [Stott Despoja] never once referred to the brutal slaying of eight children by a woman in Cairns last year?”

The airwaves, the internet and the offices of leaders will continue to be filled with men's rights arguments. But the various parties in the debate are arrayed in mutual contempt. And that seems unlikely to change.

---

TAGS:

men's rights John Abbott Blackshirts Warren Farrell The Myth of Male Power B.R. Merrick  
A Voice for Men Paul Elam Dr Greg Canning Family Court

*This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Mar 21, 2015 as "Inside men's rights groups". [Subscribe here](#).*

---



**MARTIN MCKENZIE-MURRAY**

is *The Saturday Paper's* chief correspondent.

Comments are moderated and will generally be posted if they are on topic and not abusive. [View the full comments policy](#).