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On 26 August 2014 Duncan Abey of the Mercury reported “Top cop defends probe into murder of Bob Chappell”



Dr Bob Chappell.

THE chief investigator in the Bob Chappell murder case has defended police handling of the probe as pressure builds for the matter to be reopened. Inspector Peter Powell yesterday said Tasmania Police remained happy with the soundness of the Supreme Court judgment that convicted Mr Chappell’s partner Susan Neill-Fraser, left, of his murder. “We stand by the integrity and thoroughness of the investigation, and the efforts of the investigation team, including the forensic experts, and the prosecution of the case by the office of the DPP,” Insp Powell said.

Sentenced to serve a maximum of 26 years in jail, Neill-Fraser had the term reduced at the Court of Criminal Appeal to 23 years with a non-parole period of 13 years. And while two failed attempts to appeal against her conviction have left Neill-Fraser with very few legal avenues remaining, a small yet vocal band of supporters ensures her story is rarely out of the news.

The latest strategy is an appeal to Attorney-General Vanessa Goodwin to refer the case back to the Court of Criminal Appeal. But yesterday Ms Goodwin ruled out such a move. “A petition for mercy is the proper mechanism to determine whether further review of the conviction is warranted,” she said. “No petition for Susan Neill-Fraser has been received to date. “If I receive a petition for mercy in relation to Ms Neill-Fraser it will be considered at that time and in accordance with the law.”

As the first Tasmanian murder trial to proceed in the absence of a body, the case of Neill-Fraser occupies a unique and intriguing place in the state’s legal history. The very nature of the highly circumstantial 2010 case made many doubt whether a jury would be able to unanimously convict the Hobart grandmother of killing Mr Chappell, a Royal Hobart Hospital chief physicist, aboard their newly purchased yacht Four Winds off Marieville Esplanade on Australia Day the previous year.

But in the end Neill-Fraser was sunk less by the evidence than by her own lies, with Justice Alan Blow describing a deliberate killing motivated by personal gain that warranted a heavier penalty than most murders. Mr Chappell's body has never been found. But her supporters have never give up the fight.

Rallies on Parliament House lawns, candlelight vigils, television documentaries, offer of cash rewards for new information, calls for coronial inquiries — and last Sunday a two-part special on national current affairs program *60 Minutes* — have all drawn attention to supposed flaws in everything from the DNA evidence used in the case, the judge's directions to the jury and the trial process.

A battery of high-profile backers that includes former integrity commissioner Barbara Etter, federal independent Member for Denison Andrew Wilkie and barrister and human rights campaigner Greg Barns, has been joined by legal academic Dr Bob Moles, who recently described the case as the "worst of the worst" miscarriages of justice in Australian history.

And despite being incarcerated behind the wire of Mary Hutchinson women's prison at Risdon since her conviction, Neill-Fraser has been a constant voice in the ongoing saga, with letters written from behind bars being read out at most rallies. Even a phone conversation the killer had with daughter Sarah Bowles — who took a call from her mother during a sit-down interview with reporter Charles Wooley — was included in the *60 Minutes* story at the weekend.

In 2010, at the beginning of Neill-Fraser's four-week trial in 2010, DPP Tim Ellis described the case against her as circumstantial "but not second-rate." "This is a case where we can't say how or why he was killed ... but circumstances add up to murder by Susan Neill-Fraser," Mr Ellis told the jury.

The court heard testimony from a former acquaintance of the accused, who said Neill-Fraser had years earlier divulged a plot to kill Mr Chappell which involved dumping his weighted body off a yacht, and then sinking the vessel by tampering with the bilge.

Other witnesses told of admissions by the accused that her 20-year relationship with Mr Chappell was effectively over. The prosecution claimed that Neill-Fraser killed her partner by striking him with a wrench or other tool, dumping his body overboard, weighed down with something that was most likely a fire extinguisher.

They claimed the accused used her intimate knowledge of the boat's bilge pumps, pipes and alarms to scuttle the vessel. Neill-Fraser's explanations as to her whereabouts on the fateful day and night of January 26, 2009, were also exposed during the trial as false.

Earlier this year, almost five years to the day after Mr Chappell's murder, coroner Glenn Hay found there was no need for a full inquest into the 65-year-old's death, saying there was no justification for what would be a costly procedure.

In adopting the findings of the criminal proceedings that Mr Chappell was killed following an attack by his wife, Mr Hay said: "I am not satisfied that it has been established that there is any significant possibility, beyond merely speculative ones, that the holding of a public inquest would elicit any information further to that disclosed by the lengthy and in my view comprehensive police investigation and the findings of other courts."

Mr Hay said Mr Chappell's family did not want an inquest into his death, having expressed a desire to end all formal processes to move on with their lives.

Even so, Neill-Fraser's supporters fight on.

