

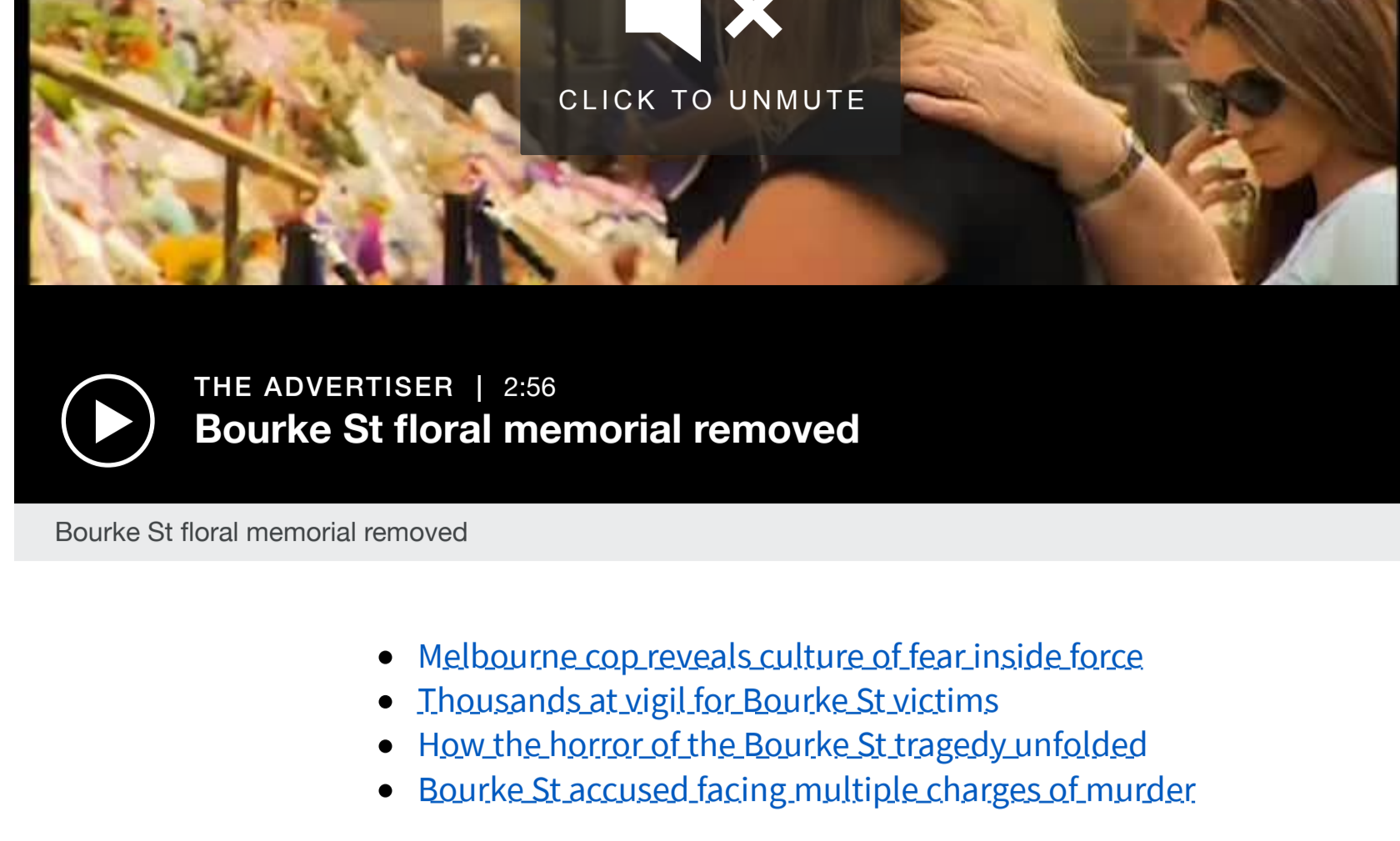
# Mark Carroll: System should protect police officers if mistakes are made in the heat of the moment

POLICE officers should feel confident that the system will protect them if they make mistakes in the heat of the moment, writes Mark Carroll.

Mark Carroll

February 1, 2017 - 5:14PM The Advertiser

0 comments



Bourke St floral memorial removed

- Melbourne.cop.reveals.culture.of.fear.inside.force
- Thousands.at.vigil.for.Bourke.St.victims
- How.the.horror.of.the.Bourke.St.tragedy.unfolded
- Bourke.St.accused.facing.multiple.charges.of.murder

FEBRUARY 2009. Oruzgan Province, Afghanistan. Following an operation that went horribly wrong and resulted in the deaths of civilians including five children, two Australian commandos were charged with manslaughter.

The prosecutor, who wasn't actually there, asserted that the soldiers "... knew for certain that women and children were present..." prior to the deployment of two hand-grenades.

The two soldiers, who were actually there, and being fired upon, were absolutely adamant they had every reason to believe that all civilians had been removed from the operational area.

It's hard to imagine that two highly trained Australian soldiers would have thrown the grenades otherwise.

Eventually, the charges were dismissed but the case is still one of the most gut-wrenching and disputed chapters in the history of the Australian Army.

Police officers around the country had immense sympathy for these two soldiers.

A huge floral tribute to the victims of the Bourke St tragedy was removed this week. Picture: Wayne Taylor/Getty Images

We know only too well what it's like to be involved in horrific, adrenaline-fuelled events during which you have to make split-second, life-and-death decisions.

We know only too well what it's like to then have your actions scrutinised and second-guessed before being subjected to criminal and/or disciplinary proceedings.

Like all Australians, our members were absolutely gutted by what happened in Bourke Street on January 21.

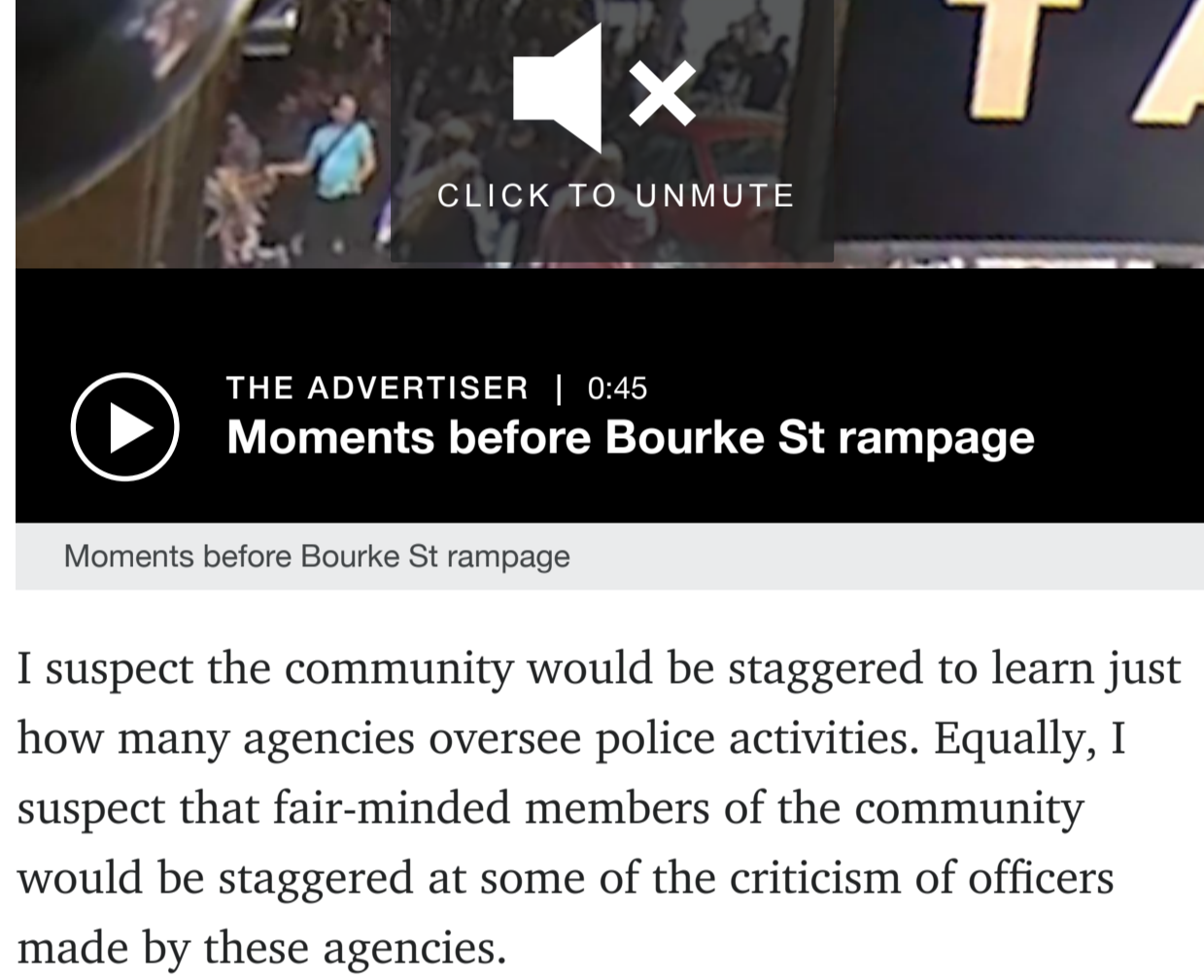
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Psychological resilience is absolutely necessary in police work but there were plenty of tough coppers here in South Australia who "teared up" when we heard that little Zachary Bryant, 3 months old, died in hospital from his injuries. I was one of them.

We can only imagine how our police brothers and sisters in Victoria feel right now. Over and above the idiocy of the Victorian bail process, wave after wave of questions and criticisms will continue to crash on the shore of their police professionalism.

"Why didn't they just shoot him?"; "They should have rammed him."; "If it were me, I would have..."; "Somebody needs to take responsibility ..."



Moments before Bourke St rampage

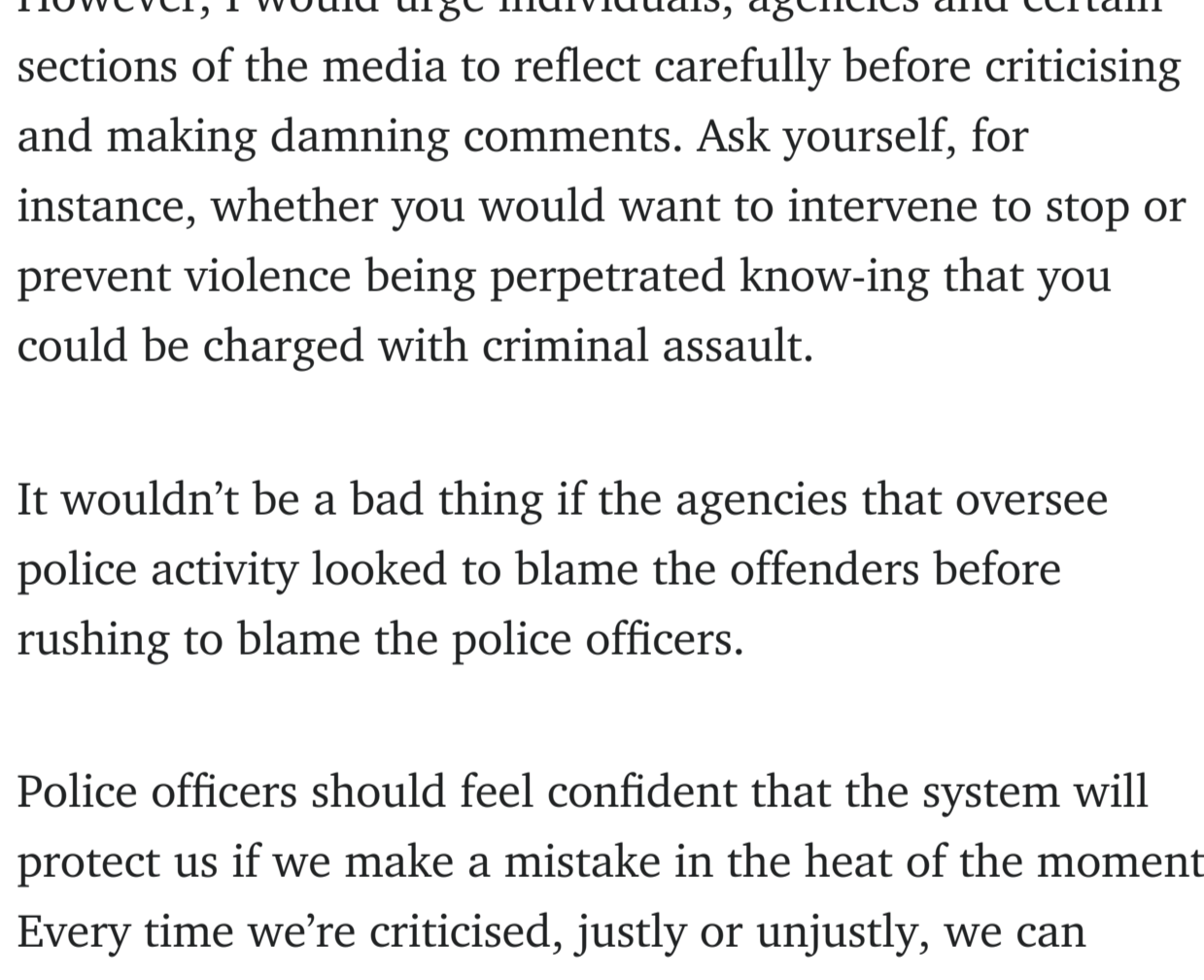
I suspect the community would be staggered to learn just how many agencies oversee police activities. Equally, I suspect that fair-minded members of the community would be staggered at some of the criticism of officers made by these agencies.

A couple of years ago, police had just started to pursue a vehicle whose driver had sped off from police. Moments later, the fleeing driver lost control on a bend and ploughed into a wall, killing himself and the passenger.

This was hardly the fault of the officer involved; nonetheless the Deputy Coroner was critical of police action and questioned the appropriateness of police pursuits across the board. Damned if you do, and damned if you don't.

Then there are the violent altercations, domestic and otherwise, in which we find ourselves involved.

Watching from the sidelines with a mobile phone camera, it's certainly easier to accuse police of using excessive force than it is to be in the thick of it yourself. A number of our members have been pursued in the courts, charged with criminal assault.



Memorial held for victims of Bourke St rampage

This is not to say that police shouldn't be scrutinised. We are empowered by legislation in this way, that other members of the community are not and it's fair, reasonable and important that we are held to account.

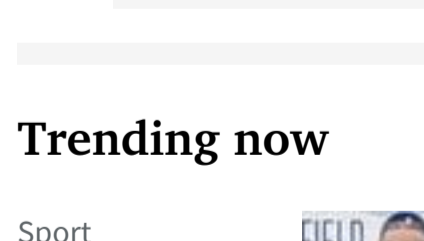
However, I would urge individuals, agencies and certain sections of the media to reflect carefully before criticising and making damning comments. Ask yourself, for instance, whether you would want to intervene to stop or prevent violence being perpetrated knowing that you could be charged with criminal assault.

It wouldn't be a bad thing if the agencies that oversee police activity looked to blame the offenders before rushing to blame the police officers.

Police officers should feel confident that the system will protect us if we make a mistake in the heat of the moment. Every time we're criticised, justly or unjustly, we can become more and more risk averse.

Month by month, year by year, our willingness and our capacity to take the sorts of risks necessary to protect the community will erode. Then everybody loses.

Mark Carroll is the President of the Police Association of SA



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