

**INQUIRY INTO UNSOLVED MURDERS AND LONG-TERM
MISSING PERSONS CASES IN NEW SOUTH WALES
BETWEEN 1965 AND 2010**

Name: Neil Mercer

Date Received: 24 March 2026

SUBMISSION BY NEIL MERCER TO PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE 1

MARCH 24 2026.

Re Unsolved murders and long-term missing persons cases.

Thank you for the invitation to make a submission.

By way of background, I have been a journalist for more than 50 years. I have reported for both newspapers and television on some of the cases listed by the committee.

My involvement as a reporter is as follows:

In mid-1996 I researched and presented a one-hour documentary for Channel 7 on Ivan Milat and the backpacker murders. This involved numerous interviews with witnesses, previous victims of Milat, members of the Milat family, his workmates and parents of the backpackers. It aired on 28 July 1996.

I subsequently wrote a book: FATE: Inside the backpacker murders investigation.

It was published by Random House in 1997.

In early 1998, while working at Channel 7, I started researching the disappearances of Leanne Goodall, Amanda Robinson, Robyn Hickie, Gordana Kotevski and Anni Tominac.

From memory this came about because of work done by the Newcastle Legal Centre, in particular Hilda Armstrong.

In February 1998 I met with and interviewed some of the parents, including Beth Leen, the mother of Leanne Goodall and Peggy Kotevski, mother of Gordana.

I also spoke to Jim Hickie, father of Robyn. I think this was around the time Strike Force Fenwick was getting underway. I recall interviewing senior police such as Clive Small. This program went to air in mid-March 1998.

In 2018, along with a colleague, Ruby Jones, I made a three-part documentary for ABC-TV concerning the June 24, 1978 disappearance of Trudie Adams from Sydney's northern beaches. In the weeks following her disappearance about 15 young girls and women came forward to police to say they had been abducted at gunpoint and raped by two men.

They had been picked up while hitchhiking.

Unlike Trudie, they survived. A career criminal, Neville Tween, was the prime suspect. He was also, for a time, a major suspect in the backpacker murders.

No-one was ever charged with the (at least) 15 abductions and rapes. In our book we described this outcome as 'one of the greatest investigative failures in the history of the NSW Police.'

The Trudie Adams case is, in my view, relevant in terms of the Amanda Robinson case/the role of Homicide Squad detectives and the lack of follow up inquiries.

I would like to address terms of reference (b), (d) and (e).

In relation to (b), it was clear to me from the interviews with the families of the missing Newcastle girls in early 1998 that the NSW Police had failed them in many ways.

These failures are set out clearly in the July 2002 findings of the Coronial Inquest into the deaths of Leanne Goodall, Amanda Robinson and Robyn Hickie.

For instance, Coroner John Abernathy found that police failed to: get written statements from important witnesses; carry out follow-up inquiries; take statements from persons of interest; and in the case of Leanne Goodall, to launch any investigation at all.

I believe some of these failures are applicable to other cases.

One of those mentioned by the Coroner, John Abernathy, was the inexplicable withdrawal of Homicide detectives (Hermann and McDowell) from the Amanda Robinson inquiry after just two weeks.

I raise this particular point because the same thing happened in the investigation into the disappearance of Trudie Adams, last seen on Barrenjoey Road outside the Newport Surf Club in June 1978.

One of the Homicide detectives involved in that investigation, Gary Matthews, told myself and Ruby Jones he was taken off the case after a matter of weeks, with his commander saying words to the effect: 'You're a homicide investigator, not a rape investigator.'

It appears he was removed, like Hermann and McDowell, on the directions of the head of Homicide.

In his 2002 report Mr Abernathy quoted Senior Sergeant Peter Marcon from the Missing Persons Unit as saying:

‘Up until the later 1980s the community perception of the problem of missing persons, apart from those individually affected by the disappearance ... was such that barely a ripple of public interest was raised, except in the more notable cases where children disappeared...

‘During this period police generally believed that missing persons issues were a social concern rather than a case for law enforcement.’ Sgt Marcon told the Coroner that the police response ‘varied considerably depending on the attitude and priorities of the Patrol Commander and those officers involved at the time of the actual report by a relative or loved one.’

While Mr Abernathy set out the failings of the original police inquiries, he also praised the work of Strike Force Fenwick. He said: ‘The Strike Force is, in my view something of a showpiece. It shows what can be done where the resources are provided. My hope is that from it, many of the innovations of the Strike Force will be utilised in other major investigations, particularly of homicides and major critical incidents.’

He also said: ‘The commanders of Strike Force Fenwick came to the view ... that the NSW Police Force approach in responding to reports of missing persons was unstructured and dysfunctional.’

Mr Abernathy said he shared this view and added: ‘Missing persons were too often perceived to be family, social or welfare issues as opposed to issues of law enforcement.’

He further noted that ‘in recent years a concerted effort has been made by the Police Force to improve the reporting of missing persons so as to ensure that any appropriate missing persons case will be investigated as a homicide.’

In short, I believe Mr Abernathy’s report encapsulates the failures that impacted the delivery of justice to victims and their families, particularly in the 60s, 70s and 80s, and not just in Newcastle. Sadly, many of those failures, even with dedicated detectives and the best will in the world, cannot now be rectified.

In terms of (d) I believe Strike Force Fenwick was a well-led, well-resourced, detailed and thorough investigation which made significant progress.

The Coroner, who had the benefit of the Fenwick investigations, listed a number of persons of interest in the Newcastle disappearances.

One was Ivan Milat. He said Milat was 'a major person of interest in relation to the missing girls, perhaps more so Leanne Goodall than Robyn Hickie or Amanda Robinson.

'One cannot discount the involvement of Ivan Milat in any of the disappearances particularly that of Leanne Goodall.'

In his findings, Mr Abernathy also identified five other persons of interest.

They were: Paul James Podmore, Robert Sidney Kiddle, Kelvin John Macey, Jeffrey Francis Armstrong and Neville Peter Julian Drinkwater.

On my reading of his findings, the latter was of particular interest.

The Coroner said Drinkwater 'was in the area near where Amanda Robinson disappeared on the night in question.

'He had the opportunity to abduct her.

'The combined thrust of his versions of events of that night leave him greatly lacking credibility and reliable alibi.'

Mr Abernathy concluded: '...he must be considered a major person of interest in both the Robinson and Hickie investigations.'

In summary, according to the Coroner who heard all the evidence, Ivan Milat is not the only significant suspect.

In terms of (e) I have read the remarks of the Chairman, Mr Buckingham, in the Legislative Council on 24 October 2024 and 19 March 2025.

I have also read a number of newspapers articles in which a range of allegations have been made about Milat's possible involvement in other crimes.

I would like to comment on the following:

1. A report in The Daily Telegraph that two former detectives believe that Milat may have murdered as many as 80 people.
2. Milat was involved in 'organised crime and human trafficking, feeding men, women and children into paedophile and sadistic, murderous sex rings.'

3. Milat was 'highly social and active' particularly around King Cross, where he worked on the Kings Cross tunnel (built, I believe, between 1970-75).

4. It was possible that Milat's 'long-term relationships with powerful and corrupt interests protected him from investigation, prosecution and justice for many decades...'

5. He was possibly responsible for the Wanda Beach murders and his description matches that of the suspect.

Addressing these allegations in order, I respectfully submit that:

1.Task Force Air arrested and charged Ivan Milat with the murder of seven backpackers.

In sentencing Milat, Justice David Hunt said of the investigation: 'I commend the police and the associated Government agencies for the extensive and painstaking detection work involved in bringing this case to trial.

'It was a massive task, and the results of it have been extraordinarily impressive.

'All involved in that investigation deserve the thanks of the community for their efforts.'

It is common knowledge that police believe Milat murdered more people.

Task Force Air examined dozens of other cases. It concluded he was very likely involved in three other murders, including that of Peter Letcher.

This was based on evidence, ie, the three murders had certain similarities to the other seven. In the other cases, it's my understanding the task force concluded there was simply not enough evidence to link them to Milat.

The figure of 80 is, to me, based on nothing more than speculation and/or guesswork.

I have not seen any evidence that would support this proposition.

I agree with Mr Buckingham that if the evidence does exist it must be brought to light.

2. I have never heard of Milat being involved in organised crime or in sadistic paedophile sex rings.

On this question, I refer the committee to the reports of the Wood Royal Commission.

In the mid 1990s, the Royal Commission spent a long time investigating paedophilia, paedophile rings and the alleged protection of them by police and people in high places.

It spoke to numerous paedophiles and many who went to places like Costellos in Kings Cross.

In its August 1997 report: The Paedophile Inquiry, Volume IV, at page 787, it discusses 'Partiality'.

It says: In the course of the Royal Commission, suggestions were made, from time to time, of the existence of a ring or conspiracy, involving politicians, judges, lawyers, police and other persons of influence in the community who were:

- * either practising paedophiles; or
- * complicit in the protection of such offenders.

It said two witnesses, Colin Fisk and KR5 had supplied the names of 'various persons within politics, the judiciary and the legal profession whom they suspected of paedophile activity.

The commission stated: 'Such suspicions seem to be derived from rumour, or from assumptions made as to their shared sexual orientation, or their attendance at Costellos night club.'

The commission found these suspicions were 'unsupported' by any direct knowledge.

In terms of Colin Fisk, a paedophile himself, the commission found that Mr Fisk had made a statutory declaration, in which he named solicitor John Marsden as a paedophile. It was tabled in the NSW Parliament in 1994.

The commission reported that a couple of months after making that statutory declaration, he made another, on 27 January 1995.

This time he said at the time of making his original declaration he could not differentiate between fact and fiction.

Further, the reference to Mr John Marsden in his first statutory declaration was 'pure hearsay from an unreliable source.'

Similarly, in terms of allegations of a 'high level' network of paedophiles, the commission said it 'looked for, but found no high level network of this kind.'

The report went on to say the commission had spoken to 'numerous paedophiles and victims of abuse' and that none of them endorsed the existence of any such 'high level' group.

'They acknowledged the existence, from time to time, of various informal groups, made up of essentially male offenders.'

The Royal Commission examined and took evidence from a number of these groups.

It looked particularly at those who frequented Costellos nightclub in Kings Cross.

At this point, a timeline may be of some assistance to the committee.

Ivan Milat was arrested on 22 May 1994.

He was sentenced to life imprisonment on 27 July 1996.

The commission's public hearings in relation to the paedophile reference started on 18 March 1996 and continued, on and off, until March 1997.

The final report on the paedophile inquiry was published in August 1997.

Given the massive publicity surrounding Milat's arrest, trial and conviction, if he was involved in sadistic paedophile sex rings around Kings Cross, Costellos, or anywhere else, I find it hard to believe that his name did not come to the attention of the Wood Royal Commission in 1996-97.

In relation to murderous sadistic sex rings, I refer the committee to the commission's report, Volume IV, Chapter 5 'Satanic Ritual Abuse'.

3. It has been reported that Milat was active around Kings Cross because he worked on the Kings Cross Tunnel.

It may well be he did work on the tunnel.

But he was also arrested in 1971 and charged firstly with armed robbery and later, rape. He was on remand before getting bail.

He then went on the run to New Zealand where, according to Clive Small and Tom Gilling in their book "Milat' (page 62) he spent about two years.

On his return he was arrested and again held on remand until being acquitted at the end of 1974.

It appears he was either in jail or overseas for a significant part of 1970-75.

4. I have never heard of Milat having long-term relationships with corrupt and powerful people who may have protected him. I have never heard of John Marsden having a sexual relationship with Ivan Milat.

Sometime after his 1996 conviction I met with the Milat family, including his sister Shirley Soire, and some of his brothers who tried to convince me Ivan was innocent.

I had met with one or two members of the family prior.

Based on what the family told me – and the information gathered as part of writing my book *Fate* – which included talking to his workmates - Milat rarely trusted anyone, including his own brothers. However, I agree with Mr Buckingham, that if there is reliable evidence of this - and I mean evidence in the true sense of the word - it should be brought to light.

5. Wanda Beach.

There were, as I understand, a number of persons of interest and a number of different identikit sketches.

In a contemporaneous television news report aired in 1965, not long after the Wanda Beach murders, reporter Ian Ross told viewers a 'blonde hair surfer youth' was being sought by police.

In a 1981 news report by legendary television crime reporter Harry Potter, viewers were told a 'fat flabby' 25 year-old man apparently from South Australia was the suspect.

Then, there is a July 2014 report in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

The SMH spoke to retired NSW Police Inspector Ian Waterson who, in 2007, had been directed to reinvestigate the murders.

He said he believed Christopher Wilder, who was involved in a gang rape at a Sydney beach in 1962, was the killer of Marianne Schmidt and Christine Sharrock.

Wilder later moved to the United States where, according to the SMH, he abducted, raped and murdered at least eight women.

In 2014, Waterson told the Herald: 'He (Wilder) was mentioned in the case files. He has a good resemblance to *one of the 'suspect' sketches at the time...* (my emphasis).

According to former police Inspector Ian Waterson, there is not just one, but a number of 'suspect' identikits.

It has been reported that Milat resembles one of these sketches.

That may well be true but as far as I know there is no evidence that he was a person of interest. I believe he may have been in jail at the time.

Once again, if such evidence exists, I urge the committee to make it public.

In summary, it's clear that for many years, indeed decades, missing persons were not taken seriously enough by police. Investigations were haphazard and often perfunctory, if they happened at all.

They were often badly under resourced. I am confident that has now changed.

The committee should urge the government and the police hierarchy to dedicate more resources to these many unsolved matters so that more families may find some peace or at least know that their loved one has not been forgotten.

I thank you for the invitation to make a submission.

If the committee believes I can assist further I am willing to appear at a hearing.

I am also happy for this submission to be made public.

Neil Mercer.

March 24 2026.

