

## Nguyen Tuong Van

While the unprecedented publicity given by all sections of the Australian mass media to the case of Nguyen Tuong Van, currently awaiting execution in Singapore for drug smuggling, has effectively pushed the Federal Government's Industrial Relations and anti-terrorism initiatives off the front pages, it has also brought into focus the issue of capital punishment.

While our politicians and pundits may tut-tut about how unfortunate this particular candidate for the gallows is, and how much more 'civilised' we are than the Singaporeans, very few have mentioned that of the countries most likely to impose the death penalty on convicted criminals, the United States is right up there with the most bloodthirsty, being headed only by China, Iran and Vietnam in executions per capita. This statistic is more chilling when it is realised that there is no capital punishment in many of the American states, so the rate is that much higher in those where it is the practice.

In recent decades, the highest incidence occurred in Texas under the governorship of George W Bush, but no leading political figures from either major party have been outspoken against capital punishment. It would appear that campaigning for the repeal of the death penalty is seen as a way to lose, rather than gain, support and votes.

Last year it was in only 12 of the 50 states that executions occurred, accounting for some 59 lives, although 120 men and five women were actually sentenced to death. So far this year the figures seem to be comparable. Improved DNA testing has resulted in scores of prisoners being released from death row, but we shall never know how many innocent people had already been wrongly sent to their death before such scientific methods could be applied in their cases.

The fact that no redress can be made to those executed in error is one good reason for the abolition of capital punishment, but the most important reason is that it does not work. A society which has violence built into its legal system is a society in which violence is going to be rife. This can be proved by looking at the evidence, comparing murder rates between those US states which enforce the death penalty and those that have either abolished it or, like Illinois, have kept it on the books but have chosen not to use it.

It is not an effective deterrent, otherwise Nguyen Tuong Van would not have done what he did, nor would the almost 1000 Americans who have been executed since the Supreme Court changed its mind back in 1976, nor the countless others throughout the world whose personal passions, greed or fanatical beliefs have driven them to disregard the consequences of their violent acts.

The only argument in favour of the death penalty which holds up is that it carries out the desire for revenge on behalf of society. For a nation or state in which this matters, it is just one of many unpleasant symptoms which indicate that radical changes in attitude are necessary. It is essential to eradicate the belief that killing either an individual human who has broken the law, or a platoon of humans wearing the wrong uniforms, or a whole village full of humans of all ages who have done nothing, can be of any benefit to the world.

I believe that in order to bring about such changes in values universally there needs to be a whole raft of other, structural changes to the way we interact with each other and with the planet. Meanwhile, although it might be too late for Nguyen Tuong Van, there are plenty of other lives to be saved by making those changes sooner rather than later.