

# Features



**The slaying of Mario Condello could lead to a new round of Melbourne gangland killings, writes Cameron Stewart**

**H**E was called the luckiest man in Melbourne. His best friends and his best enemies had departed this world, gunned down in a hail of gangland bullets.

Those still alive were mostly behind bars, rotting in maximum security for their role in the nation's bloodiest underworld war.

Yet Mario Condello, the dapper mafioso and kingpin of the city's oldest crime gang, had somehow survived the carnage.

The Calabrian-born conman acted as if he didn't have a care in the world. Each day he would don one of his trademark black skivvies or a designer suit and walk his dog along the gilded streets of the wealthy Melbourne beachside suburb of Brighton.

Sure, he had a little unfinished business to deal with — he was due to face trial this week for incitement to commit murder.

But it had been almost two years since anyone had been killed in the city's gangland war and the chances of a bullet arriving with the Condello name on it were fading.

Or so it seemed until late on Monday night when an unknown gunman confronted the 53-year-old crime figure in the driveway of his high-security home. A neighbour said Condello's two children were at home at the time.

Condello's sudden, violent death has shattered the uneasy peace inside Melbourne's underworld. It also embarrassed the Victoria Police who believed they had won the war.

And it has raised the spectre of another round of tit-for-tat killings, creating fresh rivers of gangster blood just when the city is seeking to present a pretty face to the world for next month's Commonwealth Games that start on March 15.

Condello's death proves wrong the popular theory that after nearly 30 deaths in seven years Melbourne's underworld war had simply exhausted itself.

This theory argued that with the killers either dead or in jail and with tougher police surveillance, the war was all but over.

Indeed, only hours before Condello's death yesterday, the state's police chief, Christine Nixon, was celebrating her reappointment by claiming that the underworld war was now under control.

Just a few hours after the sun had gone down on Nixon's boast, police were confronting the fact that bad blood runs deeper than ever in Melbourne's underworld, where two rival gangs are locked in a bitter struggle to control the city's lucrative amphetamine trade.

But Condello's death has made this struggle an increasingly lop-sided one.

He was one of the last kingpins of Melbourne's old Italian-style mafioso, which once exerted unrivalled control over the multi-million-dollar illicit amphetamine trade.

This group, known as the Carlton Crew, had a penchant for designer suits, dark glasses and European cars. They conducted business over strong coffee with swarthy men wearing large gold rings and chains. They extracted revenge on those who got in their way.

Condello was a lawyer with a love of Shakespeare before he dabbled in organised crime and served time for drug trafficking and fraud. He liked to tell people he was a funeral director and was said to be a member of the Calabrian-based crime group, the Honoured Society.

Although he denied being a crime boss, he took no chances, keeping a loaded .32 calibre pistol in his home with the safety catch off.

A detective once described him as someone who had "no legitimate source of income" yet "displayed an extraordinary amount of wealth".

Condello gambled with more than his life —



**Dead man talking:** Mario Condello, one of the last of Melbourne's old-style mafioso, was due to face trial this week for incitement to commit murder

## Someone is going to pay

### KEY FIGURES

#### Carlton crew

- Dominic "Mick" Gatto: Burly ex-boxer, lover of fine suits and cars, acquitted of murdering underworld hitman Andrew Veniamin.
- Mario Condello (dead): Former lawyer and convicted drug trafficker. A lover of literary classics and crime fiction. Close friend of Gatto.
- Graham "The Munster" Kinniburgh (dead): Old-school crime figure, believed to have been shot dead by hitman Veniamin.
- Alphonse Gangitano (dead): Crime boss described as "the Robert de Niro of Lygon Street". Gunned down in his underwear in the laundry of his Templestowe home. His 1998 assassination sparked the underworld war.

#### New guard

- Carl Williams (in jail): Cherubic-faced underworld figure, a central player in the war. Facing trial on three counts of murder.
- Victor Brincat (in jail): Close friend of Williams, pleaded not guilty to shooting dead Jason Moran and Pasquale Barbaro at a junior football clinic.
- Andrew Veniamin (dead): Underworld hitman capable of gross violence, shot dead in Carlton pizza restaurant by Gatto.
- Tony Mokbel: Wealthy businessman accused of drug trafficking. Has close connections with the Williams family.

he was a regular visitor to the elite Mahogany Room at Melbourne's Crown Casino where he would gamble up to \$10,000 a hand on the baccarat tables.

As one of their gangland rivals once told me about Condello and the Carlton Crew: "It's like their actions come from them shows like *The Sopranos*, their words come from those shows, their everyday lifestyle is a comedy sequence from *The Godfather*."

By contrast, Condello's gangland rivals take their cultural cue from *Kath & Kim*, rather than *The Sopranos*.

This group, often called the New Guard, are bogun killers. Hailing from Melbourne's gritty outer-western suburbs, they have bad teeth and a bad attitude and are more likely to be spotted at Hungry Jacks than at the ballet.

But they have proved to be far more deadly in claiming their victims.

Condello's death — coming on top of the murder of other Carlton Crew leaders such as Graham "The Munster" Kinniburgh and Jason, Mark and Lewis Moran — has all but delivered victory to the New Guard.

However, police know there is no guarantee that the remnants of the Carlton Crew will not seek revenge. There are several early theories about why Condello was killed. The first is that it was revenge for the acquittal of Dominic "Mick" Gatto in June for the murder of underworld hitman Andrew Veniamin.

Gatto, the most senior surviving member of the Carlton Crew, shot Veniamin dead in an Italian restaurant in 2004 after the two men grappled. Gatto said he acted in self-defence after Veniamin pulled a gun on him.

Veniamin was a close friend of alleged underworld boss Carl Williams, now in jail awaiting trial on three counts of murder.



**Survivor:** Dominic Gatto dined with Condello on Monday

he did not let on. He even hinted with bravado that he would have killed the alleged hitmen before they could have killed him. "Once they [the alleged hitmen] reached the other side of the road where my place was, they wouldn't have been able to walk back to the car," Condello boasted.

He declined to accept police protection but privately he invested in extra protection for his home, including extra video surveillance, turning it into a mini fortress.

Despite the danger to his life, Condello fought hard to remain a free man. Following his arrest in 2004, he fought to get bail and after nine months he won a controversial bail decision. Police opposed his release.

A prison psychiatrist told the court that jail had sent Condello "stir crazy".

However Condello was not so stir crazy that he didn't know the dangers of returning to live on the outside.

Shortly before his release, he took deliberate steps to bury the hatchet with his oldest enemy Carl Williams.

Condello's lawyer Tony Howard QC said his client had written to Williams in January last year telling him that he would not testify against him at his upcoming trial. In response, Williams wrote: "Mario, all the best for court. Hope you're home soon with a win, or even bail. Good luck Carl."

At the time Howard said the exchange suggested it was unlikely that Condello would be the target of gangland violence if he was released.

But someone was not willing to make peace with Condello.

On Monday night, Condello dined with Gatto at a city restaurant in Bourke Street.

It was the last meeting for the two most senior surviving members of the Carlton Crew.

When a stunned Gatto was told of Condello's death on Monday night he rushed to the scene of the crime. It must have been a chilling moment for Gatto, who now finds himself the sole surviving senior member of the Carlton Crew and an obvious target.

Acting Deputy Police Commissioner Simon Overland admitted as much yesterday: "It seems that he is at risk and possibly is at greater risk as a consequence of what has happened. We need to think ahead and try to think about who else might be in danger."

On the streets, the surviving players in the gangland war will be acutely aware of the dangers they face.

The lesson of seven years of underworld violence is that both sides believe firmly in the concept of "payback".

Condello is just the latest in a long line of underworld figures who hoped the rules would not apply to him.

After police foiled the attempt on his life in 2004, a wistful Condello said he looked forward to happier days. "For the first time, I've heard the birds singing in the trees," he said. "So let's hope these birds continue to sing and everything becomes more peaceful."



JANE FRASER

### But for the grace of God

SENIOR politicians extended their sympathy to Mark Latham yesterday, describing his current situation as unfortunate, sad and disappointing. Latham has been charged with assault, malicious damage and theft of a camera from a journalist. Fellow hothead MP Wilson Tuckey defended the former Labor leader's right to privacy. The maverick Liberal said he felt "total ambivalence" when he heard about the charges but believed there was an issue of privacy, saying: "When we move on from this place I'm not sure we should be pursued by the paparazzi." Sydney Labor MP Anthony Albanese described the case as unfortunate, while Latham's star recruit, former Midnight Oil frontman Peter Garrett, was upset. NSW Premier Morris Iemma took a tougher stance, saying no one should be above the law. And Latham's successor, Kim Beazley, while sympathising, said he was all for "putting Mark Latham and his period behind me".

### No gold for Vic coppers

VICTORIAN police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon says police don't need compensation for working during next month's Commonwealth Games. The Police Association, however, believes police working during the Games deserve \$100 a day allowance and four extra annual leave days to compensate for the additional workload. This would cost \$3 million and 31,500 days in lieu for the state's 10,500 union members. The association's Victorian secretary, Paul Mullett, says the allowance is necessary to support police when resources will be stretched to the limit. Nixon, whose five-year contract to run the force was extended this week by the state Government, says police had plenty of warning that leave would not be available during the Games. Mullett says he is "bitterly disappointed". But he'll have to cop it.

### Court spoils the circus

THE tawdry case which pitched tennis player Lleyton Hewitt and wife Bec Cartwright against businesswoman Judith Crawley and her husband Christopher was settled out of court yesterday, with the terms confidential. The dispute involved Hewitt seeking an unspecified sum over photographs published in *The Sun-Herald* in Sydney, taken on the Crawleys' Sunseeker yacht. The Crawleys counter-sued for non-payment of the \$3971 bill. A media pack waiting for Hewitt outside Sydney's Downing Centre Court yesterday were disappointed at his non-appearance and Crawley said she could say "nothing, nothing, nothing". But when *Strewh* told her the media had enjoyed the circus even if no one else had, and thought Hewitt was a spoilt brat, she responded: "Exactly."

### Amateur scores a payback

TEENAGE golfer Amy Yang, who won the Australian Ladies Masters on the Gold Coast at the weekend, has been awarded a \$20,000 scholarship. Queensland Education Minister Rod Welford said Peter Beattie's Government would pay her school fees for two years to mark her hard work, determination and talent. The 16-year-old Korean amateur is one of several international students enrolled in Robina State High School's golf program, which Yang put on the map. Queensland Tourism is climbing on the bandwagon, too. The Masters was televised into 46 countries with an estimated audience of 100 million, and Tourism Minister Margaret Keech says golfing tours will be high on the agenda for a push in Korea.



**In the money:** Masters winner Amy Yang

## Chuckling hissy fits only encourages the bad-taste jokers

**G**OD, Buddha and Mohammed walk into a bar ... Just joking.

But jeez, it's tempting. That's the danger with insisting certain subjects should only be discussed with superlative gravity and reverence. Mighty bursts of impolitic sniggering are sure to follow.

Schoolteachers charged with educating students about the gassy rings of Uranus have possessed this knowledge for some time. In fact, such is the delightfully perverse complexity of human nature that the urge to high jinks is often in direct correlation to the grimness of the consequences.

But is this really so sacrilegious?

Any supreme being responsible for whipping up the human race must have a well-developed sense of whimsy. Just look at the cathartic power of black humour. The physiological benefits of laughter. The slapstick nature of external genitals (good Lord, they're punch lines all on their own). Hardliners seem to be suggesting the

### EMMA TOM

THE WRYYYY SIDE

almighty is a humourless bastard who is completely bereft of comedy stylings and is never heard cracking droll one-liners after a hard day's omnipotence.

But surely such an awesome entity would be capable of weathering occasional earthly toomfoolery — even if it's as unfunny and badly drawn as the Danish cartoons causing all this kerfuffle over in Mecca.

In some ways, the grumpy Muslims of the world are right to be shirty. The cartoons in question are gratuitously inflammatory, irresponsibly provocative and depressingly Bart Simpson-esque.

If drawing a pair of devil's horns on Mohammed is the best our comics can muster,

the end really is nigh. But, as with classroom clowns who discharge armpit flatulence during Uranus lessons, overreaction keeps the culprits fuelled with attention and street cred. Ignore bad Danish comedy (apart from, say, a restrained announcement explaining Mohammed's sensitivity about having his portrait taken) and it really would go away.

Before getting all heavy about Islam's need to lighten up, however, it's worth remembering that many of us in the West also suffer from humour bypasses. Perhaps the moral of the story is: Let he who has never taken a joke the wrong way draw the first "does my bomb look big in this?" turban ...

In 1729, Irish writer Jonathan Swift caused an outrage after making the modest proposal that the children of the poor be fattened and fed to rich landowners to combat overpopulation and unemployment. "A young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled," Swift wrote, "and I make no doubt that it will

equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout."

Nearly three centuries later and, embarrassingly enough, blatant satire such as this is still taken literally. Americans, in particular, are also ridiculously sombre when it comes to perennially silly subjects such as body parts, sexuality and swearing. Janet Jackson's nipple cost television network CBS more than \$700,000, while Louisiana recently attempted to introduce six-month jail terms for low-rider daks.

Surely the sane response to these provocations would have been to rise up in mirth.

Speaking of sanity, an obsession with political correctness and victim mentality is also taking a grave toll on the West's ability to take a joke.

At [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA01-3513/sma01-3513-03.asp](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA01-3513/sma01-3513-03.asp), a US support group encourages people to write to media outlets saying that jokes about mental illness make their blood boil or cause them to "cry from pain and anger".

Suggested targets include an advertisement for Denny's Grand Slam Breakfast (because it includes the line "you must be out of your mind") and McDonald's (because its Happy Meal boxes feature "Animaniacs"). Similar campaigns are run by well-intentioned groups in Australia.

While misinformation and vilification are indeed unfortunate problems, encouraging vulnerable groups to feel violated every time they pass a Maccas doesn't seem all that helpful, especially as insensitive humour isn't going to disappear any time soon.

Real empowerment — for puritanical Americans, the mentally ill, Muslims and anyone else you care to mention — requires developing a Teflon skin and learning to expect and deflect spiteful jokes. Sure it's tempting to chuck a hissy fit, respond in kind or threaten the infidels with decapitation. But these are exactly the sorts of responses that keep off-coloured comedians in business.

[info@emmatom.com.au](mailto:info@emmatom.com.au)

[strewh@theaustralian.com.au](mailto:strewh@theaustralian.com.au)