

Victims and villains

Two men stab their attackers. One walks free, one is jailed. Guess which one was white.

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It is sometimes unwise to draw comparisons to make a point. One has to have a sense of proportion. Otherwise one ends up firing off letters reading: "If you are so concerned about minority rights, why is it that you say nothing about the right of falconers to take our beloved pets into cinemas?"

Some comparisons, however, are asking to be drawn. For example, a postmaster, Richard Watkins, stabs a robber to death and is hailed as a hero, but Satpal Ram is still in jail for stabbing one of his attackers to death in a restaurant fight 13 years ago.

Richard Watkins was held up in his post office by a man wielding a gun. I have no doubt that such an experience is very frightening. In the same position I doubt I would fight to defend, as one local villager put it, "the property of the crown". I didn't even know the Queen owned the cash in post offices. Perhaps her agent swung something because of the use of her image on stamps. Perhaps that's where the word "royalties" comes from - I don't know. Anyway, it seems that, in addition to owning the nation's swans (which is why they have the power to

break your arm, whether in self-defence or not), she has a stake in post offices.

Given that her claim to most things is highly suspect, and that we're only talking about a few quid, I would hand over the money and say, "Would you like any TV licence stamps with that?" I would be especially nervous of getting hurt in the Kidderminster area, where hospital services are being hacked to bits to make way for the private finance initiative. So I doubt I would make a grab for an armed robber's gun, unless perhaps I knew it was unloaded, as this one turned out to be.

But it is hard to know what one would do in a situation one has not faced. It would depend on a number of things, such as one's past experiences and one's perceptions of the world. We are told that rural communities live in terror of crime and it might be true.

In the case of Tony Martin, which does not bear comparison with this one, it appears that a man who had been burgled before stored up a lot of anger. He cannot be said to have been defending himself against a man who was legging it, unless the person saying it is a Tory. Conservatives have an interesting idea of what constitutes self-defence, forged in the heat of the slaughter of the young conscripts aboard the *Belgrano*. Believing time to be curved, Tories see retreat as a potential attack. I suspect that they also view the shooting of minor criminals as a treasured countryside pursuit, believing that the criminals enjoy it and it is more humane than prison. I do not know.

As I say, the post office case is very different. The robber was armed and the victim felt threatened. There was a struggle during which the postmaster sustained a head injury requiring three stitches. He stabbed the robber several times in the chest with a lock knife that he used to open packages. The robber later died. The chief constable said of Mr Watkins: "The starting point is that he is a victim."

This is where I would like to bring in Satpal Ram. He was eating in an Indian restaurant in Birmingham in November 1986. Six white men at another table became racially abusive to waiters and demanded that the Indian music that was playing be turned down. Ram demanded the music be turned up. The men then attacked him with plates and glasses.

One man, Stuart Pearce, broke a glass and stabbed him in the face. Ram fought back with the short-bladed penknife that he used to open packages at work, stabbing his attacker twice. Stuart died later having refused medical treatment. Satpal Ram was never treated as a victim. After going to the police voluntarily, he was charged with murder.

Prior to trial, he was advised not to plead self-defence or indeed to take the stand, because Pearce's body showed a number of other cuts. In fact, these were caused by Pearce falling on to broken glass. It might not be surprising that a jury convicted Ram, but it is appalling that appeal judges should refuse to consider the possible failings of defence counsel.

At trial, most of the Asian witnesses were not

called and no Bengali translator was provided for the one who was. The prosecution witnesses were the surviving men who had attacked Ram, men you might think should have been on trial.

The crown, as well as having an interest in postage, has a stake in putting people away and keeping them there. It is not always that choosy about the materials it uses. But it is highly selective in other ways. It would be interesting to speculate as to whether, if Satpal Ram had not defended himself and had perhaps died, his attackers would have been brought to justice. One would need to draw comparisons with other racial attacks.

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