



Just In Time

CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee

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Justice in time?



Time is money

Introduction

Prisons, and the rights of prisoners, have been long term issues for CLRI(NSW) and are frequent causes of debate. The victims of crime may feel that criminals should be locked up and have the key thrown away. But if our justice system is true to its name, prisons must be *just* places where, though other rights may be restricted, prisoners' human rights are respected.

NSW, with 10,000 prisoners, has the highest prisoner population in all of the states and territories in Australia, nearly half of the entire prisoner population of Australia. Despite the growing numbers in NSW gaols, funding of the prison system continues to be reduced. This means that vital rehabilitation and education programs are shrinking or disappearing. As a result many prisoners are leaving prison without the skills necessary to create a new life and succeed in society. The fact that many leave prison with little or no education or basic life skills may go some way to explaining why NSW has the shockingly high recidivism rate of 43%. It is a clear sign that our prison system is failing if almost half of all people who leave prison after serving their sentence, will later return to serve another. This is a failure of our society for both the prisoner and the broader community.

Michael Poynder, coordinator of the prisoner advocacy organisation **Justice Action**, recently spoke to us about some of the struggles undertaken to improve prison conditions in NSW. In addition to many ongoing battles being fought to improve conditions in prisons, prisoners and prison officers in NSW are now facing a new threat: privatisation. The recent mini-budget delivered by Treasurer Eric Roozendaal proposed the privatisation of Cessnock and Parklea prisons as a solution to some of the State's financial difficulties. CLRI(NSW) are joining Justice Action in their opposition to this plan.

What are the problems with prison privatisation? Justice Action give six key reasons why they object to this plan:

- It is morally wrong to make profit from people's imprisonment
- The profit motive of private prisons equals a low standard of care
- Growing business in private prisons is not in the community's interest
- Financially, private prisons are not cost-effective
- Prisoners and prison officers alike oppose privatisation

Those championing privatisation claim that private prisons can run at a lower cost and provide better and more innovative services. However, an article published in the UK Independent Monitor in March revealed that 10 of the 11 privately operated prisons in the UK were ranked in the bottom quarter and were "consistently worse than their publicly run equivalents". [Follow this link for Stephen Nathan's original article on page 24 - <http://www.justiceaction.org.au/images/stories/CmpgnPDFs/privmonitormarch08.pdf>]. Similar findings in the United States suggest that private prisons in NSW would also perform poorly.

While some may think that prison privatisation is only a concern for the prisoner, it is ultimately an issue that affects the entire community. Michael Poynder spoke of the ripple effect of crime. It is not only the victim of crime who suffers. The families of both the victim and the criminal also face great hardship. The effects of crime ultimately ripple out to touch the entire community.

We are all affected, not just in a personal way, but in a financial way. It costs a minimum of \$70, 000 per year to keep someone in prison. If our prisons were operating justly, with effective education and rehabilitation programs in place, some of the 43% of prisoners who would otherwise return to prison and continue to drain the state's resources, could instead return to society and begin making a valuable contribution.

The privatisation of NSW prisons is not in the best interests of the prisoners, prison officers, or society at large. We must send a clear message to the NSW government that it is time to start investing in prisons and expand their services, instead of allowing them to disintegrate. But where do we start?

Unlocking our minds



The first step towards creating a better prison system for our society is to unlock our own minds. Now is the time to start thinking about prisons as an integral cog in the wheel of society, which helps it to run more successfully. We must value the role that prisons play in giving people whose lives have gone astray, a second chance to learn to contribute to society. We must stop thinking of prisons as places where the hopeless can be dumped and forgotten about.

The inspiring success stories that have emerged from Justice Action's mentoring program, where ex-offenders mentor and support recently released prisoners, prove that with the right assistance, ex-offenders can return to the community and lead a positive life. If we can show that we care about prisons, our politicians will care more too.

How can we help?

Communication is the key word in this issue. The best way to help stop the privatisation of NSW prisons is to write to your state MP and tell him or her that you care about prisons. It is also essential to talk to others about this issue and increase awareness. Holding public or informal talks about prisons is also a wonderful way to show that we have not forgotten about the rights of those who are least seen and heard in our community, prisoners.

Christmas visits

Last month CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee Member Anne Lane began a letter writing campaign to the Minister for Justice, John Hatzistergos, regarding fears that prisoners in NSW would be denied family visits on Christmas Day. As a result of the campaign, CLRI(NSW) received notification that family visits would be allowed this year. However, this decision was later rescinded.

Since beginning action on this issue, the Social Justice Committee has learned that some prisoners prefer that their families stay at home on Christmas Day, while some others would enjoy a family visit. Like all issues regarding prisons, Christmas Day visiting is a complex issue. We will continue to work on this issue in 2009 and hope to understand how best to advocate for prisoners. We would like to thank everyone who took part in the original campaign, and we encourage your continued participation in advocating for the rights of prisoners in NSW.

Web Links



We recommend that you visit the following sites for more information about prisons and links to ways that you can get active and help stop the privatisation of prisons in NSW.

Justice Action homepage. Follow links to article on prison privatisation, and don't forget to get involved in their many other campaigns!

<http://www.justiceaction.org.au>

Read an article giving a Christian perspective on prisons

http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20081114_1.htm

Read about prison officers' opinions of privatisation

http://www.psa.labor.net.au/news/1225441091_28183.html

Find out more about alternatives to prison

<http://www.beyondbars.org.au>

Check out the Human Rights and Arts Film Festival that is currently screening in Sydney!

<http://www.hraff.org.au/sydney.html>

CLRI(NSW) – read past issues of Just in Time online

<http://www.clrinsw.org>