

Lock em' Up Policy is Bad for Everyone - 28 December 2010

The recent Victorian election campaign was, unsurprisingly, dominated by law and order issues. But, in the upcoming NSW state election, many are holding out real hope that this will finally see an end to the obsession with law-and-order campaigns. 

To the immense credit of the Coalition's shadow attorney-general, Greg Smith has said he is planning to substantially reduce the number of people inside NSW jails and instead invest in mental health services to reduce crime. Although the current Attorney-General, John Hatzistergos, has not been publicly supportive of this position, he has been rightfully trumpeting the success of his programs that divert people with drug and alcohol problems away from the criminal justice system and into treatment.

Together, the targeting of investment in substance misuse and mental health programs instead of prisons will have a much needed impact on our ever increasing prison populations, and in turn improve the safety, health and well being of communities in the long term.

Conventional wisdom dictates that political parties should define themselves as being the tougher party on crime because this is what the community wants to hear. Of course, people like to know that those who break the law are punished; especially when the victims of crime are people they identify with. However, the community is also starting to understand more and more that locking up thousands of people each year at well over \$50,000 each can also be an incredible waste of money. We only have to look at what we eventually get for our billion-dollar investments. In short, half of the people going to prison reoffend and are returned to prison within a couple of years, almost half of prisoners are under the age of 35 and as a result thousands of children and families are having to bear the pain and hardship of their imprisonment; and appallingly, Indigenous Australians are now so over-represented that they make up one-quarter of the male prison population, one-third of the female prison population and over half of the juvenile detainee population — and rising.

In contrast to our ability to over-invest in prisons we woefully under invest in the services that may actually address the causes of much of this crime, such as substance misuse treatment and mental health services. At times there seems to be a misunderstanding or disconnect about what prison is really like and what it actually does to people. Forget what you may hear about prison being some type of holiday camp because what our money is doing is creating some of the most intimidating, violent and harshest environments possible. The recent revelations of a former prison guard in Perth of a system that is violent, repulsive and awash with drugs is not one many would like to call home. <http://www.perthnow.com.au/news/western-australia/ex-prison-guard-blows-whistle-on-life-inside-wa-jails/story-e6frg13u-1225953099214> Which is why those that can will spend all they can to keep out of there. Rather than rehabilitating prisoners so they are less likely to engage in crime when released, prisons end up potentially causing greater problems for communities when prisoners are released. And let's be clear about this, the overwhelming number of people in our prisons will be back on the streets within a year. So, if we were to ask ourselves how well our investment has gone so

far, the answer is simple – it has been a reckless and wasteful folly.

At the current rate of imprisonment, NSW governments now and into the future will have to build a new prison every year or two to accommodate the increasing number of people being locked up in NSW. And prisons are not cheap to either build or operate.

If we can significantly reduce the prison population it will mean that state governments can better target these resources at actually solving some of the problems that can lead people to commit crimes.

This is not a call for opening the gates to the prisons and setting everyone free. But we do need to be far more clear-headed in our thinking and realise that the evidence overwhelmingly shows that the “lock em’ up” approach is a failure of public policy failure.

Prisons should be for people that commit violent and heinous crimes and should never become the first option for those that require and could benefit greatly from treatment.

Unless you believe that there is something innate about people in NSW that makes them twice as likely to engage in illegal behavior as people in Victoria, then there is something wrong with how we do things in NSW. This new approach heralded by the NSW opposition to recognise the evidence and tell the community the truth about what our criminal justice system should really be doing is a very welcome step. Couple this with what will hopefully be the NSW government’s matching of its beliefs with real and substantial funding increases for substance misuse treatment, then there is finally more than just a glimmer of hope for wisdom in public policy.

It is also important to realise that this is not just an issue for reform here. The UK Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, is seeking to reform their system <http://www.justice.gov.uk/sp300610a.htm> after figures released showed that 61 per cent of prisoners reoffended within a year of release. The UK will try to have thousands of offenders diverted from prison to drug treatment. He is quoted as saying that “for those for whom drugs are the main problem, it is obviously sensible to tackle their addiction outside prison”.

Today, both political parties bear a responsibility to start informing the public on how we can reduce crime by redirecting funds to where we get the best results and stop adhering to some political cliché that being the toughest is best when all the evidence is to the contrary.

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