

How to be a wolf in sheep's clothing: Using the Non-profit Industrial Complex to defeat the Prison Industrial Complex

- I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners, the Gadigal people and pay my respect to their elders past and present.
- I also acknowledge and pay my respect to women and men who are unjustly criminalised, and those who struggle on behalf of their families and friends as part of the prison abolition movement-it takes time, energy and courage

Many of us at this conference are revolutionaries at heart-this is why our vision is for prison's to be abolished, not reformed.

So what do I mean by my whacky title?

I'm talking about us being strident advocates for prison abolition - using the non-profit industrial complex, with its extensive networks and capital, to leverage resources toward our vision. I'm talking about an ongoing organising strategy –a way to influence public opinion and action toward our vision.

To date, I don't think we've thoroughly considered how we do this, as a movement for change.

I'm proposing that we fully exercise our privilege of having and being part of a NFP sector, and work in a more mindful and impactful way, to make these resources count. I'm also proposing that in the absence of a strategy for using the NFP sector-we are complicit in state repression. We are allowing resources to be allocated to the amelioration of poverty and distress-the charity model-rather than effectively working to a social change model, and the demise of systems for criminalisation.

Of course many of us are already using the NFP sector, doing this to some extent - through the groups and organisations that we are part of, through individual and systemic advocacy, public speaking, the use of community media and social networking, the development of shared resources, and so on.

But as we don't have a national or international coordinating body for our action-(outside of Sisters and our various local change networks), let's in the first instance, have a crack at a united and organised course of national action.

Let's have a crack at a couple of planned strategies, review our impact annually, and at the next Sister's conference, and re-consider how we might build on our success.

My primary reason for identifying the NFP sector as a place for organising-is that in the absence of a people's revolution, we are going to need ongoing resources to sustain our social change movement; and in the time between now and all prison's being closed, we will need to offer clear alternatives in the form of quality services that embrace systemic advocacy.

My sense is that there are individuals and organisations out there that we have failed to rally.

Let's firstly look at the size and sectors that make up the non-profit industrial complex. Many of these sectors are firmly embedded within contemporary Australian and international societies and economies.

According to the ABS, at the end of June 2007, there were **41,008 not-for-profit organisations in Australia**. These organisations employed **889,919 people at the end of June 2007**. **Social services organisations accounted for 24.9% (221,549 people) of total employees**.

In addition to paid employees, there were **2,182,476 volunteers** during 2006-07.

Some of these groups support prison abolition - but many are working inconsistent with our vision for prison abolition - in fact many are working in concert with the state to manage dissent. For many of these groups, their work and their survival is predicated on expanding criminalisation and imprisonment. They are systemic co-dependents in criminalisation.

It's my view that the sectors that make up social service organisations – are working with many of the same people we seek to liberate from criminalisation and imprisonment, and we need to convince these organisations to support prison abolition. To make prison's obsolete.

The housing and homelessness sectors; the drug and alcohol services; community health centres; mental health services; child, youth and family services; community legal centres; arts and leisure communities; neighbourhood houses, and so on, are all NFP service sectors, that work with, (or in some cases fail to work with), the vast majority of people who are criminalised.

They get government resources to work with marginalised communities, and they have a duty to the people they purport to represent. But many of these services are so hooked on their need to devote all their resources to inadequate services; they have failed in their real purpose, which is to end social and economic injustice. This is in spite of the fact that many of these sectors arose from very effective voluntary social change movements-but what have they become? And how can we work with them, to walk with us, as strident advocates for prison abolition.

It's my view, that these sectors need to be rallied toward a united vision of prison abolition. They are not going to come to the space of prison abolition, without leadership.

The level of collusion with the violent institutions of police and prisons – the resources power and propaganda that sits around the prison industrial complex, and the heavy reliance of NFPs on state and federal government funds, ensures that the vast majority of NFP organisations will collude with bad practice, as a means of securing their own survival.

For those of us working and managing organisations that are part of the NFP sector, the small number of us that do have a prison abolition vision at the front and centre of our work - we have a number of big tasks ahead of us.

We have to convince other NFPs that it is possible to maintain and grow your organisation whilst at the same time sustaining a radical agenda for prison abolition.

At Flat Out in Victoria, we have done this in a number of ways. We are what I call **'a wolf in sheep's clothing'**.

We've been around for 22 years now, and we have never veered from our prison abolition vision. As part of this vision we have maintained a strong focus on being an exemplary organisation - not an average organisation - an extremely well run organisation.

We never lose sight of the critical importance of running systemic advocacy alongside our service delivery, and we are meticulous in ticking the boxes - we are mindful that we have to 'report' and 'comply' if we want funding to support and sustain our work.

Recently we have been put through an extremely rigorous process of 'quality improvement and accreditation'. Our photocopier and shredder ran hot, to the point of explosion, as we pushed our organisation through the hoops of proving that we are a sophisticated community organisation worthy of public funding.

As we drove through the process, we quivered and quaked as we waited for the external reviewers' report that might say we were misusing our service delivery funding, or that our collective governance structure was antiquated, or perhaps we were doing work that we shouldn't be doing.

On the contrary, the review report commended all aspects of our activity, and we are now a fully accredited organisation. We got through because we were able to prove that the women we work for, criminalised women are at the centre of our work, and that our systemic advocacy work, our prison abolition work, is consistent with our vision to keep women out of prison.

Why are we so proud of this? We are proud of this because we now know that after going through and being part of this process of 'continuous quality improvement', we are free to continue our vision for prison abolition. We are a squeaky clean organisation that has effectively leveraged a number of important resources toward our vision. We occupy 2 buildings, we have employees and equipment, we have an active management collective - and all of our resources are being harnessed toward prison abolition.

However, gloat as we will - we are a small and insignificant NFP organisation, up against the massively resourced and powerful prison industrial complex - and we are only one among a handful of community organisations in Victoria that supports the vision of prison abolition.

So while we feel good about our achievements, the bottom line is, we are working in a context of unprecedented prison expansion. Over the past 12 months – there's been a 30% increase in the number of women being locked up.

I only have a few minutes left, so I want to move back to my original point... I'm talking about us being strident advocates for prison abolition - using the non-profit industrial complex, with its extensive networks and capital, to leverage resources toward our vision. I'm talking about an ongoing organising strategy –a way to influence public opinion and action toward our vision.

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Strategies for change-a two year plan

Beyond Sisters Conference, held every two years, there is a distinct lack of any coordinated strategy or action that speaks to the prison abolition agenda in Australia.

There are ad hoc actions and movements. But there is no coordinated and reviewable action, where the effectiveness of that action is being analysed against numbers of people being criminalised and locked up.

I'm proposing that we use non-profit sector resources, to build a nationally coordinated network - to rally people and organisations toward prison abolition.

In the first instance we are going to have to check out whether or not this going to work- whether we can work together, so I'm further proposing a couple of simple actions to test the water.

1.

Firstly, one of the biggest challenges for social change movements is **staying on top of the knowledge related to the breadth and power of the prison industrial complex - alongside alternatives to criminalisation and banging people up**.

To this end I propose a National Prison Abolition Knowledge Network

- A working group with representatives from each state and territory to take up the task of creating a national repository of evidence and resources to support our movement

2.

Secondly, I propose we get on top of the **key messages of Prison Abolition, and we get these messages** out there and across the NFP sector and broader community - this is a proposal to get others on board, and make prison abolition a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To this end, I propose a National Prison Abolition Communication Network

- We need to map all significant national and international conferences that will be held over the next two years - we need to submit papers and presentations to these conferences, and call on other organisations to register their commitment to the values and principles of prison abolition
- We also need to develop these key prison abolition messages into template media releases and get them out there to refute widespread law and order campaigning

I propose we make a list of representatives from all states and territories to kick these networks off. We want to work with everyone here, and representatives from other states and territories, using the resources of our organisations, to make this happen.

This is just 2 nationally coordinated tasks that will help us build a mindset of working collectively to leverage NFP resources toward prison abolition.

I'm proposing that as part of this conference, prior to the closing ceremony, we collect contact details of NFPs present that are prepared to commit resources to this work.

Flat Out would be honoured to be part of this.

Thank you.

Annie Nash, Manager, Flat Out Inc.

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