

SPEECH TO FREE MINDS CONFERENCE

NOVEMBER 3 2008

THANKS TO TRADITIONAL OWNERS

Acknowledge women in prison and what has happened so far today

I'd like to be able to stand up here today and go through the usual things I say at such gatherings about prisons, in the same tone of voice I usually use, with the same conviction, and some fresh fire in my belly.

But the truth is I'm sick of it all - I'm sick of prisons and the people who defend them and work in them and build them.

I'm sick of saying band-aid things when all around us, everything to do with prisons is deteriorating.

The numbers of people being incarcerated in them
the arguments used in their favour
the arguments used AGAINST people who are sent there, that they deserve it, etc
the treatment meted out to them, that they deserve it
the shocking and heartbreaking degradation they experience inside.

I'm sick to my stomach of hearing human beings talk about other human beings in this way.

About them being ANIMALS

About them being STUPID

About them being SUB-HUMAN

About them being VIOLENT

All meaning: THEY DON'T MATTER.

Even if people don't say these things out loud, this is the sub-text of what they say when they talk about locking people up.

It's the sub-text of our attitude to anyone who has experienced disadvantage, mental illness, abuse, or life as a person of colour or difference. Because they are the people who fill up our prisons. These are the people we're talking about.

And it's the sub-text of our entire system. Can you all see that?

The sub-text of our tolerance of prisons as punishment, of a criminal justice system that favours and rewards the rich and sends the rest to those huge dumpsters out there at Wacol we call 'correctional centres'.

It's the sub-text of all our lives – because in our system we can only enjoy the freedoms we have if other people take the blame on our behalf.

Believe me, no one CHOOSES to be born into poverty, deprivation, and the great cycle of abuse and cruelty that so many children are born into.

No one CHOOSES to feel alienated, terrified, stupid, good-for-nothing, a loser – which is frequently the state of mind of the children who grow up to be the adults we send off to prison.

That mindset is also the inheritance of many Indigenous people in this country, people who have been made to feel outlaws and aliens in their own land.

But these are the people who are filling up our prisons.

When are we going to say, enough is enough?

When are we going to say, we can't treat our fellow human beings like this?

When are we going to stop the abuse and even the killing that is still happening in our so-called 'correctional centres' now?

You think I exaggerate? Let's look at the news reports for the past couple of weeks:

An Islander man who had been in and out of psychiatric care and then incarcerated on minor offences, dies while he is manacled and held down by no less than FOUR prison officers.

He was one of the people regularly spat out of the health system and into the community where there is nothing for them except the inevitable collision with the police.

A collision that is sure to further harm and brutalise such people, and this man was harmed and brutalised to the extent that he died – he turned blue after being physically and mechanically restrained and held down by these four prison officers.

These same officers then threatened to strike because in this terrible process, they got urine on them, and they had to stay in their uniforms while an initial investigation was done. I'd like to say just this to them: that's what happens when someone dies underneath you, beneath your weight. You get urine on your clothes.

Then we have Palm Island man Lex Wootten being found guilty of inciting a riot after the death in custody of Murinji Doomadgee. Within days of this verdict, the police minister announced that EVERY police officer involved in the riot on Palm Island that day would get a bravery medal pinned to his chest.

She then announced she was going to VISIT Palm Island at the time the awards would be given.

This is not just insensitive, this is not just ignorance. This is blatant provocation. Minister Spence should probably be charged with the same offences as Lex Wootten, because her actions may well have incited a riot if there had been no intervention.

We have seen over the past few weeks some shocking violence in the parks of our suburbs, with killings in Woodridge and in South Brisbane.

These crimes rightfully shock people but when you unpack it all, why should we be shocked?

Why should we wonder that kids are mimicking our grown-up behaviour? When you brutalise people they're going to respond with brutality.

When governments have no respect for the underclass, when there is a 'they deserve it' mentality about the poor, of course we are going to see brutality.

And these are just the things you all hear about. In my position I hear much, much more. I'll give you a light taste of what you haven't heard in the past couple of weeks –

Women are being hog-tied in the detention unit of Brisbane Women's prison.
(explain)

More than 82 women prisoners are doubled up there, such is the over-crowding situation.

What this meant two weeks ago was that the plumbing inside the centre failed, and showers and toilets were backed up and full of water and faeces for FIVE DAYS. Women were ringing our offices, hysterical.

But still we keep increasing the numbers of people we incarcerate.

As activists and advocates we are in a double bind on this one.

Raise the issue of over-crowding and the government says, THAT'S WHY WE'RE BUILDING MORE PRISONS.

They say, thanks a lot for making that argument for us.

So we get the super-prisons, like the one sprouted as Queensland's biggest now under construction outside Gatton.

This is how the minister talks about it:

Ms Spence said the first stage of this major project will be the building of a 300 bed women's prison. "The women's prison will be on an 11 hectare site, known locally as the 'Weaver block'," Ms Spence said. "The centre will include 104 secure cells and 196 residential beds including eight beds for mothers and babies and eight beds for women with disabilities.

"This facility will incorporate state-of-the-art digital security to ensure the ongoing safety of the community. "The completion of the women's centre, expected in 2011, is anticipated to create about 200 new jobs in a range of roles including custodial officers, programs staff, administration and intelligence.

"Future stages will include a men's prison, with room for at least two more facilities, with the site having the potential to deliver up to 3000 beds and five prison facilities if necessary.

"This government had the foresight to secure this 6 00 hectare block of land so we could build the prisons of the future, to ensure we can continue to accommodate growing prisoner populations.

"As we continue to increase the number of police on the streets, and arm them with tough legislation to crack down on criminals; it is inevitable that more people will end up behind bars. "That is why we are taking action now to secure Tomorrow's Queensland, by building and planning for the future."

Yes, they boast about that. Queensland's biggest prison. The FORSIGHT to buy the land to build our PRISONS OF THE FUTURE! The INEVITABILITY of more people going to prison!

Meaning: we're going to keep coming up with ways of punishing you, of dealing with you, all of you who are in pain, all of you who are feeling loss and grief and despair and who know brutality well because that is what you were born to.

More and more of you.

But of course, that's not what they SAY.

What they say they say through the multi-million dollar MARKETING machines of police and corrective services, the media machines of the minister and the department, the press releases, the announcements, the websites.

I'd like to give you just a small taste of how your money is being spent on promoting the prison system in Queensland.

On promoting the barbaric practice of locking people away from their homes and their families and their communities and their lives for the kinds of behaviour that come straight out of living life at the bottom of the barrel.

Take this, for instance, from the Corrective Services website:

Our Vision (*our VISION!!*)

Queensland Corrective Services' vision is to become the leader in our business and a partner in criminal and social justice.

Being a leader in corrections means we are:

*building on established and sound correctional practices

what is a 'sound' correctional practice? Is it the strip-searching that happens not once but every 30 minutes to a women in prison and in the course of someone's admission to one of our fabulous world-class correctional centres?

Is it the removal of every shred of identity and dignity they insist on?

Is it the isolation and punishment experienced by those with mental illnesses - people already punished by having such an illness and further punished for behaviours they cannot prevent?

Corrections go on

*actively driving the policy agenda to set the future direction of corrective services

driving which particular policy agenda? The one that promotes fear and hatred of one part of society by another, one that divides whole communities, one that sees some children grow up healthy and educated and with every possible advantage, and other grow up with limited access to health and schooling and every possible disadvantage?

They go on....

*establishing innovative and effective intervention strategies

and programs

like the one that sees up to 66 percent of women and 88% of Aboriginal women who go to prison ... return to prison? Like the one that spits them back onto the streets after their sentence is up, leaving them with one Centrelink payment to get some accommodation, get a fridge and fill it, get their kids back, get to job interviews? With no support at all for the new life they're now expected to live?

*Being a partner in criminal and social justice means that we will:

* share our knowledge

sorry, I nearly choke laughing on this one. Corrective Services is of course one of the most secretive bodies in government. Try getting any kind of information out of them.

*influence positive change – *ditto above*

*be responsive to community priorities –*read here: put as many people in prison from those pesky lower-class suburbs so we feel more comfortable about everything.*

*establish participative and collaborative networks – *ask anyone at Sisters Inside how collaborative they are.*

*QCS is striving continuously for more effective and innovative programs and services, fair and humane treatment of offenders and a strong commitment to equity and cultural diversity.

This one takes the cake. 'more effective and innovative programs and services' – like their wonderful support for Sisters programs like Mothers and Children camps, which they deny to so many women; like the one-on-one counseling services we are no longer able to provide; like the continued lock-out of Sisters management committee from the prison, effectively removing from Sisters the structures that have made us unique, that have won us worldwide recognition and acclaim.

What about the denial of educational opportunities, employment opportunities, counseling? I mean real opportunities to do real study and real jobs, both of which are doorways to new ways of living.

And what about, 'fair and humane treatment of offenders' – fair in which ways, I would like to know. The separation of mothers from their children in the first place when we all know now that community options work best for women; cancellation of visits at short notice, preventing children from seeing their mothers, turning them away at the door for flimsy

administrative reasons.

What about the abuse of women in detention and isolation units, hog-tying them, stripping them, starving them?

And the 'strong commitment to equity and cultural diversity'?

Give me a break! Prisons are the antithesis of equity.

They are the ugly living symbol of the unfairness and brutality of our society.

And 'cultural diversity'? well they certainly deliver it physically, with a third of prisoners now being Indigenous.

Prison is just another way of decimating our Aboriginal population. If our everyday white way of living has proven poisonous for Aboriginal people, what do you think imprisonment does?

It kills them, that's what it does. We see it time and time again. And if it doesn't kill them physically it kills our First Nations Peoples souls. It kills their families. It kills their communities.

Here's another taste of that fabulous website:

What happens when a person first arrives at prison?

There is a range of reception processes that prisoners go through when they arrive at a prison. These include having their property logged and going through a formal identification process. A number of assessments are also conducted to identify their personal needs. These include program, educational and medical assessments as well as an assessment to determine whether they are at risk of harming themselves or others, or of being harmed by others. The assessments are used when developing a case management plan for the prisoner.

Gee, doesn't sound too bad, does it? it sounds as if they might really care about you, all those assessments to make sure you're okay.

Funny that it doesn't mention the strip search, women holding up their breasts and men their testicles to make sure there's nothing hidden there. Fully naked – squatting and coughing in front of prison officers.

They don't mention the degradation, the humiliation, the jokes, the threats.

They don't mention the feeling of losing everything that previously told you who you were – your clothes, your possessions; apers, your wallet, your dignity.

They don't mention any of that.

They go on - What do prisoners do all day?

Prisoners are encouraged to participate in rehabilitation programs and activities. These programs and activities are designed to enhance personal development and build self-esteem.

Prisoners may also access nationally-accredited vocational and education training programs. Prisoners who are released on parole part way through completing a program can continue the program through their Probation and Parole Office.

Some prisoners are also able to participate in the prison industries' programs that help them gain job-relevant technical skills and develop positive work habits. Prison industries are diverse and vary from centre to centre.

Rehabilitation programs and activities? Designed to enhance personal development and self-esteem?? Nationally accredited vocational and education training programs?? Programs that give them job-relevant technical skills?? The industry people work in under the guise of TAFE programs which is nothing more than slave labour and no guarantee of a job on release.

What is in a cell? Do they share?

Each cell generally accommodates one person. Most cells contain a bed, desk, toilet, shower and hand basin. Prisoners are able to purchase personal items such as soft drinks and reading materials.

Sorry, guys, this one is blatantly WRONG. The women's prison is so overcrowded presently – nearly the whole prison is doubled up

Are prisoners with special diets catered for?

Meals in correctional centres are designed in consultation with dieticians to meet the needs of all people, including vegetarians and those with specific religious or medical diets.

The Minister has just pushed through Parliament laws that negate this paragraph.

From the press release: "New laws to stop prisoners from abusing the prison complaint system have been unanimously passed by Queensland Parliament today. Corrective Services Minister Judy Spence said: "The Corrective Services and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2008 will stop the misuse of anti-discrimination legislation by offenders making frivolous complaints.

"This government is committed to providing a fair and just correctional system, but we are not prepared to sit back and watch prisoners abuse the complaint process and go straight

to the Anti-Discrimination Commission with frivolous complaints.

"Prisoners need to understand this Government is not running a hotel and an offender's every whim will not be accommodated. "The passing of this legislation ensures offenders must exhaust internal complaints processes before making an application to the Anti-Discrimination Commission.

"The Anti-Discrimination Tribunal will also now be required to consider whether the treatment of a prisoner was reasonable within the unique environment of a correctional centre. "And where the Tribunal does determine there has been discrimination its capacity to award compensation will now be limited to cases where it finds an offender has been treated in bad faith.

What rules must visitors follow?

Visitors must book each visit and have a security clearance before they can enter a correctional centre. They are not permitted to pass anything to prisoners and must follow the centre's rules. Visitors must wear respectable clothing and footwear. Visitors entering secure facilities undergo a variety of security checks which may include electronic drug detection scanning devices, metal detecting and the use of Passive Alert Drug Detection Dogs.

Once again, it's what is NOT in this paragraph. Like the fact that contact visits mean a strip search.

Strip searches are demeaning to anyone but to women with backgrounds of sexual abuse, they are traumatic. They must make a terrible choice every time their children visit: to hold them, touch them, kiss them, and endure the horror of taking off all their clothes in front of a bunch of uniformed officers, or

talk to their children from behind a barrier screen.

The thing is that you know and I know it doesn't have to be like this.

That there are better ways.

We had them here in Queensland, once, in the past. We had a director general of prisons who was able to say this 15 years ago:

'If it was possible to punish crime away, the United States of America would now be well on the way to a crime-free society.'

This was Keith Hamburger. That same year, in Corrective Services annual report, he wrote of those in prison: `...the social histories on their files make horrific reading, of childhood years of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, birthdays forgotten, no toys at Christmas, growing up in domestic situations where disputes are arbitrated by screaming and by violence.

These are the children who from an early age learn to live on the streets to obtain the daily necessities of life and in many cases are safer there, or at least no worse off than in their own homes.'

And he said: `rather than focus on punishment, attention should be directed to the broader question of how do we in Queensland, in Australia, set about achieving a safer, more caring and more law-abiding community?'

Fifteen years later, I'd like to pose a similar question to you. I'd like to suggest that the answer to the question is not a new super prison, solar powered or not.

Based on all the evidence we have, wherever we look, it's clear that PRISONS DON'T WORK.

What might go a long way to answering the question is ensuring that all those kids Keith Hamburger talked about got every bit of attention and advantage that your children do, got the same fair go, the same loving environment, the same toys under the tree at Christmas. That they got Christmas to start with.

Fifteen years later, I don't want to think what's happened to those children.

But we have a new bunch now, and a new bunch will be born today and tomorrow and next month and next year, and we have a chance with them.

We have a chance.

We are the ones we have been waiting for and we need to act to stop the brutality of the most disadvantaged in our community.

Thank you.

