

Australia: Private prisons to remain in Victoria despite government takeover of women's jail

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After a series of revelations of high rates of self-mutilation, assaults and drug abuse inside the Melbourne Metropolitan Women's Correction Centre, the Victorian state government last week took over the jail, the first private women's prison to be built outside the United States.

The Bracks government terminated a five-year contract held by Corrections Corporation of Australia (CCA) and placed the facility under the control of the Public Correctional Enterprise (also known as CORE), a corporatised government agency that administers the state's 10 state-run prisons.

Situated in the outer western suburb of Deer Park, the private prison has been wracked with problems, mostly stemming from overcrowding, inadequate staffing and poor support services, ever since it opened in 1996. Built for 135 prisoners, it currently houses 161, resulting in double and sometimes triple bunking inside cells. In just four years, the prison has been locked down 75 times, half of which were due to staff shortages.

Reports, including statements from inmates, soon began to reveal a shocking level of self-harm and drug overdoses—averaging six incidents per week. In 1998-99 self-mutilation and prisoner-to-prisoner assaults occurred at rates of 26.5 and 35.3 percent of all inmates. This was four times higher than the state prison average of 6.2 and 8.9 percent. According to a state Auditor-General's report, "Victoria's prison system: Community protection and prisoner welfare," released last year, the Women's Correction Centre (MWCC) "exceeded the acceptable limit for self-mutilations and attempted suicides by 91 percent and assaults on other prisoners by 20 percent".

The previous Kennett Liberal government launched a prison privatisation program in 1993, setting in motion the establishment of three private prisons, the MWCC, the Port Philip prison and the Fulham Correctional Centre. Soon, 45 percent of all Victorian prisoners were held in privately-operated facilities—the highest proportion in the world.

One central purpose was to slash government spending. The government estimated that it would save \$225 million across the three facilities, including \$16 million at MWCC, a relatively small facility. As part of their contracts, prison operators were paid performance-linked bonuses, giving them a financial incentive not to report incidents.

Starting in May this year, the Labor government issued three contract default notices to CCA for security lapses, assaults, fires and widespread drug abuse. The government's actions, culminating in the handover to CORE, are a response to growing public opposition to the revelations about conditions in MWCC. They have been hailed by prison welfare and church groups as a step forward in ending "the profit motive" within the prison network.

The government, however, is not proposing to end the private prison system. It has rejected calls for the takeover of the Port Phillip and Fulham jails and is still planning to build a private juvenile prison, despite denying any such proposal during last year's election campaign.

Moreover, the Deer Park facility remains privately-owned. The Kennett government contracted out the buildings and infrastructure of the private facilities under 20-year agreements with a business consortium that includes John Holland Construction and Societe

Generale Australia. The Bracks government has retained these arrangements.

In addition, CORE was corporatised in 1998 so that it now functions as a company, bidding for government contracts against the private operators. In order to cut costs to match its competitors, CORE has casualised its workforce and driven down wages and conditions.

Handing over the MWCC to CORE is therefore unlikely to improve prisoners' conditions. The MWCC replaced the government-run Fairlea Women's Prison, which had more extensive support services. Inmates' children were able to visit the prison for about six hours a day over the weekend. The prisoners could cook for their children and spend time with them. From 1981, children who were more than 12-months-old were permitted to live with their mothers in the prison.

The government's 1995 contract with CCA, however, did not allow for children's visits beyond the one hour provided for in the Corrections Act. This was despite the fact that at Deer Park, 74 percent of prisoners are mothers and 85 percent of the mothers are single parents. Since Fairlea's closure, visits have also become more difficult because prisoners' families now have to travel much further from the city to Deer Park. In many cases, the public transport system is so poor that visitors require an entire day to travel to and from the prison.

A report commissioned by the government this year pointed to overcrowding and intolerable conditions throughout the privately-run prisons. The "Audit Review of Government Contracts: Contracting, Privatisation Probitly and Disclosure in Victoria" reported that private prisons cut costs and generate profits by reducing staff and introducing electronic surveillance. The report revealed that at Port Phillip prison a number of suicides took place within months of the facility opening. Between 1997 and 1998, five prisoners committed suicide—four times higher than the national average.

In April, a state coroner concluded that Port Phillip's private operators, Group 4 Correctional Services, and the former Kennett Liberal government had contributed to the hanging deaths of four of the prisoners. The deaths were largely caused by the overuse of solitary confinement due to low staffing levels. Staff members were untrained to deal with emergencies, and there were only five psychologists, most employed part-time,

for 600 inmates. In two of the suicide cases, the prisoners had not been placed on suicide watch, despite being classified "at risk".

The investigation revealed that following the introduction of the private jails, the entire prison records system had broken down, largely due to neglect by the private operators and the government. Prisoners' files were lost or left unread and, as a result, many inmates directly at risk of self-harm or suicide were ignored.

Although the findings indicted Group 4 Correctional Services at Port Phillip, the Labor government chose to take no action. In fact, Corrections Minister Andre Haermeyer commented last week: "I need to emphasise that we do not have a problem with the operation of the other two private prisons. The advice I have at the moment is that those prisons are satisfactorily meeting their contractual obligations."

The Port Phillip inquiry findings were released in May and since then the Bracks Labor government has been under fire from prison advocacy and welfare groups, as well as from Labor Party branches. But only weeks later, the premier announced plans to go ahead with a plan to open a private juvenile prison—first mooted by the Kennett government. In response, the head of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, Amanda George, declared: "Steve Bracks made a promise that there would be no new private prisons. He also said that they would not be extending the contracts for any private prisons. So Steve Bracks has lied."

The Bracks government has also continued with other private contract deals initiated by the Kennett government, such as the CityLink tollway, Crown Casino, the sell-off of public transport, electricity privatisation and the Grand Prix car race. "We are optimistic as to the future role of the public-private partnerships in Victoria," the government's audit report stated.



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