

Australia: NSW government accelerates privatisation of prisons

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The New South Wales (NSW) government's recently announced "Better Prisons" program exposes the political establishment's brutal and cynical attitude toward some of the poorest and most disadvantaged people.

The program has been presented as the government's solution to the unsafe and scandalously overcrowded state of prisons in NSW, Australia's most populous state. In reality, "Better Prisons" seeks to open up to private corporations the vast fortune to be made from prisoners.

Premier Mike Baird's Liberal-National government will progressively roll out "performance reporting" for prisons, "benchmarked budgets" and operational changes to "increase productivity." It will aim to stimulate "increased competition between the public and private sector for prison management." These are well-known privatisation buzzwords.

According to NSW government publications, if prison management fails to achieve "required service improvements," prisons may be "market tested"—that is, offered up for competitive tender from private investors. One prison, the John Morony Correctional Centre near Sydney, is in the process of "market testing." A decision on bids is due in early 2017.

Private corporations undoubtedly view prisons as a huge commercial opportunity. The federal government's 2016 Report on Government Services (ROGS) revealed that net operating expenditure (including depreciation) on corrective services across Australia was \$3.7 billion in 2014–15, an increase of 7.6 percent over the previous year in real terms.

The ROGs report revealed that 34,982 people per day (excluding periodic detainees) were in prison on average nationally during 2014–15, an increase of 7 percent on the previous year. Over the past ten years,

imprisonment rates climbed by 20.5 percent. However, only 6,394 prisoners (or 18.3 percent) were held in private facilities over that period. "Better Prisons" seeks to change that balance in NSW.

Baird's policy is part of a decades-long, global process of privatisation of government services. As the WSWs reported, the UK government's Prisons Bill is based on similar principles. Such policies impose unrealistic performance targets on prisons, while simultaneously cutting budgets and staff. The inevitable, ensuing crisis is then used to justify further "reforms" (privatisation).

Australian prisons are severely overcrowded. According to the ROGS, they were at 106.1 percent of design capacity nationally in 2014–15, and at 109.3 percent for secure facilities. In NSW, the figures were closer to 110 percent overall, and 115 percent for secure facilities.

That situation is becoming even more severe. In January 2016, the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) revealed that the state's prison population rose from 10,000 in June 2011 to 11,801 in September 2015, an increase of 18 percent. The report notes a particularly sharp increase since November 2014, with "no sight of slowing."

Deeply inhumane consequences inevitably follow such levels of incarceration. "Performance frameworks in custodial centre operations," a report published in March by the Audit Office of NSW, prison managers have adopted methods resulting in "lockdowns" and "reduced time out of cells for inmates." These practices, the report notes, could "reduce inmate welfare and increase the risk of inmate self-harm."

The systematic destruction of human beings hides behind such bland phrases. According to the 2016 ROGS, national average out of cell hours per prisoner

per day were 10.1 in 2014–15. In NSW, that figure was below 8 hours, and at around 6–7 hours for prisoners in secure facilities. That is, 16–18 hours per day spent in a cell.

Unsurprisingly, the same publication recorded the national rate of “prisoner on prisoner assaults” as 9.6 per 100 prisoners. The ROGS noted that the rate of “apparent unnatural deaths” in prisons in 2014–15 (including suicide, drug overdose, accidental injury or homicide) was 0.05 per 100. By comparison, the national suicide rate in 2014 was 0.012 per 100 (or 12 per 100,000), according to website mindframe-media.info (sourcing its data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics report “Cause of Death Australia, 2014”).

In each state, imprisonment rates are massively higher for indigenous people, who constitute some of the poorest, most oppressed layers of the working class. The ROGS reports that the 2014–15 national imprisonment rate was 139.4 per 100,000 non-indigenous people, as against 2,196.1 per 100,000 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The “law and order” policies of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, coupled with significant underfunding of the judicial system, appear to be major causes of the overcrowding of NSW prisons.

The prison population includes people on “remand,” who are awaiting trial, but not granted bail. The BOCSAR report revealed that between March 2011 and September 2015, the NSW remand population grew by 874 people (a 32 percent increase), while the sentenced prison population grew by 662 people (a 9 percent increase).

According to BOCSAR, the increase in remand prisoners is likely due to four factors: increased police prosecution in circumstances where bail refusal is likely; increased prosecution for breach of bail; increased time spent in custody on remand (possibly due to a backlog of trial cases in court); and possibly a greater likelihood of bail refusal. The report observed that some of the growth in the prison population is simply due to police “more often proceeding against people who are likely to be remanded in custody and given a prison sentence if convicted.”

The BOCSAR report showed that the proportion of those convicted who receive a prison sentence has increased in 17 out of 18 offence categories, meaning

that “harsher sentencing practice” would appear to be a “significant contributor to the growth in the imprisonment rate.”

In January, BOCSAR director Don Weatherburn commented on ABC Radio National that the explosion in imprisonment was partly due to “both sides of politics” in NSW playing up the “law and order issue” and “getting tough on crime” over the past 10 to 15 years.

The issue is not simply choosing better rhetoric. The bipartisan “law and order” agenda, particularly since the 1995–2005 premiership of Labor’s Bob Carr, has served a definite political purpose. It dehumanises prisoners as individual, evil wrongdoers, thereby deflecting attention away from serious analysis of the economic and social forces, particularly in a period of capitalist breakdown, that systematically produce social and psychological dysfunction and crime.

Of the 18 categories of criminal offences analysed by the BOCSAR report, several appear to be particularly indicative of social and psychological problems. The biggest single contributor to the increase in convicted prisoners is the offence of “stalking/intimidation.” This is followed (in the top 10) by: breach bond; criminal intent; receive/handle proceeds of crime; obtain benefit by deception; dangerous or negligent operation (driving) of a vehicle; deal/traffic in illicit drugs (non-commercial quantity); theft (except motor vehicles); serious assault; common assault.

It has been understood, at least since the age of the Enlightenment, that crime (and punishment) primarily are indicia of *social*, rather than individual, ills. That is, the social factors chiefly responsible for producing crime must be analysed, understood and overcome.

“Better prisons” is based on the opposite conception. It not only implicitly accepts high imprisonment rates, it seeks to open up the opportunity this creates for commercial exploitation. The NSW government aims to add more than 1,200 beds to the prison system by the end of 2017. That goal is not just repressive, it amounts to the priming of lucrative assets prior to sale.



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