

Children systematically abused in Australian juvenile prison

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An Australian Broadcasting Corporation “Four Corners” program on Monday night broadcast footage and interviews exposing some of the brutal and violent methods against boys, some as young as 10, held in juvenile detention centres in the Northern Territory (NT). The sickening abuses inside the Don Dale facility, south of Darwin, committed mostly against indigenous children, can only be described as torture.

In an attempt to head off widespread public outrage over the revelations, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull yesterday announced a royal commission of inquiry, designed to bury the exposures as much as possible and cover up the political responsibility for them.

The abuses did not begin under the current Country-Liberal Party government in the NT. They date back at least to 2010, during the period that the Labor Party held office in the territory from 2001 to 2012.

The “Four Corners” catalogue of evidence includes CCTV vision and video recordings made by guards showing repeated assaults on boys being kept illegally in solitary confinement for up to 17 days at a time—far beyond the legal limit of 72 hours—in hot, tiny and filthy cells without access to running water and little natural light.

One recording shows a boy, just 14, being pinned face down on the floor and stripped naked by three guards, leaving him visibly distraught and traumatised. The supposed reason for this assault, in October 2011, was that the child had threatened self-harm.

In another video taken in 2015 the same boy, Dylan Voller, then 17, is seen strapped, hand and foot, in a “mechanical restraint chair” with a cloth bag over his head, where he is left for two hours after allegedly threatening self-harm.

Commentators have justifiably described the footage as akin to the images of hooding and torture that

emerged from the US-run Abu Ghraib facility in Iraq. After seeing the video, a former guard has revealed that the device was used on Voller several times.

CCTV footage showed the tear-gassing of six boys inside the Don Dale centre’s so-called Behavioural Management Unit (BMU) in August 2014. One of the boys, Jake Roper, 17, had left his cell and smashed fittings in a frustrated protest against his prolonged solitary confinement.

Prison officers, accompanied by a savage dog, rushed in from a nearby adult prison to spray 10 bursts of tear gas at the boys, who were seen desperately attempting to escape the fumes by climbing beneath bed sheets in their locked cells, while gasping for air and crying out. Then the boys were hogtied, dragged out and hosed.

It is clear that such mistreatment was approved at the highest levels of government. The then NT Corrections Commissioner Ken Middlebrook, who was present during the 2014 incident, authorised the use of tear gas. He issued a media statement falsely claiming it was necessary to subdue a riot by six detainees who had broken out of their cells and armed themselves with broken glass and light fittings.

NT Corrections Minister John Elferink applauded the action, declaring: “I again congratulate and place my support behind, the staff who made this decision.”

After “Four Corners” went to air, Turnbull joined NT Chief Minister Adam Giles in a damage-control operation. Giles yesterday sacked Elferink as corrections minister, while leaving him as the territory’s attorney-general and children’s protection minister. Giles claimed not to have known of the evidence of abuse.

Such claims do not hold water. A report on the 2014 incident by the former NT Children’s Commissioner Dr Howard Bath was presented to the NT government

in September 2015. The report rejected the official claim of a riot at the facility and confirmed that boys had been tear-gassed. Bath's report was accurately reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* last year and received coverage in other media.

Bath's report also made clear that the horrific conditions at the centre had long been known. Bath noted that in August 2012, information came to light that staff were using restraints, but nothing was done to prevent further abuses. The government dismissed Bath's report as inaccurate, "shallow" and "one-sided."

Even as Giles tried to cover his government's tracks, describing the "Four Corners" footage as "horrific," he provided a glimpse of the underlying "law and order" regime and culture that is driving such conditions, not just in the NT but nationally.

Giles, who is an indigenous politician, sought to justify the barbaric treatment by claiming that people in NT were "sick of youth crime" and "the majority of the (NT) community is saying let's lock these kids up." He added: "The Northern Territory government does not resile from its tough approach to those who don't want to respect other people's property or safety."

The reality is that these boys are being punished for petty crimes, such as car thefts and breaking and entering, that have their roots in worsening poverty and disadvantage, and not just in indigenous communities. Despite years of lip service, initiated by the last federal Labor government, to "closing the gap" between indigenous and non-indigenous health, education, housing and social conditions, Aboriginal people remain among the most oppressed layers of the working class.

Over the past decade, the NT's rates of incarceration of Aboriginal people have increased sharply. Almost 90 percent of adult inmates are indigenous, up from 69 percent in 1991. Between 2002 and 2012, the rate of imprisonment of Aboriginal women rose by 72 percent.

While indigenous people are being particularly victimised, however, similar police and state violence is increasingly being deployed against working class people more generally. Governments, both federal and state, have conducted relentless "law and order" campaigns for decades as social conditions have deteriorated as a result of the austerity and pro-market measures demanded by the financial and corporate

elite.

The shock expressed by Turnbull and federal Labor leader Bill Shorten over the "Four Corners" exposure is doubly hypocritical because Coalition and Labor governments alike have enforced the equally brutal detention and abuse of refugees, including vulnerable young children. Both parties also oversaw the NT Intervention, a repressive operation from 2007 onward that imposed police-military and bureaucratic control over indigenous communities.

Turnbull claimed that a joint federal-territory royal commission "will get to the bottom of this swiftly and we will identify the lessons that need to be learnt." Such inquiries are a long-standing means of defusing contentious issues, whitewashing the political responsibility and strengthening the powers of the state apparatus itself.

Such was the outcome of the Hawke Labor government's 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which resulted in no prosecutions and handed down 330 recommendations that only served to ensure that the killings of indigenous people continued with impunity.



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