

Australia: Testimony details abuse in youth detention centres

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Testimony last week at royal commission hearings in Darwin has shed further light on the systemic abuse of vulnerable children in Australian youth detention centres.

Under successive Labor and Country Liberal Party governments in the Northern Territory (NT), children in detention, many of Aboriginal descent, have been subjected to treatment branded as “cruel,” “inhuman” and “degrading” by the United Nations.

The royal commission was called as part of a damage control response by the federal Liberal-National government of Malcolm Turnbull to widespread outrage over footage broadcast by an ABC “Four Corners” program in July of boys being assaulted and tear-gassed by detention guards.

The program documented the illegally prolonged detention of children in isolation, repeated instances of guards assaulting inmates, including stripping them naked and pinning them to the ground, and footage of Dylan Voller, then 17, strapped in a “mechanical restraint chair” with his head covered by a “spit hood,” reminiscent of images from the US military prison at Abu Ghraib in Iraq.

On Monday, Voller, now 19, testified at the commission. The week before his testimony, Voller’s mother said he feared retribution from guards at the Darwin adult prison, where he is currently incarcerated.

On December 8, the NT’s Labor government sought to prevent Voller and 13 other witnesses from giving evidence, warning that the testimony could “have potentially damaging consequences for the reputations of individuals or for the NT government.” The unsuccessful move underscored the nervousness of the entire political establishment over the revelations of abuse.

In his testimony, Voller detailed years of abuse

suffered since he was first incarcerated at the age of 11 in the regional centre of Alice Springs. Among the punishments meted out to Voller and other child detainees were deprivation of food and water, the removal of bedding and clothes and prolonged isolation as forms of punishment. Voller’s testimony included the following allegations:

* From the age of 11 or 12, he was routinely strip-searched by guards at the Alice Springs youth detention centre. Voller was not told why he was being searched, and said he did not understand what was taking place. In later years, at the Don Dale detention centre, south of Darwin, he was strip-searched whenever he went to the toilet or left his cell.

* Cells at the Alice Springs facility did not have toilets or water. Voller and other inmates would have to press a button to ask for water, and would sometimes be left waiting for hours.

* Children at the Alice Springs facility were sometimes denied access to toilets as punishment. On one occasion, Voller said: “I had been asking for at least four or five hours and they just been saying no. And I ended up having to defecate into a pillow case, because they wouldn’t let me out to go to the toilet.”

* Don Dale centre guards charged inmates daily rent, deducting payments from their small allowances. Voller and other inmates were also denied meals and water as punishment for swearing and other minor misbehaviour.

* At Don Dale, Voller and other inmates were repeatedly held in isolation, had their mattresses and all their clothes taken, and were left naked in bare concrete cells, sometimes for an entire night.

* Voller was subjected to sensory abuse. In one instance, he was left in a cell without any clothes with cold air conditions. On other occasions, guards

switched on a bright light and left it on for the entire night, preventing any sleep.

Voller also commented on an incident in August 2014, when officers from a nearby adult prison stormed the “Behaviour Modification Unit” of the Don Dale facility, armed with shields, gas masks, tear gas and batons after a minor disturbance. The officers indiscriminately released capsicum-spray in the small and enclosed area. Voller said: “I thought I was going to die. My heart was racing because of the tear gas. My eyes were burning.”

Voller spoke of being tied up in the “mechanical restraint chair” on three occasions. The chair had arm and leg straps, completely immobilising him. He also had a “spit hood”—a cloth bag—placed over his head. Voller was left in the chair for hours on end. He commented: “I was defenceless at that time. Felt like there was nothing I could do, and I was telling them the whole time that it was hurting. I even ended up getting sick and vomiting in my mouth a couple of times. They didn’t care.”

On Tuesday, Antoinette Carroll, a Central Australian Legal Aid Service youth justice advocacy project coordinator who has worked with Voller since he was 11, gave evidence. She noted that as a young child, he had first been sentenced to 18 months in detention for minor offences.

Carroll said Voller had been “set up to fail” by the “youth justice system,” noting that his formal education ended at the age of 10. She stated: “It just became very evident from the get-go that there would be a punitive approach taken to Dylan as he travelled through the system.”

Russell Goldflam, a NT Legal Aid Commission lawyer, pointed to the culpability of the political establishment in his testimony on Wednesday. He quoted former NT Attorney-General John Elferink who denounced Don Dale inmates as “the worst of the worst” and declared that the government would “crack down on them.” Goldflam said the law and order rhetoric of the government “created a political space that made it more likely that children could be assaulted in detention.”

The Northern Territory has been a testing ground for punitive measures, including mandatory sentencing for minor offences, for the past 30 years. Aboriginal people, who comprise the most oppressed section of the

working class, have been severely affected. In the NT, close to 90 percent of adult inmates are indigenous, up from 69 percent in 1991. The rate of imprisonment of Aboriginal women rose by 72 percent from 2002 to 2012.

The conditions confronting Aboriginal communities in the NT have been likened to third-world countries by Amnesty International and other charity organisations. Basic necessities such as running water and medical care are often lacking. Unemployment and poverty are endemic.

However, the practices revealed in the NT are not isolated, nor are they confined to indigenous prisoners. For years, reports have documented lashings, isolations, “lockdowns” and deaths in jails and juvenile prisons across the country. The abuses in the NT reveal the increasingly brutal methods being used more broadly against working-class youth, who confront high levels of unemployment and under-employment, insecure work, prohibitive housing costs and crippling tuition fees and debts.

Labor Party politicians have adopted a false posture of moral outrage in response to the abuses revealed in the NT. In reality, Labor was in office from 2001 to 2012 when many of the abuses occurred.

Labor governments in other states are no less culpable. In Victoria, the Labor government recently moved 40 children accused of “rioting” in a youth detention facility to an adult jail. In Queensland, media reports have exposed efforts by the Labor government to cover up abuses of boys in both juvenile and adult prisons, including assaults, solitary confinement and use of “spit hoods.”



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