willing to fund the state as in the boom days of capitalism. The veil between the state and corporate capital is therefore being lifted, as in the case of private prisons, revealing their dynamic interdependence and a shift in their configuration. Faced with an increase in the fear of crime, largely because of a crumbling socio-political world order, private prisons become very profitable avenues for market-hungry capital.

A gloomy future in Australia

The Commonwealth Government has begun to implement sweeping cutbacks in public spending. In the context of continuing and deepening cutbacks combined with a deteriorating domestic and world economy, the drive towards prison construction programs. Drastic changes to the industrial relations system will also intensify staff discontent, which will negatively affect inmates. The privatisation campaign, of which the drive for private prisons is emerging as a key player, has already enabled the state to curtail the power of the unions with the view to diminishing labour unrest.

But private prisons must also be opposed because they are a diversion from alternatives to imprisonment. As Hester cogently argues, public money:

would be better spent on programs which effectively rehabilitate offenders, on compensation and assistance for victims, and on addressing the social problems such as unemployment and poverty which lie at the heart of crime.21

If anything can be learned from this tragic experience, it is that private prisons are not an appropriate alternative to the public prison crisis. The privileging of profits before human needs must be stopped.

References

13. Moyle, above, ref. 7.
15. Gow, above.
16. Chan, Janet, above.
19. Chan, Sebastian, above.
21. Chan, Janet, above. See also Collins, Brett and Curry, Rachel, ‘The jails are the crime’, Framed, No. 32, Summer 1996.
22. Hester, above.

‘Tell Someone Who Cares’

Excerpts from the nightly talk by AMANDA GEORGE at Somebody’s Daughter Theatre’s production to celebrate the women of Fairlea (28-31 August 1996).

In August 1996 the Victorian Government closed Fairlea Women’s Prison, which was opened in 1956, the first women-only prison in Australia. In its place they opened the first private prison for women in Australia, at Deer Park. Eventually the Government plans to have 80% of female and 40% of male prisoners in Victoria in prisons for profit (compare this with only 2% of prisoners in the USA in private prisons).

Prisons for profit

Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), the parent company of Corrections Corporation Australia, which runs our new private women’s prison, is the largest private prison corporation in the world.

In 1995 the number of cell beds that CCA profit from increased from 15,000 to 30,000. On the New York stock exchange that year they had the fourth highest gain, their shares increasing from $16 to $68.1 An article published in the Bulletin (3 September 1996) reveals that CCA and Wackenhut (which has been awarded the contract to run the Sale 600-bed men’s private prison) have reaped profits of more than $10 million from Australia in the last two years.

With CCA making such profits why have they been saying they can’t afford to pay community groups to run programs in the prison? Perhaps this is why they are revenue raising from the women we pay them to imprison. The women have been told they will be fined $50 for swearing.

Only Tasmania spends less per capita on people in prison than Victoria. Each of us contributes less than $2 a year to women prisoners.2 The Government has been reported in the Herald Sun (13 April 1996) as saying that at most, private prisons will save 20 cents a prisoner.

Security and surveillance

In 1987 the Victorian Department of Corrective Services dismantled parts of the new Jika Jika high security unit in Pentridge Prison, after a fire in the unit (acknowledged by the department as ‘the electronic zoo’). The Department’s Annual Report for 1987-88 said they removed ‘...oppressive features such as ... electronic surveillance, pneumatic doors’ (p.9).
Yet these same features are in the new women's prison. The prison is surrounded by razor wire. The cells, gym complex, pool and prison 'town square' are all constantly monitored by cameras. The perimeter fence is topped with cameras that can see anywhere in the prison grounds and there is a camera tower in the visitor's car park. (Fairlea prison had no cameras at all, inside cells or monitoring the grounds. It had no razor wire.)

Tear gas has never been used on women in Victorian prisons. Yet CCA have been given authority by the Government to use tear gas at Deer Park. Victorian prisoners are fortunate, however, that the centrally controlled ducted tear gas systems used in US prisons have not been imported here — yet.

Public scrutiny

At the prison's 'public open day' before women prisoners were moved there, I was refused entry to the prison because I was identified from a photo as having handed out leaflets at a previous peaceful protest outside the prison — they were private prison information leaflets and flyers for this play. I identified myself and asked that my name and their refusal be passed on to the general manager. Twenty minutes later I was told I could go in.

For 16 years I have gone into prisons as a lawyer and, with many others, I have been a critic of prisons. During that time, I have organised and spoken to rallies of thousands outside Fairlea and handed out thousands of leaflets at prison gates, but never once have I been refused entry to a state-run prison.

Two years ago I received a letter from CCA's lawyers claiming I 'seriously defamed' them, because in a letter to the editor of the Age, I said that CCA used leg shackles in its US prisons — it does — and that exemptions from freedom of information law because of 'commercial confidentiality' created accountability and information problems. Although I have often made loud and harsh criticisms of the state-run prison system, I have never received a letter from the Government asking me to apologise publicly for the 'harm I have made'.

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Government dishonesty

The Government's media release (15 August 1996) issued for the opening of the new prison stated that Fairlea was 'anti-quated and overcrowded'. This can be disputed on two grounds. First, the Department's own statistics show Fairlea was not full to its capacity. Secondly, in 1986, just 10 years ago, it was completely rebuilt except for two cottages, after a fire. The Government media release said then that Fairlea was the 'most modern prison for women in Australia' (4 July 1986). Since then a new high security unit and a new 10-bed cottage have been built. Ten years old equals antiquity?

Children's visits

On the first day that the Fairlea women were all in the new prison, all 84 of them signed a petition about children's visits. At Fairlea, children came in for all day Saturday visits and had the run of the prison. At the new prison the women have been told that because of the electronic fencing, children would set off alarms. This is despite a specific promise by CCA that children would be able to have all day visits. [Update: They now do have these visits.]

Of even greater concern, it has transpired that despite the fact that for 16 years women at Fairlea got all day visits with their children, and that for six years the Government's policy documents on women prisoners have stressed the importance of women's continuing relationship with their children outside, the Government did not require in the prison contract that the company provide any more than the one-hour visit required by law. It is a matter up to the absolute discretion of the company, and so permits them to deny children's visits as a punishment.

It is difficult enough as it is for visitors as there is no public transport to the new prison, which is 26 kilometres from the city.

The Corrective Services Commissioner, John Van Groningen, a graduate of the Californian prison system, was asked on ABC TV (Stateline, 16 August 1996) whether there will be more strip-searching in pursuit of the drug free prison (given that 13,752 were done in the two years at Fairlea with an average population of 100 women). His reply was, 'We will do whatever we need to do, if it means more strip searches, tighter control of visits, checking children more carefully'.

Mr Van Groningen went on to speak of drugs coming into prison in women's body cavities and children's nappies. I spoke with a woman today in prison who has been there for 10 of the last 12 years. She said that to her knowledge drugs have come in with children three times in that time. She said that overwhelmingly women found on using children like this. Essendon Community Legal Centre's freedom of information request in February 1996 revealed that out of two random months of strip searches at Fairlea women's prison, no contraband was found in one month and two items were found in the other month — cigarettes.

Rehabilitation

Prisons say they aim to rehabilitate. Rehabilitation is from the French word to re-clothe and that is about all the rehabilitation there is. You get a uniform to wear that someone else has incarcerated in.

State prisons don't rehabilitate, neither will private ones. Prison is not the solution to crime. Punishing poverty doesn't take it away. Prison doesn't stop violence or alienation, it breeds it. It may give you a roof for a while but it compounds your homelessness.

There are 125 women in prison in Victoria; 80% are drug users. It is precisely because there are so few women in Victorian prisons that we can make a difference by providing a variety of services and support in the community. There is no gender specific residential drug rehabilitation for women with children outside. Why not? It's cheaper than prison.

Somebody's Daughter Theatre is a theatre company of women prisoners and ex-prisoners from Fairlea. It started from drama workshops run at the prison. The company has had a number of successful seasons at the CUB Malthouse. Their next production, 'The Cosmic Laundromat', will be at the CUB Malthouse, Melbourne in April 1997.

References

1. All CCA financial information is from Security APL Quotesser 21 February 1996 incorporating PR Newswire's Company News.
2. Report on General Revenue Grant Relativities, Update, Commonwealth Grants Commission, AGPS, 1996; from table V-44 calculated using women as 6% of people in Victorian prisons.
3. Victorian Government Gazette 1 August 1996

Amanda George is a volunteer at Essendon Community Legal Centre and a member of the Women and Imprisonment Group.