



Message to “Discovering Balance” Conference, Perth October 2, 2008.

Justice Action attended the prison abolition conference “Critical Resistance” CR10 in San Francisco last weekend presenting a workshop and talking with key organisers. We also were in London in July for the International Conference on Penal Abolition ICOPA X11, and facilitated its final report.

Last week we achieved a landmark success forcing the NSW government to transfer the prison hospital from Corrective Services to Health, following a six month campaign involving the patients, nurses, psychiatrists, mental health and community organisations Australia-wide. It meant gaining hospital conditions including late lock-in for the patients.

Here we share the lessons we learnt from those experiences.

Prisoners themselves should be central to our effort. Prisoners must be listened to and trusted as good people, but under immense stress without their normal supports. This acknowledges their humanity and gives us grounded strength, with their faces seen and voices heard, along with their communities outside. We are twenty-five thousand plus, strong. This means that access and interaction, the vote, visits and all communication should be defended. The latest prisoners newspaper JUST US was distributed in five states and territories, rejected in three. The NSW Supreme Court said any proposed rejection must be justified by the administration.

Recidivism can only be reduced if prisoners are involved, agree and participate with support from their own communities.

Tackle difficult cases head on. These capture media attention. The fear generated justifies laws like the indefinite detention of people charged with child sex offences, and this affects other sentencing. We should believe that the people accused are not “others.” The recent example of Dennis Ferguson in Queensland is useful. The government admitted that it couldn’t pacify the public fear that was generated by his exclusion and the media exposure of his re-entry. We entered the furore offering refuge and claiming him as a member of our community. We got a resolution supporting him from the international

conference ICOPA X11 and now he has secure housing and mentoring support from Queensland groups and with JA in constant contact. Sixty percent of a 7,000 people poll said that his whereabouts should not be exposed in future.

Therapeutic communities with restorative justice and mentoring are effective solutions to community problems. Our own experience of positive responses to trust and sharing are entirely applicable in the area of crime. The Alexander Maconochie's Norfolk Island experience, Jimmy Boyle's story of the Barlinnie Unit in Scotland, and the Special Care Unit in Long Bay are documented examples of how they work effectively.

Link with allies in mainstream services. The health and education communities are strong and will defend their principles. Our win in the Long Bay Prison Hospital was a win for them as well as us.

Abolition of prisons is achievable. Slavery is the prison precursor. The old penal colony of Australia has a special role in civil reconciliation. The goodness of our people in the dungeons, the damage done, the human rights breached, the unreasonable fear generated by the exclusion, the outrageous cost and the documented failure of prisons to create public safety, all ensure our eventual success.