



The Government is misleading the public about the supposed benefits of privatising prisons, says **Richard Wagstaff**.

Public misinformation about private prisons

IT'S time Corrections Minister Judith Collins stopped misleading the public about the benefits of privately managed prisons.

In her determination to privatise, the minister is making false claims about innovations introduced by the Australian company contracted by a National government to run the Auckland remand prison from 2000 to 2005.

Ms Collins claimed in this newspaper (March 26) that Australasian Correctional Management was so successful "that Corrections adopted many of the best ideas and practices of the private company". This is simply not true. Innovations the minister claims were introduced by ACM were actually established by the Corrections Department.

DOG HANDLERS IN PRISONS

Drug dog teams in prisons were introduced by Corrections, not ACM as she claims.

In 2000, the year ACM began running the Auckland remand prison, Corrections already had five drug dog teams in prisons. It now has 12. The department is looking at using dogs to control violent prisoners, as police do. This is seen as an alternative to arming prison officers with defensive weapons such as Tasers.

CRIME PREVENTION POSITIONS

These were established by Corrections, not ACM as the minister claims.

In September 2000, Corrections Minister Matt Robson highlighted work being done by the department's "crime prevention officers" to detect drugs and other contraband being smuggled into prisons. He noted that they were working closely with the department's drug dog teams.

HIGH-RISK ASSESSMENT TEAMS

Corrections was assessing the risk prisoners posed to each other, prison officers and themselves, well before ACM's contract. Programmes to manage prisoners at risk of self-harm were adopted after suicide prevention reviews in 1995 and 1996. This has proved successful, with suicides almost halving from

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0.11 per 100 prisoners in 1997-98 to 0.06 in the 2006-07 financial year.

PRISONS IN FORMAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH MAORI AND PACIFIC PEOPLES

Corrections opened its first Maori focus unit at Hawke's Bay Prison in 1997, three years before ACM began its contract.

Five prisons now have Maori focus units housing up to 60 prisoners, all of which work closely with Maori from the local community.

The Maori focus unit at Rimutaka Prison has a local kaumatua working fulltime in the unit. Ngawha Prison, near Kaikohe, has a close working relationship with Ngati Rangi, the kaitiaki for the site, and has contracts with the iwi to deliver educational and spiritual programmes.

Maori Party co-leader Pita Sharples acknowledged that the Maori focus units were working well when he visited the Rimutaka unit last month.

Corrections has a 44-bed Pacific focus unit at Spring Hill prison in Waikato which brings in people from Pasifika communities to work with inmates. The department also has a faith-based unit at Rimutaka Prison which has a programme based on Christian values.

All these initiatives have been established at public prisons run by Corrections. They did not come from the private company that ran Auckland's remand prison, as Ms Collins claims.

The existence of Maori focus units in our public prisons puts the lie to the claim by the minister and the Maori Party that we need to privatise prison management to enable Maori to work with prisons to rehabilitate prisoners.

THE GOVERNMENT continues to make false claims about benefits of privatised prisons despite evidence that they cost more and provide a worse service.

Corrections figures show that ACM cost taxpayers \$43,000 per inmate, when the company ran the Auckland remand prison, while Corrections operating costs per remand prisoner were \$36,000.

The company also refused to admit prisoners after 6.30pm when its 12-hour



day-shift ended. This lack of flexibility ended when Corrections resumed management of the prison. Now prisoners are admitted after 6.30pm, to accommodate those arriving late from courts or from another prison.

Refusing to admit prisoners at night shows how privatised prisons seek to drive down their costs, at the expense of the service they provide. Why? Because, unlike public prisons, they have to make a profit.

A company called Wackenhut was stripped of contracts to run prisons in Texas and Louisiana in 1999. It was fined for mistreating prisoners and accused of seeking to maximise profits at the expense of drug rehabilitation, counselling and literacy programmes.

The United States Bureau of Justice Assistance has found that cost savings promised by private prisons "have simply not materialised".

Last year, 10 of Britain's 11 private prisons ranked in the bottom quarter of a league table of 132 prisons. The privately managed prisons scored badly on security and maintaining order and control. Now the Prison Governors Association is urg-

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ing the British Government to rethink its policy of allowing private companies to run prisons.

In the US, concerned citizens have formed the National Public Service Council To Abolish Private Prisons.

Here the Government continues to ignore the evidence as it pushes blindly ahead with its privatisation agenda.

■ Richard Wagstaff is national secretary of the Public Service Association.



Captive clientele: A contractor cost \$43,000 per inmate, compared with Corrections' \$36,000.