

The government is misleading the public about the benefits of privatising prisons says PSA National Secretary Richard Wagstaff.

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

In her determination to privatise prison management 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.

Judith Collins claimed in this newspaper last week (March 26) that Australasian Correctional Management (ACM) 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. Let's go through her list.

Dog handlers in prisons.

Drug dog teams in prisons were introduced by Corrections not by ACM as the Minister claims.

In 2000, the year ACM began running the Auckland remand prison, Corrections already had five drug dog teams operating in our prisons. It now has 12.

The department is continuing to innovate. It is now looking at expanding the use of dogs in prisons by using them to control violent prisoners, in a similar fashion to the police. This is seen as an alternative to arming prison officers with defensive weapons such as tazers.

Crime prevention positions.

These positions were established by Corrections not ACM as the Minister claims.

In September 2000, Corrections Minister Matt Robson highlighted the 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 pose to other inmates, to prison officers and to themselves, well before ACM began running the Auckland remand prison.

Corrections programmes to manage prisoners at risk of self-harm were adopted following reviews in 1995 and 1996 on suicide prevention in prisons. This work has proved successful with prison suicides almost halving from 0.11 per 100 prisoners in 1997/98 to 0.06 in the 2006/07 financial year.

Prisons having formal relationships with Maori and Pacific peoples.

Corrections opened its first Maori Focus Unit at Hawkes 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 full time in the unit. Nga Wha Prison, near Kaikohe, has a close working relationship with Ngati Rangī, the kaitiaki for the site and has contracts with the iwi to deliver educational and spiritual programmes.

Maori Party leader Pita Sharples acknowledged that the Maori Focus Units are working well when he visited the Rimutaka unit this month. (March 16).

Corrections has a 44-bed Pacific Focus Unit at Spring Hill prison in Waikato which brings in people from Pasifika communities to work with its Pasifika 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 Judith 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 Maori prisoners.

Yet the government continues to make false claims about the 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 that arrive late from courts or after being transported 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 programs.

The U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance has found that cost-savings promised by private prisons "have simply not materialized."

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

Now the Prison Governors Association is urging the British government to re-think its policy of allowing private companies to run prisons. In the United States concerned citizens have formed the National Public Service Council To Abolish Private Prisons.

Here the government continues to ignore the evidence that private prisons cost more and provide a worse service as it pushes blindly ahead with its privatisation agenda.

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