



# Taxpayers will pay more for less from private prisons

By **RICHARD WAGSTAFF**

**I**N ITS determination to privatise the management of prisons the Government is turning a blind eye to evidence that shows publicly-run prisons cost taxpayers less and perform better.

It even seems prepared to mislead the public in its efforts to convince them that private is better when it comes to running prisons.

This appeared to be the case last week when Corrections Minister Judith Collins announced that the law will be changed to allow private companies to tender for contracts to manage prisons.

The Minister was reported as saying it cost \$42,000 per inmate to run the Auckland Remand Prison, when it was run by an Australian based company, compared with the average cost of \$52,000 per inmate in a Corrections Department prison.

What the Minister didn't say is that it's cheaper to manage remand prisoners who are held for shorter periods awaiting trial, than sentenced inmates who are locked up for longer and are involved in full rehabilitation programmes.

The Minister was not comparing apples with apples. Why? Because the company, a previous National government

contracted to run Auckland Remand Prison from 2000 to 2005, cost taxpayers more than if the Corrections Department had continued to manage it.

Figures from Corrections show the private company cost \$43,000 per inmate while Corrections operating costs per remand prisoner were \$36,000.

The Government also doesn't mention that despite costing more the company provided a reduced service, by refusing to admit prisoners after 6.30pm when its day shift staff went home. Now Corrections are running the prison again, prisoners are admitted at night to accommodate those that arrive late from courts or after being transported from another prison.

The refusal to admit prisoners at night is an example of how privately run 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.

The fact private companies have the extra cost of needing to make a profit, is something the government seems determined to ignore as it pushes privatisation of prison management.

It also seems intent on turning its back on overseas evidence that private prisons perform

worse than public prisons.

In 1999 an American company called Wackenhut was stripped of contracts to run prisons in Texas and Louisiana. Wackenhut has appeared in federal courts 62 times since 1999.

As well as being fined for the mistreatment of prisoners the company has been accused of seeking to maximise profits at the expense of drug rehabilitation, counselling and literacy programmes.

The Government has not mentioned that the company contracted by a previous National government to run the Auckland Remand Prison, was a subsidiary of Wackenhut.

Nor does it refer to the problems Britain is having with



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its private prisons. Last year a Prison Service survey, leaked to the media, showed that privately-run prisons in the UK perform worse than public prisons. Ten 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.

Peterborough prison, which has been privately managed for three years, ranked the worst prison in England and Wales. It had a poor record for organisational effectiveness, decency and reducing re-offending.

The Prison Governors Association is now urging the British government to rethink its policy of allowing private companies to run prisons

Questions are also being asked about the performance of private prisons in the United States. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance has found that cost-savings promised by private prisons "have simply not materialised."

In September last year, figures release from the National Crime Prevention Council, showed inmates released from private prisons in America had higher reoffending rates (33 per cent) than those released from public prisons (30 per cent).

People in the US are also

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questioning the morality of companies making money out of denying people their liberty. They've formed the National Public Service Council To Abolish Private Prisons.

A petition has been launched calling on the US federal government to abolish private prisons because – "incarcerating people for profit is wrong. There are certain functions that are inherently public, and prisons are such a function."

The [PSA](#) and its members agree. We believe denying people their liberty should not be treated as just another way to make a buck.

It involves fundamental human rights and should remain a core public service.

The Government rejects that view. National's law and order policy says those who object to private prisons are being ideological – "rooted in the belief that only the state can deprive another citizen of its liberty."

But it's the Government that's being driven by ideology.

How else can it explain, that despite all the evidence showing public prisons perform better and cost taxpayers less, it continues to push for the privatisation of our prisons.

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