

Keep prisons public

PSA members working in Corrections have presented strong and well-informed arguments against the controversial bill to privatise prison management.

Their views form the basis of the PSA's submission on the Corrections (Contract Management of Prisons) Bill that is now before a parliamentary select committee. The bill will also allow prison assets and maintenance to be privatised.

A PSA survey shows that 80 per cent of members who work in the criminal justice system strongly oppose any form of prison privatisation. They understand better than anyone the risks it poses, both for themselves, for the prisoners they work with, and for public security.

But to governments grappling with a politically-charged portfolio, privatisation can seem like a godsend that takes away the problem of having to front up and be accountable to the public, with claims of cost savings to boot.

Prisons are, by their very nature, volatile and complex environments and difficult to run. But as much as prisons present challenges to the State, private contractors are not the answer.

Privatised industries are not as publicly accountable. The phrase "commercial sensitivity" can be all that's needed to keep information under wraps. Accountability matters. Not only is incarceration a core State responsibility, prisons have an impact on the local community, both as an employer and as custodians of public safety.

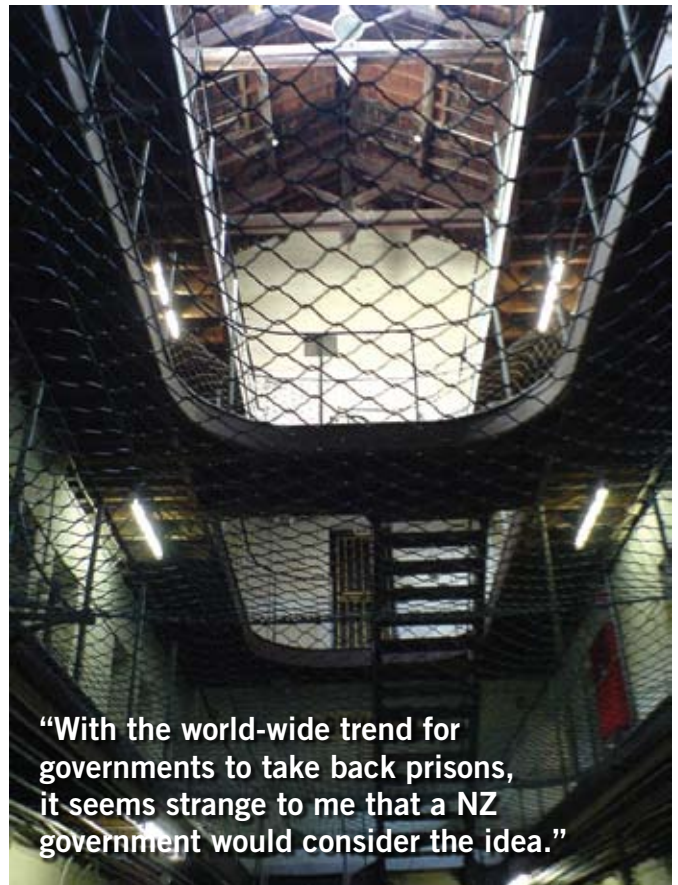
Any cost savings will carry a heavy price tag. Experience overseas shows savings are made employing fewer prison staff and with less training, paying lower wages, packing in more prisoners, and failing to provide rehabilitation programmes. The collateral damage further down the track incurs long-term costs for society.

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

Australia is changing its mind on prison privatisation. The New South Wales Government has just announced that it will revise plans to privatise two state prisons and that Cessnock jail, which was to be privatised, is to be retained under public management.

Public value is central to the PSA's thinking: citizens deserve and expect high quality public services that deliver value for the investment of public funds. Central to this is the contribution workers make through their motivation and commitment, their interaction with service users, and their ability to bring forward ideas that can improve and develop services.

But this can only be effective when it is not undercut by assumptions of reduced conditions of employment, job losses and cost-cutting.



"With the world-wide trend for governments to take back prisons, it seems strange to me that a NZ government would consider the idea."

What members say

"I have some experience and knowledge of the problems of privately run prisons within the UK. From my experience, private prisons in the UK suffer from poor morale, high staff turnover, less favourable terms and conditions of employment, corruption and inadequate security. . . Prisoners commonly spend too much time in their cells and don't have access to suitable and meaningful rehabilitative programmes."

"Friends who have worked in private prisons in Australia have stated to me that they are babysitters. Minimal training, overcrowding, low morale . . . There is no re-integration, just lock/unlock on a daily basis. Staff would [have to] become corrupt to survive in this environment. We are better than this."

"It should be the responsibility of the state to look after offenders. Neither the police nor the courts are privatised – where is the logic in privatising prisons?"

"There will be no room for rehabilitation. Criminals will learn to be harder and end up committing more serious crimes. This is the biggest fear."

"Privatisation leads to an ethos of 'let's make a profit' and you cannot make a profit from punishment unless you cut back on the rehabilitation aspect of a prison."

"I do not believe it is a responsible thing to do to put prisons back in the hands of private companies. There is too much negative research and evidence across the world to support private prisons."