

ABORIGINAL PRISON POPULATION

**495. Mr P. PAPALIA to the Minister for Corrective Services:**

I refer to the fact there were 1 590 Aboriginal adults in state prisons on 1 December 2008, which was some months after the Barnett government took office. Yesterday, on the day the Constitution Amendment (Recognition of Aboriginal People) Bill 2015 was second read, there were 2 214 Aboriginal adults in prison.

- (1) How does the minister explain the growth by 39 per cent of Aboriginal adults in Western Australian prisons under his government when the state's total population grew by only 18 per cent in that time?
- (2) How does the minister explain that during the royal commission into deaths in custody in the 1990s, Aboriginal people represented 30 per cent of the state adult prison muster, but yesterday they made up 40 per cent?

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS replied:**

(1)–(2) I thank the member for Warnbro for that question. I am happy to stand here all day and talk about the number of people in prisons in Western Australia. Unfortunately, as to why they are there, the member for Warnbro has directed the question to the wrong minister. He should have directed that question to the Attorney General in the upper house, because he is responsible for government policy on determining who goes to prison.

The growth rate of the prison system population in Western Australia for the last five years is slightly above the state population growth rate, and, of course, that is concerning.

**Mr P. Papalia:** It has doubled!

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** I will talk about the general population first. Just cool your jets, sonny Jim! The population has increased. A general observation of the state prison population is that if the state population continues to grow, regardless of the push and pull factors involved and demographics, the prison population will also continue to grow. The government is committed to try to reduce the rate of Aboriginal incarceration in Western Australia, because at 39 per cent or 40 per cent, with 5 536 Aboriginal people in prison today, Aboriginal people are grossly over-represented. The reason that anyone goes to jail—in this circumstance, Aboriginal people—is that they have committed offences that warrant their incarceration. That is the cold hard truth of the matter.

**Mr J.R. Quigley:** What about the late Ms Dhu?

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Butler, I call you to order for the first time.

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** I will say to the member for Butler's interjection that the late Ms Dhu was not in the custody of the Department of Corrective Services, and I think the member might best serve his time waiting to see what the State Coroner's report concludes on that sad situation.

We have made a lot of inroads, but these people have committed offences. I pointed out on Tuesday that members of the Labor Party go on about what they refer to as the overpopulation of the prison system and state that too many people are incarcerated for fine defaults and minor offences. I do not know the categories of offences Labor members think people are in jail for that they should not be in jail for, but I challenge them to come out with that answer if it is to let out fine defaulters.

**Ms R. Saffioti:** We have.

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** They have not. On any given day, less than 0.4 per cent of the prison population—on average less than 10 people—is in jail for fine default alone. If members opposite do not think that fine defaulters should be incarcerated, people who absolutely refuse to cooperate with the judiciary and the legal system to repay their debts from fines, which they can get for many things other than parking tickets, including some very serious offences, I encourage them to get out and say that. It would undermine the entire justice system in Western Australia if people who refuse to pay fines were not incarcerated.

**Mr J.R. Quigley** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Butler, I call you to order for the second time. I asked you to stop screaming out.

**Mr J.M. FRANCIS:** As I said yesterday, we are very proud of our record on juveniles. We have managed to have almost record low numbers of juveniles in detention for decades. Today, the muster at Banksia Hill Detention Centre was 143 juveniles, which is a new low for who knows how long? That is compared with what it was under the Labor government and over the last two decades. Of the 143 juveniles at Banksia Hill, just over 80 per cent are Aboriginal boys—I think one girl is there at the moment. Of 143 juveniles in detention, there are

three females and 140 males. We have come a long way to address the rate of Aboriginal incarceration. We started with the juvenile population and we are having some great results that we are very proud of.