

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE  
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**“MAKING OUR PRISONS WORK”: AN INQUIRY INTO THE EFFICIENCY  
AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PRISONER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND  
EMPLOYMENT STRATEGIES**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN  
AT PERTH  
WEDNESDAY, 19 MAY 2010**

**SESSION TWO**

**Members**

**Ms A.J.G. MacTiernan (Chairman)**

**Mr A.P. Jacob (Deputy Chairman)**

**Mr I.M. Britza**

**Mr A.P. O’Gorman**

**Mr T.G. Stephens**

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**Hearing commenced at 11.08 am****BARON-ST JOHN, MS HELEN MARY**

**Employed on Contract to Review Offender Employment in WA at Department of Corrective Services, examined:**

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you very much for coming along today. Helen, have you participated in committee proceedings before?

**Ms Baron-St John:** No, I have not.

**The CHAIRMAN:** The committee hearing is a proceeding of Parliament and warrants the same respect that proceedings in the house itself demand. Even though you are not required to give evidence on oath, any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. Have you completed the “Details of Witness” form?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes, I have.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You obviously understand the notes at the bottom of the form?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Do you have any questions that you would like to ask?

**Ms Baron-St John:** No, I have not at this stage.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Thank you. Helen, we understand that you were commissioned to review the management of prison industries. Can you tell us when that was? What is your background that led to you being selected to do that?

**Ms Baron-St John:** It was in July 2009 and it was actually a review of offender employment, which covers a range of issues relating to employment, training and so on. I had been employed by the Department of Corrective Services since September 2007 in a variety of different roles, always on contract—one contract following another, open to expressions of interest and so on. The most recent of those was this review of offender employment and the contract for that was completed at the end of March this year. So I conducted the review and wrote the report myself, but there was also a business users group and a business owners group that worked with me to provide input, advice, guidance and their views. Also, the deputy commissioner of adult custodial, Mr Ian Giles, was the project owner, so it was taken forward as a project within the department.

My background is state public service. I have worked in TAFE quite a lot as a counsellor, as a manager, as a director of a college. That college happened to be the Balga then college, which was all about trades and training and construction and that kind of thing, so it was an interesting background because I sort of had a bit of a jumpstart on what I was looking at. Having been in the department for effectively two years at the time that I started the review, I did not have a corrective services long-term service background, so I was not an ex-prison officer, community corrections person or someone like that and I felt that I had come to it with fairly fresh eyes. It was quite interesting to go into prisons and work camps and that sort of thing and have a really good look around. I was given carte blanche to go and talk to anyone, speak to anybody, ask any questions I wanted; it was very interesting.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What is your fundamental view of what you found and what needs to be done? I know that you have great deal of detail, but what would be the key strategic direction that you would take this outfit in?

**Ms Baron-St John:** There is a strategic direction document or a vision within the report. I should say that I am having to reconnect with this having sort of gone off to do other things since March. But just speaking from what I know and think about this whole thing, there is a degree of underemployment within the prisons, and by employment we are talking about employment, education, training, work camps, community work orders and that kind of thing. It seems to me that there are a lot of people doing a lot of fantastic work under fairly difficult circumstances. I know you are aware of the rising muster and the overcrowding and those sorts of things. There are difficulties in providing appropriate employment for everybody. There are difficulties in getting staff on the ground to actually do the work—for example, the vocational support officers. It is difficult to get good tradespeople to go to outer metropolitan areas and places in the country. It is difficult to get good work camp officers. The range of industries has just sort of grown. I think it is important that the department has a good look at what the industries currently are, where jobs will be in the future, the state training profile and try in some way to target more effectively and more accurately what will happen to offenders once they leave the prison environment—the custodial environment.

There are various aspects to offender employment which are really working very well and are very valuable. One is the self-sustainability, whereby the department provides not only food for the prison and the offenders, but also a whole range of other things like maintenance, construction, clothing—just a whole lot of different things that they do. The self-sustainability move is working very well and could be better. The corporate social responsibility aspect of what the department does is growing daily and is very well accepted by the community, but I think that it is very important that the department understand that most people in the community have absolutely no knowledge of these kinds of activities. The general public—with the notable exception of communities that are fortunate to have work camps in their areas and therefore the work camp offenders go out into the community and perform useful work and so on—has a view that offenders are offenders and should be locked up and we should throw away the key. That is obviously not the way we go; it is obviously not the way to treat people to reduce reoffending and to rehabilitate people. Any money that is spent in any way to assist in rehabilitation seems to be something that the community resents. So I think there needs to be a lot more awareness; there needs to be more education of the community as to what the department does, how it does it, and why it does it in terms of rehabilitating offenders. I think if the department were able to promote and educate about the sorts of things that it does and the achievements that it can record, then there would be greater understanding and greater support. I do not think there has been very much publicity about the amount of money that is saved by the activities that go on in industries in the work camps and so on and the amount of contribution to the community that the department makes through its offender programs.

How would I take it forward in other areas? I think I would look to be streamlining industries instead of having a whole raft of industries. I think the department needs to target industries that are flourishing and growing at the moment. I think there is a desperate need to pay more attention to the needs of Indigenous people. My personal view is that—I am not the only person who holds this view—there are such cultural differences that when we take Indigenous people, particularly from remote communities, into a custodial environment and require them to work, to undertake certain tasks, it absolutely has no meaning for them; there is no cultural connection. We then send them back to a remote community with some kind of skill that is going to be of absolutely no use to them whatsoever. That is not to say that something has not changed, and a lot of the vocational support staff will say to me, “Well, we’ve taught this person some work readiness, some skills about being employed and being in the workplace.” I think that is valuable but we should think more carefully about the environment to which people are going to return post-release and see if there is not something that we can do that will help them and will maybe help their communities. There is still a great big rift that we just have great difficulty addressing.

Maybe if I can just refer to some of the things that I have spoken about in the strategic plan—excuse me for a moment. I guess what I have just talked a bit about is our corporate reputation. I think that probably one of the ways to enhance that would be to have bodies that reach out to the community that involve the community more in what the department does. Forgive me if I say “we”; I am no longer employed by the department but I am still sort of emotionally attached, I suppose.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You said that you had business users and business owners groups, what sort of people were involved in those? What is the difference between the two?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Business users are basically the people who are on the ground, practically interacting and operationally performing within the department in relation to offender employment. The business owners are a more high level strategic group of directors, maybe deputy commissioners and so on depending —

**The CHAIRMAN:** This is not talking to “business” as is commonly understood.

**Ms Baron-St John:** Sorry; no, they are internal business branches and so on. I certainly did go out and talk to a lot of external stakeholders as well, but those two groups, the business owners and business users, were basically internal groups to assist, guide and provide information internally to feed into the project.

[11.20 am]

**The CHAIRMAN:** What was the nature of your discussions with the private sector?

**Ms Baron-St John:** You probably know that the department has arrangements with some industries. Generally speaking, they were quite positive because, I think, the private sector does quite well out of its relationships with the department. I had some concerns because some of the industries were, I think, trying to almost use the offender groups as some kind of very cheap labour. There was less of a partnership arrangement; it was just one way. For example, there is one industry, I think in cabinet making, that is continually trying to squeeze down the price to get more product for less, which I thought was not really in the spirit of what is trying to be achieved. Perhaps the department needs to be a bit careful about who it partners with and how it does these kinds of commercial arrangements. The difficulty is that within a prison, particularly with a high muster, there is a sense of necessity to get as many people as possible involved in meaningful work or activity, training or whatever. If that does not occur, then there is concern about safety and security within the prison. Because of that, I found that individual prisons would accept all kinds of work, to do all kinds of things, just so that offenders could be employed and occupied. The crux of the whole issue for me was the very fine line between keeping people occupied, producing and generating a little bit of income, meeting the needs of offenders—in terms of employment, education, training, skills enhancement and so on—and, also, looking at the future for each offender. If we teach this person to make socks on an out-of-date machine, how valuable is that going to be when he leaves this prison? Is there a sock-making industry out there for him to go to? Is there any value in what we are doing? Inside the prison there is because we give this person a degree of self-esteem, we give him some work-readiness skills—so that he understands that he has to turn up on time and has to be there all day and has to produce some goods—but when he leaves, there is nothing. All we can say is that he has some work-readiness skills. That is the area in which I think the department needs to be a bit more careful.

**The CHAIRMAN:** In researching this review, did you look at the different models that are in place in other jurisdictions?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes, I did.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Which ones impressed you? What did you look at?

**Ms Baron-St John:** I went to New South Wales and Victoria, and I also had a look at Canada, New Zealand and, briefly, at the UK. Victoria has a very client-centred approach in which they look at the prisoner and say, “What does this person need?” They work in teams to support every individual offender. New South Wales has a totally different approach, which is highly commercialised. I believe that they have a turnover—I prefer not to be quoted on this—of something like \$16 million. It is a big business. They actively compete for contracts; for example, all the curtains made for people’s homes that were bought from Spotlight were made in New South Wales by offenders in prisons. They are really very active and quite aggressive in their commercialisation. They are very, very successful. There is lots of literature and lots of colour promotional material. They have branded it “Corrective Services Industries”—CSI. Their staff wear a CSI flash if they are involved in the industries. They have big, big workshops. They do a whole range of things—even, for example, repairing electrical goods. If I take something back because it is faulty, it will go there, be repaired there, and be sent back. These are useful workplace skills. There is a massive textiles industry and a whole lot of things. It is very, very commercial.

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** Are there definite benefits to the offenders in that or are they being exploited as cheap labour?

**Ms Baron-St John:** It is a matter of philosophy. I think that you have probably hit the nail on the head there because one of the criticisms that is levelled at that system is that the offenders are just used as cheap labour and do not actually get very much out of it. Now, people in the system will say, “No, that’s not fair; that’s not a reasonable criticism.” But I did note that, for example, there was a big facility where they fit out spas. They get a fibreglass mould and one person drills holes in it, another person puts things in the holes, and another person puts some steps in, and so on. I said that this was fantastic and asked if they rotate people around these different tasks. They said no, they did not do that. They just do that one job—it is all that they do. So one person spends —

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** Is that traditional in that type of industry? That is how that industry works. It is like the production line in a car factory. You do the same job all day every day.

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes, that is right. So it is a very realistic recreation of the outside world—very much so. I was able to go up to and talk to and interview the offenders. Basically, they were quite happy. They were doing something and they did learn new skills. In one of the areas they had computer screens up and once each task was completed they actually entered the fact that it was completed and that it had moved onto the next person and where it had gone and so on. So it was a very realistic representation of the real workplace. And in a way that was very good. But as I was saying, one of the criticisms that I heard from other people was that that was all very well but that they are just teaching them to do one small thing. I think it is probably fair to say that there are other benefits and spin-offs from that, and that is that they have a good appreciation of the world of work and the realities —

**The CHAIRMAN:** Are these facilities located inside prisons?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And what happens to the proceeds? What is the financial impact of these?

**Ms Baron-St John:** My understanding is that there is, I think, a return to consolidated revenue. Now, I am not absolutely sure of this, but I think that there is a proportion returned to consolidated revenue and that a proportion goes back into the prisons. This is a bit of an issue for the Western Australian Department of Corrective Services because some prisons have opportunities to partner with industry to do more and other prisons have very, very limited opportunity to enter into any kind of partnerships or relationships with businesses. A classic example of that is Bunbury, where they are pretty well sited opposite an industrial park so there is lots of opportunity for them to interact, and they do it very successfully. Somewhere like Roebourne has very little opportunity to do those things. And so when we start talking about —

**The CHAIRMAN:** Well, not necessarily.

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** We thought that Roebourne was actually doing very well. We were up there last week.

**Ms Baron-St John:** They are doing well; but not the same —

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** It was very impressive.

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes. And that is a representation of how dedicated and passionate people can be about making things work. There are some wonderful people doing this work. But I guess what I am saying is that some people have the opportunities on their doorstep and others have to go and really make an effort.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Roebourne would have opportunities on its doorstep. It was just equipped. There would not be a place in Australia where there is a bigger shortage of personnel. Anyway, this New South Wales model obviously generated income.

**Ms Baron-St John:** It does; yes, it is business.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And are the industries run as part of the department or is there a separate unit?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes, they do. It is a unit within the department called Corrective Services Industries—CSI.

**The CHAIRMAN:** When you said there was criticism of the model, was that from Victoria?

**Ms Baron-St John:** The criticism is general. It is not Victoria criticising New South Wales—although maybe they do! It is more to do with the approach or the philosophy, I guess. Victoria has taken a different view and said that the individual clients' needs are very important. So they look at an individual and say, "What does he need? Does he need programs? Does he need training? Does he need some kind of support?" Although Western Australia does that, it does not do it to the same degree that Victoria does.

[11.30 am]

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** Can I just ask about the gratuities that prisoners receive for work in New South Wales? Are they equal to award rates or are they just really cheap labour for Spotlight and places like that?

**Ms Baron-St John:** I suspect it is the latter. The gratuities are set within the prison environment and obviously they are graded according to the type of work carried out and the level of complexity and the trade's requirements. Some of them are virtually unskilled. They do provide training and accreditation for skills gained, but I think in terms of the gratuities I am 99 per cent sure that it is not an award wage that they get in the prison.

**Mr A.P. JACOB:** But Spotlight would be paying something close to the market rate for what they get. Any profit would be going back into the department, would it not?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Did you have a look, in assessing these other jurisdictions, at their recidivism rates or the impact of these activities, given, as has been said, the overall aim of the exercise is to reduce the frequency with which people come back to prison? Did you analyse or have the opportunity to analyse?

**Ms Baron-St John:** We did not have the opportunity to get a lot of detail but I can certainly get that information. What they basically said was, "We're interested in what happens while they are in the prisons." They want to provide training. They want to provide meaningful work within the prisons. They were quite positive about the fact that they felt that they did a really good job, but I do not have any statistics on the recidivism rate.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I would have thought, if you were trying to work out what is the best model for us to go down, you would want to have a look at what is working, and what is working would have to be assessed by reference to recidivism rates.

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes. It is always difficult to get hold of those because they can be a bit woolly. Following up on people is very difficult as well. Certainly there is some information on that, which I have not actually included in my report, but I will be more than happy to provide it to the committee at a later date if you would like me to. Anecdotally, I do not think anybody does it any better than anybody else. They just do it in different ways in terms of the outcomes in recidivism.

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** I think you might have answered this but I missed it: the industries that are in New South Wales, in the prisons, are they actually within prison grounds? Is there space provided by the Department of Corrective Services?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes.

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** And the organisation fits that out with the equipment needed, or the department fits it out?

**Ms Baron-St John:** They are pretty huge places. They have got very big workshops. For example, the textiles workshop is enormous. They are within the prison grounds, which are quite extensive. They are like factories I suppose. I am not sure how the arrangements for fit-out work —

**Mr A.P. O'GORMAN:** The Singapore prison system provides the space but then they lease the space and the organisation fits it out and the products are put through.

**Ms Baron-St John:** I know that the department actually builds the space. There may be some arrangement with the fit-out but I suspect that it all belongs to the department and that they go out and seek contracts.

**The CHAIRMAN:** You visited various work camps, did you?

**Ms Baron-St John:** I did, yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** What was your general view of work camps?

**Ms Baron-St John:** I think they work very well for the offenders who go there. They are extremely well accepted by local communities because they make a good contribution to the communities. Classically, offenders in work camps are involved in reparation and they will go and clean up parks. I think in Wyndham, when it is race week, they go and tidy up the racecourse and so on and make it all look nice. They are well accepted by the community because they assist. In my report I have suggested that there is a little bit of a problem there because the danger is that the work that is carried out is just low level—picking up rubbish-type work. The department aims to help people to gain some useful skills, some marketable skills, and maybe some education or training on the way. That is not to say that picking up rubbish is not a good thing to do, and tidying up the shrubbery and so on. I had a concern that the work camp offenders become effectively an unpaid extension of the local government workforce. You are in an area where there is a small local authority, it does not have a lot of money and a gang of people from the work camp can go out there and give them a hand. That is community reparation, but I would like to see it taken a step further and I would like to see maybe traineeships so that the local authority says, “We’ll offer a couple of traineeships to people and we’ll give them a little bit of experience and training and maybe there will be a job at the end of it.” That is something that does not happen. The work camps themselves have some incredible challenges. One of them is that if they are able to provide some training and some work experience for the offenders, it is very, very difficult for them to get people to come in and formally assess the skills and accredit skills that the offenders have achieved. It might be because of the remoteness of the camp, it might be because the local TAFE college does not have anyone who is available, it might be because it is just too far to travel and nobody wants to do it. That is a bit of a problem for them.

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** Have you been to the Millstream work camp?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes, I have.

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** Can you give us your impression of that, please?

**Ms Baron-St John:** Apart from the fact that it is very beautiful!

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** The operations mostly.

**Ms Baron-St John:** I spoke to the offenders in the camp and they said they were very happy.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Why would they not be!

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** It is a very beautiful place. They can walk around and do whatever they want, basically.

**Ms Baron-St John:** They are. I think this is probably symptomatic of several of the work camps; it is almost a lifestyle. I remember speaking to one guy at Bungarun and asked, “How long have you been here; what are you doing here; how is it?” and all that sort of thing. He said, “It’s really great. Sometimes I get into trouble with the missus and it’s really good to have a bit of time here away from all of that. I stopped drinking. I feel better. I’m with a few nice guys. We go fishing.” It almost becomes a lifestyle event. The chain of events or places that they go through—I am sorry, I am getting off the topic of Millstream for a moment, but it is quite interesting that people offend, they go to prison, then they go to a work camp. They like the work camp because there is a lot more freedom, it is a nicer place to be. They know they are going to be working but the kind of work they do they seem quite comfortable with. They get some recreation time, which is really very nice for some of them, and they are away from some of the not-so-good parts of their “other” life. Classically, they will go back to this other life eventually and almost discard everything that has been given to them and that has changed them over time. I heard many, many stories from work camp officers who would say they got this guy off the booze. He has diabetes but we taught him that he can drink certain types of soft drinks that have zero sugar and that sort of thing. He knows how to take his medication. He is so much healthier. He has got things that he can do now. He has got a few skills. When he left we made an appointment for him to see a doctor within a week’s time and we beefed his medication up. When he left, we put him on the bus. When we went into his room, his pills were in the bin. We know that the first thing he will do is go back and drink inappropriate things. Within two days, the guy you saw on the street is roaring drunk and fighting and in all sorts of trouble. They said, “This doesn’t change people’s behaviour. It’s almost a sort of process that they go through.” They just keep coming back. It is a revolving door. What I think about the work camps is I think they are terrific because they give time out. They help people to get healthy, they are meaningfully employed and they are very good PR for the department. They also help to reduce some of the pressure on the prisons in terms of the muster, but they are not the ultimate solution. Having said that, my recommendation is we should have more of them.

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** Do you want to push hard about Millstream?

**The CHAIRMAN:** No.

**Ms Baron-St John:** What is it about Millstream that you really wanted me to talk about?

**The CHAIRMAN:** It was pathetic. It was just unbelievable.

**Mr A.P. O’GORMAN:** We were very impressed with Roebourne, we were very impressed with Decca, we were a bit disappointed with Millstream. It did not seem to have the structure and the drive to get things done in a reasonable amount of time, and to actually achieve outcomes for the offenders that were in there; that is, certificates and things like that, things that they can go away with and say, “We’ve done it.” It sets up, to me, exactly what you are talking about—it is like a bit of a holiday away from the prison, away from the family, but “as soon as I am finished here, everything goes in the bin and I am back to my normal way of life.” That seems to be defeating the purpose of the work camp.



**The CHAIRMAN:** The whole culture of the place is one of languidness —

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes.

**The CHAIRMAN:** And no achievement, and a massive oversell of the few things that have been done.

**Ms Baron-St John:** The clearing of the waterways and that sort of thing.

**The CHAIRMAN:** Which were covered in weeds. The thing was not cleared. They have been there 10 years and they have not managed to clear the weeds, even the part that we could see that was right next to the work camp. If ever there has been a place that is designed not to give people any change, even if all they are going to do is go back to their communities, they have learnt nothing other than “this is just another lark, another government joke where you’re paid sit down money.”

**Ms Baron-St John:** It is certainly very different from Decca, isn’t it?

**The CHAIRMAN:** Decca needs a lot more investment in it.

**Ms Baron-St John:** Yes, it does.

**The CHAIRMAN:** I think we have got to wind it up. Thanks very much, Helen. You will shortly receive a transcript from Hansard. If you want to make any corrections to that, you have got 10 working days to do that; otherwise the transcript will be deemed correct. You cannot introduce new material and you cannot change the sense of your evidence, but if you want to provide any additional information to us, please feel free to do so as an additional submission. We very much appreciate you coming in to see us. I appreciate that you still say “we” because you identify with the work that you have done.

**Ms Baron-St John:** I am very passionate about it, actually.

**Hearing concluded at 11.43 am**