

Australia Dossier by Robert Barwick

Victoria's private prisons explode

Once again, the British are involved in setting up inhuman penal colonies in Australia.

On March 11, prisoners at Melbourne's privately run Port Phillip Prison went on an eight-hour rampage, destroying thousands of dollars worth of property, and nearly murdering a prison guard. Eight days later, two prisoners hanged themselves.

These incidents are merely the latest in a series of disasters to afflict Victoria's private prisons since the first one opened just 18 months ago. Riots, robberies, suicides, self-mutilations, and drug abuse have been rampant, under conditions in which one prison guard will sometimes have to oversee 500 inmates. The Port Phillip Prison, the state's newest, has the worst record: Since it opened last September, there have been 7 deaths, 41 self-mutilations, and 10 drug overdoses. Despite having only 22% of Victoria's record prison population, Port Phillip has accounted for 70% of all Victorian deaths in custody.

Like the rest of Victoria's privatization program under Mont Pelerin Society pin-up boy, Premier Jeff Kennett, the new prisons are a British import, complete with British owners. Port Phillip, for instance, is owned by the British firm, Group 4 Securitas.

Following the fifth death at Port Phillip in early January, the opposition spokesman on prisons, the Labor Party's Andre Haermeyer, charged that it was Kennett's "horrendous" privatization program which caused the mayhem: "These private operators are in the business of making a profit, and to do that they cut costs by cutting corners in safety and security, and that is totally unacceptable," he said. In just 18 months, Kennett has transferred

50% of Victoria's prison population to private prisons, the highest proportion of prisoners in private jails in the world. This compares with 3% for the United States, and 7% for Britain.

Officials in Victoria's judicial system have also attacked the privatized prisons. In February, senior magistrate Brian Barrow recommended an Aboriginal man not serve any of his sentence in a Victorian private prison, because his life would be in danger. Last June, one of the state's most senior judges, Justice Frank Vincent, charged that privatization meant no accountability and the likelihood of cover-ups, with which governments "might become complicit for political reasons."

As if to prove Justice Vincent's fears, Kennett's Director of Correctional Services, John van Gronigen, told the Law Institute of Victoria on Oct. 16, 1997, that private prison operators had the right to keep secrets, for "commercial" reasons. "There are things in prisons systems and procedures and ways of doing things that I feel, if you tried to explain it to the public . . . they would never accept it and . . . they would never understand," he said.

Port Phillip Prison's private operator, Group 4 Securitas, was the first private prison operator in Britain, and is an investor in other British privatizations, including that of the gas industry. Group 4 has a lunatic "market approach" to prison operation, and defines prisoners as "customers." The company's director of Australian operations, Stephen Twinn, told the *Herald Sun* on March 23 that "keeping the

customers satisfied, with good food, good visitation rights, and civilized treatment," is a sound investment, and that "it was a 'commercial death' for a private operator to have a major disturbance caused by poorly treated prisoners."

But, the day after the March 11 riot, Twinn astounded the prison's guards, police, and emergency workers by downplaying the riot as a "passive demonstration." The guards were already outraged by Twinn's refusal, at the peak of the riot, to issue them batons. This caused a tense stand-off between guards and management, until Twinn eventually backed down. Following the riot, the prison officers union, the Community and Public Sector Union, demanded changes, including increased staffing levels and the completion of overdue repairs to broken cell trap doors (through which food is passed). Anecdotal evidence suggests poor morale among guards under Group 4's management: a prison officer was found hanging by his belt in his home in February. In a face-saving effort, Group 4's international managing director, David Banks, flew in from London on March 20 to announce that the company will be flying in 15 senior British staff to take control of the situation at Port Phillip. Haermeyer responded that importing British officers would not solve the problems. "It's their system that caused the problems," he said. "Why bring more of them out here?"

On March 24, Haermeyer attacked Twinn in Parliament as a "reject from the United Kingdom," highlighting Twinn's removal from his post as the director of Britain's first private prison, Wolds Remand Centre, amid reports of drug abuse, violence, and poor discipline among inmates. The Wolds record under Twinn in 1992 is strikingly similar to Port Phillip's problems today.