

Australia's Abu Ghraib: The Scourge of Youth Detention, Racism and Torture in the Northern Territory

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"What we're changing is a culture in an organisation within the youth detention system and I think we've come a long way in that time." — Adam Giles, NT Chief Minister, ABC News, Jul 26, 2016

It was an image that would not have been out of place in the sickly procession of pictures that came out of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay during the ill-fated and misnamed war on terror. Here was a young man, seated, strapped in and euphemistically "restrained," verging on catatonic; on his head, a suffocating bag.

Within hours of the Australian investigative news program Four Corners covering that incident on Monday, and various other incidents of violence at the Don Dale facility outside Darwin in the Northern Territory, the Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, announced a royal commission.

Context is everything, and a mere description about the abuse of youths in detention facilities tends to fall on a public deaf and immune to state sanctioned cruelty.

Australia's two-track morality here is evident in its tolerance of pacific gulags that house intrepid asylum seekers, and on land for others similarly deemed undesirable.

In the Northern Territory, where frontier law making meets frontier violence, such devices as the restraint chair which kept Dylan Voller shackled, were approved under the legislation of the state. Carceral politics, in other words, is big in the north, and becomes particularly piquant when dealing with youths.

The Don Dale facility is but one manifestation of this state-sanctioned enthusiasm, characterised by periods of prolonged solitary confinement, strip searching and excessive force. It is designed to be punitive, a form of retribution against youths who have defied the social order. As with any other system of torture, it is the foot of power visibly applied to the backs and bodies of children.

The policy of the Territory has also seen a growing young prison population of which 96 per cent are Indigenous. It is also the Australian territory with the highest percentage of indigenous citizens – 30 per cent in all.

The NT Chief Minister, Adam Giles, gives an insight into how distinctly indifferent he has been to such revelations. On the one hand, an appearance of immediate action has been

required: sacking, for instance, the minister overseeing young detainees, John Elferink. “I sat and watched the footage [from Four Corners] and recognised the horror through my eyes.”[1]

What has followed since has been a cultivated obliviousness, despite knowledge about such footage as the tear gassing of youths at Don Dale being available for at least a year. Giles claimed to have had no sense that this had been happening. As a head disembodied from the rest of the detention structure, the chief minister suggested that “over time there has most certainly been a culture of cover-up within the Corrections system.”

Ditto the police commissioner, Reece Kershaw, and ministers at the federal level. “This is not Australia,” declared deputy prime minister, Barnaby Joyce, who went on to suggest that Indigenous affairs minister, Nigel Scullion, would have stirred had he gotten an inkling something was wrong.

Such surprises become even less plausible given the operating assumptions of the entire detention system. Giles paints a picture of necessary incarceration in a world of violent children, street menaces who risk the security of everybody else. At a press conference on Wednesday, Giles observed that, “Nobody wants to see a kid in jail, but nobody wants to see their own kids assaulted by other kids.”

Members of the NT community, the minister noted on Tuesday, were “sick of youth crime... they have had a gutful.” The children, not a sick frontier mentality, constituted the ghoulish problem, these demons keen to smash cars, initiate house break-ins and assaulting citizens.

Each press conference has given has been typified by this spirit of disingenuousness. All of it is marked by one overwhelming acceptance: youth detention, with all its maximums security frills, is necessary. Besides, he retorts, there were “improvements” in youth detention; but it was “not perfect”.

This begged the question as to whether a royal commission was even necessary, an overegging of an already improved pudding. “I want to make sure we have a safe community to live in, where kids aren’t breaking into homes.”

On Tuesday, Giles revealed another tactic suggesting that any investigation into the youth detention system is not going to have legs. Note, claimed the chief minister, the way some of the youths in the footage were *actually* behaving. The blaming of inmates remains the default position.

“There are kids who are trying to deliberately cause cranial issues by bashing their head against the wall.” Such naughtiness, though quiet, meditative reflection is hardly the sort of thing encouraged in the NT detention system for desperate youths.

Officers themselves need “to be able to de-escalate issues when children are not in... a calm environment within themselves and at all times those kids’ wellbeing is being put at the best possible place.”

To add to this furore, Giles has been accompanied at stages by indigenous politician Bess Price, the Territory’s Minister for Community Services, claiming that various families were happy to see their children in prison. This eye-brow raising comment was perfectly tailored to a system of necessary teaching and retribution: bad boys needed to be taught a lesson, to be made better.

Whatever it is deemed, be it a culture, a form of thinking, or an attitude, any revelation to its practitioners via the medium of a television program is bound to sting. That a royal commission has been the borne fruit in this endeavour may not mean very much. Political figures such as Giles suggest that mentalities can be immoveable. The prison alternative remains all powerful.

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Note

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-26/nt-prisons-minister-john-elferink-sacked--after-4-corners-outrage/7661086>

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