

“To Forum Seminar on Prison Enlightenment”

Tuesday 20 December 2005

From: Michael J. Marlow - Risdon Prison

First cab off the rank ladies and gentlemen and my trusted and loyal friend, who is reading this letter on my behalf - let me just say, united we all stand, but divided we all gargantuan-ly fall.

The quest and combine zest for prison reform and accompanying inner enlightenment, weighs rather precariously on so many shoulders. You're welcome attendance at this seminar, and forum, is a clear indication of your will and need to see positive changes in many, many, prisons, both in Australia and worldwide.

The Risdon Prison's long-suffering inmates have been voicing their concerns at the Draconian state of Risdon Prison, seemingly since Adam and Eve first copulated.

My name is Michael Marlow and I am currently serving a '[hamburger and double cheese', (forget the mayonnaise) which in prison slang equates to a life lagging. My determination to seek some justice, has taken my case to Appeal Courts in Tasmania and the High Court in Canberra, but, alas to date, with no positive result. Indeed the opera is never over till the rather hefty soprano hits that first orgasmic high note or the pool cue is never put in the rack and that applies in my, and that of my colleague and co-accused's, unjustly convicted quest for our case to be reviewed and brought back before the Courts for justice and acquittal.

Moving on to Risdon Prison and its antiquated days and ways, where I have now been incarcerated since mid-1999 and where I have seen, first-hand, the prison's structure, and fabric, decay rapidly, through a potent mix of basic neglect and puzzling management decision-making.

The emphasis is on containment, control and our punishment and resultant loss of liberty, confirmed by the fall of the judges hammer, and thus, being cut off from beloved partners, our children and firm friends, and by prisons isolation nature, we, the Risdon inmates, can live with that. The ensuing loss of liberty and freedom, however, is a burden that our family and close friends carry 24/7, meaning 24 hours a day seven days a week.

Ned Kelly's tongue-in-cheek eloquence and grit in stating “such is life” on his fateful journey and steps towards his destiny and an appointment with the hangman is indeed, Australian and Irish folklore.

Ned Kelly did a lagging at Beechworth Prison, in country Victoria. Built of sandstone in the 1860s or early 1870s, in comparison to the ancient Beechworth Prison, this prison at Risdon is in the dark ages and Port Arthur-ish. The writer and friends were incarcerated there in the mid-1970s for a short time – and it is sufficient to elaborate that the old Beechworth Prison has a virtual 4 1/2 star rating, compared to the cold and harsh Risdon Prison and that is, a harsh, 100% fact.

Now down to business and though the writer could go on like the proverbial broken gramophone record, it is my intention and aim to speak or write about Risdon Prison's horrendous and archaic punishment block or division, Division-8, formerly N-Division and, also, the former remand yard and now, I should say, 'segregation tomb' or division, Division-7, formerly H-Yard.

In October 2002 Risdon Prison's hierarchy, in their misguided and poorly judged wisdom, decreed that 9 inmates were to be taken out of the main part of Risdon Prison and placed in the punishment block; some of whom had not been charged with any breaches of the prison's disciplinary code for months, prior to their unjust removal from Risdon's general population divisions.

The writer went to Division-8 in late September/early October 2002 and it took three long, arduous, years, to get out of the punishment and segregation tombs. Indeed, some of the original 9 inmates, who were placed on the very poorly conceived segregation program, still languish in both Division-8's punishment block and Division-7's segregation division.

Without going into elaborate detail and not wanting to blow your concerned compassionate minds, those 9 inmates endured, and some still endure, a nightmare of deprivation and filthy, inhumane, conditions, that one ponders "how indeed" it could be allowed to happen in a 20th-century, allegedly modern, penal system.

It was more than mere coincidence, that when two career policemen took up senior managerial positions within the Tasmanian prison service, that those 9 inmates became the scapegoats of management's determined thrust and search, to lay blame on any high-profile, opinionated inmates.

The original list was 17 names, but was culled to 9, on the timely intervention of the Aboriginal Liaison Officer. Those 9 inmates, were not only isolated, but also treated very, very, harshly and inhumanely.

Those 9 inmates had their meagre rights violated - most were prison yard reps, who spoke on, and for, their respective divisions, seeking some accountability and some decency from Risdon management, but alas, those 9 inmates, whom Risdon Prison hierarchy perceived to have a collective voice, became the unwilling victims and pawns in a dangerous and shameful game of chess, in

managements zestful search, looking to lay blame on inmates for a flagging and Draconian prison system, which had languished in years of neglect and Band-Aid solutions.

At varying times, inmates could surely be forgiven for thinking that Risdon management had a monopoly on supply of Band-Aid's from the Johnsons Company. Rather unfortunately, 9 inmates were highlighted, and nightmarish, years of anguish then followed.

The 9 inmates, from October 2002, endured conditions and treatment that would curl the hair of even the most hardened prison reformer.

6 3/4 days a week lock-down for the 9, became the norm, not the exception, and our rights and conditions were of miniscule concern to Risdon management. WHY? Because we were wiped off the blackboard and sealed in an out of sight, out of mind, tomb, named Division-7.

The treatments that were dished out to the 9 inmates were of a nature that would make John Howard's eyebrows appear droopy.

Risdon Prison's yard reps, who had attempted to seek accountability from Risdon management, were effectively taken to the 'cleaners'. For openly protesting and helping to organize peaceful protests and various petitions and letters, leaving a paperwork trail that would stretch to Mount Wellington, a nightmare of hell followed, being shuffled backwards and forwards from Division 8 to Division 7, taking three long years for the writer of this letter's eventual reintegration, back into the general prison population in October 2005.

The May 2005 occupation of Risdon Prison's reception area, labelled a siege by management and various media outlets, was a Pandora's box, that became unwrapped by years of Risdon inmates yard-rep's paperwork trail leading to a virtual dead-end, in our quest for better conditions for all inmates!!

Despite a Death's in Custody Inquiry, and the following Ombudsman's Report, and the Prisons Report and Inquiry, alas conditions for Risdon inmates, have gone from bad to worse, like the marble rolling and rolling and turning into a snowball of huge proportions, the segregation program escalated out of control, with no clear direction or hope given to those 9 inmates. An uncertain atmosphere and no real light of hope being offered by management became our fate, for years.

The 9 inmates on the introduced segregation program of October 2002, suffered immensely! Hunger strikes of up to 15 days, and letters that were written by us to the director (of prisons) and Minister's office and the ombudsman's office, seeking some form of clarification and sanity regarding our fate, led nowhere, except, and save, to a brick wall approach!!

We knew we were being victimised and unfairly treated, but our calls for a clear direction and path regarding our fate, saw us treated like lepers.

We had to **highlight** our unjust treatment in a search for some justice, hence our extensive paper trails to various government bodies.

During my, and the others, segregation we were never encouraged, or given, the opportunity to do education courses and sport was something that we could only watch on TV.

In three years, the writer never got above a slow walking pace, of a dozen paces, up-and-down an exercise division.

Because of our continual and prolonged time in lock-down mode, our skin went white and gray and we all suffered alarming weight loss. The writer lost approximately 25 kg during three years of segregation and we all suffered various skin and ulcer complaints, due to a lack of sun, fresh fruit and any decent protein intake.

It is no small wonder, that with no education program in place, in the punishment and segregation divisions, and 6 3/4 days a week in lock-down mode, with no sport and without the luxury of obtaining a decent library book, (treated like a TattsLotto win), one hardly needs the foresight of Nostradamus, nor the wisdom of Solomon, to set a climate and state of mind, for punishment and segregation divisions inmates, of a time bomb waiting to explode.

All movements out of cell, in both these divisions, are with hands in handcuffs behind the back, or a waist belt, or leg shackles, when any inmates are fortunate to have a visit, be it a box visit or a contact visit.

Alas, the segregation program became a runaway train of injustice and victimisation and still continues to this day!! With only a brief burst of sunshine and one hours walk a day, with nothing else in between, except and save being locked down, indeed, this is the climate that presides and flourishes in Risdon Prison's notoriously, Draconian, Division 8 and its segregation Division 7, is only a shade better and in reality, could be likened to an Egyptian tomb, with a prevailing atmosphere of doom and gloom pervading the air on a daily basis.

Does the writer, in any way, shape or form, exaggerate or embellish the conditions endured by Division 7 and Division 8 inmates? I only wish I was, but it's all 100% factual.

In this magical island of hours, a lifestyle and environment is offered that is the envy worldwide of so many overcrowded and polluted countries. We, the inhabitants of Tasmania, are fortunate, in the extreme, to live here.

It is some consolation that our families, those of the incarcerated, can breathe and to take in a lifestyle that offers hope and an atmosphere of good fortune and positivity, that prevails in Tassie.

In drawing to a conclusion, the writer has more decorum than to seek compensation from management, for RSI of the wrist, not to mention dwindling pen and ink.

Suffice to say that good manners, and accompanying etiquette, should never be abandoned at the front gate of any prison upon admittance and the writer and prison inmates offer our support and goodwill and need forums and seminars and similar formats, to project our voice of anguish, up and over the walls!!

If this letter helps to raise awareness to our plight, and especially those of the inmates incarcerated in the punishment and segregation divisions, then excellent, and our voices within can only be magnified and enriched by those concerned enough to care.

Your attendance at this seminar is surely an indication of good and genuine intent, and for that, the Risdon Prison inmates' thank you.

A special thanks to Ted Bull and Peter Brown and Rodney Crosswell, all of whom have the heart to care.

Our hands entwine and unite to combine in our quest and mission to raise public awareness to the chain-gang like conditions that prevail and exist in the 20th century, in a supposedly enlightened, modernistic, penal system.

The inmates of Risdon Prison, wish you ladies and gentlemen "good karma without drama" and Caroline Dean, you're a champion.

Mick Marlow.