

Canberra Times – Letters to the editor
Saturday 5th October

Strip Searching

I write out of deep concern that the ACT Government has legislated to allow routine strip searching in the new prison. Previously this practice, which the Attorney-General himself describes as “humiliating”, was permitted only in exceptional circumstances.

Speakers at forums organised this year by Christians for an Ethical Society highlighted that, if prisoners are to have any chance of rehabilitation or indeed to leave prison no worse than on incarceration, the ACT must do things differently. A sentence is about deprivation of liberty not deprivation of human dignity. Those who are incarcerated remain part of our community.

The Attorney-General stressed that the culture of the new prison would be a far cry from that of other Australian prisons which contribute to high rates of reoffending. In “our prison”, wrongdoers would be treated as “people first”. The new legislation shows these words lacked substance.

I am unaware of evidence that random strip searching contributes to safer prisons. There are studies, however, that show it further damages prisoners. Strip searching is an instrument of serious mental harm particularly of female prisoners, some 40 % of whom have been sexually abused as children. How can prison guards who have been required to strip search prisoners then be accepted by prisoners as anything other than authoritarian figures not to be trusted in any circumstances?

If inhumane prisons lead to greater re-offending, then the Canberra public will ultimately be the loser under this change of legislation.

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