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# Community Idol Presentation

Address to the Communities in Control Conference  
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## Sisters Inside

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Before I start, I'd like to acknowledge the custodians of this land, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. We are on Aboriginal land, and I always feel privileged to walk on this beautiful land, so thank you.

I worked on this speech with women in prison, because that's who we are; we work with women in prison, and women in prison are on our Committee, and anything I say today has been endorsed by those women in prison.

My name is Debbie Kilroy, and I am the director of Sisters Inside. Just being able to say that sentence makes me feel as if we've already won a great prize. I'm proud of our organisation, and as Australians you should be proud of it as well.

Along with some close friends who were incarcerated with me in Brisbane's Boggo Road prison in the early 90's, I am the founder of Sisters Inside.

People are sometimes surprised to hear that this organisation grew and was nurtured inside the cells of one of Australia's most notorious prisons, but in Sisters Inside the words 'community' and 'inclusion' and 'sustainability' have never been used rhetorically.

By 'inclusion we don't mean only that women inside have real power in our management structure (although they do).

By 'community' we don't mean only our local community, or prisoners, or women (although we strive to serve all of those groups).

By 'Sustainability' we don't mean 'today', or 'until our funding runs out' but "being a long-term voice for women prisoners, no matter what".

Let me tell you what we mean by these three words. First, inclusion.

Sisters Inside was founded in the wake of a courageous experiment in prison reform in Queensland which followed the election in 1989 of

the State's first Labor government in 32 years. Six weeks later I was sentenced to six years prison in Boggo Road.

The irony of that wasn't lost on me. A reforming government comes to town to free the state from the shackles of corruption and I promptly lose my freedom, being locked away till I thought I should never see those historic changes occur. How wrong I was.

Just a month after Wayne Goss was elected, one of my closest friends was murdered right beside me as we sat at lunch in that prison. As she lay in my arms dying from massive stab wounds, I guess I felt myself break open – but with her murder it would be the entire prison system that was broken open and laid bare for real scrutiny and change.

A bright spotlight was shone on the way prisons worked – their lack of real rehabilitation options, the lack of educational work opportunities, their general treatment of prisoners.

The old guard of prison management at Boggo Road was replaced by a new guard, men and women who had a simple yet profound approach to reform – treat prisoners with dignity and respect, treat them like human beings.

One of the best innovations they made was to set up a series of committees inside the prison on which prisoners had a real voice. For the first time ever we were given some power – limited, of course – over how the prison was run, over what we needed and what our families needed.

For some of us, that meant education. I enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Work, which I completed some years later. It also meant work opportunities, both inside and outside the prison. It meant outings – to see our children in their homes, for exercise, for community service.

We were able to voice concerns about the lack of services, about our children, about us.

The net result of all of this was that many of us were at last able to see beyond the confines of a prison cell to a world where we might live differently – a world in which we might strive and succeed, and see our children do the same.

It showed us what compassion, and just a tiny bit of control over our own lives, could achieve. It showed us that the huge benefits of counselling and education and real work could be. And it proved to me that things could be changed for the better.

After my release, and as soon as I was able to establish myself in a new life – one in which I no longer saw prison as home – I went back to the prison in a different capacity.

Because I had the trust of the new prison management I was able to go in and meet with my old friends and to discuss what we needed to do to improve services more and to make a real difference. Sisters Inside was born from that.

Our first discussions established that the most pressing need at the time was for sexual assault and drug and alcohol counselling.

You may not know this, but 89% of women in prison have experienced sexual assault or abuse, and over 85% are in prison for drug-related crimes.

A huge proportion of that number have grown up in poverty, severe deprivation, and disadvantage. In simple terms, they have grown up in places where their lives were not valued. The effects of poverty and abuse mean that most prisoners have a low level of education and few skills.

Many attempt to self-medicate to deal with a life of pain, leading to a high level of addiction to drugs and alcohol.

Their health is characteristically poor (even corrective services concedes that). Many have mental health issues, and a few – not a great number – have physical disabilities that have often gone unaddressed.

Too high a proportion, of course, are indigenous, and for them all these problems are multiplied. Some are from culturally and linguistically diverse background, and their problems, too, are multiplied.

How do we know that the services that were needed? Because Sisters Inside is women in Prison. We were not just another organisation going into the prison and dictating to the women what they needed, what they wanted, what was wrong.

From the very beginning it was enshrined in our constitution that the women inside were the decisionmakers.

They constituted the steering committee that met with the management committee of women outside and made all decisions. A group of trusted women on the outside made up the rest of the management committee, enacting the decisions of women on the inside and advocating on their behalf.

This is where we differ from many other prisoner advocacy organisations. The women inside are in charge.

For many, this is the first time they have been able to exercise any control over their own lives. They have grown up, gone into relationships, and run foul of the law with very little control over what has happened to them.

People outside talk about consequences, about women who commit crimes having to face the consequences of their actions. May I just say to you that for many women their whole lives are one big consequence – of so many things, with deprivation and abuse being critical.

The involvement in Sisters Inside is often the first time they have ever been treated with any degree of dignity or respect. They just don't know what those terms mean.

That is what we mean by 'inclusion'. We do not try and decide what is best for women. They decide it for themselves. It is essentially a 'power with' approach rather than a 'power over' approach. We walk

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with the women, right beside them, not behind them, not in front of them assuming we know better. We don't. Our walk with the women is now and for always.

At another level, we mean by the word 'inclusion' something much wider again.

We do not believe, as many of our politicians seem to, that the women in our prisons are any different from any other women.

We do not believe that women in prison are bad, and we do not believe subscribe to the notion of 'the other'. Let me explain that by recounting a bit of history.

Since the reforming days of the Goss government, when women in prison were afforded all the rights and dignities enjoyed by other human beings, things have changed dramatically, and not for the better.

That great gamble – the gamble to give women some control over their own lives – is over. The opportunities for education, training, and leaves of absence that helped them to stay close to their kids and their families – to get a running start on getting their lives together on the outside in a way that might prevent them going back to prison, as most women eventually do – are over.

It was a gamble that worked. Women did get university degrees, they did reunite with their children and their families, and they did get jobs and stay out of prison. I was one of them.

But we have lost all that now. Since then we have had the phoney war on drugs and the phoney fear campaign about personal safety - the campaign to make you turn your home into a fortress and trust nobody, to retreat into gated communities that keep out 'the other', meaning people like me.

Because despite what you see, despite labels like 'director', 'Bachelor of Social Work', or even 'Member of the Order of Australia', I am what many of those people fear; I am 'the other'; I have been to prison.

And it is women like me who make up the preposterous numbers of women in prison. Our political system, with its campaigns of fear, has seen the number of women in prison skyrocket over the past ten years.

You could be excused for not knowing that, because the bumper numbers of prisons built to house these new prisoners are built, of course, on the outskirts of town, where they are conveniently invisible.

The two lies of government are community safety or rehabilitation. Prisons have an economic, a political and a social purpose that has nothing to do with community safety or rehabilitation. That purpose is exclusive, not inclusive.

It seeks to exclude from society certain groups which can, when it all comes down to it, serve as the receptacles of blame from the rest of society. Things going bad? Blame the Other. Things not looking rosy or predictable? Is crime too high and work too hard and the kids off the rails and the trains not running on time or, worse, vandalised?

Blame the Other.

At Sisters Inside the words 'inclusive' and 'community' and 'sustainable', taken together, mean that we don't ghettoise any group. But when one group is treated as appallingly as some women and children are treated, as badly as women prisoners are treated, whole communities suffer.

We suffer, of course, because we lose the beautiful potential of those human beings, potential our governments would throw on the scrapheap, labelling them 'bad'. We all become less compassionate, and angrier, and in that we suffer too. More directly, we all suffer because blaming and punishing do not achieve what people tell us they will achieve.

They do not produce good outcomes, better people, or safer communities. Punishing rather than rehabilitating produces, in fact, more crime.

Sisters Inside wishes to draw attention to the facts of women's imprisonment through Community Idol, but ultimately we want to expose the overriding fact that prisons don't work. From this standpoint, although we continue to provide services to women, we are abolitionists.

We believe that not only do prisons fail women and families but they work actively to deepen the disadvantage felt by women and to lock them into a cycle of trauma and degradation. Rehabilitation? 60% of women in prisons come back there. Public safety? Because our rehabilitation has failed, more crimes are committed.

We all want less crime in our community, but the way to get there is not by putting more women in prison and treating them as we do.

I've talked about the service provision arm of Sisters Inside. Our other arm is advocacy. We have always in the past advocated on single issues, but last year I decided with the women that we would write a submission and make a human rights complaint against the Queensland government. We did so.

That submission covered all the areas of systemic discrimination that women in prison experience.

The day we lodged that we were summoned into the office of the Minister for Corrections and banned from the prison. Our services have been restricted and curtailed and our management committee meetings have been banned.

That was in June last year. We will not be silenced, we will keep talking out, because women say to me each day when they ring or write that "You have to keep speaking out, you have to tell people in the community how bad it is in there."

If we want to reduce crime, we need to speak out and say that prisons don't work. We need to think outside the box.