

changing lives
reducing crime

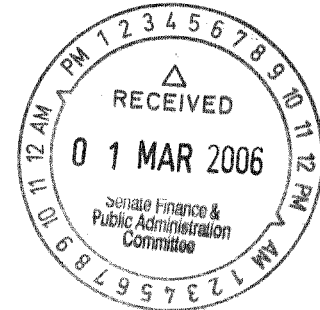
Head Office

174 Broadway (cnr Shepherd St),
Broadway NSW 2007
Ph 02 9288 8700
Fax 02 9211 6518
info@crcnsw.org.au

Hunter Office

PO Box 749
Hamilton NSW 2303
Ph 02 4961 4626
Fax 02 4961 4135

Committee Secretary
Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia



Wednesday, 1 March 2006

To The Committee Secretary,

RE: Prisoners Vote

The Community Restorative Centre (CRC) works with prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families in New South Wales. It has done so for over 50 years.

The vast majority of people we see on release from prisons, have histories of extreme disadvantage- characterised by drug and alcohol dependency, poverty and abuse. Most have lived both socially and economically on the margins of society. These people have of course also committed crime and as a consequence gone to prison. Our job is to help people stay out of prison and stay away from committing crime. And we have had some remarkable success. Whilst the recidivism rate in NSW is around 40% (and much higher amongst some populations, including those populations from which our client base is drawn) the clients that access our transitional services have a recidivism rate of only 13%. Our primary strategy (and the reason the transitional service is so effective) is to spend a lot of time helping ex-prisoners to reconnect – or in many cases connect for the first time- with the community. We do this via assistance with accommodation, employment, family support, counselling, and effecting linkages with other services in the community

We aim to help the people we work with find a place in the community- a sense of belonging. We do this, not just because it is the *right* thing (although it is), nor simply because this is what so many ex-prisoners want (although they do). We do this because it keeps the community safe. When people feel connected to communities, when they have an investment in the community, when they feel welcomed, and part of society, they tend not to commit crime.

Maintaining the right of prisoners to vote whilst they are in custody is about much more than maintaining their right to have a say as to who they believe should be running the country. It is about retaining the citizenship rights necessary for inclusion in a democratic country.

Community Restorative Centre Inc.

www.crcnsw.org.au

ABN: 75 411 263 189

When people go to prison they should not lose their human rights, nor should they lose their rights as citizens. When Australia signed up to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1980, this principle was made very clear. Although the maintenance of some rights in the context of a prison environment is challenging for prison administrators (particularly when having to be balanced against important security considerations) the maintenance of voting rights is not in this category. Being able to vote allows prisoners to take on one of the responsibilities of living in a democracy. Developing a sense of responsibility is a key ambition of many (psychological and other) programs inside Australian prisons. Although this ambition is often compromised in institutional settings such as prisons, the principle remains that taking responsibility (for crime committed and all other aspects of life) is an important part of rehabilitation and reintegration into the community. There is no small amount of hypocrisy involved if we are to ask prisoners to take responsibility for themselves and their crimes, but we refuse to allow them to take on one of their important responsibilities as democratic citizens.

The sad truth is that for many prisoners, being told that they are no longer able to vote will not be surprising. It will form part of a litany of experiences in which they have experienced exclusion from society. The greater the sense (and reality) of exclusion, the greater the barriers are for restoration and reintegration. If Australia is serious about community safety and reducing crime, then taking steps to further alienate an already disconnected population by refusing them the right to participate in the democratic process is an extremely counterproductive measure.

Mindy Sotiri - CRC Board of Management
Alison Churchill - CRC Executive Officer