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A Community Legal Centre

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Media Release

Victorian Parliamentary Review of Sentencing Urgently Needed.

Victoria has increased its prison numbers by 50% over the last decade. This alone is enough reason to stop and review our sentencing policies.

Both the major Victorian political parties have embraced policies that will result in more money being spent to build more prisons. This is despite the fact that crime rates have dropped in Victoria per head of population. The effectiveness of the present policies deserves review.

“Locking up more people each year should be a wake up call to the community urging us to rethink our strategies. An ever increasing prison population is not a recipe for more of the same policies” said Robin Inglis, Executive Officer Fitzroy Legal Service. “The UK Government is starting to embark on this path of review and it would be financially and socially responsible to follow suit in Victoria” he added.

UK Justice Secretary Ken Clarke in June 2010 questioned the orthodoxy of continuing to build new prisons. UK prison numbers have increased by 100% over the last 18 years. In January 2011 he announced closure of some small prisons and a reduction of 3000 in prison numbers.

There are at least three reasons that a parliamentary review of sentencing in Victoria should urgently occur.

- It is nearly a century since such a high proportion of the population was in prison; Why has it happened? What are the alternatives?
- Community views on sentencing are more complex and compassionate than simplistic surveys indicate. When given information about a specific case the majority of people would choose a sentence which was similar to a judge or magistrate. Tabloid treatments of crime don't tap into community interest in rehabilitation and prevention ideas.
- Prisons are expensive, difficult to operate safely and create a series of downstream costs for Governments and communities.

It is vital that we stop the alarming trend of simply building more prisons. A joint parliamentary committee review could provide an opportunity for community inclusion and review of the facts.

For Further Comment contact Robin Inglis, Fitzroy Legal Service. 0422281109.

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