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## CRIME AND THE RECESSION

I am honoured to participate in this forum where academic and social policy leaders have contributed or commented on the topic "Crime and the Recession". I can only assume that as the Minister for Justice, the Hon T A Griffiths has been a major contributor, my role is to respond in a political context and I am happy to do so. I will confine my response to the issue of juvenile offenders.

It is interesting to have heard the Minister deliver such a concerned approach to the problems of young people in the corrective services system. I certainly agree with him that in fact we require a bipartisan approach to the problems that are evidenced by juvenile offenders. I would like to point out of course that although the Minister is quite convincing in his assertions of care and understanding about the origins of offending behaviour, it is most unlikely that he will be encouraged by his colleagues to pursue his stated ideological approach which has some potential to produce beneficial change in this area.

One problem lies in the fact that Mr Gary Sturgess who organised the ministries and the structure of government services after the last election, May 1991, does not, I believe, share the Minister's attitudes and in seeking to facilitate "management by the managers" certainly created some difficulties for him. In the first place Juvenile Justice was separated from the Department of Community Services and moved to the administration of the Minister for Justice whose primary responsibility was for the management of the prison system (now to include young offenders). The fact that he was given the administration of Juvenile Justice but policy responsibility remained with the Attorney General compounded the absurdity. For a time it was the most chaotic of systems imaginable. Public pressure and the Minister's own assessment of the situation led him to the understanding that the management of juvenile offenders required a separate system in which to provide programs for this discrete group of children in trouble. Clearly, it was agreed, Juvenile Offenders programs cannot and must not be run in conjunction with adult offenders. To his credit the Minister was able to convince Cabinet of the need to establish the Office of Juvenile Justice as a separate entity within his portfolio.

The difficulty remains, however, that this does not afford the Minister a great deal of impact on the many facets of public administration and public policy which need to be effected if his philosophical approach to juvenile offenders is to be implemented.

I would like to mention some of the limitations he faces.

He is not the Minister for Police, so while the police continue to use the *Summary Offences Act* to unnecessarily arrest large numbers of young people for offensive language, particularly in country towns, there will continue to be an over-representation of young people and particularly Aboriginal young people in the system.

He is not the Minister for Education and the recession has led to more children staying on at school. When a young person is having difficulty relating to the system and is in danger of turning to offending behaviour, how influential can the Minister be in sensitising that Department to managing kids who are acting out? Are there sufficient resources providing support and alternatives?

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And how can the Minister impact the Education Department in a way which means that the system will be flexible enough to readmit a child who is emerging from a Juvenile Detention Centre, in a manner which is likely to be successful and not just another experience of failure? He is not the Minister for Education, therefore he has no control on the number of children who are suspended from the system and so are further alienated and more likely to "offend" once they are outside the system. We know that even at the age of 13 and 14 young people are being suspended from schools.

He is not the Minister for Housing and we find when we look at the young offenders population that one of their greatest needs is stable, affordable, secure housing and what is happening in the Housing Department? Is he going to promote a flexible, responsive policy from the Housing Minister? Will he be able to influence his Government to affirm a policy for creating secure housing for young people? It is no solution to pick up homeless children in the street and return them to their parents where the parental situation is often unsatisfactory and the direct cause for the children leaving home and entering into a cycle of destructive behaviour in the first place.

I have already stated that he is clearly not the Minister for Community Services and policy objectives in that department have a direct impact on services to juvenile offenders, who have often come to notice in the first place for "welfare" reasons. At the moment everyone is aware of the fact that funding of refuges is a matter of major disputation between the Federal Government and the State Government. Meanwhile the effective operation of youth refuges, particularly for young women at risk, is very unsatisfactory. The Department of Community Services of course has also closed down 70 offices across the State, thus severely restricting access to professional support for families. The work of the Child Protection sector within that Department is extremely limited by the policies of this Minister's Government.

Despite the Minister's claims of progress and reform for juvenile offenders, as the Deputy Chair of the Legislative Council's Social Issues Committee inquiring into Juvenile Justice in New South Wales, I must report that I am alarmed at the unsatisfactory circumstances in which some young people are detained. I believe that it is improper to remand children in police cells for minor offences; anyone who has seen a 15 year old boy in a police cell in country New South Wales would realise that our system is not conducive to improving the circumstances of the child or the community. The many instances of young people being refused bail because there are no alternatives to being remanded in custody is unacceptable and surely it is not too radical to propose that policy and practice in this area be reformed. For those who are granted bail it is a matter of urgency that bail conditions be monitored so that impossible conditions cease to be imposed. How is it reasonable to expect a child to reside outside his or her home town as a condition of bail?

Why is it that in New South Wales we have over 400 children in secure institutions, while Victoria with a similar population has about 140 in secure institutions? More than 60 per cent of young offenders never re-offend, or appear before the courts more than once. Every inquiry into Juvenile Justice in the last ten years has concluded that early and repeated contact with the judicial system and subsequent institutionalisation of children has been disadvantageous to the individual, their family, the victim and subsequently the

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community at large. Why do we persist in gaoling so many Aboriginal children? They are 1 per cent of the population and yet represent 30 per cent of those in institutions.

Finally I would also like to emphasise what others have stated and that is that employment, a key issue in this forum, is a critical issue for young people in this society. How can we deal with job creation for young people effectively? In the first place we must reaffirm that full employment is a goal. I do not excuse the Federal Government from criticism in this area. All governments have been blighted by theories of economic rationalism and microeconomic reform. We must acknowledge that one way young people develop a feeling of self-worth, acceptance and admission to our society is through work. If we deny them the opportunity to participate in society through work then in fact we are compounding the likelihood of them losing faith in the system and turning to antisocial behaviour. They will become as young people, either self destructive, as we have seen in the increasing youth suicide rates or they will be destructive of the community as we see in levels of violence and vandalism.

So once again I would like to offer my support to the Minister in his endeavours to deal with the totality of need of young people and I would like to urge him to pursue all the related matters I have raised. I think there is enormous opportunity these days, and there certainly is a need, for people who have public office to be opinion leaders. Unfortunately these days we are often led by opinion polls. Leadership is needed as well as a clear definition of the nature and basis of the problem. I believe problems reside in our emphasis on economic policy and in our downgrading of social policy. Economic policy is not an end in itself. For governments economic policy must be integrated with and serve social policy goals or governments are betraying the community. The Minister has my public offer of support to raise these issues in the public arena.

We owe young people a strong and joint effort to meet their needs which are really simply based on the desire to be fully accepted members of their society.

*The Hon Ann Symonds, MLC*