

Darwin youth prison a scene of 'disrepair and despair'

By Damien Murphy

DECEMBER 5 2016

Hanging points, mattresses that could burst into flames, and all-male Caucasian staff who preferred to monitor young Aboriginal prisoners via CCTV rather than interact with them and allowed them to smash up the place.

This was Darwin's Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, as described to the Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory on Monday.

Keith Hamburger, a former CEO of Queensland's prison system, said Don Dale was a scene of "disrepair and despair" that doubled as a "human storage" with a guardian rather than a therapeutic culture.

Mr Hamburger said the NT government had failed in its duty of care to the incarcerated children and teenagers.



Youths were isolated and strapped to mechanical chairs at the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre in Darwin. Photo: ABC News

Mr Hamburger told commissioners he undertook a root-and-branch investigation into the Territory prison system but was so horrified after an inspection of the Don Dale facility last May that he felt compelled to alert Corrections Commissioner Mark Payne before the report was finished.

He said the NT government had blatantly ignored a key finding of the 1980s Royal Commission into deaths in custody that authorities had a duty of care to people in jail.

He said the NT government had failed to protect "people in captivity who no longer exercise their free will to make themselves safe".

"I said to my team: 'Look, we have seen hanging points, we have seen inappropriate staff supervision practices, we have seen all sorts of problems . . . we can't leave this until the end of the review. We need to raise this concern now because we need to bring it to attention and see if we can get something happening'.



A scene from the Four Corners program, at the Don Dale Detention Centre. Photo: ABC

"It was an old male prison. Its ambience was very poor," Mr Hamburger said.

"It's basically a prison. Young people are kept in concrete cells."

The Don Dale centre was built in the grounds of an old adult jail and Mr Hamburger said it was condemned as an adult facility and was unsuitable to house teenagers.

The royal commission followed revelations on July 25 by the ABC program *Four Corners* of tear-gassing and youths being shackled with handcuffs and fitted with spit hoods at NT jails. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called a royal commission the following day.

Three days later, Mr Hamburger handed his report to the the Chief Minister of the former Country Liberal Party government, Adam Giles.

Labor won the NT election in August but refused to release Mr Hamburger's scathing report, *A Safer Northern Territory Through Correctional Interventions*, until it was leaked to local media.

With 85 per cent people of NT jail population comprised of Aborigines, his report recommended a statutory authority chaired by an Aborigine to run the NT prisoner service.

Mr Hamburger said senior and middle management NT Corrections staff in training sessions had identified many of the problems and the lack of a business plan and strategy to prevent what had happened, prompting Commissioner Margaret White to openly wonder why nothing had been done.

When hearings resumed on Monday after a six-week break, Senior Counsel assisting the Royal Commission Tony McAvoy said there had never been a royal commission dealing with evidence from children currently in protection or detention.

Hearings resume on Tuesday.