

Indigenous imprisonment is ‘affront to us all’

Former WA Governor, Lieutenant General John Sanderson, has described the excessive imprisonment of Indigenous people in WA as “an affront to the humanity of all of us”.

The chair of the new Indigenous Implementation Board WA, who is also a former Chief of the Army, was speaking at a gathering of local government and Indigenous representatives in Perth.

One of the problems, General Sanderson indicated, was that the situation was so dire that Indigenous people preferred being in jail to being out of jail. He said:

“(It) took me back to a discussion I had previously with one of our regional magistrates who, when I asked him how many of those Aboriginal people who came before (him) actually wanted to go to jail, replied, ‘About 80%. For many it’s a case of life and death’.”

General Sanderson said that, in part, this attitude might explain why WA has the worst rate of Indigenous incarceration in the world – nearly 45% of the prison population comes from less than 3% of the total population.

“This is not improving, and, given the overwhelming youth of the Aboriginal population with 50% of the population under the age of 20, and the levels of foetal alcohol syndrome in very young children, without fundamental changes to the way we engage with this issue it can only get worse.

“Frankly, this should be an affront to the humanity of all of us. If it isn’t, we truly need to ask ourselves what is wrong with our society. These are our fellow human beings I am talking about.

“More to the point, they are our fellow Western Australians, and they are our challenge if we are to live decent and sustained lives in this State. Dare I say it, they are our problem rather than the problem of some disengaged bureaucracy from far away.

“Western Australia needs a strategy of its own to deal with this – one that is about inverting our dealings with our Aboriginal people from a needs-based, mendicant status to one where they and their culture are contributors to the common wealth of this state,” General Sanderson said.

– from a speech by Lieutenant General John Sanderson, AC, April 2009, speaking at the Local Government and Indigenous Communities Conference, UWA, April-May 2009 Vision and Partnership – a Regional Framework for Participation. Lt-Gen Sanderson is chair of Indigenous Implementation Board WA, which began operating in early 2009. He is a former Chief of the Army, and Governor of WA. Full speech is available at: <http://www.dia.wa.gov.au/Our-Business/Implementation-Board/Indigenous-Implementation-Board-News/>

See also: CLA’s 2009 Australia Day letter to the WA Attorney-General/Corrective Services Minister: <http://www.cla.asn.au/0805/index.php/articles/2009/australia-day-letters-2009>

See the Minister’s reply to CLA: <http://www.cla.asn.au/Article/ADayReply09WAPrison.pdf>