Rita Panahi: We need more stick and less carrot in detention centres

Rita Panahi, Herald Sun
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IF YOU keep doing the same thing and expect a different result, you’re either mad, a nincompoop or running Victoria’s youth justice system. The softly-softly approach has contributed to a culture of entitlement, bullying and thuggery in our juvenile detention centres. It's no longer just lack of respect and insubordination, there are now regular riots where young inmates cause enormous damage and demand junk food — KFC and pizza are favourites, it seems — to stop the mayhem. Youth offenders may be troubled but they’re not stupid; they know the system, its weaknesses and how it can be manipulated.

For years it’s been a system that’s all about the carrot and not the stick. One where every offender is considered a victim who needs understanding, not punishment. Valuable police resources are tied up on a regular basis dealing with violent inmates rioting and destroying property at Parkville youth detention and Malmsbury youth justice centres.

Earlier this month, Lachlan Mitchell, 20, a Malmsbury inmate described by police as “seriously dangerous”, allegedly escaped from the facility by walking out the front door. He was arrested in South Australia after an alleged crime spree across two states.

On Monday a gang of young males was arrested on West Gate Bridge after a high-speed chase across Melbourne. We learnt on Wednesday these young men are not only known to police but at least one was out on bail for violent offences.
Contrast that with the tough, no-nonsense treatment meted out to those guilty of hooning. Hoons’ cars are firstly impounded then compounded, with repeat offenders seeing their cars crushed.
I doubt you’ll find too many Victorians who have any problem with this zero tolerance approach but compare it with what happens if you are involved in a break and enter in which the homeowners are terrorised, beaten and robbed.
The courts are likely to release you on bail, leaving you free to commit further offences that traumatisé more innocent victims.
If you eventually receive a custodial sentence, you will be treated with kid gloves because you are under 18 and considered a victim of disadvantage, and can look forward to a spell at Parkville. Then it’s video games and pizza, with the occasional riot thrown in to break the monotony.
Vic Police Association secretary Ron Iddles believes it’s time for a new approach and a move away from the “therapeutic model” in detention centres.
“It was reviewed back in 2011 and, quite clearly, I think it’s time to move on, time to stop holding hands and singing Kumbaya,” he said. “I think you go back to putting them in cells. Some of these young people, sadly, I don’t think will change, while there are some who will be rehabilitated. This model was about empowering healing though safe caring and respectful, collaborative relationships. Well, it hasn’t worked. We have to go back to where we were many years ago; they’re incarcerated, they are given education but they are treated as if they are prisoners.”
Shadow Minister for Families and Children, Georgie Crozier, agrees that the therapeutic model isn’t working.
“Dozens of riots and millions of dollars later, Daniel Andrews still defends the therapeutic model,” she says.
“If it was working we wouldn’t be seeing the police tactical response group and ambulances at youth justice centres nearly every second week.
“It’s time to go back to a model that rewards good behaviour and punishes bad behaviour.”
Underlying issues of disadvantage, drug use and parental neglect shouldn’t be ignored but juvenile offenders, no matter how troubled, must eventually learn that actions have consequences.
MANY of the young crims in Parkville and Malmsbury are products of a broken system in which they’ve been shunted from home to home and exposed to drug use and crime.

The rotten ideology that sees children kept in foster care or as wards of the state instead of being placed with families seeking a permanent adoption is a contributing factor that deserves greater scrutiny. The Department of Human Services’ obsession with biology and the assumption that children are always better off with their biological parent has seen countless children suffer and even die as authorities leave them with negligent or abusive parents ill-prepared to care for them. Or they go into state care where their prospects aren’t much better.
How different would their outcomes be if they were allowed to be adopted by the huge waiting list of hopeful parents?
It’s cruel to deny children the chance of a loving, stable home because authorities subscribe to the theory that kids are always better off with their natural parents and therefore those parents should be given every chance to reform — no matter how endlessly hopeless they are.

In the aftermath of the latest riots, there has been tough talk from the Andrews Government but it appears incapable of taking steps to reform the system.
“Enough is enough, these perpetrators of this damage will face serious consequences,” said Children’s Minister
Jenny Mikakos, who has threatened to send offenders to adult prisons. “This behaviour is unacceptable and staff shouldn’t have to put up with it. We are developing a range of tougher measures to ensure we put a stop to this.” But staff at the centres are said to be demoralised and frustrated by a culture that tolerates insubordination and even aggression. Workers feel disempowered and can be disciplined for the slightest misstep, which is exploited endlessly by inmates who understand how to work the system. It’s time for juvenile detention centres to be moved from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Justice, which runs the state’s adult prisons. It’s the first step in many to reform a system that is failing inmates and the wider community. Otherwise the lunatics will continue to run the asylum.

RITA PANAHIS A HERALD SUN COLUMNIST

Comments:

Steven
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It’s all very well for the public to call for harsher treatment and harsher conditions for young offenders without truely considering the long term cost to the public. Whilst I agree young offenders deserve lengthier sentences for the recent spate of crime, harsher treatment and conditions do little in the long term to ever be of any benefit to the community as a whole. I personally know of many men who suffered at the hands of an imhumane, barbaric and brutal system in the 1980's in the old Turana youth training centre and all became scarred individuals who went on to adult prison, murdered, raped and robbed and became violent blights on the community as a direct result of brutal incarceration and ultimately institutionalisation. Many of these men went on to be some of this states most violent and notorious criminals who ran wild in our community and ended up committing brutal crimes against innocent members of the community. Is this really what the public wants from our youth justice system? I don’t know what the answer is, but I for one do not support a return to the system of the 70's and 80's as that simply does not work and only breeds young men that are hell bent on extracting their tonne of flesh on the community upon release.

The lock them up and throw away the key attitude has never ever worked and I ask why would it now work?