



Statement on behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society

Madam Chairman,

The Australian Institute of Criminology, while conducting research to help the current Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, discovered that the rate<sup>1</sup> of imprisonment for Aborigines is 23 times higher than for whites.

This is much higher than the usually accepted multiple of about 14.

When the commission was set up under Commissioner James Muirhead a year ago it was to investigate 44 deaths; it is now investigating over 100. The commissioner's team has been augmented by the appointment of assistant commissioners and by a consultant, the aboriginal activist, Gary Foley. (The Society is aware that not all Aboriginal groups are happy with the latter appointment.)

Earlier this year the Australian Institute of Criminology found that although Aborigines account for only 1.3 per cent of the national population, they form about 15 per cent of the prison population.

I mention all this, Madam Chairman, to show both the gravity and the complexity of the problem. The Anti-Slavery Society, in this forum, would like to congratulate the Australian authorities, not only on setting up the Royal Commission, but for allowing press coverage of its deliberations.

However, Aborigines have expressed concern to the Anti-Slavery Society about intimidation of witnesses, and during the inquiry into the death, on 9 July 1987 of Kingsley Dixon, allegations were made that the prisoners who gave evidence were subsequently "bashed" and that one was flogged at the Adelaide Remand Centre. The director of the South Australian Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, Mr Jim Stanley, has said that Aborigines are reluctant to give evidence out of fear of harassment.

Police and prison officers have been the visible enforcers of oppressive laws that were operative until the 1960s and it is not unnatural that Aborigines should fear the possibility of intimidation. If nothing else, prison officers are going to view with disfavour any person, black or white, giving evidence to the Royal Commission. Distrust and fear of authority, particularly by Aborigines can only be fostered by such comments as that attributed to NSW premier, Nick Greiner, that: "There's nothing wrong with the old system where the police sergeant could plant his size 9's in someone's backside ..."<sup>2</sup>

The Anti-Slavery Society would like to support the suggestion made by the Aboriginal Law Bulletin, the journal of the Faculty of Law, University of New South Wales, that the Royal Commission fully address the problem of witness protection through specific provisions for custodial and community protection of those who testify before it.

Your widely reported comment, Madam Chairman, that "Australia had not yet achieved the level of United Nations standards in some areas" would, unhappily, prove to be applicable in regard to this aspect of justice.

1. Sydney Morning Herald, 19 November 1987
2. Aboriginal Law Bulletin, 31 April 1988

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