

The Secretary
Legal & Social Issues Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
East Melbourne Vic 3002

Dear Secretary & Committee Members,

The juvenile justice system continues to attract adverse publicity. It is impossible to avoid the impression that, whatever the current system is, it is not working.

Allow me to put a proposal for an alternative policy that I believe could work. I speak as a pragmatist, not as a bleeding heart or a latter day Genghis Khan.

Principles to be observed:

- There has to be a structured system to deal with juvenile offenders.
- The system has to provide for a spectrum of offenders, from first timers through to a few of sociopathic tendencies.
- The primary aim of the system must be rehabilitation, else the offenders simply return to society better equipped for further criminal activity. A system based on punishment alone will almost certainly guarantee recidivism.
- The system must be cost efficient though not at the expense of its objectives. Cutting costs for essential programs would defeat the aim of rehabilitation. It would not make sense.
- The system needs to incorporate self-discipline, education, community awareness, self management, vocational training & self reliance. It needs to break down the attraction of the mob mentality, the false sense of bravado that mob leaders seek to encourage.
- The environment must encourage juveniles to feel part of it, to respect it, to want to enhance its appearance.

Where to start?

My system would not work for true sociopaths, I feel. A tiny percentage of offenders will need to be separated under high security for specialised

treatment. I'm thinking of the likes of John Travers, the mastermind behind the rape & murder of Anita Cobby. Their very presence in society presents a serious threat. *I do not have answers for this group.*

I'm thinking along the lines of a boot camp scenario but one of specific design, not simply a house of punishment.

I'd seek out ex-service people to run the show. Former army sergeants or warrant officers, used to managing people, no strangers to difficult situations, no nonsense types but level headed, pragmatic & sensible in dealing with people. Referees & interview would single out good candidates, purposeful, dedicated, determined but also humane & sound of judgment. They would also be strongly committed to team building.

I would let them have a hand in choosing their staff.

There would need to be residential facilities within defined limits. The place, however, need not resemble a prison. No razor wire, for example. The space should include lawns & gardens, requiring maintenance by juvenile residents, enabling them to take pride in their surrounds.

A key element in my strategy for rehabilitation would be based on horses & horse management.

Let me explain. Horses are high maintenance animals. Having to spend time working around stables, mucking out stalls, grooming, maintaining equipment & so on would require disciplined effort. The work won't do itself. The work won't go away. The horses themselves would impose the discipline, not someone representing the authority of the State.

Horses are sensitive to the way they are treated. Bart Cummings made that his first principle of horse management. He got to know every horse in his care. A young offender would soon bond with a horse, would soon get to know it, and get to love it. Horses have that effect.

The most effective way of imposing punishment on a juvenile would be to deprive him/her of the company of a horse. I doubt that any youngster would be tempted to offend, if it could mean missing the company of a horse.

Participation in the horse program could be made dependent on good behaviour generally. Be a good lad & you get to visit the stables & your horse mate. Believe me, the incentive to behave would be powerful.

The companionship of a horse would encourage self discipline, infinitely better than say solitary confinement or lockdown. It would also be a powerful deterrent to anyone seeking to lead others into antisocial activities such as riots & vandalism. Prospective gang leaders would be ostracised, would lose face, would have their perverse ambitions thwarted & frustrated.

I would include elementary lessons in horse riding. Bravado soon disappears when a youngster is alone, on top of a 400kg animal, needing to be in control. Gradual mastery of elementary skills would provide impetus to growing self esteem.

Horses can also have a calming effect. I've seen this with autistic kids. They change when they get on a horse.

Horse & stable work could occur perhaps one day per week. I'd suggest a full day to allow them to get the feel of stables. A quick hour or so would not suffice, indeed could be counterproductive. Haste would not allow for soaking up the atmosphere of stables. Let's not overlook either the possibility of some youngsters setting their sights on a career with horses. I'd lay odds on that happening.

Where to find suitable facilities for a horse day program? I'd suggest an approach to Riding for the Disabled Victoria, initially through my daughter Edwina Boase-Stratford who is the State Coaching Coordinator. If a program were feasible, she would know & would offer practical, constructive advice how to implement it. She knows all aspects of riding of this kind including OH & S requirements. Safety is paramount around horses. No need for the system to worry on that account.

There could be an RDA Centre prepared to host the program. I'd imagine that payment to the Centre would be appropriate. The Centre could provide coaching staff. There would of course be a need for adequate boot camp staff supervision. I doubt that any youngster would try to do a runner, though one can never be 100% certain that won't happen. I'd reckon that the horses would offer such attraction that escape would go off the agenda. In any event, it could be made clear that attempted escape would mean going off the horse day program altogether. Who'd want to have to listen to the others bubbling on about their horse day, having been banned from the program by stupid misbehaviour? Very few if any, I'd suggest.

I imagine an RDAV Centre would want to schedule the horse day away from its normal riding programs. That should not present a problem.

The youngsters would return to camp tired, dusty but exhilarated, eager for the next horse day. Horses are like that.

An overall boot camp program would need to incorporate an element of vocational training. The possibilities for this are too many to explore here. I'd be suggesting the enlistment of retired TAFE teachers, seeking their ideas. There is no better source of practical ideas about vocational training than old hands of TAFE. They are also the kind of forthright, no nonsense types that these kids would find helpful & supportive in the wider sense. The kids would be treated with respect but they would soon realise that they had to return the respect.

Youngsters would no doubt exhibit a range of educational achievement. Distance Education is a flexible, well established means of delivering the different kinds of programs that these kids would need. Supervision of lessons at camp might

require the services of a teacher, preferably one with experience of dealing with young offenders.

Self management would need to be addressed. Boot camp could reasonably require a minimum standard of self presentation. The youngsters would need to meet basic dress requirements. Clean hands & fingernails after a stable day would be essential.

They would need to be given responsibility for maintaining the environment. That could include gardening, sweeping up, kitchen duties etc. The work could be rostered.

I'd be suggesting an element of community service as well. This could take diverse forms, too many to mention here. Half a day a week doing gardening at an old folks home, as an example. These kids have abused community trust by antisocial activities, now let them give back to the community, to make amends. There'd be no need to sermonise about this. The implications would soon become apparent.

I'm sure that volunteers could be found to assist in the programs. They would need to be screened with care. I'm aware, for example, of volunteers with autistic kids who think the answer to their condition is 'a good kick in the bum'. One would not want volunteers who were negatively predisposed towards young offenders.

Volunteers would be ideal to work with youngsters with hobbies. A register of volunteers could be kept for this purpose. Regular time(s) for hobbies would need to be set aside.

Hobbies would be useful in reducing the common dependence on social media. It may prove necessary to forbid access to mobile phones. If so, that should be known at the outset of the scheme, not come in later as retribution. Access to the Internet should be subject to controls including *no pornography*. Computers should be sited in open spaces, not in individual rooms.

I'll leave it there, having outlined what I see as a workable scheme that would likely produce the preferred outcomes. Surely, anything is better than what we have now. To this outsider, witnessing riots on the news bulletins, the system is *broke*. It *needs fixing*.

I'm not suggesting some kind of holiday camp, tut tutting all the time, going all touchy feely, patting heads in sympathy for an unhappy upbringing. The youngsters are there as punishment. Boot camp must not be a merely procedural experience.

There would be physical activity for fitness purposes. I could envisage an occasional 3km run. An ex-army fitness instructor would come up with a suitable regime, I'm sure.

Which is not to say that a boot camp should depend on harsh, old style methods of discipline. The best form of discipline is self discipline. There are common sense ways of encouraging the development of self discipline. The overall program must be coherent in its philosophy & its structure. The whole must be greater than the sum of its parts. It must be purposeful, its objectives clearly defined. And its performance would need to be monitored externally by someone qualified to make judgments, not by an uninformed bean counter.

There could be incentives built into camp life. Good behaviour must ideally come to be seen as a reward in itself. A range of modest incentives, however, might prove efficacious. An outstanding garden display? Maybe a day trip somewhere nice for the gardeners, under supervision of course.

I should add that my wife Jeanne is Chair of the National Committee of Riding for the Disabled Australia. She is aware of these suggestions but is not party to them. My scheme carries no endorsement by RDAA, nor have I sought same. Pursuit of my scheme using RDAV facilities would probably require the approval of the RDAA Board but these are early days. I have no idea if RDAV would be able to incorporate my scheme. I am aware of successful programs for veterans suffering PTSD in the USA involving horses. I believe the concept is worth trying. I would be confident of its success. If perchance it were not to succeed, the experiment would have been a noble one.

You might not even agree with my suggestions, perhaps regard them as a load of old cobbles! That is your prerogative.

I'm only trying to be helpful. I don't envy you your job. I do recognise its importance.

Yours sincerely

Dick Stratford