

This is very much a work in progress. There is more editing to do and the in-text notes will eventually be transformed into endnotes.

This text is the first half of what will be a very long chapter reflecting Ann Symond's long commitment to prison reform). It may seem perverse to post something unfinished. But online publishing allows authors to ask for feedback and assistance. I drafted most of this account of Ann's work in isolation. First there were three lockdowns and now my access to sources has been curtailed by my role as a carer. I have Ann's papers and her taped interviews but I need to talk to other people, both supporters and critics of her approach. I would welcome suggestions about contacts and alternative sources, as well as criticism of the text so far. I am quite prepared to be told where and how I have got things wrong.

Hilary Golder

Women in Prisons Chapter

When Ann Symonds became a Labor MLC in September 1982 she chose to join the three caucus sub-committees that focused on Women, the Arts and Corrective Services. She remembered that there was little competition for the last assignment: more ambitious members of caucus tended to see Corrective Services as a grim backwater. By 1982, however, overcrowding and lack of services in women's prisons were demanding a response. The activists of Women Behind Bars – ex-prisoners, lawyers and students – had been disappointed by the major review of the New South Wales prison system conducted by Justice J F Nagle in that late 1970s. In Nagle's report women's experience of incarceration was subsumed into that of the male majority, except for one brief chapter that acknowledged problems 'peculiar to women' such as a lack of appropriate medical care.

Women Behind Bars were making it much harder to ignore women's appalling conditions, although they objected to the government's preferred solution, which was to build another prison. Ann was sworn in to the Council just before Rex Jackson, the Minister for Corrective Services, announced a new 'prison complex for women' and predicted that it would be 'another great achievement of the Wran government'.¹ This was a difficult moment for Labor women as party loyalty risked stranding them outside the consensus of the

wider women's movement that more and more 'efficient' incarceration was not the answer to overcrowding.

Ann dated her own interest in prison reform to 1973, when Suzanne Bellamy of Women's Liberation organised a protest outside the Parramatta Girls Home. For anyone trying to understand the history of women's imprisonment in New South Wales, Parramatta was Ground Zero. A cluster of heritage buildings made visible the genealogy of women prisoners' 'peculiar' problems. The idea that those problems were simultaneously marginal but intractable dated to the earliest days of the colony. Convict authorities designed a system of punishments and privileges for men, who had the skills and strength that could be used to build the new colony. The small minority of transported women – 'useful' only as domestic servants – were outside this carefully crafted regime and subject to harsher judgments on their morals and behaviour. These inconvenient anomalies were the first convicts to be incarcerated when the Female Factory was built in 1804 and then replaced in 1821 with a larger specially designed building, which was presumably 'another major achievement' of Governor Macquarie's public works program.

The Parramatta Girls Home, which stood next to the Factory building, was the legacy of a later experiment in incarceration. In the second half of the nineteenth century Industrial Schools were set up to confine juvenile offenders as well as children who were considered 'neglected, uncontrollable or exposed to moral danger'. The schools were supposed to train the young people in some saleable trade. In practice inmates in what was originally known as the Industrial School for Females, were – like convict women and generations of stolen Aboriginal girls – condemned to domestic service. At Parramatta distinctions between the rescued and the convicted broke down; young women were blamed for their own neglect and especially for their 'exposure to moral danger'. In 1973, when Ann Symonds joined the protest, Parramatta Girls Home was a notorious site of physical and sexual abuse. It was closed down in the following year, although the place was quickly recycled. When Ann arrived in the Legislative Council in 1982, Parramatta's 'historic precinct' housed the Kamballa 'Children's Shelter' and the Norma Parker Detention Centre for Females, which was an annex to the main women's prison, Mulawa, and confined women with a low security classification.

This was not the first time Parramatta buildings had been re-used. When the Industrial School for Females arrived in Parramatta in 1887 it took over the premises of the Roman Catholic Orphan School. The origins of Sydney's Orphan Schools touch on one of Ann's lifelong concerns – the treatment of

prisoners' children. The first school was set up as early as 1801 and during the convict era most of the so-called orphans were the children of convict mothers. Women who arrived with children lost them to the schools, while those who got pregnant in New South Wales gave birth in the Female Factory and had their children removed when they were weaned. Convicted women were generally seen as unsuitable mothers. In these orphan schools the distinction between incarceration and education was blurred and girls were trained in – surprise – domestic skills.

Conflicting Loyalties

When Ann Symonds opted to join the Corrective Services subcommittee of the Labor caucus, the relationship between imprisoned mothers and their children was attracting more political attention. In March 1982 the Family and Children's Service Agency (FCSA) issued a report on Children of Imprisoned Parents. The research team, led by Betty Hounslow of the Marrickville Legal Centre, frankly acknowledged a 'sense of deep despair' about the current state and future prospects of prisoners' family relations. The cover featured a drawing of a small child wearing a large ball and chain. For once the investigation had concentrated on women prisoners rather than men since they were more likely to have dependent children. And the news was depressing. The Hounslow report showed how hard it was for women at Mulawa's overcrowded and underserviced prison to maintain relationships with children outside the walls. The lack of attention to these separations suggested that prison and welfare authorities still assumed a convicted criminal must be a 'bad mother' and even that her children might be better off without her. The report challenged this implicit discrimination; loss of contact was not just a secondary sentence for women but a punishment for vulnerable children. Until recently there had been a Mothers and Babies Unit in the prison complex, housing a small number of women and children, but this unit had just been emptied. Officially the program had been 'suspended': its immediate reinstatement and reorganisation was one of the FCSA recommendations.

Ann, as an ex-member of the FCSA Advisory Board, must have been aware of the report and of the ironies embedded in it. The agency that issued criticisms of the 'get tough' regime of Jackson, the new Corrective Services Minister, had been created by Jackson himself in his previous role as Minister for Youth and Community Services (YACS). The FCSA was a small policy unit sitting outside the departmental structure, established as an independent source of advice to Jackson who was determined to drag children's services out of the

‘Dickensian Age’.² In his years at YACs Jackson was responsible for innovations such as youth refuges and Ann rated him as one of the department’s ‘best’ ministers (*French interview. Tape 3*). When Jackson was moved to Corrective Services in October 1981 – with a brief to get escapes, riots and disruptions off the front page – her loyalties would be tested. Ann was distressed by the closure of the Mothers and Babies Unit but she was inclined to accept the more benign interpretation that the minister had reacted emotionally to the sight of babies behind bars. WBB took the more cynical view that he had made a deal with the Prison Officers’ union who immediately took over the empty premises.

The dispute over the Mothers and Babies Unit was part of a much wider debate about conditions in women’s prisons, a debate that would expose Labor women’s conflicting loyalties. Members of the Labor Women’s Committee (LWC) visited Mulawa and Norma Parker in October 1981. They confirmed what WBB and other prison reformers had been saying: the growing number of women prisoners meant conditions at Mulawa were tense and overcrowded but it seemed that number was still not large enough to make the organisation of educational and recreation services ‘practicable’. Utilising Ann’s existing relationship with Jackson, the LWC set up a meeting with the minister himself early in 1982 and with the head of Corrective Services later in the year. Women’s health was the first item on the LWC’s agenda. There had been minimal improvements in medical services since Justice Nagle had stressed the ‘lack of routine ante-natal care and gynaecological services, lack of treatment for [the relatively high proportion of] psychiatrically disturbed prisoners, lack of routine medical care and the extensive over-use of tranquillizers’ in women’s prisons (*p. 366*). The LWC took up the issue of prisoners’ children and asked what was being planned for mothers and babies. Labor women also questioned Corrective Services about policies and options for transsexual prisoners.

The official response to LWC questions was that conditions and services could only be improved by building a new prison. Mulawa, which had been opened in 1968 to house a maximum of 90 high security prisoners, was now crowded with women of different classifications who were all subjected to a high security regime because segregation was just not possible. The prison was a tense and insecure environment. Labor women initially accepted the party line. At their Annual Conference in May 1983 they endorsed the planned new prison for women, at the same time calling for initiatives such as a detoxification unit and an educational program that prioritised literacy and employable skills over domestic activities.

Locking themselves into support for Jackson isolated Labor women as the WBB built a convincing case against his plans. Women Behind Bars had been honing

their arguments since 1975 and could call on personal testimony of ex-inmates. The WBB contended that Mulawa was an unhappy place not just because it was a crowded and poorly serviced prison but because it was – a prison. A prison with a high proportion of women with psychiatric and drug dependency problems that should be treated outside the walls. The solution to unsustainably high numbers at Mulawa lay in bail reform, decriminalisation of minor drug offences and other diversionary programs that would keep women out of court and prison. Building a new state-of-the art jail would actually undermine diversion because of the First Law of Incarceration: If You Build It, They – Police, Magistrates and Judges – Will Fill It. Even the programs advocated by the LWC would have limited impact because a long-standing culture in women's prisons denigrated and infantilised inmates, using tranquillisers as a means of control.

The salience of the prison debate was evident when the Women's Advisory Council (WAC), the peak body of women's organisations in New South Wales, chose WBB's Wendy Bacon to give the annual Anne Conlon Memorial Lecture in August 1983. (Conlon's distinguished record included work on prison reform at the Women's Coordination Unit as well as research into the history of women and work in Australia and her role in the equal pay campaign.) Bacon made all the above points in an excoriating critique of Jackson's prison proposal. Her reference to the LWC support for the plan must have stung: the women involved had 'the best intentions' but 'have never talked or studied women's imprisonment very much'. Soon after the lecture WAC gave Premier Neville Wran the unwelcome news that there were differences 'within the women's movement at present'.

The Labor Women's Committee had to manage a strategic retreat, although it could not simply override a resolution of Annual Conference. A subcommittee headed by Beverley Schurr and Barbara Armitage organised an October seminar that heard again from Wendy Bacon and other prison reformers. The LWC then voted to 'defer any action on the building of a new women's prison until the next Labor Women's Conference' (*LWC Box 2, this quote comes from the loose collection of minutes in a folder*). Meanwhile Ann Symonds had been doing a little freelancing. She arranged for Labor backbenchers to hear the case against the prison from WBB and then, with other members of the Left, she lobbied Jackson and the Corrective Services Commissioner. Despite the scepticism of her contacts in WBB and the Prisoners Action Group, Ann believed that Jackson was persuadable. After meeting the backbenchers the minister did promise to consult with women's groups including WBB before designing 'a new facility for the small number of women who need the custodial care of the

Department of Corrective Services'. (*Jackson Press Release, draft, never issued, AS Papers*) Although the language was conciliatory Jackson still appeared intent on building a prison albeit one with a detoxification unit and arrangements for mothers and babies. The question of how many concessions Jackson would make became moot when he was forced to resign on 27 October 1983 because he had accepted bribes and corrupted a scheme for the early release of prisoners on licence.

Jackson's removal allowed the Wran government to beat its own retreat from the prison proposal. Helen L'Orange, head of the Women's Coordination Unit, proposed an extensive inquiry into the needs and conditions of women in prison. On 8 March 1984 (International Women's Day) the Premier announced the postponement of any decision on a new prison pending the report of a Women in Prison Task Force. Referring controversial issues to a review/committee/task force was a familiar resort for governments hoping to 'kick the can down the road'. Under the heading 'Task Farce' *Jail News* argued the whole exercise was a 'placative gesture' by Wran that would not be taken seriously.

The Women in Prison Task Force

Ann Symonds was more sanguine. The membership of the Task Force, announced by the new Minister John Akister, did at least suggest that competing views would be heard. The Chair was Frank Hayes, Commissioner of Corrective Services, while Ann became the Deputy Chair and Community Representative. As well as the Superintendent of Mulawa and representatives from the Department of Corrective Services, the Attorney General's Department, the magistracy, the Probation Service, the Prison Officers and Public Service unions, the Task Force recruited members from Community Legal Centres (including Betty Hounslow), from the Children of Prisoners Support Group and from the Mothers and Babies Committee as well as Debbie Payne from WBB. The wider women's movement was represented by Helen L'Orange, while the inclusion of Pat O'Shane from the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and Irene Mamontoff of the Ethnic Affairs Commission signalled that the Task Force would address the overrepresentation of First Nations women in prison and the particular problems of non-English speaking women caught up in the justice system. And in an unprecedented move the Task Force included a prisoner, a woman serving a life sentence at Mulawa. This was not just an exercise in progressive tokenism: the representative not only brought prisoner perspectives to the table but, more importantly, argued with sceptical inmates

that it might be worth cooperating with the Task Force. (*Ann Symonds, personal communication*)

The Women in Prison Task Force produced a thorough and surprisingly radical report. Although the preface by Commissioner Hayes admitted that there was no consensus on 'several important points', this diverse group agreed that crowded women's prisons signified a failure to implement Justice Nagle's principle that imprisonment should be a sentence of last resort.³ Many recommendations were aimed at reducing the number of women under sentence and the unusually high number of women held on remand. Based on interviews with 84 per cent of sentenced women in custody in August 1984, Corrective Services researchers drew up a detailed profile of that population. (Task Force members credited this high response rate to the intervention of their prisoner representative.) The Hounslow Report had been scathing about the Department's failure to keep records of the number of prisoners with children and the number of children involved. The finding that 46 per cent of sentenced women were mothers, and that nearly half of these were single mothers, shaped Task Force recommendations on a range of issues. The researchers also asked for the experiences and opinions of prisoners so their voices are heard throughout the report. Finally, the profile reinforced what Women Behind Bars had been arguing for years, that prisons were crowded with young women who had led a precarious and often unemployed life outside 'traditional family structures'. (*Task Force p. 43*) They reported high rates of drug and alcohol use. Women on remand tended to share these characteristics. Once in prison women got very little incentive or assistance to change. For Ann, who had chaired a 1983 Inquiry into Women and Homelessness, this prisoner profile reinforced its findings on the vulnerability of women, especially young women, outside those traditional structures.

On the basis of the Corrective Services research – and members' own discussions with women in all sections of the prisons – the Task Force was explicit that imprisonment rates were socially constructed. Which was 'an important advance on most official criminological discourse.'⁴ Because those rates were largely the product of political, police and legal processes, changing the processes should significantly reduce the number of women in gaol.

Clearing the crowded remand section of Mulawa (Catchpole House) was a priority; staff and inmate interviews agreed that Catchpole was a disgrace. The Task Force recommended improvements to the bail system including provision of legal aid at all levels of the court system, expansion of accommodation for women on bail and the funding of a drug rehabilitation centre for women that

would accept women as a condition of bail or probation. Changes in sentencing practices were also necessary. The Task Force recommended that government look at decriminalising or removing prison as a possible sentence for offences, including prostitution, minor drug offences and shoplifting, which brought too many women before the courts.

Noting the unusually punitive attitudes of judges and magistrates in New South Wales, the Task Force actually ventured onto the dangerous terrain of judicial independence, suggesting 'strategies for influencing judicial officers' to reduce both imprisonment rates and length of sentences. It even recommended legislation to declare that imprisonment must be the sentence of last resort, mandating pre-sentence reports that would canvass all options before it could be imposed. And there should be genuine options: currently fines imposed on women without the capacity to pay simply funnelled poor women into prison as defaulters. When it came to the broader question of alternatives to prison, the Task Force was wary of setting up new schemes of 'community correction' that could easily turn into an extension of prison and not a genuine replacement. But the rules governing the existing options of Community Service Orders and Periodic Detention should be relaxed to accommodate women with children.

Women Prisoners and their Children

Implicit in many of these recommendations was a preference to keep mothers and children together. Preferably outside prison. But even if these reforms worked well, some mothers and pregnant women would still be sent to gaol. The Task Force findings on women prisoners and their children made a great impression on Ann, who once argued that the convict women of the Parramatta Factory had a better deal than the mothers of Mulawa. In the 1820s women could expect to keep their children until they were weaned at three years old. In 1984 there was still no Mothers and Babies Unit at Mulawa so that very young children were cared for by family or foster parents who might be complete strangers. One woman told the Task Force that she knew her five-month-old child was ill but complained that she had not been given the details.

Children's visits were problematic. Visiting times were inflexible, public transport was difficult and visitors faced intimidating security designed to keep drugs out of the prison. Once inside, tired toddlers met their mothers in noisy and uncomfortable conditions (slightly better at Norma Parker). Although both

women's prisons organised occasional day-long sessions for mothers and children, the Task Force politely concluded that the situation was 'unsatisfactory'. The report recommended several prison-emptying initiatives, including the release on licence of women who give birth in prison, or who were their children's primary caregiver. Corrective Services was urged to make more use of Section 29 of the Prisons Act, which would allow mothers to serve their sentences with their children in approved facilities, such as a half-way house or a drug rehabilitation unit. While the Task Force recommended the reinstatement and improvement of the Mothers and Babies Unit, taking mothers out of gaol was the preferred option.

Women Prisoners and Drug Use

The Women in Prison Task Force was Ann's first sustained exposure to debates about appropriate responses to growing drug use. The fact that a high proportion of women were imprisoned for drug and/or drug-related offences underlay some of the harsher aspects of the current regime. The high security around and inside Mulawa was designed to keep drugs out, but did *not* stop drugs filtering into the prison. Dealing with drug-dependent women also coloured the attitudes of prison staff: women complained that officers were unsympathetic to any medical requests, suspecting that inmates were only 'after drugs'. Everyone – prisoners, officers and all members of the Task Force – agreed that the treatment offered to drug-dependent inmates was 'totally inadequate'.

Their report recommended some improvements to prison facilities and services, arguing that Corrective Services must connect with the outside world. Community organisations should be invited in (and funded) to provide education and counselling for prisoners even if this might compromise security. It 'was unrealistic to expect a drug-free prison in a drug using society' (*Task Force, p. 100*). Because prisoners would eventually be released into that drug-using environment, more half-way houses were needed and Corrective Services could ease women's transition by maintaining strong links with outside drug programs.

Even if these changes were made, the Task Force insisted, prison was an 'inappropriate environment' for young women who had turned to drugs for complex social, economic and personal reasons. The two imperatives of security and rehabilitation could not be reconciled. The report again put more emphasis on pre-trial and pre-and post-sentence programs to take women out of

the criminal justice system. Delivering them into the arms of health and welfare agencies was not necessarily a great improvement as existing services were not designed to meet women's needs. At the most basic level they often refused to take women with children. For this reason the Task Force prioritised the development of a new service specifically designed to meet the needs of 'young, working class, drug-dependent women'. (This initiative has already been mentioned in the section on bail reforms).

The Task Force ventured into the political minefield of drug laws and policies. After canvassing – but not agreeing on – options including some form of licensed supply of heroin, the report made relatively modest recommendations that would cut prison numbers for men and women. The government should at least look at the possibility of treating marijuana like alcohol, as a drug that was regulated but not outlawed. The Task Force also called for legislation to remove imprisonment as a sentence for use/possession of heroin for personal use. Finally, their report advocated a wider debate on competing legal and medical approaches to drug use, a debate not driven by 'journalistic hysteria'.(p.106) This phrase must have come back to Ann in her later career as a drug law reformer as she waged her long war of attrition against the tabloid press.

A New Prison?

All these prison-emptying plans seemed to make a new building redundant. Indeed the Task Force voted 17 to 7 against the proposal for a custom-built women's prison (*Brown and Quinn, p. 264*). But there is no reference to this vote in the report and the Task Force simply recommended that any decision should be put off for a few years. The later sections of the report betray a distinct division between a minority of members, who still argued that a new prison was the best response to the problems at Mulawa, and others who believed a 'new prison' could be created at Mulawa by radically redeveloping existing accommodation and by equally radical cultural change. Ann was firmly in the second camp.

The division was so intractable that 'insiders' from Corrective Services, Probation and Parole and the Prison Officers' Vocational Branch wrote a minority report, which was not shared with the rest of the Task Force. The influential dissenters did not disagree with the 'reductionist' aims of the Task

Force but objected to specific proposals and to the implication, embedded in the majority's report, that a new prison was unnecessary and undesirable. On this crucial question the government was confronted by two competing conclusions.

The majority argued that Corrective Services should impose a ceiling of 97 prisoners: Ann later conceded that this precise target – a pernicky 97 rather than a round 100 – left them 'open to ridicule' (*French tape 3*). To meet this target, the report suggested, a Women's Prisoners' Diversion Committee would be needed to manage prisoners' access to pre-release and other programs. A much smaller prison population could then be accommodated in a redevelopment/expansion of the Mulawa site. Although they officially recommended postponing a decision on a new building, the majority signaled that such a project would consume resources needed to improve Mulawa now. They also pointed to the long penal history of the state, which suggested that building more cells meant filling more cells and that new institutions nearly always supplemented rather than superseded the old prisons.

What was missing from the report were specific proposals for redevelopment at Mulawa. Although the Task Force had included an Accommodation Subcommittee – and Ann herself made a productive visit to facilities in Western Australia and South Australia – the minister John Akister vetoed attempts to produce detailed reconstruction plans, arguing these were beyond its terms of reference. The report could only make the general point that a reconfigured prison should obliterate internal fences, increase open space and offer 'unit living' on a domestic scale, giving women far more say over their daily lives. Redesigning buildings had to be accompanied – in fact preceded – by the redesign of existing management systems. Corrective Services needed to enlist prisoners in the development of a more participatory management model. Adult women should not be subject to unnecessarily rigid rules: the majority report singled out the petty and patriarchal punishments for petty offences. Some of these – like swearing or idleness – would not have been out of place in the Female Factory. To redress the lack of work and educational opportunities for women prisoners, Corrective Services had to take affirmative action, even if programs for women would never be cost effective. Both work and education programs should offer more than variations on 'domestic duties'. Finally, women's prisons should be more open to the outside world. Counsellors, teachers and especially health workers should be welcomed in, not subject to the current security and suspicion. Community support was essential for migrant prisoners and Aboriginal women who were significantly overrepresented in the prison population.

The majority insisted that their approach was ‘neither naïve nor ill-considered’ (a glimpse into the Task Force debates) (*TF*, p.279). To anchor this ambitious program they proposed a Women’s Council to ‘co-ordinate and monitor’ implementation. As well as predictable representation from Corrective Services, the Probation and Parole Service and the Attorney General’s Department, the 14-member Council should include members from TAFE and the Department of Health along with three community representatives from organisations such as WBB or community legal centres. The Council should also follow the precedent set by the Task Force and recruit a serving prisoner. The central body would then develop a series of sub-committees to cover issues such as rehabilitation and facilities for mothers and babies. The most important of the proposed sub-committees would deal with the redevelopment of Mulawa.

These suggestions were contested in the minority’s report. First, they argued that the attempt to put an immediate cap on the number of women in New South Wales prisons was too abrupt: although gradual reduction could be achieved by implementing bail and other reforms, a ‘projective study’ was needed to ‘determine the future rate of women’s imprisonment’. The minority also objected that the Women’s Council and its numerous sub-committees would be hopelessly unwieldy. Their report suggests discomfort with the prospect of too much ‘outside’ involvement in the running of prisons. Corrective Services had statutory responsibilities that could not be delegated to other groups. Instead of a Women’s Council the report suggested an Implementation Group made up of Corrective Services personnel who would ‘consult’ community representatives.

Although the majority report had recommended postponing a decision on a new custom-built prison for three years, it suggested that the issue could then be referred to the Women’s Council. This was quite unacceptable to the insiders. The minority took issue with the argument that a new building could well increase prison capacity and decrease incentives for judicial officers to change their sentencing practices. They also argued that the redevelopment of Mulawa was not feasible, implying that the outsiders were not really familiar with the site, sitting in a heavily industrialised suburb with polluted air and dangerous neighbours such as an oil refinery and an ammunition dump. Their report insisted that a new prison on a new site would not only be consistent with a move to unit living but preferable to a patch-up at Mulawa. It could be designed for women’s needs with specialised facilities including a mothers and babies unit.

‘The Demise of the Women in Prison Task Force Report’

The hefty 344-page Report of the NSW Task Force on Women in Prison was presented to the Minister for Corrective Services and tabled in parliament in March 1985. In Ann's words, it was a 'blueprint for change' although there were already signs that implementing those changes would be difficult (*Demise of the Women in Prison Task Force Report, 10 March 1993*). The minister, John Akister, surprised Task Force members when he also tabled the much shorter minority report.⁵ This slight document seemed to carry more political weight. According to Ann, Helen L'Orange prepared a press release announcing the establishment of the Women's Council and naming Ann Symonds as its Chair. If this was a pre-emptive strike it did not work. Akister and the Department of Corrective Services rejected a Women's Council and opted for implementation committees. Also Judy Johnston was promoted to the new position of Assistant Director Women's Services

Other initiatives worried members of the Task Force. Before their report had been completed, the government had responded to overcrowding at Mulawa by moving some women to Bathurst and others to Parramatta. The Task Force could only put on record the hope that this was not meant to be more than a stopgap solution. One more hopeful sign was the allocation in the 1985-86 state budget of \$11 million for capital works at Mulawa and \$500,000 for programs including drug rehabilitation. This seemed to be an endorsement of the argument that Mulawa could be transformed. Ann was recruited to both the Redevelopment Design Committee and the Redevelopment and Co-ordinating Committee as the 'community representative'. Although she hoped that these new committees would tap the knowledge she had developed on the Task Force, it seemed likely that the real decisions would be made in the Implementation Committee set up within Corrective Services without any outside representation.

In the early 1990s Ann gave a series of speeches on 'The Demise of the Women in Prison Task Force Report', her own disillusioned history of the two committees she had joined. Perhaps she underestimated the difficulty of managing change in the massive machine that was Corrective Services, but she felt that the Co-ordinating Committee was hardly living up to its name. She suspected bureaucratic foot dragging on key Task Force recommendations and was particularly frustrated at slow progress on the question of mothers and children. In 1986 section 29 of the Prisons Act was amended to allow the release of women prisoners with young children: they could be accommodated with their children in approved supervised facilities such as a half-way house.

Although Ann congratulated her government on this reform, the responsibility for turning these good intentions into workable arrangements lay with Corrective Services' internal Implementation Committee. They were reported to be 'working on the matter'.

There had been other promising beginnings. Ann was encouraged in 1985 when work started on converting the reception area at Mulawa into a Detoxification Unit. Two years later the minister had to tell her that the opening of the unit, and a three-stage treatment program, had been held up by the withdrawal of Drug and Alcohol funding. (*Akister to Symonds, 26 November 1987*) Also in 1987 Judy Johnston – caught between the reformers and the resisters – listed modest initiatives including the upgrading of library services, the temporary appointment of an Aboriginal Officer and the creation of a position of Bail Coordinator. The number of women on 'not under sentence' was reduced in the years following the Task Force, but this change was overshadowed by the significant *increase* in the overall number of women imprisoned⁶. The prison census was depressing reading for a reductionist like Ann.

NB. THE TROUBLED HISTORY OF DRUG PROGRAMS AT MULAWA IS ONE AREA WHERE MORE RESEARCH IS NEEDED. CAN ANYONE SUGGEST USEFUL CONTACTS AND REFERENCES?

Ann may have found the Co-ordinating Committee frustratingly slow but she said that meetings of the Design Committee were 'without doubt the most stressful committee meetings I have ever participated in' (*Demise*, p. 5). Coming from a veteran of Left-Right battles in the New South Wales Labor Party, this was quite a claim. She later admitted that she was naïvely surprised that the real resistance to design changes came from the union, the Prison Officers Vocational Branch. She never forgot that Pat Armstrong, chairman of the POVB, insisted on new facilities for officers (including a sauna, tennis court and swimming pool) as the first priority of redevelopment at Mulawa. This flexing of union muscle was a reminder that no government – perhaps especially a relatively progressive government – could afford to alienate the POVB.

For their part union members on the Committee believed that Ann and the government architect assigned to the project – 'a lovely young man' – had no idea of security problems in a prison (*French Tape 3*). The two sides clashed over the possible use of reinforced glass instead of bars inside the prison, over the provision of observation towers and, especially, over the design of a Segregation Unit with 'dry cells' for the detention of unmanageable women. She was told that 'you don't understand Mrs Symonds that sometimes you have

to strip a woman and throw her into a dry cell for her own protection' (*Demise*, p. 7). Ann was unconvinced; as a Task Force member she had heard too many horror stories about difficult women who had been consigned to a dry cell, became much more agitated and were then medicated into submission.

Ann and the lovely young man were worn down. In May 1987 she wrote to the minister and to the Acting Chairman of the Corrective Services Commission, reminding them that the Task Force had agreed 'to pursue an adapted domestic environment within a secure perimeter'. Now the POVB was insisting on repressive changes to prison design that would also make it hard to develop a more participatory management plan. Feeling outnumbered and outmanoeuvred Ann resigned from both committees in August.

What did Ann take from this experience? While she found the aftermath of the Task Force depressing, she could not agree with *Jail News* it was nothing but a 'Task Farce' (*Jail News*, 8, 1, p. 8). The woman who was once described as a 'born teacher' was also an enthusiastic learner and relished the chance to work with a group of people bringing such different experiences, interests and qualifications to the table. (Even if consensus was not achieved.) The fact that the Task Force included a serving prisoner, and commissioned extensive interviews with other inmates, reinforced the lesson that Ann had drawn from her work on child care in the 1970s. Then Kim Beazley Snr, Education Minister in the Whitlam government, had been scathing when Labor women wrote a child care policy 'on the vague grounds that a lot of women want it'.⁷ Ann was convinced that anyone advocating change had to listen to those who were directly affected by policies and practices. (*Ann Symonds, Politics in the Pub*, 21 October 1994).

Her year on the Task Force clarified Ann's views on prisons. The minority report had implied that the majority had been hijacked by 'abolitionists', who thought there should be no prisons at all. In her later years as a reform advocate Ann had friends and allies who were abolitionists, but she always remained a 'reductionist'. She felt that the Task Force had demonstrated that the community was *not* made safer by incarcerating large numbers of young women with multiple problems that could not be addressed in prison. Ann was proud of the fact that their report had made practical recommendations on bail, pre-trial and pre-sentence diversion and early release to cut the numbers. She cited two principles enunciated by Justice Nagle, that imprisonment should be a sentence of last resort and that, once the sentence had been imposed, deprivation of liberty was the punishment and should not be compounded by needlessly harsh conditions. The Task Force even recommended that new 'unit living

arrangements' should be designed to 'provide the most pleasant environment possible within a prison', which was an increasingly unfashionable approach. (*TF Recommendation 232*). By 1987 the political tide was running strongly against prison reform: a confident Coalition opposition was already planning a law and order election campaign. But Ann insisted that it was important to set out your 'blueprint for change', even if change was hard to achieve. Patience and, above all, persistence were needed. In 1987 she began thirty years of work for women prisoners and their children.

The Yabsley Years

Ann Symonds was disappointed that her own government's response to the Women in Prison Task Force involved some progress and much compromise. The new buildings opened at Mulawa in 1989-90 were a legacy of this ambivalence. 'Wyndana' offered prisoners chance to 'cook, wash and clean for themselves within a communal layout'. But Mulawa also gained a new Segregation Unit, complete with dry cells. There was little ambivalence about the regime established when the Coalition won the 1988 election, Nick Greiner was the new Premier and Michael Yabsley became Minister for Corrective Services. Ann was both horrified and liberated by Yabsley's arrival.

To the end of her life Ann would fire up at the mention of the Greiner government. The new Premier's priorities were clear: he intended to balance the government's books and to run its 'core' functions – law and order, health and education – efficiently and economically. On his first day he declared that 'all areas not central to Government' would move out of the Premier's Department (*AS speech to NSW Social Workers Union, 13 May 1989*). The Women's Coordination Unit was an early casualty: dispatched from the Premier's Department, the unit lost its panoptical position at the centre of government and was shunted into Family and Community Services under the government's only woman minister, Virginia Chadwick. When he took over Corrective Services Yabsley quickly dissolved all three committees set up to implement the Women in Prison Task Force. His press secretary explained that 'the Government regards the Task Force as having given too much attention' to the small minority of women prisoners. (*S Herbert Lowe typescript in AS papers. FIND A BETTER REFERENCE*).

For Ann Symonds this was taking the state back to the 1970s, if not the 1790s.

During the Yabsley regime Ann tried to ensure that women prisoners remained visible by asking questions in the Legislative Council about the demise of the Women in Prison Force, the progress of redevelopment at Mulawa and the continuing failure to provide a detoxification unit at that prison. But it is perhaps an exaggeration to say Ann was liberated by Yabsley's advent. While she could wholeheartedly oppose his policies she could not always vote against them because the Labor leadership was taking a cautious line, not wanting to give the government and the press a chance to paint the party as 'soft on criminals'. Labor criticised but did not vote against the government's signature reform, its 1989 'truth in sentencing' legislation. In her own speech to the Council Ann accepted that the 'present system had fallen into disrepute' (*Hansard, 23 May 1989*): the amount of time prisoners spent inside bore little relation to the sentences imposed in court because they benefited from a confusion of remissions, some automatic and some earned. Yabsley's solution was to abolish all remissions, to insist that every prisoner serve 75 per cent of their head sentence and in the remaining 25 per cent of that sentence would become *eligible* for parole. Labor correctly pointed out that this inflexible regime would compound prison overcrowding. Unless judges and magistrates were themselves willing to run the tabloid gauntlet and reduce the sentences they imposed to compensate for the lost remissions, each prisoner would spend longer in prison. The opposition argued that abolishing earned remissions removed the incentive to join educational programs, for example. The new regime also cut the time prisoners might spend on parole, the supervised transition to life outside. It was a system designed with men in mind and Ann noted that the sentencing legislation had nothing to say about the alternatives to imprisonment that were especially relevant to women with children.

Women were often collateral damage as the Minister was determined to 'show who was boss' in the state's prisons. In 1990, after a prisoner at Long Bay stabbed a warder with a bloody syringe, Yabsley took the opportunity to set limits on the private property prisoners could keep in their cells. He argued that regulating personal property made it easier for officers to search for drugs and that items such as jewelry were currency in a prison market run by standover bullies. Because the policy was introduced abruptly, with the Minister deploying his trademark aggressive rhetoric, prisoners were unsure exactly what was going to be confiscated. Ann heard stories of women trying to bury rings and other small treasures at Mulawa. Was the Minister really coming for their baby photographs?

In reality the new rules were painstakingly specific, rationing goods – from photographs and books to sandwich makers – according to a prisoner's

classification. While inmates may have been confused about the details of the policy they understood its intent. Restricting the things that humanised their environment reminded them that they were lesser beings: it was a departure from the Nagle principle that imprisonment itself should be the only punishment. The reaction was immediate. While the press concentrated on violence and extensive damage in men's prisons, there were also disturbances and lock-ins at Mulawa. Ann's prison contacts told her the new policy was both demeaning and disruptive. Did prison security really require the strict rationing of underwear for a population of menstruating women? Their needs had simply been overlooked. Also officers removed items that women were actually entitled to keep and prisoners then had to buy replacements from their meagre prison earnings. (*Letter 18/10/90*)

It was in these years that Ann sharpened her feminist reading of women's incarceration. When she was working with the Task Force she had been struck by the similarities between the majority of women currently in prison and the young working-class women transported to New South Wales in the early-nineteenth century. Equally telling was the way in which the authorities treated both groups. Convict women were famously condemned as 'damned whores'. In the late-twentieth century the language was softer, but police, magistrates, judges and prison officers could take an equally punitive attitude to women leading a precarious existence 'outside the traditional family structure'. Women sentenced to prison were doubly deviant: their crimes – rarely crimes of violence – were compounded by their rejection of conventional feminine roles. Single mothers coming before the courts did not get any kind of motherhood dividend when it came to sentencing. Keeping their families together was not a priority.

This bias came sharply into focus in 1990 when the government brought in a Bill specifically aimed at street prostitutes, the 'damned whores' of the day. Under current legislation fine defaulters were not sent to prison but issued with Community Service Orders. According to the Attorney General, John Dowd, street prostitutes were regular defaulters and failed to show up for community service. He also argued that few community organisations wanted to run programs for them. His legislation proposed imprisonment for prostitute fine defaulters and – as an equitable figleaf – any clients who failed to pay their own fines. The Labor party tied itself in knots over the Bill with shadow cabinet deciding to oppose it and then choosing to criticise it without actually voting against it. Some vigorous lobbying eventually locked caucus and shadow cabinet into opposition to legislation that singled out street prostitutes. Journalist Matthew Moore predicted some 'righteous breastbeating' when the

Bill was debated in the Legislative Council. (*SMH*, 5/5/90, p.24). Did he have Ann Symonds in mind? Her speech was actually light on righteous rhetoric: it stressed not just the unfairness of the Bill but its impracticality. Drawing on her knowledge of homelessness, prostitution, drug use and women's prisons, she pointed out most street prostitutes were poor, some were working to support a drug habit and some to support children. Sending these women to prison was an expensive option that would increase overcrowding there and would not magically remove sex workers from the streets. It would separate mothers and children while prison offered the women almost nothing in the way of treatment or rehabilitation. Interventions to support and divert them before trial or sentence would surely be a better investment of state resources.

After Yabsley

When Michael Yabsley ended his tenure as Minister for Corrective Services in June 1991 his successors, Terry Griffiths, Wayne Merton and John Hannaford, were more receptive to the need for change in an overcrowded and combustible prison system. Ann Symonds' papers – including everything from formal letters to notes scribbled on the back of an envelope – reveal the range and persistence of her lobbying on prison issues. They also demonstrate her strengthening ties with academics such as Julie Stubbs of the Sydney University Institute of Criminology as well as David Brown and Eileen Baldry of the University of NSW. She also used her platform in parliament and the press to assist the relatively small number of committed activists who belonged to interlocking groups and were working on several initiatives. Ann was particularly involved with Women and Girls in Custody (a sub-committee of the NSW Prisons Coalition), whose members included Eileen Baldry, Jodie Sherrin, Lindy Cassidy and Blanche Hampton.

Ann made no apology for concentrating on the need for reform in women's prisons. Some affirmative action was needed as women inmates were still 'lumped in' with the male majority. Penal policy ignored their particular characteristics; roughly 80 per cent of them were detained on drug related charges but treatment was derisory. Nor was there official recognition of their distinctive problems. In December 1991, as one of a series of detailed questions to the Minister of Justice, she asked how many women had given birth in detention and how many prisoners had children. (*Hansard*, 9 December 1991) She got the reply that had shocked Betty Hounslow in 1982: the Corrective Services Department did not collect this information. An unofficial estimate that approximately 30 per cent of women in prison were solely responsible for

children reinforced the argument for alternative sentences, especially for pregnant women and mothers of young children. The Children of Prisoners Support Group was another organisation championed by Ann Symonds.

In the final years of the Greiner government Ann was developing themes she had sketched in the debate over the prostitutes and fine default. Prison – and Mulawa in particular – was not a safe nor even a neutral space, but a toxic environment. Her questions in December 1991 uncovered a confronting statistic: since March 1988 there had been 70 suicide attempts by 34 women at Mulawa. The uncomfortable truth about that prison was confirmed when a 1993 investigation headed by retired coroner Kevin Waller found that Mulawa had the third highest rate of suicide, attempted suicide and self-harm in the state prison system. Critics sometimes dismissed Ann as a bleeding heart who ‘would let them all go’. Not true, but she did insist that very few women offenders were themselves so dangerous that they needed to be held in these dangerous circumstances (*LC, 21/2/91; SMH, 26/12/91*).

Ann’s special contribution to the reform debate was a reminder that the blueprint for change already existed. She never missed a chance to revisit the recommendations of the Women in Prison Task Force, starting with a contribution to ‘Five Years After – A Seminar on Women in NSW Prisons’, organised by the New South Wales Prisons Coalition in 1990. In 1991 she opened her WIPTF files to Blanche Hampton, an ex-prisoner and member of Women and Girls in Custody. Hampton’s book *Prisons and Women*, which came out in 1993, detailed the promise and aftermath of the Task Force under the heading ‘A Whiff of Reform.’ Hampton reminded Ann that even small victories won after the Task Force were easily lost. For example, she detailed her own difficulties in getting time in the library even though the Corrective Services Department had reported improved library services (*Hampton, p. 67*). Reforms ‘ticked off’ at managerial level could be subverted by understaffing, indifference and outright hostility in the prisons. This message was reinforced by Ann’s contacts among serving and ex-prisoners and served to temper her optimism as Corrective Services embarked on a reform program for women’s prisons in 1993.

New Initiatives

Ann’s most unlikely new ally was Major General Neville Smethurst, the Corrective Services Commissioner. She was fond of telling one story of how they met. In March 1993 she went to the State Library to speak at a seminar

organized by Sydney University Institute of Criminology. She gave another trenchant account of the downfall of the Women in Prison Task Force. Sitting at the back of the room was Neville Smethurst, who approached her to ask for more detail about the Task Force. This may have been the beginning of their productive relationship but it was not the first contact between them. In February she had received an official invitation to discuss a draft policy on imprisoned mothers and their children; that meeting was held just before the State Library seminar. But the less formal discussion at the Library signaled the Commissioner's awareness that substantive changes were needed to arrest the deteriorating situation in women's prisons. Like Ann, Smethurst must have been receiving statistics on self-harm at Mulawa as well as reports of overcrowding that increased tensions in women's prisons and decreased inmates' chances of getting effective medical treatment. What was interesting was his willingness to listen to Ann – derided by Yabsley for her 'banal rhetoric'— and to prison activists on a range of issues (*Hansard, Legislative Council, 16/10/90, p.8347*).

Ann's notes show prison reformers caucusing, taking advantage of this new openness. She was part of a 'Coalition of Individuals Concerned with Women in the Justice System', who presented Corrective Services with detailed proposals on familiar issues, including arrangements for bail, sentencing options and alternatives to prison for mothers of young children. While these interventions, if properly resourced, would reduce numbers in prison, the Coalition also recommended a new Women's Unit to drive reform in prison management. The unit, headed by an Assistant Commissioner, should develop women-specific policies and coordinate services provided by other departments and community organisations. It would also be expected to consider the not unrelated question of the number and prospects of women officers in Corrective Services. Changes to staffing and training were needed to address the 'unhealthy power relationship between officers and inmates' in women's prisons (*New Directions for Women in the Justice System, p. 15*)

The Coalition also focused attention on the difficult transition from prison to the outside world. Already inadequate post-release programs had been cut in the Yabsley years so women were leaving prison with little or no help to find accommodation or reconnect with their children. Ann was involved with Guthrie House, the state's only halfway house for women. Calling herself a 'matron' rather than a patron, she was sometimes drafted in to drive women to appointments and saw for herself how difficult it was to make a post-prison life. She once said, 'It's as if prisons are saying, "Here's the door, and see you when you get back"' (*SMH, 2/11/94*).

To fill this void, activists had taken some progressive initiatives. Women at Work was set up in 1991 under the umbrella of CRC Justice Support (formerly the Civil Rehabilitation Committee). It was funded by the Department of Industrial Relations, Employment, Training and Further Education to assist ex-prisoners into education and/or employment. In 1993 Women and Girls in Custody were also planning a new Women's Counselling and Support Network, using royalties from Hampton's book and applying for grants. Such grant-dependent activities were always precarious and the Coalition argued that Corrective Services should take responsibility for effective pre- and post-release programs. Coalition proposals for non-prison sentences and transition programs for inmates demanded both investment and cultural change. Given that the Greiner government's expensive prison building exercise had not solved overcrowding, it was reasonable to divert resources and buy housing to provide supported accommodation for women avoiding or leaving prison. (*New Directions*, pp. 19-20)

ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWS WITH PEOPLE WHO WERE INVOLVED IN THESE PROJECTS ARE OBVIOUSLY NECESSARY

Ann was encouraged by reports that the Commissioner was receptive to some of these proposals. But activists also reminded each other that 'Change at the top, when it occurs, does not automatically mean change at the bottom' (*New Directions*, p. 3). Ann maintained this dual perspective throughout the next few years. In June 1993, when Smethurst announced a new 'task force on women in prison', her response was tart: 'We do not need another task force. We need action' (*SMH*, 5/6/93). She saw no need to reinvent the wheel. But she was impressed when Corrective Services began consulting on its (well-named) Women's Action Plan. Aware that 'consultation' can be a sham exercise, she felt that Smethurst was listening and that some of the original Task Force recommendations were being revived. (Their correspondence progressed from 'Dear Ms Symonds ... Yours sincerely Neville Smethurst' to 'Dear Ann ... Kindest regards, Neville'). At the same time she was still receiving disturbing reports from Mulawa about the epidemic of self-harm, the sexual abuse of prisoners by officers and the trading of sex for favours (including drugs) that encouraged factions among staff and inmates.

The difficulty of balancing the optimistic reform narrative with news from the frontline was evident in Ann's speech to the Legislative Council in April 1994. She reported that 'on the whole' the draft Women's Action Plan had been 'warmly received' by veterans of the fight for women's prison reform. She also noted that 'progress had been made in developing a concept' for a crisis support

unit for at-risk women at Mulawa. ‘Developing a concept’ was an odd choice of words. It implied that change was coming too slowly and it signaled a change of direction in her speech. Without questioning the reform commitment of Commissioner Smethurst and the Minister for Justice, John Hannaford, she reminded the Council how easily that commitment could be undermined. Putting her inside information on the public record, Ann argued that ‘something is seriously wrong with the management at Mulawa’, given the report of a recent suicide and the extent of self-harm, depression and drug use. She also referred to an ‘unscrupulous’ traffic in sex for privileges. (*LC, 21/4/94*). Her demand that Mulawa management should be investigated was backed by revelations in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (23/4/94, 27/7/94) and an episode of the ABC’s *Background Briefing*. When the government eventually commissioned an Ombudsman’s inquiry into women’s prisons, the *Herald* credited Ann with first raising the issues (2/11/94). For her the inquiry confirmed the importance of giving activists and inmates a voice in parliament.

The Women’s Action Plan

When the Ombudsman’s report confirmed many of Ann’s criticisms, Corrective Services could at least point to changes outlined in its *Women’s Action Plan. A 3 Year Strategy for Female Inmates in NSW Correctional Facilities*. This plan, which was the work of Corrective Services Senior Planning Officer, Lawrence Goodstone, acknowledged and aimed to correct the continuing marginalisation of women prisoners. Ann was pleased to see that it endorsed the reductionist approach of the 1985 Task Force and revived several of its recommendations.

Neville Smethurst told Ann that the Department was giving priority to a limited ‘number of significant, **achievable**, objectives’ (*NS to AS, 4/3/94*). Chief among these was a radical program of capital works. First, the Plan addressed one of the longest-standing injustices in the prison system: the vast majority of women prisoners had a minimum security classification, but overcrowding and neglect kept over one hundred of them in Mulawa with its daunting perimeter and internal fences (*Action Plan, p. 36*). The Action Plan advocated the development of three ‘Transitional Centres’ in the Sydney metropolitan area. Each would house up to 25 prisoners and – where necessary – their children in conditions that would not prioritise security, would emphasise self-management and promote connections with the surrounding community. The use of the word

‘transitional’ implied that this was purely a pre-release program but the Plan suggested that the centres might also house some women diverted from prison.

In addition the Action Plan proposed to move men from the existing Emu Plains prison farm and to develop a 50-bed minimum security facility for women there. They would be housed in cottages rather than dormitories and again some inmates could have their children with them. Emu Plains was also the best site for a proposed 70-bed medium security unit. Finally, Mulawa would be left to house a smaller population of maximum security women and prisoners with ‘special needs’.

How did Ann respond to the Action Plan? The capital works program was a challenge for a dedicated reductionist. Ann generally had reservations about prison building on the grounds that it would undercut and take resources from diversionary programs. She worried that mothers were still being incarcerated and comparatively few of them were able to access section 29 (2) (c) of the Prisons Act, which allowed for their supervised release. Cottages at Emu Plains at least offered some respite for them and their children. For Ann, the proposed Transitional Centres were the most promising initiative, although the Action Plan acknowledged that it would be hard to find suitable sites and welcoming communities. Ann was disappointed but not entirely surprised when opposition to developing a centre in Glebe was supported by the local Labor MLA, Sandra Nori.

The state’s first centre, with a 21-bed capacity, opened in 1996, opposite Parramatta jail, which was not an ideal location for a facility that was supposed to stand outside the prison system. Parramatta again! But the building was anonymous enough to allow women to go to work – and children to go to kindergarten – without being identified. Ann was enthusiastic and even invoked the great Australian cliché to describe the centre as ‘world class’ (*French Tape 3*). The positive evaluation of Parramatta encouraged the development of a second centre, Borowa, at Emu Plains. This was designed for Aboriginal women who, even more than Aboriginal men, were grossly overrepresented in s

A relatively enlightened building program –with special facilities for mothers and children – signalled a cultural change in Corrective Services. But the stories still reaching Ann from Mulawa confirmed that much more was needed. The Action Plan also rehearsed the longstanding inadequacy of facilities and programs in women’s prisons. To drive the necessary change Corrective Services planned a Women’s Unit ‘charged with researching and responding to the needs of female inmates’ (*Action Plan, p.19*). As part of its research remit the Unit was to develop inmates’ committees to ‘cover areas of inmate concern’

(p. 7). The Plan also proposed a Women's Advisory Network to advise the Commissioner – and offer 'constructive criticism' – on issues in women's prisons. Corrective Services staff would be joined by someone from the Office for the Status and Advancement of Women, by representatives of the Corrections Health Service and members of relevant community organisations. The Women's Unit should, therefore, be able to call on both inside and outside expertise.

Ann was never the kind of absolutist who argued that prisons were simply dangerous places that served no useful purpose and could *not* be 'improved'. She was pleased to see that the Action Plan revisited issues – regarding management, staffing, programs and facilities – that had been raised in the Women in Prison Task Force Report in 1985. But it was depressing to observe how little progress had been made since then. She always gave credit to Smethurst and his team, but was well aware that reforms could be eroded by resistance and inertia in the prison system. She and fellow activists had questions about Action Plan proposals.

First, the Women's Unit was not designed to be a permanent addition to the Department of Corrective Services, although the problems in women's prisons were complex and intractable. It would also have to operate, as Blanche Hampton noted, in a gender-isolated environment' (*Hampton, 6/12/94*). There were questions about the proposed Women's Advisory Network: it bore a family resemblance to the Women's Council recommended by the Women in Prison Task Force, but had a narrower membership and fewer powers. How effective and independent would it be? Would the inmates' committees be set up and taken seriously? Ann felt the answers to these questions would be critical (*AS to Lamont, 8 April 1994*).

A Report into the Children of Imprisoned Parents

Ann had been wholehearted in her approval of the new transitional centres. But however successful those centres might be in easing some women's transition from prison, they could not meet the objective of keeping women – especially women with children – out of prison. They could not carry the 'reductionist' burden. The problems of mothers and children would preoccupy Ann Symonds in the next stage of her prison activism.

In 1995 the Labor Party won the general election and Bob Carr became the Premier. David Brown of the University of New South Wales Law Faculty once suggested that if an incoming Labor government was really committed to

reform, Ann Symonds should be chosen as Minister for Corrective Services. This was never going to happen, but the change of government did mean she was promoted her to Chair of the Legislative Council's Standing Committee on Social Issues. Ann quickly persuaded the Minister Bob Debus to commission a report on the Children of Imprisoned Parents.

To be continued

¹ Jackson, 29 September 1982, *NSWPD*, Series ?, Volume ???, p. 1367

² *SMH*, 5 January 2012, p.12.

³ Preface, **Report of the NSW Women in Prison Task Force**, March 1985

⁴ D. Brown and Meredith Quinn, 'Review of NSW Task Force report Women in Prison', *Legal Service Bulletin*, vol. 10, no. 6, December 1985, p. 261.

⁵ GET HANSARD REF. 28 March 1985

⁶ Prison Census 1988 records that there were 54 women 'not under sentence' in prison on 30 June 1984. In 1987 the comparable statistic was 36. CHECK ALL THIS AGAIN

⁷ *SMH*, 17 July 1973, p.12.