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LAW & HUMAN DIGNITY

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BEYOND BARS: TOWARD ABOLITIONIST JUSTICE IN AUSTRALIA

DEBBIE KILROY*

This narrative examines the prevailing carceral system in Australia, with a specific focus on Queensland, Victoria, and the Northern Territory. Drawing on firsthand experiences and empirical data, the author challenges the efficacy of punitive measures and the proliferation of prisons as responses to social issues. Through case studies such as the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre in Victoria and Don Dale in the Northern Territory, the narrative underscores the disproportionate impact of incarceration on marginalised communities, particularly First Nations peoples and women. By interrogating the intersections of race, gender, and class within the criminal justice system, the narrative advocates for a paradigm shift towards abolitionist approaches. It explores alternatives to imprisonment, such as Participatory Defence, emphasising community empowerment and restorative justice principles. Ultimately, this narrative calls upon legal professionals and policymakers to engage in transformative justice practices and envision a future devoid of incarceration and punitive systems.

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I INTRODUCTION

In this country, 40,000 people are sitting in cages and tens of thousands more are on community orders. At present, in this country, laws continue to be enacted that protect the few and damage the many. Many people reading this article right now are likely complicit in the violence exacted against the criminalised and have had a hand in their incarceration because the colonial carceral system exists to keep people like you safe from people like me.

My name is Debbie Kilroy, and I am one of the tens of thousands of people who have been warehoused in this country's criminal punishment system. I am a lawyer and a social worker, but it is my experience garnered from the inside of a cage that underpins all of my expertise. It is those experiences that inform my life's work of abolishing prisons, policing, surveillance, and every arm of the criminal injustice system — including the criminal legal system.

II QUEENSLAND SENTENCING ADVISORY COUNCIL AND THE ROYAL COMMISSIONS

Where I live in Queensland, we are experiencing an incarceration boom. Our prisons are full. The number of women sentenced to imprisonment quadrupled between the periods of 2005-06 and 2018-19, making Queensland the state with the most imprisoned women

in the country.¹ The number of girls sentenced to detention tripled between the periods of 2005-06 and 2015-16.² The Queensland Government argues that building new prisons is the answer to this mass imprisonment crisis. This is evidenced by the state's police minister, Mark Ryan, who commented to *The Guardian* in 2023, 'the construction of a new correctional centre near Gatton in the Lockyer Valley as a development... will reduce strain on the system'.¹ This country has a love affair with punishment, exile, and imprisonment. Despite many protestations otherwise, we *are* an incarceration nation.

A sentencing profile report by the Queensland Sentencing Advisory Council ('QSAC') considered the trends and patterns in the sentencing of women and girls in Queensland.² The stated purpose of this report was to provide an analysis of quantitative data gathered from Queensland courts spanning the years 2005–06 to 2018–19 to better understand the criminalisation of women and girls in Queensland.³ The numbers in the QSAC report are damning: in 2005-06, 1.7 per cent of all sentenced women received a prison sentence, which increased to 6.2 per cent in 2018-19.⁴ Women and girls are far more likely to be sentenced in remote parts of the state, with 35.6 per 1,000 women and girls sentenced, compared to 9.9 per 1,000 in major cities.⁵ The number of girls sentenced to prison has tripled.⁶ Around one-third of women sentenced in Queensland identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and more than 74 per cent of the girls under 12 years of age sentenced in Queensland are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.⁷

These statistics should make your blood boil. They should make you feel sick. As legal professionals, they should make you really uncomfortable. Certainly, as citizens, they should make you stand up and take responsibility for what is happening to women and

¹ Laura Hilderley et al, *Engendering Justice: The Sentencing of Women and Girls in Queensland* (Sentencing Profile Report No 4, August 2022) 1

<https://www.sentencingcouncil.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/735425/Sentencing-profile-on-womens-and-girls.pdf>.

² Ibid.

¹ Eden Gillespie, "'Extreme Self-Harm': Queensland Labor Faces Internal Criticism over Prison System", *The Guardian* (online, 4 June 2023) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jun/04/extreme-self-harm-queensland-labor-faces-internal-criticism-over-prison-system>>.

² Hilderley et al (n 1).

³ Ibid iii.

⁴ Julius Dennis, 'Number of women being sentenced to prison in Queensland quadruples in 15 years', *ABC News* (online, 17 August 2022) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-17/qld-prison-female-incarceration-rate-quadruples-raise-the-age/101336904>>. See also Hilderley et al (n 1).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hilderley et al (n 1) iii.

⁷ Ibid.

girls in this state and across this country. However, the QSAC report is just one report in a long line of reports. Reports that likely rest upon your bookcases in your law offices. I don't say this to diminish the stories or data held within the glossy binds of the report, or to diminish the work done by many good people. I say this to remind people that we have decades and decades of confronting reports with hundreds — potentially thousands — of non-implemented, and deliberately ignored recommendations. The Women's Safety and Justice Task Force,⁸ the Queensland Productivity Commission Report,⁹ Walter Sofronoff's report on Parole,¹⁰ and crucially the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody¹¹ in 1991, come to mind. This country not only has a love affair with punishment but also with the industry that the prison system upholds and generates. No matter how well intentioned these reports, inquiries and royal commissions are, sadly, the only people who benefit from them are those who are paid to conduct them. This is because the criminal punishment system is a beast, and all beasts must be fed in order to survive. The criminal punishment system in this country *is* an industry — an industry with inordinate power, sway, and money (including a budget that continues to rise and expand).

In fact, the power and reach of the prison industrial complex are ever-expanding. The industry sells the expansion of surveillance and prisons in our community as 'progress' and good for the local area.

III DAME PHYLLIS FROST CENTRE VICTORIA: HOMES NOT PRISONS

On 19 March 2021, the Victorian Government unveiled plans for the expansion of the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, a high-security women's prison located in Ravenhall,

⁸ Women's Safety and Justice Task Force, *Hear Her Voice: Women and Girl's Experiences of the Criminal Justice System* (Report No 2, July 2022) vol 1, vol 2 <<https://www.womenstaskforce.qld.gov.au/>>.

⁹ Queensland Productivity Commission, *Inquiry into Imprisonment and Recidivism* (Final Report, 31 January 2020) <[¹⁰ Walter Sofronoff QC, *Queensland Parole System Review* \(Final Report, November 2016\) <<https://parolereview.premiers.qld.gov.au/>>.](https://apo.org.au/node/273991#:~:text=Key%20points%3A,reduce%20community%20safety%20over%20time.>>.</p>
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¹¹ Elliott Johnston, *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (Report, 9 May 1991) <<https://www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/first-australians/royal-commission-aboriginal-deaths-custody>>; Thalia Anthony et al, '30 years on: Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody recommendations remain unimplemented' (Working Paper No 140/2021, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, 2021) <<https://caep.r.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/30-years-royal-commission-aboriginal-deaths-custody-recommendations-remain>>.

Melbourne. This initiative comes with a hefty price tag of \$188.9 million.¹² The proposed expansion entails the construction of 106 additional cells, alongside the establishment of two new 20-bed 'Management Units' designed for solitary confinement.¹³ Solitary confinement! Really? Are we still doing that?

Before the commencement of the expansion, Dame Phyllis Frost had the capacity to imprison 604 women. In June 2020, at the height of the COVID pandemic, the number of imprisoned women there was 330, which has now increased to over 400.¹⁴ According to the 2019/20 Victorian Budget, the expansion of Victoria's women's prison is part of a \$1.8 billion expansion of prisons for women, men, transgender, and gender-diverse people across Victoria.¹⁵ Despite reductions in prisoner numbers in Victoria during the COVID pandemic, the Victorian Government remains committed to building thousands of new prison cells.¹⁶

The abolitionist campaign, Build Homes Not Prisons¹⁷ is essentially a prison moratorium campaign. It calls on the Victorian Government to stop the expansion of Dame Phyllis Frost and reallocate the budget for prison building to public housing. This would provide 'housing first' and support for criminalised women and their children. The campaign argues that a brief incarceration period for mothers can result in their children being placed in out-of-home care, subsequently leading them into the cycle of juvenile detention and prison.¹⁸ What I know as someone who has been inside, and as someone who works with and alongside women and girls in prisons, that over half of those released from prison will be re-criminalised and put back into prison within two years. These consequences can extend across generations. What we also know is that by

¹² Victoria State Government, 'Construction Set To Start On Women's Prison Upgrade' (Media Release, 19 March 2021).

¹³ 'Don't expand Dame Phyllis Frost prison for women', *Build Homes Not Prisons* (Web Page) <<https://homesnotprisons.com.au>> ('Build Homes Not Prisons'); Rachael Knowles, 'Victoria to Expand Prison System One Week After Death in Custody', *National Indigenous Times* (Online, 22 March 2021) <<https://nit.com.au/22-03-2021/1856/victoria-to-expand-prison-system-one-week-after-death-in-custody>>; State Government of Victoria, 'Dame Phyllis Frost Centre', (Web Page, 2023) <<https://csba.vic.gov.au/our-projects/dame-phyllis-frost-centre>>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Noel Towell, 'Victoria to spend an extra \$1.8 billion on jails', *The Age* (online, 24 May 2019) <<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/victoria-to-spend-an-extra-1-8-billion-on-jails-20190524-p51qra.html>>.

¹⁶ Build Homes Not Prisons (n 15).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

allocating more resources to prisons, at the expense of housing and social services, we will experience higher rates of criminalisation.¹⁹ Conversely, higher investments in housing could lead to a reduction in criminal activity and therefore lower incarceration rates.²⁰

Compared to any other Australian State or Territory, Victoria spends the least on public housing per capita.²¹ According to the Big Housing Build project announced in the State's 2020/21 budget,²² Victoria is focused more on privately operated 'community' and 'affordable' housing, rather than on public housing that is accessible to criminalised and highly disadvantaged women and families.²³ In stark contrast to this underinvestment in public housing, the government has allocated a significant \$188.9 million to expand the Dame Phyllis Frost prison. The additional 106 cells will cost \$12.5 million per annum to operate, which could alternatively fund basic operating costs for 1,614 public homes.²⁴

What we know about the propaganda of the prison industrial complex is that more often than not, prisons are sold as being financially beneficial to communities. Certainly, the Andrews government had been spruiking job creation as one of the primary benefits of expanding the Dame Phyllis Frost prison. Build Homes not Prisons argues that construction of public and Aboriginal community-controlled housing would create more and better jobs, both in construction and in support for the women and children who will live there.²⁵ They argued that all workers — whether we are builders, social workers, nurses, architects, educators, carers, labourers, doctors, therapists, gardeners, lawyers, counsellors, artists or planners — want jobs that build and strengthen our communities, not jobs that cause harm. Therefore, they campaign on the platform that we should spend on a 'Big Public Housing Build', not a 'Big Prison Build'.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Australian Human Rights Commission, *Social Justice Report 2009* (Report, 2009) <<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/social-justice-report-1>>; Queensland Productivity Commission, *Inquiry into Imprisonment and Recidivism* (Final Report, August 2019) <<https://s3.treasury.qld.gov.au/files/Imprisonment-Volume-1-final-report.pdf>>; Thalia Anthony et al (n 14).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Reference.

²² Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 'Social Housing Growth Fund', *Homes Victoria* (Web Page) <<https://www.homes.vic.gov.au/social-housing-growth-fund>>.

²³ Build Homes Not Prisons (n 15).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

IV PRISON ABOLITION

In October 2022, Anastacia Palaszczuk, the Premier in my home state of (so-called) Queensland²⁶ stated that Queensland's Labor government is considering expanding youth justice detention and building a youth prison in Cairns.²⁷ Notably, the previous year also saw the Palaszczuk government use the override declaration of the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld) s 43 to amend other statutes²⁸ creating an offence for breach of bail conditions in relation to a child, carrying a maximum sentence of 2 years imprisonment.

In response, we formed a campaign called the 'End Toxic Prisons — Block the Pipeline' which calls for the end of the incarceration of First Nations girls, boys and other criminalised young people.²⁹ We are seeking an investment in community-controlled solutions to end the criminalisation of marginalised people. We demand that the government prioritise the development of local community care to address the underlying social issues that youth in Far North Queensland are subjected to.

'End Toxic Prisons - Block the Pipeline' believes that the youth most targeted and disproportionately affected by the development of this latest state-sponsored carceral project, will be First Nations girls and boys.³⁰ These new developments will enable the carceral machine to more effectively entrap young First Nations people in the criminal legal system. Our campaign seeks to end the gendered and racialized violence endured by First Nations people and to abolish the age of criminal responsibility in order to prevent First Nations people being killed in custody.

²⁶ The use of the term '(so called) Queensland' reflects my respect for the Traditional Owners of all of the lands that make up the place the colonialists now call Queensland. I recognise that Queensland was once many Aboriginal nations and that the state it is now is a wholly colonial construct.

²⁷ Christopher Testa, 'Premier Floats New Youth Detention Centre for Cairns, where Police are Warning Against Vigilantism', *ABC News* (Online, 5 October 2022) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-05/premier-floats-cairns-youth-detention-police-warn-vigilantes/101505070>>.

²⁸ See *Strengthening Community Safety Act 2023* (Qld) which amended the *Youth Justice Act 1992* (Qld), *Bail Act 1980* (Qld), *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000* (Qld) and the *Criminal Code Act 1899* (Qld).

²⁹ Sisters Inside, 'End Toxic Prisons – Block the Pipeline' (Web Page) <<https://sistersinside.com.au/end-toxic-prisons/>>.

³⁰ See generally Australian Law Reform Commission, *Pathways to Justice—Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (Report No 133, 9 January 2018) <<https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/pathways-to-justice-inquiry-into-the-incarceration-rate-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-alrc-report-133/2-context/social-determinants-of-incarceration/>>.

You will note I said, ‘abolish the age of criminal responsibility’ not ‘raise the age of criminal responsibility’. I am not a supporter of the Raise the Age campaign.³¹ This is not because I want to see 13-year-olds in prison — on the contrary. I do not want to see any child in a cage — no matter their age. I am an abolitionist. I will not kneecap my demands of ending the reign of punishment and exile in this country, and I will not leave any child behind when we liberate kids from cages in this country.

V DON DALE

Don Dale, a prison recommended for closure by the Royal Commission and Board of Inquiry into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory,³² continues to cage and contain children — despite local and international calls for its immediate closure. The conditions inside Don Dale are horrific. The situation is critical and Don Dale is dangerous. Kids huddle in corners of their cells to avoid being rained on and are forced to stay in their cells for nine hours a day due to short-staffing.³³ The number of children in Don Dale continues to skyrocket because of bail reforms, yet we hear barely a whisper, let alone a roar, across mainstream Australia — and why? Because a majority — actually, nearly all — of the children in Don Dale are Black.³⁴ The only voices we hear are the dedicated activists of the Close Don Dale Now group (‘CDDN’).³⁵ The CDDN comprises previous Don Dale detainees and their families, Elders and Community members, professionals, experts, students, and volunteers. They are calling on the Northern Territory Government to immediately close Don Dale and they regard their work as especially urgent. I know the work they do and have stood shoulder to shoulder with them. Getting the children out of Don Dale is an urgent aspect of a much larger need

³¹ See ‘Raise the Age’ (Web Page) <<https://raisetheage.org.au/campaign>>.

³² Royal Commissions, *The Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory* (Final Report, 17 November 2017) vol 2A, 32. <<https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/child-detention/final-report>> (‘Royal Commissions’)

³³ Darwin Action Group, ‘Close Don Dale Now’ *Amnesty International* (Web Page) <<https://www.amnesty.org.au/events/close-don-dale-now-2-2-2>>. See also John Lawrence SC, ‘Indigenous Child Abuse Continues in Australia’ (online, 29 June 2022) <<https://arena.org.au/indigenous-child-abuse-continues-in-australia/>>; John Lawrence SC, ‘What the Meaning of Don Dale is’, *Arena* (Web Page, 9 March 2023) <<https://arena.org.au/what-the-meaning-of-don-dale-is/>>

³⁴ Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities, ‘Youth Detention Census’ (Web Page) <<https://tfhc.nt.gov.au/youth-justice/youth-detention-centres/youth-detention-census>>.

³⁵ For information on this campaign, see ‘Close Don Dale Now’, *Close Don Dale Now* (Web Page) <<https://closedondale.com>>.

to address systemic issues facing First Nations peoples in the Northern Territory, and it can no longer be delayed.

Don Dale is not a purpose-built juvenile facility. The Royal Commission report itself states that 'a fundamental principle underpinning youth justice and detention is that children and young people should not be managed in the same way as adults'.³⁶ Yet they are using the former Berrimah adult prison which was built in the 1970's, never intended for kids. The prison was condemned in 2014 and deemed 'only fit for a bulldozer' by the CEO of Correctional Services.³⁷ Yet, it continues to cage children. I want Don Dale closed and I do not want to see another juvenile prison built in its place. Rather I want to see an investment in children and families in the Northern Territory.

I am an abolitionist and I believe that transformative justice, rather than punishment, is a proper response to so-called criminal acts. The present criminal (in)justice systems focus on someone to punish, caring little about the person's need or the victim's loss. The abolitionist response, in contrast, seeks to restore both the person who has caused harm and the victim to full humanity, ensuring lives of integrity and dignity within the community. Abolitionists advocate for minimal coercion and intervention in an individual's life and the maximum amount of care and services to all people in society.

We are seeing an upsurge in interest in building an abolitionist future. The Sisters Inside 10th International Conference, held in 2023, brought together leading abolition activists from around the world with First Nations and Indigenous thinkers and leaders in this country.³⁸ The opportunity to gather and share, to reflect and to learn from each other is critical. While abolition as a practice in the United States may seem way ahead of us here in so-called Australia, Indigenous communities here have been practising abolition long before there was a word to define it. I see it practised every day in the First Nations' celebration of Blak love, Blak joy and Blak care:³⁹ the love, care and sense of community

³⁶ Royal Commissions (n 33) 43.

³⁷ Helen Davidson, 'Young Indigenous imprisonment in NT: "You Wouldn't Believe it in a Modern-Day Society"' *The Guardian* (online, 22 October 2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/oct/22/young-indigenous-imprisonment-in-nt-you-wouldnt-believe-it-in-a-modern-day-society>>.

³⁸ See Sisters Inside, 'Guest Speakers' (Web Page) <<https://sistersinside.com.au/guest-speakers/>>.

³⁹ The use of the word Blak is done with respect to Destiny Deacon and her deployment of the word in 1994. See also Kate Munro, 'Why "Blak" not Black?: Artist Destiny Deacon and the origins of this word',

that abounds in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. As white settlers, we could learn a lot. After all, the colonial carceral system is only 233 years old in this country. It is relatively young compared with the traditional lore systems that rest in the lands we occupy.

In short, imprisonment is morally reprehensible and indefensible and must be abolished. Along with imprisonment, policing, systems of exile and surveillance, and our jobs as lawyers, cops and welfare must go. In an enlightened, free society, prison cannot endure, or these will continue to prevail. The task of abolition is a long-range goal, an ideal. After all, the eradication of any oppressive system is not an easy task. However, it is realisable, like the abolition of slavery or any liberation, so long as there is the will to engage in the struggle.

I'm a lawyer, so I figure start with my own backyard. So where do you, as a legal professional, fit into the abolition space?

VI PARTICIPATORY DEFENSE

Participatory Defense⁴⁰ is a powerful and innovative strategy for overhauling public defence and could address the mass incarceration crisis we are facing in this country. The model brings together all of the stakeholders in a matter, including individuals facing criminal charges, their families, and their communities. Together, they strive to resolve the legal matters within a process centred on care, accountability, and reciprocity. By empowering participants to transition from passive recipients of legal services to proactive change agents, Participatory Defense enables heightened transparency, accountability, and fairness within a justice system. It operates as a community organising model, allowing those facing charges, along with their families and communities to impact case outcomes and reshape the power dynamics within the court

NITV (online, 29 June 2020) <<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/why-blak-not-black-artist-destiny-deacon-and-the-origins-of-this-word/7gv3mykzv>>.

⁴⁰ For information on this initiative, see Raj Jayadev, 'The Origin Story of Participatory Defense', *Participatory Defense* (Web Page) <<https://www.participatorydefense.org/about>>; Janet Moore, Marla Sandys and Raj Jayadev, 'Make Them Hear You: Participatory Defense and the Struggle for Criminal Justice Reform' (2015) 78(3) *Albany Law Review* 1281.

system. This transformative initiative is spearheaded by the very families directly affected by their loved ones involvement in the legal process.

Originating from Silicon Valley's De-Bug Cobarrubias Justice Project,⁴¹ Participatory Defense has evolved into a nationwide initiative. Initially focused on advocating for police accountability, it now seeks justice beyond the initial interaction with law enforcement. The architects of this model recognised its potential to bridge the gap between street-level activism and courtroom support to address the challenge of mass incarceration. Their journey from street advocacy to courtroom engagement inspired the creation of Participatory Defense. This thoroughly developed model has been refined over the past decade and currently being applied in diverse cities across the nation.

The Participatory Defense model is guided by three principles:

FAMILY and COMMUNITY STRENGTH can play a pivotal role in stopping and reducing incarceration for a loved one and a community.

Families and communities can be even more powerful when taking the role of ORGANIZER AND AGENT OF CHANGE, rather than service recipient.

By working on individual cases, communities can BUILD THE MOVEMENT of directly impacted peoples to hold the actors of the court accountable, make systemic change, and ultimately end mass incarceration.⁴²

From my perspective, the strength of Participatory Defense as a model is its community-based approach to justice that empowers individuals to actively engage in the legal process. The model seeks to democratise the justice system by involving those directly affected by criminal cases in the defence strategy. It shifts the traditional dynamics, where legal professionals take the lead, to allow those directly affected to have a voice and agency in their legal outcomes. This provides us with an opportunity to provide education and training to community members, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the legal system. This includes understanding legal procedures, terminology, and the intricacies of the criminal justice process. In turn, we can start to

⁴¹ For information see 'De-Bug the System', *Silicon Valley De-Bug* (Web Page) <siliconvalleydebug.org>; See also Sajid Khan, 'Protect Your People: A Public Defender's Reflection on Participatory Defense', *Albert Cobarrubias Justice Project* (Blog Post, 23 May 2017) <<https://acjusticeproject.org/>>.

⁴² Participatory Defense, 'Principles and Practices', *Participatory Defense Network* (Web Page) <<https://www.participatorydefense.org/about>>.

address systemic issues within the justice system, such as mass incarceration and disparities in legal outcomes. By actively engaging communities, the model challenges aspects of the system that contribute to injustices.

As an activist, one of the values of this model is that it takes us one step closer to abolition. A Participatory Defense model establishes a connection between grassroots movements advocating for social justice and activism within courtrooms. By linking these movements, Participatory Defense creates a holistic approach that addresses both the broader societal issues and individual legal cases. The model promotes transparency and accountability within the justice system. By involving community members, it encourages a more open and accountable legal process, helping to develop trust between communities and the legal system. Beyond individual cases, Participatory Defense can serve as a catalyst for advocacy and policy change. By actively engaging communities in the legal process, the model contributes to broader conversations about abolition.

This potential is very much within reach for Australia. The model has the capacity to free all of us. Our collective well-being suffers when individuals disappear from our communities and our homes and are put in cages. This model has the potential to revive communities drained by the presence of prisons, allowing life to flourish once more. It grants communities the ability to wield their power, offering a unique opportunity to scrutinise legal proceedings and court actions collectively. In that way, it harnesses our combined strength for positive change, fostering healthier and safer communities and enabling shared prosperity.

The proposal behind Participatory Defense is not entirely revolutionary. Currently, individuals across the country stand resolute in courtrooms, in solidarity with their children facing hearings, while employers or church leaders write letters to judges during sentencing hearings. These actions exemplify the widespread potential of Participatory Defense. If such efforts were viewed as integral components of a larger, named practice rather than isolated responses, a more profound and sustained transformation of the criminal punishment system could follow, fuelled by the impacted communities. This is our ongoing commitment until we liberate ourselves. It is our persistent endeavour as we work towards dismantling the carceral system, with the ultimate objective being the complete dismantling of the criminal punishment system as we currently know it.

Total annihilation as a goal shouldn't scare you. I see abolition not just as a goal that focuses on tearing down prisons, but also as a building project. Not a building project where we replace one flawed system with another oppressive system, but rather a project of building up community together. It is a process of collectively coming together to dream up possibilities for communities to flourish, and to generate processes of reciprocity and accountability, where we transform environments and systems into care collectives. Abolition is two-pronged work: a process of defunding, demolishing, and abolishing, but also about building, creating, and dreaming — people often forget this — and this is why they tell people like me that abolition of prisons and punishment is impossible.

I don't think it's impossible — in fact I think that the process has already begun, and I am here for all of the disruption and dreaming that is to come.

Because I will do this work until we are all free.

If you would like to join me on the emancipatory pathway to an abolitionist future, feel free to join our Abolition in Practice Network. We would love to welcome you.

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