

**INQUIRY INTO THE CLOSURE OR DOWNSIZING OF
CORRECTIVE SERVICES NSW FACILITIES**

Organisation: Federal Electorate of Page

Name: Ms Janelle Saffin MP

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Janelle Saffin MP



FEDERAL MEMBER FOR PAGE

Phone: (02) 6621 9909 Fax: (02) 6621 9959

Email: janelle.saffin.mp@aph.gov.au

63 Molesworth Street, Lismore NSW 2480

PO Box 609, Grafton NSW 2460

The Director
Legislative Council Select Committee on the Closure or Downsizing of
Corrective Services NSW Facilities
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000.

I welcome the opportunity to condemn the New South Wales Coalition Government's decision to downsize Grafton Gaol to a remand centre on Grafton Cup Day (July 12, 2012), axing 90 Corrective Services, Justice Health and TAFE jobs worth an estimated \$10 million a year to the local economy.

The day before, Ramornie Day, I joined the local community at the picket line to show solidarity with affected workers, their families and the families of inmates as the prison trucks were in transit to take the remaining inmates away, the final act in this sorry saga.

The Liberal Premier of New South Wales Barry O'Farrell, his National Party Deputy Andrew Stoner and newly-elected Nationals State Member for Clarence Chris Gulaptis got everything wrong.

It was an absolute debacle -- the ideological rush to cut costs, I knew to be incorrect and was later confirmed by the revealing of the \$1-billion budgetary mistake, the immediacy of it, refusing to consult with locals directly, and no plans put in place for the workers, their families, and the City of Grafton.

Grafton in the previous 18 months had suffered the body blows of Telstra closing its Call Centre (more than 100 jobs lost) and the South Grafton Abattoir shutting its doors (more than 250 jobs gone, albeit with about one-fifth of these transferring to the Northern Co-operative Meat Company in Casino).

While these were business decisions by a corporation and a company, in themselves hard to justify, Grafton Gaol was different again; these were well-paid country public service jobs given by the hand of government and now taken away by government.

I met on site at the picket, with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, who were there protesting the jobs going and deeply worried for inmates, up to 70 per cent of them indigenous, being moved to Kempsey, Cessnock or other faraway gaols.

Despite what we know from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which recommended that inmates have regular contact with family members, there were no transition plans in place.

Staff at the Grafton-based Bulgarr Ngaru Aboriginal Medical Service contacted me personally to express their grave fears for the safety and mental health of inmates and their kin.

There are many cruel impacts caused by this callous treatment; TAFE teachers who were offered a redundancy but then told they cannot go into teaching elsewhere for 12 months under some State Government rules. These rules could have been relaxed for them.

When the Abattoir closed in the lead up to Christmas last year, a State Government Rapid Response Team was deployed.

However, I know that when Federal agencies made repeated attempts to gain access to Grafton Gaol to organise Centrelink assistance and the like, they were frustrated at every turn.

It took many weeks before workers gained any certainty whatsoever of their future, either redundancy packages or transfers to other Corrective Services facilities, few of which were taken up.

In the wash-up, my understanding is that 90 local jobs were lost and only five Corrective Services staff ended up transferring to Cessnock Gaol, where a new wing reportedly has remained vacant due to a lack of staff.

One must ask the question whether this unclear outcome was worth it all ... the brutal approach of twice using prison trucks to break a peaceful community picket line, uprooting dozens of well settled families' lives and inflicting more economic pain on Grafton and the Clarence Valley?

What the NSW Government did not count on was that the local community would come out of their homes for six days and make such a public and dignified stand against what they knew was so wrong.

Graftonians are solid and stoic people, who will rebuild and pick up the pieces, but this betrayal was hard to accept.

Grafton Chamber of Commerce President Jeremy Challacombe, a local farmer whom I respect, and others at the time urged people not to be political, but the decision to downsize and push ahead at any cost, was a highly political one.

I am political and proudly call myself a politician, one who speaks up for locals.

That is my job.

The NSW Government could have made a political decision to at least do what thousands of local residents kept calling for at two 'Save Our Town' rallies -- 'to push the pause button'.

History will show that this did not happen, but from that dark, sorrowful day when Corrective Services staff did their last passing out parade, I started putting my mind to what I could do practically to help Grafton and the Clarence Valley to not only survive but flourish.

State MP Chris Gulaptis recently supported the Public Service Association of NSW's suggestion that a wing of Sydney's Long Bay Gaol be closed with Grafton Remand Centre being upsized to a gaol at some future stage.

We cannot rely on this vague promise, so I have been lobbying in Canberra for a Clarence Valley-based economic development strategy to help drive jobs

growth and economic prosperity in the wake of heavy job losses at Grafton Gaol, South Grafton Abattoir and the Grafton Telstra Call Centre.

My strategy would involve Clarence Valley Council and Federal and State government agencies supporting and strengthening the key industries of seafood (fishing and aquaculture), forestry, marine and transport.

We need to provide proper structural support for fishing and forestry, two traditional industries which employ 26.3 per cent of the local workforce, and the related construction sector, which employs a further 16.6 per cent of workers.

It is critical that Federal, State and local governments work together to capitalise on opportunities like a proposed transport hub near Grafton Airport, the Pacific Highway upgrade between Grafton and Ballina, the roll-out of the National Broadband Network and Southern Cross University establishing a presence at Grafton TAFE.

We also need to implement more of the Clarence Valley Council's marine industry strategy to fully realise the export potential of the Port of Yamba and the recreational tourism potential of the Clarence River.

The Australian Government has made a significant investment in Grafton and the Clarence Valley since its election in 2007 -- \$26 million for the Grafton Base Hospital redevelopment, \$5 million for the Grafton GP Super Clinic, \$8 million for a new Grafton Library, \$1.8 million for the Fisher Park

redevelopment, \$1 million-plus for South Grafton CBD revitalisation, and tens of millions more for new school buildings.

All of this unprecedented Federal funding has helped protect and create local jobs in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, and I argued for the Clarence Valley and Richmond-Tweed to be added as Priority Employment Areas.

We still face significant challenges here in Grafton with relatively high unemployment, and our retail and services-based economy still heavily reliant on the NSW Public Service sector, most departments of which are under attack from the NSW Coalition Government's razor gang.

I have worked hard as the Federal Member for Page to ensure that the Grafton and the Clarence Valley received an unprecedented level of attention from Canberra and hated seeing that put at risk by the bungled downsizing of Grafton Gaol.

I firmly believe that the community of Grafton is a resilient one which can bounce back from 'having its heart ripped out', as *The Daily Examiner* reported on its front page, but it now needs a helping hand from governments over this critical 18-month to two-year rebuilding period.

Janelle Saffin MP

Federal Member for Page.

Member of the NSW Legislative Council 1995-2003.