

**Submission
No 33**

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

Organisation: Grafton and Lower Clarence Branches Country Labor
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The Director
Legislative Council Select Committee on the Closure or Downsizing of Corrective
Services NSW Facilities
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000.

Country Labor was warning as early as the lead-up to the March 2011 State election of the real possibility that Grafton Gaol, an iconic institution established in 1893, could be privatised, downsized or closed.

The then Country Labor candidate for Clarence Colin Clague launched a virtual campaign office with an online campaign acknowledging the importance of more than 30 public services, vital to the everyday lives of Clarence residents and industries.

As part of an innovative series of mini video presentations, Mr Clague warned that an incoming Coalition government could target Corrective Services, particularly an older gaol like Grafton.

“Unfortunately, nobody was listening then!”

This was Mr Clague’s reflection when Country Labor’s Grafton branch, of which he is President, discussed the aftermath of the gaol’s downsizing at a recent meeting.

Mr Clague, of Woodford Island, is a Life Member of the Australian Labor Party and is known for his strong social justice values and commitment to his community.

He was appalled by the lack of care for indigenous inmates during the downsizing, and the related lack of compassion for family members who are now being forced to travel great distances, away from their country, to visit loved ones.

I was Country Labor's candidate in the Clarence by-election of November 2011, triggered by the shock resignation of sitting MP Steve Cansdell.

The O'Farrell-Stoner Government had been in power for about six months, and in its first State Budget, had announced plans to close three gaols at Parramatta, Berrima and Kirkconnell.

That Budget also announced 350 job cuts from the Department of Corrective Services, 13 of them from Grafton Gaol. Those 13 jobs might sound like small fry, but they equated to \$1.3-million-a-year loss to the local economy.

I held a media conference outside Grafton Gaol on Tuesday, October 18, 2011, calling on the Government to give an iron-clad guarantee that the gaol would not be closed or privatised, and to give a commitment to maintaining current job levels.

I then went inside the facility with Public Service Association of NSW regional organiser Shane O'Brien to meet with Corrective Services staff, Justice Health nurses and TAFE educators for more than an hour.

Tellingly, Nationals candidate for Clarence Chris Gulaptis declined to meet with any of these workers to listen to their concerns about job security.

I attach to this submission my campaign media releases from October 18, 2011, and Monday, November 14, 2011, to show that I was warning of the devastating impacts on local families and businesses of any closure or downgrading.

I attach a related campaign media release issued by the NSW Shadow Attorney General and Shadow Minister for Justice Paul Lynch which revealed secret Government plans to almost double prison job cuts from 350 to 600 state-wide.

And I also attach a more recent media release from October 2012, in which Assistant Secretary of Country Labor's Lower Clarence branch Christine Robertson sums up the craven politics behind the decision to downsize Grafton to a remand centre.

Ms Robertson, of Woombah, is a former member of the NSW Legislative Council.

When Premier Barry O'Farrell visited Grafton on Jacaranda Thursday (November 3, 2011) in support of candidate Chris Gulaptis, he dismissed as 'lies' the PSA's claims that Grafton Gaol had been slated to close by the Government.

"I can also give you an iron-clad guarantee that Grafton Gaol is not closing," the Premier told *The Daily Examiner*.

Regardless of this assurance, when the axe came down seven months later, prison officers said it was inmates, not management, who first revealed they would be losing their jobs.

So much for consultation.

State Nationals Member for Clarence Chris Gulaptis then spent the best part of a week defending the indefensible.

Mr Gulaptis had the hide to blame the former Labor government for allowing the gaol 'to reach such a low point'.

He described the gaol as a time bomb waiting to go off, harbouring a culture of bullying and harassment among staff and inmates.

He explained the culture thus: "If you have a box of apples and there are a few bad apples in there, you don't take the box."

He further asserted that the gaol's role in the economy of the city was exaggerated.

“The jail does not buy in anything except milk and bread,” he told *The Daily Examiner*, “And half the staff live in places like Red Rock and Corindi, which are really more in Coffs Harbour than the Clarence Valley.

“The impact of this restructure is more psychological than real.”

In fact, 90 per cent of the workers lived in Grafton or in nearby towns.

It was only when 2000 angry locals rallied in Grafton’s Memorial Park that the MP recanted: “I stuffed up. I thought it was my job to defend the Government’s decision to the people. I was given a pup to sell.”

And what a mangy pup it turned out to be.

I took leave from my policy adviser duties to join NSW Shadow Minister for Regional and Rural Affairs Mick Veitch MLC who flew up from Sydney for the ‘Save Our Town’ rally.

On the banks of the Clarence River, I gave media interviews condemning the downsizing as ‘the worst act of political bastardry ever inflicted on Grafton and the Clarence Valley’.

Mrs June Baker, after whom the Women’s Wing of Grafton Gaol is named, endorsed my comments.

At a second ‘Save Our Town’ rally in Memorial Park, Mr Gulaptis pledged to join the picket line outside the gaol, but even this was qualified to ‘when required’.

The former WorkChoices advocate never appeared comfortable as a newly converted union supporter.

As a unionist, I was proud to join the hundreds of locals at the picket line to support the workers and their families, and unlike the Member for Clarence, I have been consistent in my public statements and actions.

NSW Opposition Leader John Robertson also made several visits to the picket line during a visit to Grafton and this was very much appreciated by 'the long haulers', some of whom kept up a six-day vigil.

After three decades of my working life witnessing community protests on the Northern Rivers, 'The People's Picket' in Grafton stands as one of the most powerful examples of civil disobedience.

The biggest lesson it should teach governments, of all political persuasions, is that proper consultation on such restructures, is desirable because to do otherwise is seen as undemocratic and bordering on thuggery.

Peter Ellem

Former Country Labor candidate for the Clarence by-election.

President of the Lower Clarence branch of Country Labor.

Authorised to make this submission on behalf of the Grafton and Lower Clarence branches of the Australian Labor Party.