



## PROFILE

### Michael Yabsley

16 October. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reports Cessnock prison inmate Michael Meredith's desperation and frustration at the confiscation of the manuscript he has worked on for two years.

That day, a Sydney playwright writes angrily to the *SMH* describing the confiscation as "similar to the amputation of a limb". A week later, she receives a mysterious letter from Peter Frecklington, another prisoner, this time from Goulburn jail's maximum security wing. He wrote: "I'm an old crim, 57, and they took everything from me at Bathurst. This included a play which I treasured above all else...probably the only decent constructive effort of my life..." Attempts to recover the play have so far proved fruitless.

Michael Yabsley, NSW Corrective Services Minister, is indeed making his mark on the NSW penal system in "the biggest shake-out and shake-up this state has ever seen".

Yabsley's latest policy of confiscating prisoners' personal possessions was enacted in October, leading to rampages in prisons. So far the damage bill is put at \$8 million in the worst rioting in decades.

While there are plenty of critics of his policies — including senior members of his own department — supporters have so far kept their heads low. But Yabsley claims to be a man with strong community backing. This is difficult to

dispute — any poll on the reintroduction of the death penalty suggests strong support for a tough stance against violent crime. Yet it is hard to discern his overall plan for the state's penal system — except that he "must regain control of the jails" and that he rejects any "soft-liners" pushing rehabilitation rather than punishment.

The principle ingredients of Yabsley's penal doctrine began in September 1989 with the NSW Liberals' promised "truth in sentencing" policy — "if you get 18 years, you serve 18 years instead of three".

As a result, NSW prisons now have the worst overcrowding problem the state has ever seen. To counter it, Yabsley developed the biggest prison construction program in NSW history —



three new maximum security jails are being built to house 800 prisoners at a cost of \$160 million. But it is not enough; even with the new ones, the prisons will still be overflowing. While awaiting the new jails, Yabsley has thrown more prisoners into cramped cells and kept them locked up for 16 hours a day. The mounting violence in NSW jails during the year has resulted in at least six prison officers receiving needle-stab injuries, including Geoff Page, who has since tested HIV-positive. Thus, drugs and other illegal possessions had to go.

In September Yabsley ordered the confiscation of personal property. Thongs, guitars, wedding rings, ear-studs, cooking utensils, religious ornaments and posters ("I've seen too many religious statues stuffed full of

heroin") in maximum security jails. Pet birds had to go, as well as of course writing materials and treasured items such as manuscripts.

Intent on "regaining control of the jails" Yabsley then introduced compulsory AIDS testing — this time against the advice of the prison officers' union, which considered the move too hurried and lacking adequate medical and psychological counselling services.

Over recent months cries of "enough! enough!" have come from disparate quarters — from within his own department, the Law Society, the churches, the welfare sector and more recently NSW independent MPs. But Yabsley claims the public supports him "absolutely" and says he feels very secure in the portfolio.

Politically Yabsley is an arch conservative in a conservative party. As a student, he won a Rotary exchange to South Africa and was described as a right-wing activist at university. At 24, he first stood, unsuccessfully, in a federal election. Undeterred Yabsley soon became the youngest MP in NSW by winning the state seat of Bligh in inner-Sydney. After holding Bligh for four years, Yabsley was defeated in 1988, but popped up three months later as the new member for the blue-ribbon seat of Vaucluse — where he's been ever since.

He admits to leading an "extremely good lifestyle" in a \$700,000 Victorian terrace in Woolloomooloo, owns a guesthouse outside Lismore and "a few other properties around the place". And he does have some powerful friends. It was recently disclosed that he was given a week's free trip to London by stockbroker Rene Rivkin while on a government-funded prisons tour — the largest gift declared by a state MP this year.

If Yabsley survives his prison reforms he will no doubt move on to bigger and brighter political challenges. In the meantime we can expect more violence. In Peter Frecklington's words, the recent crackdown "resembled scenes of Pol Pot and Hitler. What books the screws weren't throwing on to the rubbish heap...the crims were setting fire to."

Clare Curran