

The following is a summary of an article about crime and punishment in our time and place.

'Doing hard time at the top of the prisons heap'

'Overcrowded cells, ice behind bars, a jailbreak that befit a Hollywood flick – yet Peter Severin's biggest problem may be the perception he is 'soft' writes Nick Ralston'

This article appeared in the News review supplement of the Sydney Morning Herald on 22nd August, 2015, and began with an account of how two high security prisoners, on separate occasions, escaped from the maximum security prison at Goulbourn in New South Wales. This is seen as a major embarrassment for the official in charge of prisons in NSW, Peter Severin.

In the next paragraph Severin admits that the recent escape of the prisoner, Jamieson, should not have happened in a maximum security prison like the one at Goulbourn and that an urgent review has been ordered. The results of the review are to be ready within several weeks.

The journalist writing the story, Nick Ralston, explains that Severin, the official in charge of prisons, faces more challenges than just the escape of one prisoner. The prison population of NSW has apparently grown by 12% in just the last financial year and there are not enough beds for all the inmates of the jails. Sometimes prisoners have to be housed in police stations and courthouses.

The article continues by referring to other problems in prisons such as a smoking ban which could cause trouble with prisoners and the use of the drug, ice, by prisoners.

Another problem faced by Peter Severin is that he has been criticised by some in the media and even by colleagues in his own department. The main criticism of him has been that he is seen to be too 'soft' on prisoners.

Recently, for example, Severin downgraded the status of an inmate convicted of the rape and murder of a young girl at the town of Bargo in NSW in 1992 from A-grade maximum security prisoner to B-grade. As a result, the prisoner was allowed to work in the prison and undertake education courses. When the mother of the girl found out about this she was outraged and blamed Severin for an error of judgement. Severin tried to excuse himself by saying that his department had a new policy for communicating with the families of victims. He also took the opportunity to rebut the idea that he is 'soft' on prisoners.

One of Severin's most strident critics has been a radio host called Ray Hadley. He was a staunch supporter of Severin's predecessor as Commissioner for Corrective Services, Ron Woodham, who Hadley saw as appropriately tough on prisoners. Hadley also had a conflict with the politician who appointed Severin as Commissioner, Greg Smith, the Attorney-General.

The premier of New South Wales, Mike Baird, was also highly critical of the escape of Jamieson. He said that nothing like this should happen again. He explained that it was unacceptable for a prisoner to escape from a high security prison.

However, according to the journalist, Peter Severin still has the confidence of the premier and of the government so he will not be removed from his position. They are impressed with how he is trying to address the problems in NSW prisons.

The article ends with some information about steps being taken to solve infrastructure problems.

Voices in the text

The focus of this summarised newspaper article is the contested performance of the Commissioner for Corrective Services in New South Wales, Peter Severin.

After outlining some problems in the NSW prison system, the journalist, Nick Ralston, sets up a dialogue between Peter Severin and his supporters and Severin's detractors. Essentially Ralston is a moderator in a debate about the suitability of Peter Severin for the position that he holds. The dialogue in this article is not particularly complex. Often a number of different 'voices' taking different stances on a topic can be heard in texts. Ultimately, in this article, Ralston, as the writer of this article, closes down the dialogue in favour of Severin.

(As a matter of interest, does Ray Hadley sound to you like Maurice Frere and Peter Severin like Captain Vickers? Just a thought.)

The dialogue follows this pattern:

1. The article begins with Nick Ralston outlining the situation.
2. Peter Severin speaks. Attribution through a direct reference.
3. Nick Ralston gives some further background.
4. Nick Ralston reports what Severin and the NSW government are thinking.
5. Severin's detractors are quoted through indirect attribution.
6. A mother 'voices' outrage at a decision made by Severin. She joins his detractors. Severin responds through indirect quote.
7. Radio host Ray Hadley is a 'fierce critic' of Peter Severin. The original article quotes him through direct speech. His proclamation brooks no reply and works to close down dialogue.
8. Premier Mike Baird is also quoted directly in the actual article, commenting on the prisoner escape.
9. The dialogue ends with Ralston attributing a position of government support for Severin.

Altogether about seven or eight 'voices' can be heard in the dialogue set up by this article. The important public voices are presented through direct quote while Nick Ralston presents other voices through indirect attribution. Only the proclamation by Ray Hadley works to close down the dialogue which is perhaps what we would expect from a radio 'shock jock'.