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Revamped CJC risks being more than a mouthful, less than effective.

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The widely misunderstood Fitzgerald formula for Queensland was to put independent research at the centre of the crime control and criminal justice process. But having been marginalised by the CJC, it seems research is to be politicised by the Premier. Phil Dickie laments the passing of the vision.

The new Crime and Misconduct Commission seems to be the final stage of the junking of Tony Fitzgerald's scheme for turning Queensland into a bright beacon of best practice in crime control and criminal justice.

Premier Peter Beattie, the very independent first chairman of the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee, should know better than to sweep the independent research capacity of the CJC into his own department.

While Peter was chairing the CJC, it researched and consulted widely and came up with a scheme for regulating prostitution. This was found politically inconvenient by then Premier Goss, who had his department cook up its own scheme for regulating prostitution.

It was an unmitigated disaster, putting prostitution onto the streets and into the suburbs, increasing violence and increasing public nuisance. Peter Beattie, to his credit, went back to the original independently researched CJC formula.

It is not a perfect solution to a vexing social problem - quite possibly none exists. But the researchers, of which I have to acknowledge that I was one, did look at the issue in a reasonably dispassionate way, did engage with interested and involved sections of the community, did expand our knowledge of the industry well beyond the prevalent moralist, libertine and police myths, did look at what had been tried elsewhere and how it had worked.

Most important perhaps, the CJC's work - and all its working assumptions - were out there in public to be judged, equally available to the government, the opposition, the media and the populace. Officers of a government department would not usually be able to examine an issue at such depth or with such little restriction; it is also highly unlikely that the fruits of their work would be permitted to be shared around at all or without censorship.

The prostitution report was probably the high point of the CJC's research career. It need not have been. Out of fear, work stopped on a comprehensive examination of the reality and perception of justice and its dispensation.

Another promising project, into how exactly crime was organised and what could best be done about it, fell foul of the vested interest of law enforcement agencies and personnel determined to maintain the supremacy of their well funded games of cops and robbers. The risk was real. Research of this type tends to demonstrate that the law enforcers remove from the market the least competent and ruthless of criminal entrepreneurs, thus increasing the profitability and viability of the more competent, corrupt and criminal outfits.

Elsewhere in Australia, independent but government-funded crime research agencies have put the brakes on the endless police and political fiddling of crime statistics, put facts and figures to the links between drug crime and other crime and shown up the links between crime and mayhem and the marketing practices of alcohol and gambling vending venues.

This has been - and is - important work, even if governments might not like some of the results.

It is, as the Premier emphasised, entirely right and proper that government make the final decisions on social policy. But the record is fairly clear that governments of whatever party cannot necessarily be trusted to canvass all the options with the electorate and come up with the most workable as opposed to the most expedient answers. Crime also often comes mixed up with issues of class, race and ethnicity. To abandon public and fearless research is often to leave the way open for demagogues to exploit ignorance.

To take a pertinent current example, Australia does have a problem with illegal immigrants. Overwhelmingly, they fly in bearing perfectly valid visas and don't go home. Undesirables entering this way have included criminals, war criminals and dare I say it, suspected members of terrorist organisations.

However, also overwhelmingly, our political and media attention has been focused on a small minority seeking to enter Australia on leaky boats. The majority of this minority are found after a fairly hostile assessment to fit our criteria for refugee status.

The Fitzgerald formula was to put Research and Co-ordination at the very centre of the reform process. But having been marginalised within the CJC, it seems that research is now to be politicised within the Premiers Department.

If not under this Premier, then under the next one.

My term as a crime researcher showed me that we can have less crime, organised or otherwise. But not with Laura Norder being trotted out each election and no powerful and independent voice to show that being tough on crime mostly just produces tougher criminals.

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