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# **The Great Debate: In the Face of the Enormity of Global Threats, Local Action is a Waste of Time**

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For the Negative:

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Before I start I do want to acknowledge that we're on Aboriginal land, the Wurundjeri people, and I thank Auntie Joy yesterday for her beautiful welcome to country and I accept her invitation to be here today on the Wurundjeri people's land.

I want to thank Our Community as well for the invite and acknowledge colleagues in the audience that I work with, both in Queensland and across the country. And even my local soccer team member is here as well I just discovered.

I also want to acknowledge if there are any women here that have been criminalised and spent time in prison – I'd like to hear your voice and what you think on the matter of local action, local issues in regards to global threats.

I know when you're sitting in a prison cell you're not thinking too much about what's happening over in Bali or the ice age really. You're thinking about what's happening to you on a day-to-day, minute-to-minute basis and the brutality that you're experiencing.

And with 1500 of you wonderful people here that work in the community sector, the other team is saying that what we do means nothing, absolutely nothing, and I know you as well as I disagree, that every minute of our lives and the passion that we hold, and the work that we do absolutely means everything to each and every one of us and to the people that we walk with in the community.

I'm going to tell a bit of a story about Sisters Inside because Sisters Inside is known around Australia and overseas. It started with a handful of women, of voiceless and powerless women on the south side of Brisbane about 16 years ago.

Women in prison have no voice, they have no liberty physically or psychologically. But at that time in Brisbane a movement to take some control grew directly out of the prison experience of myself and other women.

It was limited control, sure. But it was about opportunity to get an education, to get a job, to keep in contact with our families, to keep our children so they weren't removed by the state.

And it worked because it was not about individualism or ego. We had a progressive government and administration at that time that made that possible in Queensland. But it is effective because it was in the hands of the women themselves. We had control, we had the power. And it was local action and still is.

The organisation that grew from it, Sisters Inside, was successful because it worked from within the hearts and souls of the women ourselves. It was conceived as an organisation run for women in prison by women in prison.

We knew what we wanted and what we needed and that's what Sisters Inside provided, as we still do today, whether it's sexual assault counselling, drug and alcohol counselling, employment training, post release support, connection with children, youth workers to work with young people who are in detention centres. Sisters Inside has always and still is run by a committee of women in prison as well as on the outside.

The inside steering committee of that organisation, my organisation, our organisation of women prisoners, is the beating heart of the organisation. It informs everything we do and how we do it. So even if we're in prison with ice up to our eyeballs, we will still decide how we're going to get rid of the ice.

In this way it is truly in the hands of those it serves, the women. In this way it stays true to its vision. It's authentic, it reflects the real experiences of us as women and it is true to them.

Since then the organisation has grown and prospered, offering a wider range of services as I described just before. And we also advocate for the human rights of women in the criminal justice system, a broader advocacy role that we didn't actually intend to take on or have that vision earlier on, back when we were sitting in prison, where we have, over the years, dragged the reality of prisons into the wider consciousness of the public and even here today.

In my time inside prison I saw daily and unforgettably how the words 'human rights' can seem ludicrous to someone whose experience leaves you feeling barely human anymore. Sisters Inside has successfully brought the fundamental lack of human rights in women's prisons to the

fore – in public inquiries across several jurisdictions in this country, Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales, and more recently tabled in Parliament in the Northern Territory last Friday, reviews and investigations into the abuses of women in prison across these jurisdictions; in a best-selling book; in a human rights medal; an Order of Australia; and through an international network of associations that we work with very closely.

Of course there is always resistance to local action, as we all know, and ours has come in all shapes and sizes, but none larger than the current Minister for Corrections in our state, Judy Spence.

Sisters Inside has so rattled her cage that she has tried several avenues to make the organisation go away, disappear, be silenced, have no voice. In one of these she succeeded in preventing the management committee from holding its regular monthly meetings with the steering committee of women inside the women's prison.

If she thought this would magically bring about our disappearance she was gravely wrong, because the grass roots, the local action will always be there and we've found other ways to communicate. If it's not face-to-face through monthly management meetings it's through many other avenues that she has not been able to stop and she will not stop.

We're in touch with what the women need and we're proud of our local action. We're proud of our grass roots organisation and women feel proud to be part of that. We're not going anywhere fast.

Governments come and go. Ministers come and go. But we're here for the long run, as you all are in your day-to-day work with the people that you walk with. And we will survive, because unlike Minister Spence our approach is not power over anyone. It's power with the women, with the women we walk with.

It's about local action and I have to tell you I don't think it's a waste of time. And that's what grass roots organisations are all about and where the high majority of you in this room come from, and believe in. That's why you're here participating, and of course no doubt going to vote against the other side.

It's interesting. We've had conversations, myself with Anne Warner and Pat Turner over the last couple of days, because we're in the same motel, talking about this debate and remembering Minister Spence, it brought into the forefront of our minds Burma's military junta. In Burma, people have been prevented from banding together by the junta, which has the power right now.

But all tyrannies eventually overreach themselves, like Spence, like the junta. Grass roots organisations in Burma, its monks for that matter, are about meeting people's needs, and will triumph exactly because of that. They cannot separate them from the people, as we will not be separated from women in prison in this country and around the world.

And that's what some people try to do, who take their power and use it in an abusive way. This is what global threats are all about, misuse of power.

In the end, grass roots organisations, local action, will always triumph. It may take time but particularly in times of crisis and in a world of crisis, local action will flourish, not diminish. All of us here are thriving. There are over a thousand people here, 1500 I think. We will not be turned away from those that we work with, those that we believe it's an approach of 'power with', not 'power over'.

And as long as we stay in touch with people's needs, represent people's needs, share people's needs and walk with people, we'll always be there and be effective.

It's interesting that on the other side, Jenny seems to be quite confused about the debate point because she seems to have got globalisation confused with global climate change, and they are two separate things, as we know, from local action. And there are different things that we need to take in account working at that grass roots level and in local action.

Local action is 'power with' and not 'power over'. We don't take threats lightly but we will stand up to them and we will mow them down in any small or large way we can as a community sector.

Now, the lights haven't been dimmed for me so I'm just going to come to an end. I don't know who said this but I'm happy for someone to tell me

who did. I thought it's quite relevant at this moment. And that is, "Silence is complicity and speaking out is about change". And all of us from the grass roots, from local action groups, we talk and we are about change.

A threat will always be a threat, whether it's local or global. It doesn't really matter because we're not scared of it.

Thank you.