Kew Cottage Fire 1996

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Kew Cottages Fire Context 1:
Disability & Society

- Kew deemed temporary for 4 decades - stigma
- Least powerful thus few resources
- The politics of shame
- Few advocates:
  - Journalists from Day 1
  - Parents from 1940s
Changing Ideas of Intellectual Disabilities

- 1887 - the promise of education
- 1920s - Eugenics & social threat
- 1950s - renewed hope, new emphasis on programs
Kew Cottages Fire Context 3: Costs of Normalisation & Deinstitutionalisation
Kew Cottages Fire Context 4: Recession of the 1990s & Neo-liberalism

• 1987 stock market crash 40%
• Recession: 10% jobless
• 1990 Pyramid collapse
• State Bank > CBA
• 1992 Kennett Govt elected
• Small govt, privatisation of utilities, spending cuts, council amalgamations. Pentridge closed!
Fire in Building 37: Units 31-32 (similar layout to 28-29)

- 60% more residents 1960-1993
- 1996 normalisation: > 5 flats
- 10.49 pm 8 April 1996 fire begins
- 10.56 MFB rang KRS
- Initial confusion
- Staff on duty alerted
- Bedroom Flat E origin of the fire
- MFB arrived 11.01- 3 appliances
Building 37 Graphic - Reveals Problems

- Two staff for 46
- Residents locked in
- Unfinished building - no sprinkler system due to asbestos
- Cause of: ‘Paul’?
Aerial View Day1

• The intensity - 600 degrees
• The chaos inside
• Evident still in 2005
• The difficulties of evacuation
• MFB magnificent
• Staff courageous Peng & Bartful
• Death toll: 9/10
• Mean of 30 years in care
The Initial Reactions

• The Press: immediate & beyond
• The Public: close or reform
• Advocates budgets ie VALID
• The Kew Parents: trauma
• Themes: tragedy of sprinklers, budget cuts, Govt to blame
• Elizab’th Hastings (HREOC) equality

• Services KRS Rose Garden; Sacred Heart Kew; S Paul’s Bishop Grant
Investigations Begin

• Underfunding: Riddiford’s letter morning after the fire
• Age 4 week investigation – Victoria’s Forgotten People’
  1 System: in crisis
  2 IDPS Act (1986): breached
  3 drugs/chemical restraints: excess
• Kennett plays hard ball
The Inquiry

- Calls for RC – rejected: why?
- G. Johnstone’s Coronial Inquiry
- 81 sitting days - meticulous
- Geoff Welchman attends
- 496 page Report findings – failure of duty of care
  - Warnings 10 years
  - Commended staff, MFB consultants
Conclusions

• New ideas of N & D create more costs and temporary state
• 1990s economic context + neo-liberal philosophy > spending cuts
• In 1996 those at Kew lowest priority + duty of care breached
• Liminal moment of change leaves Kew vulnerable
• Outcomes:
  • Short: DHS spends $75m across institutions
  • Longer: Norm & Deinstit. Revitalised
  • New traumas but over to David
For More Detail see: