Elferink was “judge, jury and executioner”

by Ben Smee

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The face of youth crime, until yesterday, was the one we could see.

Break-ins, stolen cars, wannabe teen gangsters. And seemingly endless reoffending.

There has been an undeniable frustration within the community that our justice system does not break the cycle, and that kids leave youth detention to resume lives of near poverty, drug use and petty crime.

The main reaction, perhaps the natural reaction, was to suggest our system needed to harden up.

Where the community can be forgiven – and the NT government cannot – is that the treatment of our troubled youths had a face that most of us could not see.

There can be no doubt, after viewing the footage on “Four Corners”, that the brutalisation of young people within Don Dale is an overwhelming cause of that reoffending.

In that environment Cabinet approved the use of those horrific restraint chairs. And in that same environment, Cabinet backed changes to the bail act designed to put more young petty property offenders into detention.

If Cabinet did not know about the treatment of kids in Don Dale – if the Chief Minister did not know – they must still shoulder some of the burden here. John Elferink has been allowed, unchecked by his colleagues or his leader, to serve as the Territory's proverbial judge, jury and executioner.

He's in charge of the child protection system, the justice system and corrections system. The problems in each of those systems have been compounded because each is run according to Elferink's singular and self-righteous agenda.

After the February 2015 coup attempt, Chief Minister Adam Giles and Elferink came to an uneasy truce. The result was the Attorney-General and Corrections Minister exerted almost total authority over his areas of responsibility.

That was a political necessity, required to keep the CLP wing intact until the election. But the consequences of allowing Elferink to dictate these policies, which have drawn national condemnation, must be owned y Giles and rest of the Cabinet.

While they must shoulder some culpability, it's Elferink who will ultimately be remembered as the man responsible for a regime that tortures children, responsible for a regime which the Chief Minister said yesterday harboured a “culture of cover up”.

His appearance on “Four Corners” was a train wreck. And it explains why he's been a train wreck as a minister.

He seemed to think that riding out to Don Dale on a Harley-Davidson, and offering the reporter a ride, would make him look cool.

That's the action of a man utterly convinced of his own infallibility, who colleagues and staffers say is unwilling to listen to advice.

Elferink's biggest problem has always been that he believed himself to be the smartest person in the room, but he has always lacked the empathy, and the perspective, to be a decent or effective politician.