

With many decades of life experience in the Canadian penal system, I was encouraged by others to outline my life journey with Correctional Service Canada (CSC) and the Parole Board of Canada (PBC) to highlight some of the shifts that have occurred in the federal penitentiary system over the years.

ON CONDITIONAL RELEASE

I was convicted of murder as a teenager. After a decade behind bars, I was released on full parole, enrolled in university and got a degree, got married and had a child. I started a business, but then as a result of a family dispute where I threatened court action to maintain custody of my child, I became targeted for false complaints about to my parole officers. My parole was subsequently suspended and revoked on a number of occasions. I was later told by CSC and PBC officials that this should not have happened.

At one point, I was released on day parole and several months later I was again granted full parole. This is where my life experiences with Prime Minister Stephen Harper's policies crossed paths. During my parole hearing, I admitted that I smoked a joint to help with the stress of moving from a small town to a large city, leaving my family and friends behind, and starting all over again. I was given a "substance-abuse condition" even though the rules state that conditions could only be imposed if it was a "risk factor" that contributed to my offence, which it was not. I was told by an official that the imposition of this condition was a direct result of the federal government's 'tough' stance on marijuana.

While on full parole and issue free, I was suspended for an alleged assault and I was later revoked in February 2014 without a hearing. The charges were later dropped in court as the person whom claimed that I assaulted him admitted that the accusations were false and that he was the one whom had assaulted me. I had requested that my revocation hearing be postponed until after my court date because I knew that I was innocent. However, I was not granted this request. I was told that the federal government had put in place rules that if a prisoner is charged with a new offence that their parole is automatically suspended and revoked.

After returning to prison, I grappled with memories of childhood abuse I experienced. As I tried to access counselling, I was informed that because of CSC cutbacks mandated by the Harper government as part of their austerity

plan there were no trained counsellors I could speak to. In 2014, I met with a contract psychologist for a risk assessment. She recommended that I be transferred to the minimum-security unit, attend church via Escorted Temporary Absences (ETAs) for three months and then be released. My faith was identified as an important factor in my being crime-free for over four decades. I filled-out the transfer paperwork and should have been transferred with a couple of months, yet the process took five months. During this period, I was given a new untrained parole officer who could not handle the work load and went back to being a correctional officer (COII). My files were a mess and within a half a year I had five parole officers.

In 2015, I was transferred to the Minimum-Security Unit (MSU) of Drumheller and my new parole officer applied for an ETA to church at per the recommendation of the psychological risk assessment. However, there was a new problem. The Conservative government imposed a new condition on people serving a life sentence, whereby the power to grant ETAs was taken away from the Institutional Warden. That power was transferred to PBC.

During a parole hearing held in 2015, the board members denied my case management team's request for faith-based ETAs to deal with issues I had experienced in my life. In their decision, PBC members noted:

Your release plans for the proposed ETA's are aimed at assisting you in rebuilding your community supports through church activity. The Board notes these are similar to what you have done in the past and yet you have been suspended and revoked with these in place. The Board has concerns that this plan will not result in future success and also given your history that your involvement in these will not contribute to public safety at this time.

To support their decision, they made the following erroneous statements: that I was revoked in for being involved in a "hit and run accident"; and that I had a substance abuse condition, which I violated a year after it was imposed. After a file review by my case management team concluded that the information quoted by the PBC was erroneous and misleading. The Manager of Assessments and Interventions (MAI) instructed my parole officer to write to the PBC three times to correct the facts, which were refused. Finally, I was instructed to appeal the PBC decision, which turned out to be a waste of time. The Appeal Division – an in-house body – denied my request, sending me to the Access to Information and Privacy department, which in turn sent

me to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner. They in turn instructed be to again contact the Access of Information and Privacy department of CSC looking to start the process to correct the erroneous file information. This process so far has taken more than a year and a half, and the erroneous issues have still not been resolved. I was told that because of Harper-era cutbacks, correcting erroneous file information, which likely needs to be remedied if I am ever to be released, can take forever. With a parole hearing scheduled with the support of my institutional case management team, the uncertainty I am living with is unjust.

ON PRISON LIFE

Beyond the issues with respect to conditional release noted above, my stay in Drumheller Institution has brought to light several dysfunctions in the federal penitentiary system that have emerged as a result of Harper-era laws, policies and practices.

One area of profound change is with respect to trades and education. During their time in office, the Conservative government created a false illusion to the public that you could get a trade while in prison. When I was first incarcerated you could access skills training in the following areas: auto body, auto mechanics, electrical, plumbing, sheet metal, machinist, cabinet making, welding and painting. Now, only a handful of prisoners can access welding and pre-carpentry. The biggest complaint that I hear amongst prisoners is that they cannot get a trade while in prison. Many leave this place almost as they have arrived, not able to get a job. The system no longer cares if you can get a trade while in prison as long as they can show that you have taken their psychological programs, which most prisoners see as a waste of time. At one time, you could get help taking university level courses like I did. Today, only GED is on offer. As a result, many just return to the penitentiary because of no jobs and/or a lack of education where they are just mandated to take another psychological program.

A related issue is the fact that the Harper government removed employment incentives in the penitentiary so that you could save money for when you got out. People are now leaving prison with only \$80 to their name and no chance of getting a job. One person that I know asked the PBC to spend the last six months of his sentence at a halfway house so that he could save money, find employment and find a place to live, while under

the supervision of CSC. The PBC refused and sent him into the community with no money, no job and no place to go. How many days do you think he lasted, just to return to prison at a cost of more than \$100,000 a year to taxpayers? It is as if the system is just one big make work project for them where everyone else pays the bill.

Another area of change is drug urinalysis for marijuana. At one time in the penitentiary, guards were not concerned about someone smoking marijuana because it kept everyone calm. However, with the previous federal government's anti-marijuana agenda, the system has cracked down on the substance, causing prisoners to turn to harder drugs because they stay in your system for much less time. This, in turn, has created a new generation and class of drug addicts leaving the federal penitentiary system. This causes the spread of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis-C to their families and communities.

There appears to be very little accountability toward inaction by staff members in the system. For example, every forty-five days the rules state that you are supposed to meet with your COII, to go over issues that are occurring your case. I have gone eighteen months without such a meeting. Under the Harper-mindset of getting 'tough' on prisoners, people are not doing their jobs and CSC management appears powerless to do anything about it.

I hope these observations assist others in understanding what happened at CSC and PBC during Prime Minister Stephen Harper's reign.