

Kent Institution

Anonymous Prisoners

During the era of Harper, which started in 2006, nothing but a string of negative policies and procedures were implemented time after time. This has caused us to feel more isolated, depressed and demoralised. The policies that have been implemented have served to strip us of our identities and to embarrass us continually. The reason for this sentiment will be outlined below.

The food quality has significantly diminished. Previously, we were offered a healthier selection of food that was for the most part cooked fresh on-site. When the cooking was done on-site we had input into the specifics of the diet, as well as the means of the preparation of the food we were consuming. Now that the process is centralized, it is impossible for us to have any input into quality concerns. The diet that is forced upon us consist of items that are classified as scoop-ables, that is they are served out as slop. All of the meals are smothered in sauces that give no nutritional value, and are loaded with artificial thickeners colors and preservatives. The food appearance is grotesque, consistent with vomit. The taste is often worse than the appearance. Approximately 20% of the penitentiary population here suffers severe digestive problems due to the food forced upon us. These range from bloody anal discharge, bloody stool, lower intestinal cramping and bloating, constipation and diarrhea, as well as stomach pains. Prisoners have described the feeling of digesting crushed glass, coupled with acid reflux and heartburn. Two of the three writers are currently suffering several of these symptoms. We feel this is tantamount to torture as we are forced to experience physical pain just to receive the sustenance to maintain life. Most seek help from outside health care staff hoping to receive food that does not hurt us and instead they receive medication that, at best, reduces the problems minimally. We also do not believe that the diet is balanced. We receive way too many calories from simple carbohydrates. Hearing our complaints, the penitentiary pastor chose to subject himself to a week of our meals to see it from our perspective. He came away from the experience concluding that the meals being served here were inedible.

We would like to bring to light the problems caused by the additional 30% room and board pay deduction. This is an absolute ridiculous policy that was implemented despite the fact that we have not had a pay raise since the 1980s. At that time, our pay checks were based off 15% of the federal minimum wage, which had already factored in the cost of room and board. We are being double charged room and board. If you factor in today's rate

of minimum wage in British Columbia of \$10.85 we should be making more than two and a half times what we were being paid back in the 1980s. Instead, we are being paid \$30 less than the 1980s wages per pay period. The most one earns at Kent is Level C pay, which is \$5.80 per day, minus the deductions, which never reaches \$30 per ten-day pay period. Due to the fact that most institutions are in rural locations and calls to family are long distance, these funds do not go very far to help us keep strong contacts with family and the positive supports that we have in the community. Due to the dietary issues already mentioned, it is necessary to supplement our daily diet with canteen items to meet our daily needs.

Purchase orders through our new catalogue is being monopolised by one provider who is not even Canadian. We are subject to inflated prices, low quality goods and a limited selection overall. The *Competition Act* of Canada clearly states that we have a right to the best possible price for items available to us. This Act is clearly being violated behind the walls of federal penitentiaries. For example, items such as a 19-inch RCA television, before the catalogue was introduced, cost \$99 plus tax. When the new catalogue was introduced the exact same television was listed for well over \$350. After a swarm of complaints, it was lowered to \$225 plus tax. How is this justifiable in any way? Having to purchase our clothing and accessories from one supplier with a limited selection also restricts our individuality and diminishes our sense of self.

In years gone by, prisoners had access to post-secondary education. Prisoners were encouraged to better themselves and acquire skills that could assist them in becoming productive members of society upon release. Now access to post-secondary education is virtually non-existent. Prisoners have to fight tooth and nail to purchase what courses are available to them through the mail as CSC is not affording the opportunity to access schooling via the web. Obviously, this is an archaic policy as it is 2017 and paper is obsolete. In the recent past, prisoners had access to any high school level program that they wished to participate in. Now, if you have a GED you are not allowed to participate in any pre-graduate course and you cannot obtain your diploma. If you wish to upgrade to post-secondary education you are made to pay for it yourself and most prisoners cannot afford this as it is at least \$600 per course, and we do not have any adequate source of income here. It would appear from any outside observer that CSC is in fact trying to inhibit our ability to rehabilitate ourselves, instead of promoting the stated goals of corrections.

Access to trades and vocational training has been significantly reduced nationally and is non-existent here at Kent Institution. Again, this does not meet the stated purpose of corrections. Prisoners are not better able to support themselves legally and productively than when they began their sentences. It is a widely shared desire among the population to participate in programs that would result in a successful trade or career, which would translate into their successful reintegration into the community. Why CSC removed training programs involving carpentry, electrician, auto body and plumbing mechanics when the infrastructure is already in place is inexplicable.

It is also important to mention the removal of what was called incentive pay, where prisoners could make extra money for working overtime more than eight hours a day. Some prisoners used to work over 50 hours Monday to Friday just to make \$150 with the hope of saving a small amount of money for their release. This was facilitated in penitentiaries that have a CORCAN factory where prisoners are the sole workers producing items that prisoners use such as blankets pillows, mattresses, winter spring jackets and nearly every prison issued clothing that prisoners wear, which the penitentiary makes mandatory to wear during work hours. It taught prisoners the value of hard work for the pay check and also helped them plan for their futures. CORCAN continues to sell various items to other facilities and programs across Canada for a ridiculous profit, yet very little is shared with the prisoners who labour in their factories.

Limits to the amount we can spend in our own money, be it the pen pack limit of \$1,500 with the extra allotment of \$300 for jewellery or the cap that is in place at \$750 regarding how much we may spend of our own money on personal property canteen and hygiene. These numbers were put in place in the 1980s, and along with the pay policy has likewise not received a raise to these limits since that time. With inflation, we are crippled by the fact that a t-shirt today may cost \$50 when in the 1980s it would have been \$5 to \$10 on average. We are given a list of items that we may have sent in during the initial 30-day window for our pen packs, but once the items get here, the staff in admissions and discharge routinely mark down the items for ludicrous amounts, stopping us from getting anywhere close to what they say we may have. It is an unfair practice. If you take into consideration it has been 31 years since our last update where monetary values are concerned, our limits should be almost 100% higher just to keep up with rising inflation.

In conclusion, we understand that we are not perfect people, we have made mistakes, but how can we change and each become a better person when we are not even given a chance?

RESPONSE

More Stormy Weather or Sunny Ways? A Forecast for Change by Prisoners of the Canadian Carceral State *Jarrod Shook and Bridget McInnis*

INTRODUCTION

Upon being elected, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (2015) mandated the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada Jody Wilson-Raybould to review criminal justice laws, policies, and practices enacted during the 2006-2015 period where successive Conservative federal governments were in power. With the change in government there has been some initial, albeit cautious, optimism that Prime Minister Trudeau will follow through on his professed commitment to “sunny ways” (e.g. O’Connor, 2015; Doob and Webster, 2016). This optimism is not unfounded. Anecdotally, editorial staff from the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) are hearing that parole grant rates have improved. The newly appointed Correctional Investigator Ivan Zinger has also recently reported a “sharp decline” in the use of solitary confinement (Harris, 2017). Nevertheless, as this special issue of the *JPP* demonstrates, a storm rages on in Canadian federal penitentiaries and the prisoners who have been weathering it have a forecast for change.

As a prisoner-written, academically-oriented, and peer-reviewed non-profit journal based upon the tradition of the penal press, the *JPP* brings the knowledge produced by prison writers together with academic arguments to enlighten public discourse about the current state of carceral institutions. As such, the editors of this special issue are of the belief that part of the Government of Canada’s promised review of criminal justice laws, policies, and practices should involve direct input from prisoners who, having experienced recent penal reforms first-hand, are well-positioned to assess their impact upon their lives and what changes are needed moving forward.

To this end, the *JPP* undertook a Canada-wide consultation of its own to request that Canadian federal prisoners provide their observations regarding what has changed in the penitentiaries where they have served time during the last decade in relation to the Harper government’s punishment agenda. We asked them not just what they think about those changes and how they have impacted their lives, but also what prisoners would like to see moving forward in terms of their main priorities for change and the types of social