

Collins Bay Institution: A Cluster F*#k

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They say the sun never sets on the Collins Bay Empire. At least not now that Collins Bay Institution is a multi-level complex, a super prison where maximum, medium, and minimum security prisoners are brought under the sovereignty and subject to the panoptic gaze of a centralized administrative team.

Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) officials, along with the conservative ideologues who envisioned this domain in the so-called *Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety* (Sampson *et al.*, 2007), have been referring to the new prison model as a “clustered site”, a more “efficient” way of doing corrections. It is a cluster, alright – a cluster f*#k.

In the 2009 report, *A Flawed Compass: A Human Rights Analysis of the Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety*, which attacks this pernicious scheme to appeal to the conservative base and remodel Canadian prisons on the failed American prison industrial complex, the UBC law professor Michael Jackson and Graham Stewart (2009), the former executive director of the John Howard Society of Canada, ask some pointed questions about what this new “philosophy” in corrections might actually mean in practice. Among them is the question: can treatment, school or correctional staff—even administrators—easily move between prisoner groups of various security levels and adjust to these groups in an appropriate manner, or will they tend to act as though all groups are made of higher security prisoners?

This is a decisive question, because according to CSC policy, prisoners classified at maximum security require a *high* degree of supervision and control, at medium security a *moderate* degree of supervision and control, and at minimum security a *low* degree of supervision and control. Accordingly, CSC uses “research based tools” to assist in determining the most appropriate security level for the penitentiary placement of a prisoner. This includes establishing “behavioural norms” at institutions, or the degree to which an individual’s behaviour compares to the behaviours expected for those placed at a particular penitentiary’s specific security level. For instance, maximum security prisoners are expected to “interact effectively and responsibly, while subject to *constant* and *direct* supervision” (Commissioner’s Directive 706). Contrast this with minimum security prisons, where prisoners are expected to interact effectively and responsibly with *minimal* supervision. Certainly staff, for reasons of all kinds, whether

they are security officers or otherwise, must adopt a particular posture and temperament on the job that reflect the nature of their working environment. This is particularly true for guards.

To use an analogy, think of this system of control as if it were a game of hockey. Correctional officers might all be on the same team when they come to work, but they are playing different positions when they work at different security levels. Sure a forward (maximum) might be able to fall back and play defense (minimum) every now and again, or vice versa, but the coach does not go switching the roster around every game and most certainly not every shift. This would not only be too confusing for everyone, but would ultimately affect the dynamic of the game. But this is not a game. There are implications for everyone.

Not only will this “more efficient” way of doing things create havoc, but it could also have the effect of turning Collins Bay’s Minimum (formerly Frontenac) into a *de facto* medium security prison.

Convict culture is rigid. Prisoners enforce strict social rules upon one another, sometimes on the threat of violence or severe social ostracism if not adhered to. Not everyone conforms to these rules. Typically, however, as prisoners cascade from higher to lower security levels, their commitment to the convict code erodes somewhat. For this reason, minimum security prisons are generally free from the politics, and ultimately violence, that is associated with higher security levels. Prison guards too have their own particular culture and, just like prisoners, correctional officers at higher security levels are generally committed to a particular philosophy. You do not see this as much at lower security levels, nor do you see the adversarial *us* against *them* mentality that so often places an additional and unnecessary strain on an already distressful and antagonizing environment. This is a good thing – for everyone. It protects the environment from becoming any more toxic than it already is. As rotating shifts of prison guards from maximum to medium to minimum on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday are put into action, the cultural milieu of higher security levels will likely creep its way into the minimum. The result is being hardened and a *de facto* increase in the institutional security level. Without a change in trajectory, it is only a matter of time before this happens.

REFERENCES

- Correctional Service Canada (no date) *CSC Commissioner's Directive 706*, Ottawa.
- Jackson, Michael and Graham Stewart (2009) *A Flawed Compass: A Human Rights Analysis of the Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety*.
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