

Chicken Soup

Craig W. J. Minogue

I have been in prison since 1986, and at first I raged against the system with violence, barricades, and fires, but through a slow process I have matured into a jailhouse lawyer and academic. I have also come to accept the appropriateness of my being separated from the community because of my actions. That is not to say I am happy about it or do not resist when resistance is called for. In 2008, I was transferred to the Marnongeeet Correctional Centre after twenty-two years in maximum-security prisons. Marnongeeet is a programs prison. Paraphrasing their promotional material, the prison provides:

An intensive level of treatment and offender management activity to prepare for a successful crime-free release from prison. There are 3 x 100 bed neighbourhoods (one protection and two mainstream) which function as therapeutic communities where all prisoners participate as members of the neighbourhood community.

Accommodation in each bed neighbourhood comprises: one 40-cell unit, each cell with shower and toilet. The 60 other beds are in self-catering accommodation with: 2 lock-up accommodations of 6 cells which each have a shower and toilet; 6 flat-style accommodations with six bedrooms each and 2 shared bathroom facilities; 3 cottage style accommodations with four bedrooms and 2 shared bathroom facilities. All have a lounge area and kitchenette. The carpeted bedrooms have a bed, a desk, and a wardrobe the like of which could be found at an Ikea store.

Each neighbourhood has a targeted clinical purpose: protection and sex offender; violent offender and drug/alcohol offender. Prisoners cook, clean and manage budget and their own hygiene in the 4- and 6-bed units (independent living/self-catering) and take responsibility for themselves and each other, working together with custodial, clinical and vocational staff to achieve a safe, secure and therapeutic neighbourhood.

In the self-catering accommodation, the prison allocates forty-eight dollars per week per person to spend on a set list of food. There is an electric stove, microwave oven, electrical appliances, fridge and all types of cooking utensils and equipment. It seems to work well for those men

who do not want to buy junk. They deliver the food twice a week. How this system works depends on who the men are and what they want to buy. Older more organized men have a good stock of food on hand, but some of the men live from hand to mouth with milk, bread and ice cream. I am in a four-bed accommodation in physical and social conditions that I have to say are very good.

Despite accepting the appropriateness of my being here and the very good physical living conditions, I am still held coercively with the threat of violence. At this Therapeutic Treatment Community there are omnipresent levels of surveillance, categorisation, and classification, which ensure the assessments, management, and treatment interventions through programs and policies designed to reduce re-offending are relentlessly applied. There is a Custodial Assessment, a Clinical Assessment, a Treatment Management Plan, Pre- and Post-Psychometric Testing regimes, a Vocational Services Assessment and an Accommodation Plan, which combine to constitute a Whole of Services Assessment that is overseen by a Review and Assessment Committee. There are Individual Management Plan Files, a Clinical File, a Psychometric Assessment Register, a Clinical Services Register, Service Reports and many other reports, case notes, case review entries, and file notes. Michel Foucault says that in “the harshest of prisons” the disciplinary discourse holds over the prisoner the inescapable reality that the custodial officer and the psychologist will “note the slightest irregularity in your conduct” (Foucault, 1991, p. 299). And so it is at Marnongneet Correctional Centre (see Minogue, 2011).

There is a no-man’s-land barrier, surveillance, a wall topped with razor wire. To drive home the coercive and threatening nature of it all, every other week hundreds of gunshots echo loudly around the walls here as prison staff practice their aim with nine millimetre, large-capacity magazine weapons at the pistol range that is right next to the prison. And there are many more, less obvious ways in which my life here is a moment-to-moment battle, which would not be obvious to the casual visitor. My life here is experienced as continual conflict, but in comfortable conditions. The story about the clear Contact to cover books and the chicken phenomenon will illustrate what I mean.

In July 2011, I received a three-volume set of academic books about social research methodology and I wanted to cover them with clear Contact to keep them in good condition. I did not have enough for the job remaining

on a large roll of Contact I had bought a few years previous, so on July 29, I asked prison staff for a Special Spend Form. I filled out my part of the form requesting the clear Contact for covering the books, and a prison officer filled out his part. From there, I had my request approved by a more senior officer. I knew this was going to be a contentious issue here, as security and control are more intense now than ever before, so I wrote a cover letter to the people who buy these types of items and said:

I have ordered a roll of clear contact to cover some books. I bought clear contact at this location in June 2008. I have in fact, bought and used contact to cover books at every prison I have been in for the past 25 years. Occasionally however, some staff think that it is a forbidden item. It is not. If there is a problem with my buying this item then I ask that I be advised who has made the decision and on what grounds, as it would be my intention to advocate that it would be appropriate for me to have access to this item, and I need to know with whom to advocate and on what terms. Thank you for your consideration.

The form was returned to me with a handwritten note saying “Cancelled, not permitted”. So I asked, “Who says it is not permitted?” I received a second copy of the form with a note saying, “Craig, as per Collators, this item is not permitted. Thanks”. Many emails were exchanged, and I was mistakenly given copies of them attached to the form with the handwritten note (the Collator is the Security and Intelligence Officer of the prison).

So in August I wrote to the local Manager in the area in which I am housed and said:

I have bought clear Contact on special spends to cover books in Pentridge Prison’s H Division 25 years ago and I still have some of the books I covered in H Division with me now. I have used Contact to cover books in the Acacia High Security Unit at Barwon. Contact which was bought on the special spend at Barwon. I have had books covered in Contact for over 25 years in prison. I have even bought a roll of Contact here at prison 2 years ago. Contact to cover books is clear, the piece attached over this text demonstrates [the illustration imperative at work]. The prison system has x-ray machines, drug-sniffing dogs and highly trained staff [seriously they do]. I therefore, see no real need to restrict clear Contact

at this medium security prison. I have had 3 academic books sent to me. They cost \$162.00 and are books I will keep and use for the rest of my life. I would like to cover them with Contact to protect them. I ask that the decision by the Collator to refuse me access to the common office, library and home stationary item to be reconsidered.

The local manager said I could buy the Contact, so I asked for another form and filled out my part, and a prison officer filled out his part. From there, I had it approved by a more senior officer and lodged the form. The form was again returned to me, this time with an even larger handwritten note saying, "Craig, I have checked with Security Manager and this item is prohibited – Cancelled". So I met with the staff who do the Special Spends, and I asked what the problem is. They told me that the Security Manager said, "He could use Contact to hide things under it".

I said, "It's clear, what could I hide?"

The answer: "Invisible things!"

But I said, "If they are invisible, why would I need to hide them?"

The answer: "We don't know, that's just what the Security Manager says".

So I complained to the local Manager and he said he would take the issue to the Leadership Team. I wrote a short cover letter to be attached to all the documents in the matter and said:

There seems to be an imperative that if possible, items should be made of clear material to allow inspection, like pens, highlighters, and now even some electrical items. Contact is clear, like the piece which covers the text you are now reading. [This was the last piece I had, not big enough for a book, but big enough to make the point].

The local Manager then told me that the matter was being considered by the Leadership Team. By September 2011, I had not received a response from the Leadership Team, so I wrote to the general Manager of the prison and asked to be advised of the outcome. I did not receive a response. In October, I had a meeting with the General Manager to get her approval to send out some art, so I asked what was happening with the Contact issue. She said, "Oh yes, you can have that".

I said, “Thanks for that, but I need that advice in writing from you or the Special Spends people will not buy it for me”. The General Manager said she would send me a written approval.

A week later I had heard nothing, so when I saw the Executive Officer of the prison in passing, the General Manager’s secretary, and I took the opportunity to ask what was going on with the Contact issue. She told me that the Leadership Team could not settle the matter, so it went to the Director of Prisons for a decision, and he decided that I could have the clear Contact for covering books. The Executive Officer said if I had a new Special Spends Form delivered to her, she would make sure it was processed. I asked for another form. I filled out my part of the form, and a prison officer filled out his part. Once I had it approved by a more senior officer, I asked that it be delivered directly to the Executive Officer. The prison officer said that he would do that.

A week later, I saw the Executive Officer in passing and asked how it went, but she told me she had not received the form. So I confronted the officer who said he delivered the form and told him that I had just spoken to the Executive Officer who said the form was not delivered to her. The officer then changed his story and said he put it in the General Manager’s mailbox at the front gate. I told the officer I did not believe him and insisted that he call the Executive Officer and sort it out. He called while I stood there and listened to his very unconvincing lies. The Executive Officer said I should fill out another form, which I did, and she personally came and collected it a short time later. A few days later, she told me that she had attached the email from the director of prisons saying I could buy the clear Contact and she had delivered it personally to the Special Spends staff with an instruction that they must buy the item.

On November 17 I received the clear Contact—Merry Christmas to me! But why did the Security Manager have such a bee in his bonnet about this? To answer that question we need to go back to September 2010, when there was a major problem at this prison with the drug called buprenorphine (called Bupe by prisoners). At the time, the everyday conversation was about Bupe, and as Bupe sounded like ‘soup’, it was referred to as ‘Chicken Soup’, or ‘Chicken’ for short. A lexicon developed. ‘Chicken hawks’, the men who were chasing the ‘Chicken’, were seen to swoop in and out of ‘Chicken coops’ (the cells and accommodation areas where it was happening). Chicken hawks from other parts of the prison would stand at the entrance to other areas ‘scratching around’ for some Chicken. And scratching is an appropriate description, as

the men using this drug would develop skin irritations and have a nervous aspect and even paw at the ground with their feet like a chicken scratching for seed. “Have you got Chicken?”, “Do you want Chicken?”, and “The Chicken hawks are scratching around” became a running joke.

I had an idea to change the Chicken discourse. I designed a *No Chicken Here* art initiative, which did *much more* to cause prisoners to question the Chicken phenomenon than all their drug tests, disciplinary actions and searches could have ever achieved. In twenty-four hours, my *No Chicken Here* campaign completely changed the discourse in a profound way. The prison was powerless against the Chicken epidemic, but I changed the running joke to: “No Chicken here, man”. People would pass each other on the path and say as a greeting, “No Chicken here, man”.

People were empowered by the graffiti-like public art initiative to identify themselves with opposing the minority, but generally disruptive, Chicken culture. I fixed the *No Chicken Here* signs with clear contact to many surfaces around the prison. I put them on light poles and signs, on electrical switch boxes and even on the doors of staff areas, all in a kind of Banksy-like guerilla-art campaign. My actions caused great controversy with the staff and it was an agenda item on the Leadership Team’s meeting for that week.

I was told the security Manager was filthy on the *No Chicken Here* campaign and wanted to kick my head: “Who does this Minogue think he is?” The other members of the Leadership Team understood it on some level and decided that no action should be taken against me. So when it came time some months later for me to request the clear Contact, it is my guess that the *No Chicken Here* campaign was still stuck in the security Manager’s craw, and it was this that was in fact behind the resistance I faced, and which I overcame.

So, it remains a battle after twenty-six years, a battle punctuated by a few hundred gunshots every other week just to remind me what would happen if I got it into my head to decline the hospitality and comfortable conditions that the casual visitor would see me enjoying.

REFERENCES

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