

PRISON ABOLITION: THE NEED FOR DECRIMINALIZATION

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To begin the discussion on prison abolition there are a number of issues which need to be evaluated. The idea of prison abolition can be divided into two views. The first, is that all prisons should be abolished and we must find alternative ways for dealing with those who are criminalized. The second view is that although prisons may be a necessary evil, our society imprisons far too many people. There should be a halt to all prison construction and a drastic reduction in the number of prisons we already have.

The first view, absolute or total abolition, is somewhat obscure and in my opinion not only unachievable but unrealistic. I believe this position has frightened many people away from the abolition movement. The unfortunate reality that there will always be a need to isolate from society the most violent and dangerous. Their percentage, however, is far less than the number of people presently incarcerated. In Canada we have one of the lowest crime rates per capita yet one of the highest incarceration rates in the western world. Canadians are under the illusion that crime is rampant in our cities, an unfortunate side-effect of being bombarded constantly by the American news media and television industry in general, which seems to have a fixation with crime stories.

Those who call for total abolition are somehow trapped in the belief that mankind can and will achieve a utopian society in which men and women will look upon

all their neighbours as brothers and sisters. They look to past cultures and indeed to some cultures which did not have prisons and use these as illustrations for how things would be. They cite as fact that prisons for much of the western world are a phenomena that developed in the seventeenth century, and that somehow we can find a way back to the mythical Garden of Eden where prisons will be unnecessary. It is, however, an unfortunate reality that men and women being innately aggressive toward their own kind will not venture down that road. The strong will always prey on the weak, even though this may be obscured under a veil of empathy.

The other abolitionist view includes the belief that there are far too many prisons and that they have developed into a spider web of despair and injustice, while becoming a financial burden on the government. All correctional facilities should be abolished with the exception of a very limited number which would be reserved for those who have been convicted of violent offenses. It is an unfortunate reality that there have been (and undoubtedly will always be) people who commit violent offenses and prisons are a necessary evil for dealing with them. The number, however, is much less than one might imagine and would include approximately three per cent of the prison population at any given time. At present, over sixty institutions at various levels of security exist for federal inmates alone. These coupled with the number of existing provincial institutions, clarifies the reality of the mushrooming prison system and of the financial drain required to maintain it.

If we want to start to understand how we can begin to dismantle this monstrosity, we must first ask what has led to its creation. I would suggest that the main contributing factor was not, as many would presume, a dramatic increase in crime. What led to the great expansion of the system were those groups of concerned individuals that have worked to try and reform the system. Consider, for example, that most of the expansion of the system took place after the 1950's. What has happened along side of this expan-

sion has been the public awareness that changes must and should be made within the system. There have been calls for treatment centres, special institutions for specific groups of offenders, and community residential centres to help prisoners reintegrate into normal society. This did not cause a reduction in the number of prisoners, rather it simply led to a dramatic increase in cell space, followed by a need to fill them. One only has to look to the last Canadian federal election and consider Prime Minister Mulroney's campaign promise to his constituents, offering them prosperity by putting a prison in their riding.

Many of the agents for reform have willingly or not become agents for control. Consider, for example, Operation Springboard in Ontario. Without trying to single out any one organisation, Operation Springboard was initially designed to provide transportation for prisoners' families to and from prisons. Over the years it has expanded to include a wide range of facilities and services to help prisoners and their families. They have recently started to run halfway houses for prisoners. The idea of halfway houses for some prisoners has some merit, however, it is my belief that the present use of these facilities has strayed from the original concept.

These halfway houses do not take the prisoner away from the prison, but they have brought the prison into the community. The Correctional Services of Canada has just recently provided Operation Springboard with a multi-million dollar contract to run their halfway houses and provide parole supervision for prisoners released to them. Halfway houses are not necessary for every prisoner, but there is a frightful increase in the number of prisoners that must first go through them. This is how Correctional Services farms out their products; the prison industry is spinning its web by moving more and more into the community.

If concerned groups would truly like to help prisoners, they should not call for programs that lead to the expansion of the system. The system is lying in wait to devour them, to suck them into working for it, usually disguised as an alternative to Correctional Services, but in

reality one and the same program of control.

So what is the answer; how do we begin to dismantle this spider web? Actually the answer is not that difficult. The first step is to stop sending so many of our citizens to jail. We do this in the belief that we can prevent crime. I am afraid this just is not the case, you can only prevent crime in the community, before it has been committed. Prisons usually only serve as a breeding ground for contempt, bitterness, and hate, to which the recidivism rate will attest. Prisons are not designed or operated for crime prevention.

We send far too many people to prison in Canada. The number of persons sent to prison for crimes other than violence is staggering, and in effect immoral. Many of our young offenders have followed an all too familiar path. They drop out of school into the unemployment scene only to scramble for a way to find a legitimate means of support. The result is, they far too often stumble into the judicial system and end up in the cyclical world of the prison. It appears that our judicial system has somehow forgotten that we are all equal under the law. It is painfully obvious that this is not the case. Many groups seem almost targeted by the inequality of the structure of our social institutions and at first contact with the judicial system get caught up in its web. This happens to a disproportionate number of people of minority groups. We must find ways to reverse this trend and have our young graduates from school move into the workforce, rather than drop into a prison cell.

We are going to have to reassess our judicial system and look for viable alternatives to prison. We do not need to send people to prison for property crimes. Community work programs are a far better approach to having offenders repay their debt rather than filing them away in some desolate time chamber. There is no gain, only a loss and one that cannot be recouped. We have to help those who find themselves trapped in a circle of life that leads to conflict with our judicial system. We are going to have to quit sending our young to jail, because, for example, they

turn to drugs to escape the pain caused by the leg hold trap our society has sprung on them.

If we stop sending so many of our people to jail it would not be necessary to maintain so many cells. We could, as Claire Culhane (1980) has pointed out, use prisons for about three per cent of the number of prisoners we presently confine. Think for a minute. Do we really need all the prison cells we have in Canada? Is that what we as a nation want to be recognized for: one of the lowest crime rates yet one of the highest incarceration rates of any western country? Prison abolition is not all that elusive. We need only to quit filling up the prisons we already have and begin to destroy them, not build them.

Reference

Culhane, C. (1980), *Barred from Prison*. Pulp Press.

