

ABOLITION: GOOD IDEA/ BAD APPROACH

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The issue of abolishing prisons in Canada is very complex. Those who support the idea must be thoroughly committed to this cause. These abolitionists are fighting against a very powerful system, a system which survives by oppressing those within the prison and those outside it who seek to change the plight of prisoners. The prison system is comprised of several bureaucratic microcosms: the Correctional Services of Canada and other governmental agencies, the courts, the police, and most importantly the guards' union. These agencies combined have the ability to manipulate every facet of our society. They control public opinion by baiting the press with lies, and consequently affect elections, beliefs and prejudices. They are not about to let their power structure erode. Any organisation which opposes them jeopardizes itself. The prison system has the power to do most anything imaginable and not be held accountable for its actions. This power is unfathomable to the average citizen as s/he is kept ignorant of its existence. The only people who truly have a grasp on what this power is and where it originates are the men and women in this country who are incarcerated in prisons.

In prison a person learns just what it means to be oppressed, and how far-reaching that oppression is. Abolitionists have not been successful to date because they do not understand fully what it is they must do to achieve their goals. The abolitionists are trying to change things at the

level of the incarcerated when the solution lies in eroding the power of the entire system. This misdirection is another example of the systems power. The system reacts enough at the prison level to make the abolitionists feel that they are accomplishing something when, in fact, they are not. The abolitionists are not going to be successful until such time as they change their direction of attack.

Abolitionists have been proceeding in the direction of prison reform. Activists such as Claire Culhane (1980) have worked to improve conditions within the prisons, attacking issues such as solitary confinement and living conditions. The hope of the activists is that by raising the awareness of the general public concerning prison conditions, the public will become outraged and demand abolition or at least a prison program which rehabilitates prisoners. The activists want the public to realize that the people who are now in prison will one day be on the street again, and that the best interest of society is served by ensuring that "ex-cons" have been treated fairly while incarcerated: society will suffer if these "ex-cons" are bitter when they are released.

Abolitionists fail to see that the work they are doing in prison reform may be doing more harm to their cause than good. By insisting on change at the level of prison reform they are shifting the focus of attention from the system to the individual prison. This practice allows the system to act behind the scenes: to make decisions without interference. Though the work the abolitionists are doing has a positive effect on the daily lives of the prisoners, the system is becoming more powerful every day. The abolitionists are increasing public awareness but not on the real issue. The end result is that if the public ever does get involved *en masse*, they will work to better the daily living conditions of the prisoner instead of working to abolish the system.

It is safe to say that the abolitionist has set the focus on the wrong subject. The real problem which faces abolitionists is that the hierarchy in Ottawa has no control over its own institutions. If abolition is to occur, the power of

the subordinates in the system will have to be removed. One example of subordinate power is the guards' union which gets more powerful each time a new penitentiary opens and the union membership increases by absorbing the new recruits. The union also becomes more powerful with each riot it causes since it can use prison riots as a bargaining tool to increase membership or salaries. Guards are dependent upon the system for their livelihood. Because they are right in the thick of the action, they can manipulate events in their favour. The guards' union and its activities are not scrutinised by any government department and therefore it polices its own activities. This is a great deal of authority which the union exploits at every opportunity. Abolition of prisons will never occur until the power of the guards' union is eroded.

The union is only one example of a bargaining unit which requires the survival of the prison system. Other jobs are created by the prison system: clerical staff, building contractors, suppliers, administrators, and employees working in prison industries and services. These groups would fight abolition just to save their jobs.

The entire system is a business now, more interested in jobs and money than rehabilitation or abolition. The power of this system is in its ability to provide secure employment. Any attempt to change the system must take place at the source of the power. The groups who hold this power must be exposed for what they really are: a violent, corrupt, and greedy group of oppressors who are making a living by degrading and oppressing prisoners.

Until such time as power is taken away from the oppressors, the injustices occurring behind prison walls will continue. Men and women will continue to leave prisons with bitter feelings for the diseased society which allowed them to suffer. Abolition can only occur when the power of the oppressor is in the hands of the oppressed. The activists working to better prison conditions are only succeeding in giving the system more to oppress.

References

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

Wilton, J.B. (1973), *May I Talk To John*. John Howard Society.