

# INTERCHANGE: A REPLY TO WILLIAM SENGER

Claire Culhane

It becomes imperative to distinguish between two types of reform proposals: those which will result in strengthening the prison bureaucracy, designed to perpetuate and reinforce the system, and those which to one degree or another challenge the whole premise of prison and move in the direction of eventual abolition.

Jessica Mitford,  
*Kind and Usual Punishment*, 1974

William Senger is correct in drawing attention to the possibility that “Prison Abolition [is a] Good Idea [with a] Bad Approach” in the Summer 1988 issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, but a more careful examination of his critique is also in order. In fact, there are various schools of prison abolition, as his fellow contributor, Rick Sauve (1988), indicates in the same issue.

It is not altogether accurate to describe my efforts as “proceeding in the direction of prison reform...trying to change things at the level of the incarcerated when the solution lies in eroding the power of the entire system” (Senger 1988: 46). I am on record as drawing “political conclusions by examining the prison system as a function of the state — an instrument for class, racial and national oppression... based upon an unequal distribution of power and opportunity... [and describing] a twentieth century nation’s need to maintain its power [by] controlling the military, police and the prison system. Any person or group daring to criticise... will receive the full brunt of authori-

tarian vengeance (Culhane 1985: 147-48).

During my first and only meeting with the then newly-appointed Commissioner of Corrections, Rhéal LeBlanc, I elaborated on the reasons why, in my view, the Canadian prison system must be abolished; and as I worked toward this goal, how my efforts were consistently directed toward helping prisoners to stay alive and to get the earliest possible eligibility date. However, should it happen that my efforts contribute to a better functioning institution, it is purely coincidental for that is neither my concern nor my intention.

On the other hand, in *his* capacity as Commissioner, within the context of being responsible for their custody, *he* is obliged to help keep them alive.

“Shall we agree,” I asked him, “to meet halfway — that we are both committed to assist in keeping them alive, you for your reasons and me for mine?”

I then proceeded to challenge such practices as “hog tying” known in official legalese as “restrictive restraint.” A chain draws the prisoner’s head backwards linking his hands cuffed behind his back, with his feet in shackles, often left naked on the cell floor in that most vulnerable position.

To repeat, I fully support William Senger’s complaint about “activists working to better prison conditions...only to succeed in giving the system more power to oppress.” However, I would also refer him to the statement on our Prisoners’ Rights Group letterhead:

We can’t change prisons without changing society. We know that this is a long and dangerous struggle. But the more who are involved in it, the less dangerous and the more possible it will be.

A young prisoner once reminded me (from his five and one half years stint in segregation) that while “all those ideas about abolishing prisons sure sound great, please don’t forget those of us looking at twenty-five years minimum [before parole eligibility].” The long term goal is prison abolition. The short term goal is helping to keep them alive and back into general population as soon as

possible, and then, of course, OUT!

I see no betrayal in this game plan. I see very meaningful survival gains within this prison abolition philosophy.

### References

Culhane, C. (1985) *Still Barred From Prison: Social Injustice in Canada*. Black Rose Books.

Sauve, R. (1988) "Prison Abolition: The Need for Decriminalization." *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* 1:1, 39-44.

Senger, W. (1988) "Abolition: Good Idea/Bad Approach." *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 1:1, 45-48.

