

Word From The Prisons, 1992

Roy Glaremin

At first I thought it would be easy to describe the current state of programs and resources for prisoners in Canadian federal prisons. Having started to do that two weeks ago, and still being somewhat unsure of how best to proceed, I have changed my mind. The difficulty I am having lies with the fact that the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) is moving forward and backward at the same time. The result is that conditions in federal prisons are in a state of flux.

I started my sentence in 1977, the same year the government appointed a parliamentary sub-committee to investigate the then seriously troubled prison system. For six years, beginning with the infamous Kingston Riot in 1971, Canadian prisons had been upset by work strikes, full-scale smash-ups, and hostage-taking incidents. Goon squads were running amok, beating and gassing prisoners routinely, without justification. The government's intervention marked the beginning of reform within the prison system, reform that continues today, fifteen years later.

Past practices and their consequences proved to be considerable obstacles to that reform, especially in the beginning. Past hiring practices, for example, had allowed relatively uneducated and ill-adjusted people into the CSC. The worst of these ill-adjusted CSC employees made all attempts at reform difficult. The idea that prisoners have rights was not only objectionable to many frontline uniformed staff, but also to some of their supervisors and to some managers higher up in the chain of command. This was apparent during the years of open hostility, between 1971 and 1977. Though confrontational thinking had become entrenched throughout the system, reforms began to take place nonetheless.

One of the first reforms concerned the use of excessive force. Prison wardens became accountable for every cannister of tear gas in prison armories. This produced immediate and welcome change for prisoners, especially for those in maximum and super-maximum security facilities, where most of the incidents involving the excessive use of gas had taken place. The change was so sudden that many men who started their sentences only a year or two before me have, over the years, been surprised to find out that I have never been gassed, even though I spent my first three and a half years in one seg (segregation) unit or another. This reminds me that the CSC's use of long-term segregation to control "rebels" was likewise criticized and curtailed, though that curtailment was much slower in coming than that which restricted the use of gas.

Along with long-term segregation, the CSC routinely used involuntary transfers ("kidnappings") to control prison populations. Rebellious behaviour (which in 1977 would have included, among more serious acts of rebellion, arguing with staff, complaining, and attempting to contact

Members of Parliament or the media) was often dealt with by simply kidnapping the “rebellious” prisoners and shipping them off to other parts of the country. The relatively new *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which came into effect in 1982, “helped” the CSC reform its policy governing involuntary transfers.

Several years ago the Federal Court began to order the CSC to reverse involuntary transfers where they were considered punitive, in that prisoners were separated from their families and/or other community contacts, or placed in higher security, and where the CSC could not show sufficient cause for the use of that punitive measure. As a result, the CSC is now quite careful in executing involuntary transfers.

In the seventies and eighties, the CSC operated under relatively loose financial constraints, which made reform easier. In 1980, the Private Family Visiting Program was introduced. It gave federal prisoners seventy-two hours alone with their families in special housing units within each prison every six to sixteen weeks, depending on facilities and the demands placed on them. Last year the criteria used to screen visitors were changed to allow partners of prisoners access to the program, even if the partnership is not recognized in law. University professors were also introduced in 1980. These programs see professors teaching classes inside.

Prisoners now have free and direct access to the media, something few people would have thought possible in 1977. “Warden’s Courts” are now run by “Independent Chairpersons”, who are admittedly paid by the CSC but who are able and increasingly willing to act in a truly independent fashion. Prisoners now have the right to legal representation on all internal disciplinary charges except those stated as “minor”. Telephones specifically for the use of prisoners are now located in every cell block. Prisoners are now asked to evaluate recommendations for changes in CSC policies. Again, even if the opinions of prisoners in this regard carry only minimum weight, it would have been considered lunacy even to ask prisoners for their opinions on such matters fifteen years ago.

The reform the CSC has been undergoing is genuine, its effects are significant and far-reaching, and it would, in my opinion, not be overstating the case to say that the CSC has striven to become more professional and publicly accountable; which makes recent changes that much more regrettable.

The current tough economic times are having strongly adverse effects on the CSC. Prison populations have already increased far beyond what were supposed to be their maximum sizes, and they are continuing to increase. Staff and post cuts within prisons have left fewer staff to manage these growing populations, and resources for prisoners are shrinking. More prisoners are double-bunked than have ever been before. The fact that this double-bunking has been accompanied by a *decrease* in facilities and resources means that the negative effects of overcrowding (increased rates for deaths, suicides, illness complaints, disciplinary offences and psychiatric commitments, among others) will soon be, or are already being experienced.

The crowding problem will get worse as the current trend toward making prisoners serve more of their sentences before being released becomes further entrenched. Legislation and policies directed at that goal have recently been either tabled, as in the case of the government’s Bill C-36, or effected, as has been the National Parole Board (NPB) policy of “tightening up” on conditional release programs. Even among optimists, there is little hope that things will get better in the foreseeable future.

What is the current state of programs and resources for Canada’s federal prisoners? It had been very good, but it is deteriorating quickly. In Collins Bay Institution, a medium security prison in

Ontario where I am, approximately 40% of the prisoners are double-bunked. Eight years ago no one was double-bunked here. The university program is in danger of being scrapped completely. For almost two years the prison's gym and yard have not been open simultaneously, a result of staff and post cuts. There are no longer enough seats in the dining hall, forcing many prisoners to perch on seats to eat, while keeping one eye on the door, ready to switch seats when those whose seats they are in show up to eat. Disputes over seats are becoming more frequent and have already led to several fights. When the new seg unit opens this year, the range now being used for seg will become part of the population, increasing the population by a further 10% in the process.

More prisoners are now unemployed than have ever been before. Coupled with huge increases in the tax prisoners now pay on tobacco products (a carton of cigarettes has increased in price from \$4.50 to \$35.00 in the past ten years as a direct result of taxation, while prisoners' pay has increased \$.25 per day during the same period), the increased unemployment has caused an increase in incidents of theft from cells and in "muscling". In short, an increasing number of prisoners are competing for decreasing resources, which is causing problems throughout the prison.

The overcrowding problem is clearly undermining the reforms of the past fifteen years. If the mechanisms governing the release of prisoners approaching the end of their sentences are not adjusted to allow those prisoners to be released sooner to make room for prisoners beginning their sentences, which appears unlikely in today's political climate, then Canada's federal prisons will soon experience a different kind of trouble than that of the seventies, though the effects may be similar. Prisons in many US states and in England have given us previews of what to expect.

Unfortunately, my perception is not distorted, which is my way of saying that the Solicitor General of Canada along with the Justice Minister and CSC's managers and the Union of Solicitor General's Employees and all informed outside observers know where the road the CSC is on leads to. From where I am at the moment, things do not look good.

Roy Glaremin was convicted for shooting and killing a Calgary police officer investigating a burglary in 1977.

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