

THE PRISON AFTER-CARE PROBLEM

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The Report of the Royal Commission on the Penal System of Canada in 1938 is generally conceded to be the most exhaustive penological study ever attempted in this country. The fact that no major steps have been taken to implement the recommendations of Judge Archambault and his colleagues is a source of despair to penologists in Canada and of bewilderment to those experts abroad who advised the Commission during their exploratory tour overseas. While it is generally known that the Report had much to say concerning the lack of reformatory treatment in Canadian penal institutions, it is not so well appreciated that the Commissioners were likewise much concerned over the weakness of after-care facilities. Their specific recommendations on this latter subject are as follows:

84. The efforts of the prisoners' aid societies should be co-ordinated in accordance with the principles applied in England and Wales under the authority of the Prison Commission and with a measure of financial assistance from the state.

85. A definite effort should be made to enlist the co-operation of the public in assisting discharged prisoners to find employment and become re-established.

86. Associations similar to the Borstal Association in England should be organized to assist in the rehabilitation of youthful offenders.

87. Certain experiments should be undertaken in selected Canadian institutions, patterned after the English system of voluntary visitors and under strict supervision.

Prison after-care in Great Britain and in the more progressive states of the U.S.A. is inseparably linked with any system of reformatory institutional treatment. There it is considered unsound to dump men out on the community after perhaps many years of isolation from ordinary life and expect them to achieve rehabilitation on their own usually meagre spiritual and financial resources. Yet such, generally speaking, is the practice in Canada—where the adherence to the antiquated custodial concept of penology makes prison after-care a vital necessity. It is largely because of our national blindness to this elementary principle that we now have on our hands in Canada a serious recidivist problem.

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In considering prison after-care in its relation to rehabilitation we must first give passing attention to the typical discharged prisoner from a Canadian penitentiary or jail and contemplate the type of individual he is. It will be found that he usually comes from a broken or otherwise unsatisfactory home, that he has very little money if any at all, that he is probably not of full normal intelligence and that in school he never got beyond the sixth grade. (In the Annual Report upon the Prisons and Reformatories of the Province of Ontario for 1945 it was shown that during the year, 2810 inmates had been in the Ontario Reformatory at Guelph. Of these 10.13% were mental defectives 14.04% were borderline, 32.79% dull normal, 40.85% normal and 2.19% of superior intelligence. At Guelph, educational tests were given to those above the borderline intelligence and 62.8% of them fell below Grade VI in educational standing.) In short, your average Canadian ex-prisoner is "magnificently unprepared for life" and on top of this we have abundant evidence that his period of incarceration has not improved him. (On the contrary, he may well have learned "tricks" from old prisoners. One young lad told me on his release from a county jail that when he went there he only knew how to forge a cheque, but that by the time of his discharge he was adept at picking locks. I know he was telling me the truth because he illustrated his new-found learning by having me watch as he opened the locked doors of both my apartment and motor car!) By any social standard, the average person emerging from a Canadian penal institution is not adequately equipped to cope with the vicissitudes of freedom.

The current picture is that a man is released from a Federal Penitentiary where he has served two years or more, with a few dollars in his pocket (what is left from his prison earnings after his tobacco ration is deducted) and a prison-made suit on his back. We need not go into the reasons why he dislikes this clothing and usually sells it or gives it away within a few days. The hordes discharged monthly from county jails are given neither clothing nor money and we know what a pitiful sight is presented by those who come to us on a bleak winter day in the same scanty clothing in which they were sentenced the previous summer. Remembering that since most of these ex-prisoners have no homes to offer them sanctuary and no influence or connections to get them jobs, it should not surprise anyone of practical outlook that an alarmingly high percentage again appear before the courts.

In Britain, as the Archambault Report indicates, the principle of effective prison after-care is fully recognized and given

government sanction and financial support. The National Association of Discharged Prisoners' Aid Societies, with head office in London, embraces affiliated prison-aid groups in every key centre of population and disburses to them government funds on the basis of the number of cases handled. Similarly, The Borstal Association has a chain of Borstal Associate groups who minister to the immediate needs of Borstal graduates on discharge. No discharged prisoner in Britain can say that he has been forced back to crime because he had no clothes, no lodging, no meals or no one to go to for reference to a lawful job. The same, unfortunately, is not true in Canada.

Our Canadian story of aid to ex-prisoners has both heroic and tragic chapters. A handful of devoted people in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, Vancouver and Victoria have kept alive Prison Aid Societies, often by their own financial sacrifices. The financial support received from governments has been almost nil and indeed reactionary officials have frequently termed their activities as "coddling" the lawbreakers. (This charge has been levied at every attempted penal reform since the days of John Howard and Elizabeth Fry and can be anticipated whenever anything progressive is mooted in the penal field.) Nevertheless, despite discouragements and financial difficulties, these member units of the Canadian Penal Association have without question aided in the rehabilitation of countless ex-prisoners with a saving beyond calculation to the Canadian taxpayers, let alone the social and humanitarian values involved.

While it is only too apparent that Canada is far behind Britain and many states in the U.S.A. in the handling of lawbreakers, it is fair to point out that there are some encouraging developments. The general public demand that something be done with the Archambault Report may yet force some action at Ottawa. The newspapers of Canada have been most insistent in this connection and the churches and bar associations have also frequently raised the issue. Meanwhile, there are signs that some of the provinces are contemplating doing away with the archaic penal system that does not reform. The province of Saskatchewan is contemplating sweeping changes. In Ontario, the Hon. George H. Dunbar, Provincial Secretary, has announced that the county jails will be replaced by farms and that the Borstal System will be adopted as far as possible. He has invited Mr. Henry Scott, J. P., Director of the Borstal Association, to survey the penal institutions of Ontario and make recommendations. Mr. Dunbar's determination to modernize penology in Ontario also includes a pledge to assist in the after-care of released prisoners

since he recognizes how important this factor is in the process of rehabilitation. His view is reflected in the following paragraph from the 1945 Report of Mr. C. F. Neelands, Deputy Provincial Secretary of Ontario:

It has often been truly said that a prisoner's worst punishment occurs after he is no longer a prisoner. He is free, but he has to face and live among honest citizens. Many of these citizens are sympathetic and helpful, but others are not. Many ex-prisoners have the courage and determination to live down their past. Many others find the going rough, and fail again. There is a great need in this country for organized societies to aid ex-prisoners. There have been and are very few. There have been many in England, and therein is much of the success of England's prison and Borstal systems. To a considerable extent they are financed by government grants.

Encouraged by the attitude of the Ontario Government and by the promise of an increased grant from it, the Prisoners' Rehabilitation Society in Toronto has embarked on an expansion programme which should be of interest to the other provinces. Branches are being established in all the major cities and towns in Ontario. The response from bench and bar, pulpit, press, educational authorities and service clubs has been marked and representatives of all these have figured in the organization meetings in every location. Experienced case workers have been engaged who will interview prisoners before release, give them work aptitude tests and send a full report to the local associations in the places to which they will go on release. No longer will those discharged to smaller places feel obliged to go to the large cities in the often fruitless search for employment and help. The research facilities of Queen's University and the School of Social Work of the University of Toronto have been extended to the Society. Business men throughout Ontario have promised placement co-operation in a measure that bodes well for the success of the rehabilitation programme.

Those engaged in the promotion of scientific prison after-care, and many members of bench and bar throughout Canada are included in these, are under no sentimental illusions. They know that numerous failures are inevitable. They know that there are professional criminals who will always seek to follow their law-breaking careers. However, they also know from well-proven experiments elsewhere that a high proportion of law-breakers can be salvaged—certainly a much higher proportion in Canada than at present. In their considered opinion and arising out of their practical experience, a more intelligent handling of the prisoner on his release from confinement would cause an appreciable decline in Canada's recidivist statistics.