

# The Municipality and Prison Reform

By A. M. NICHOL.

Legislation Committee of the Canadian Prisoners' Welfare Association.

Canadian Municipalities have a direct and important interest in the system that deals with offenders against the law, whether the law is represented by Municipal by-law, an Act of Province or the Federal Power. A community with a "criminal record" is about the worst black eye that it can sustain. In addition to the expense involved, the negative effect of a "bad quarter" or a long list of crimes in the calendar against a town or city, wards off the best type of new comer, to say nothing of the effect on the commercial world. The higher consideration is the welfare of the Dominion as a whole. On that ground alone the managing body of any given governing area should study carefully and scientifically the relation of social order to community, happiness and prosperity. Hence what is called "Prison Reform"—a phrase that has got into questionable repute—should carry with it in the minds of Town and City Councils a clean-cut definition and sane ideas.

Take the recidivist, the "ne'er-do-weel," or the "black sheep," of the civic family. What a disgrace he is to the streets, the reputation of his town, and the futility of penal restraint! I knew a man who was charged for the 90th time with a breach of the public peace. The Magistrate remarked, "Ironside, you will soon be celebrating your century." Jocularly, the "hardened case" replied, "Hurry up, your honor. Lighten the sentences and I'll soon get there." The local newspaper indulged in a humorous description of the incident, but Ironside had already cost that town \$3,500 for his maintenance and the depredations that he had committed. There is something missing in a system that permits—not only local jail birds of that type to go on year in and year out, but felons to become habituals and even first offenders to repeat and repeat their offences.

In Sagimo, Tokio, the question asked by the authorities of that Penitentiary, when they receive a prisoner, is, "What can we do for this man?" In Canada we do not ask what can we do for him—the prescription is fixed as to what shall be done with him. In Japan, the punishment of the man is a secondary matter. Caging men or beasts is not a scientific matter. It is purely mechanical, and with high walls, automatically-locking cells, strong guards, and a rigid routine the "birds" can easily be kept away from the opportunity to steal, burglar, or murder.

Any body of ordinary men can execute that task. But the handling of the individual prisoner on his merits or demerits; the re-adjustment of his habits; the equipment of his mind with the sanest ideas of life; the training him in self-control, reproductive and remunerative industry—to say nothing of remaking him morally and spiritually—but that is another question.

Such a task as that requires brains, heart, art, science, organization classification,—in short the skill of the physician, the tact of the psychologist, and the command and magnetism of a master of labor. And, further, the reconstruction of our prison after the similitude of a college for the repair and development of what is best in human nature.

To attain legal co-ordination of police officer, lawyer, judge, jury, warden, prison, and prison discipline so as to correspond with this ideal is a Herculean enterprise, and it will not be attained in this or the next generation. The public mind is too dense in its appreciation of what true democracy is in relation to the well-behaved to understand its application to the ill-behaved. And too much politics is intertwined with a thousand and one matters, (supposedly of supreme importance), to allow of the adequate discussion of this topic. It has been too long left in the hands of extremists, old ladies, and millenium like enthusiasts to make real progress.

"Prison Reform" is a business proposition. Once the Municipalities wake up to its vital place in civil life, then something will be done, and in order to stimulate the sluggish brains of our local statesmen, I venture to make the following suggestions for their consideration:—

1. A social survey of the territory over which they exercise civic jurisdiction of what are considered incitements to lawlessness; neighborhoods that supply the largest pro-

portion of offenders against the law; analysis of crime in relation to non-employment, feeble-mindedness, and lack of education; and information (other than the police records) which indicate the why and wherefore of repeaters, as well as housing, and the high cost of living. If, in the interests of the physical health of the people, we require specific sanitary regulations to be kept, it is much more germane to the all-round health of a community that mental diseases should be analysed and dealt with accordingly. Crime is largely a product of ignorance and ignorance and degeneracy are almost synonymous terms.

2. Report upon the results of probation and Suspend Sentences Acts. Municipalities will find in these much food for thought, attesting, as they do, that two thirds of crime can be checked in its incipient stages. The common sense reading of the outcome of these measures is to my mind, an urgent call upon the Provincial and Federal Legislatures to extend the principle of these Acts to courts where they at present do not operate.

3. The enforcement of an Act, where it obtains, and the introduction of an Act where is is not yet in operation, by which prisoners, both in jails and penitentiaries, shall be compelled to support, as far as possible from the fruit of their labor inside prison, dependants left as a public charge upon the community. Montreal Jail, which cost a fabulous sum to erect, was largely endorsed by the Quebec Legislature because it would be provided with facilities for enabling men to work at occupations from which they could help their wives and families. But up to this hour not a cent has come from that jail to any of its inmate dependents. The land in fact at the disposal of the Warden is utterly insufficient for the purpose, and yet there is an Act on the Statute Book of the Province which makes it imperative that inmates of the jail shall have this privilege. Instead we have jails that treat men as if they were mere vultures and had to be kept in their cells for fear of invading the big world outside their environment. Work is Nature's corrective of nearly all evils under the sun. It constitutes the best form of discipline, and to the criminally-insane—that type of character would rather steal than eat—it is "hell," especially when he knows that its concomitant, in dollars and cents, will be sent outside to feed the people whom he cruelly neglected and disgraced.

4. The construction of some plan by which men, honorably discharged from prison, shall be given a chance to make good outside prison. It seems to me not only feasible but rational that a man who has wronged the town from which he hailed should be given a chance to "make good" in that town. We sing about Brotherhood and it has become such a phrase as almost to become canting when one hears it. Why not practice it a little more than we do?

5. The appointment of a Poor Man's Lawyer and Public Defender. Believe me a heap of injustice goes by our courts in this good Dominion of ours, all because people, too poor to pay the fees for a proper defence, are sent to jail and there they lose heart. I am constantly meeting with people who need such aid, and this and a great deal more can be advanced by municipalities exercising their prerogatives as a corporate and a representative body, on behalf of the health and moral standing of the community over which they preside.

## IDLE LAND

What is it that lies between the farmer and his market? Idle land. What is it that forces workmen in the city to live so far from their work? Idle land. What is the most conspicuous thing to be seen on entering a city? Idle land. What is the only form of property that paid no war tax? Idle land. What is it that enables speculators to grow rich without working? Idle land. What is it that drives the settler a long distance from civilization to find a home? Idle land. What must be stricken from city and urban territory if we would have efficient industry and contented workers? Idle land. How can idle land be removed? By taxing it the same as though it were improved.