

Prison Reform: Breaking down the bars

by Mary Ellen Jones
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Claire Culhane loves the outdoors. She asks to be interviewed outside on the steps of one of the ivy covered buildings at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

"I have been indoors too long today and the sun is so warm," she says. Culhane is an activist who hates being inside institutions of any kind. She has just finished speaking to a class of criminology students about the need to abolish Canada's prisons.

"I challenge you people to take everything you want and lock yourself in the garage for 48 hours. Then you might have a glimmer as to what happens in solitary confinement. Nobody has a right to pass eternal judgement. Humans need space. There are prisons where there are people being confined in ways which deprive human rights of all kinds."

Culhane is touring Canada's colleges and universities this fall speaking about her new book *Still Barred From Prison* and making a passionate plea for prison abolition.

Sitting outside the Dalhousie physics building, Culhane fumbles through her bag to find the black book she carries everywhere. The pages are full of names and addresses of the people she's met on her tour, lists of things to do and the details of her travel plans. Culhane says she's lucky — so far she hasn't had to stay in a hotel once. Friends, new and old, have put her up at every stop.

Culhane, 67, hasn't exactly picked the most popular cause to argue. After ten years of working with prisoners' groups, she no longer believes that anything less than the complete abolition of the prison system is an answer to the problems of prisoners.

"There is nothing left to reform," says Culhane. "Reform is just patching up. You are looking at the whole social base when you discuss prison reform. There is no difference between the prison and the community system. That's why I am an abolitionist. People say, why not try this and that. That's the problem. Everything has been tried, but we are ignoring the fact that prisons are part of the culture," she adds.

For Culhane the problem with prisons is closely tied to the way all governments abuse their power. She says there is no government anywhere, east or west, socialist or communist, that does not have full control of the army, the armed forces, of the police department and the prison in order to maintain order.

"We must understand that prisons are part of the political power structure and when we see that, then we understand the reasons why all the terrible things go on.

Nobody really cares; all they're doing is maintaining society."

Culhane, who has been barred from visiting all of the penitentiaries in British Columbia, jokes about her outspokenness. She chuckles as she says, "I was a breech birth right from the start."

Training as a nurse in Ottawa, she was told never to sacrifice the soul of her work for techniques, and she never has.

Expelled from the hospital for taking linen from an empty bed in a private ward to give to a patient in a public ward who needed clean linen, Culhane was in trouble from day one, but that hasn't stopped her impulsiveness.

She has been barred from the House of Commons since 1971, when she chained herself to a chair in the House to protest Canada's action in Vietnam. She was told never to return.

In 1976, during a hostage-taking incident at the B.C. penitentiary, she smuggled letters from the inside of the prison to give to the media. These letters contained the horrifying description of what was actually going on in the "hole", the maximum security area of the prison.

After showing the letters to the media, she was asked to resign from her position on the Citizen's Advisory Committee; otherwise the whole Advisory Committee would have to fold.

Culhane resigned from the committee, but not from her crusade.

When asked whether being kicked out of B.C. penitentiaries is a help or a hindrance to her crusade, Culhane smiles and says the incident has given her cause more publicity. "It's their tough luck, not mine," she says.

Culhane has seen the inside of many prisons across Canada. Everytime she enters an institution her anger towards the whole prison system grows stronger.

While stopping in Halifax during her 23-city tour, Culhane discussed the conditions of the Canadian prison system with students from Dalhousie and Mount St. Vincent universities. She also talked with the students about the ways they can work to make things change.

"What is required is a grassroots organization working to expose, educate and build resistance to the erosion of civil human rights in the prison system. The straightforward use of language is a good beginning," says Culhane.

"People have asked me, says Culhane to the university class, 'How can you possibly talk about abolition? There will always be law breakers.' There are two answers. One way is to continue with the way it is. That is suicidal and insane. The other way is the abolition of prisons."

But Culhane doesn't get off easy. She says the two most often posed questions are, "What would result in the abolition of prisons?" and "What are you going to do with law breakers?"

"To saddle the offenders with the care of the victims or the family of the victim themselves would prove more of a deterrent than the threat of capital punishment at worst or at least a short-term sentence," she says.

"This restitution to families and victims comes off as a deterrent which is more beneficial than a prison sentence or a fine," says Culhane. "This must be transmitted. You hardly need a \$4 million justice system which would deal with these areas." Culhane says 80 per cent of the prison population could make restitution.

"The other 15 per cent, the ones who are not as dangerous as the top 5 per cent, but need psychiatric help won't get it by sitting in prison. They should be in psychiatric wards."

The remaining 5 per cent, those like Clifford Olson, could remain in one institution. Culhane says they would total no more than 100 in Canada.

"You are then looking at one institution instead of 250. This prison would have a humane atmosphere. It would not entail a humiliated keeper and kept. This is a direction we can begin to look at instead of the penal colonies which we are seeing now."

Culhane finds the division between victim and offender in society frustrating, "when you talk of victims, stop and check the word before you take it at face value. There is a fine line between victim and offender."

Although she's barred from visiting prisons in B.C., Culhane doesn't think it's that unlikely that the government will start using prisons as a means of isolating political activists in society.

"About three thousand people are being held in prison in the U.S. for resistance," she says.

"How long will it be, if we grant the government the right to use capital punish-

ment now on the basis of the Clifford Olsons, before it is used in the interests of protecting national security?" asks Culhane.

"We must understand, and this is my strongest argument about capital punishment, that we are handing a mechanism to the government that this year will deal with those types of culprits (Clifford Olsons). But who knows whether next year they are not going to extend it to refer to protecting national security, and anybody that is a threat to national security could be considered a traitor and liable for execution? Then how long will it be before people who are demonstrating in front of a nuclear power plant are next?"

"There may even come a time when any woman who self-aborts may be considered a murderer and be charged and executed," she speculates.

"We have a moral obligation to oppose laws which are immoral... just part of the general struggle of staying alive," says Culhane.

Culhane's moral obligation is to both men and women. "There are some feminists who I have big arguments with because I only work with male prisoners. They say we should only work with women prisoners, I mean, come on, that's absurd. Women represent five per cent of the prison population. Now we are going to fight transfers and solitary confinement; you know you can't narrow yourself down to five per cent of the population," says Culhane. she says about 80 per cent of the people visiting the prisoners are women. "Women suffer when men are in prison," she says.

"I challenge women to send their sisters into the prisons. They probably haven't gone near them. Unfortunately, there are some women's rights in the board room and the voting booth. That really doesn't affect the majority of women.

"And I would add to that by saying that I challenge any women's group that is concerned about rape, wife battering, child abuse, violence, poverty, and racism; how do you deal with your problem, fight it, research it without going to prison to see where the end product of each of these

abuses is sitting?" says Culhane.

Culhane sees progression because of her efforts, but "only to the extent that more people are becoming aware. I am met with less hostility, people are more willing to listen," says Culhane. "The fact that the struggle is continuing means that we are survivors and if we are surviving, struggles have been won and that is a point for us."

"If you stop, you are on the other side. Just by stopping and doing nothing, you are supporting by silent consent," says Culhane.

Culhane may be very angry with the role of prisons in society, but that doesn't mean she isn't enjoying herself. She says she's chosen this issue instead of others because, "it's the best fight going in town." Culhane knows the chances of closing Canada's prisons in her lifetime are slim and she says she may fail, but she'll go down fighting, kicking and having a good time. "It's all we can do," she says.

Her biggest goal in the near future is to stop construction of a new maximum security penitentiary call Renous, 100 miles from Moncton in New Brunswick. It is due to open next April, but she hopes to prevent that and encourage the closure of other prisons across Canada.

It'll probably be just one more prison that she's kicked out of, eventually. But the white-haired woman on the physics building steps likes the outside better anyway.

