

Prisons in need of drastic reform

LAST WEEK AT THE DORCHESTER Penitentiary, the eleventh hostage taking incident in ten years occurred. One wonders when the next outbreak of muffled tension will occur and who will be the next victim of unrest in the prison system in Canada.

We know the penal system is in bad shape. No one can overlook the frequency of incidents which happen in the inhuman institutions which house society's rejects.

Look at the word "penitentiary." It means "a place where one is penitent" or "a place where one does penance." Any Catholic knows what penance is. When you've sinned you go to the confessional and, after having admitted and understood your guilt, you try to make amends for it.

The dream and the mission of the 19th century prison reformers was to take the lock-ups and gaols that had existed for centuries and, in their place, build institutions that would reform, not merely confine, society's transgressors. There was indeed a fair amount of religious zeal in this dream. Punishment was to be changed to a purgatory from a hell. The penitentiary, and the word was deliberately coined, was to be a place where the offender would have the time and guidance to reflect on his or her transgression, and to do good works for society through basic labour to help repair the damage done.

The goal, very genuinely, was reform rather than punishment. Punishment for the unrepentant was to be left to the Almighty.

Why did they bother? Well, in the 19th century mind, the existence of prisons, like the existence of slavery, was a blot on human dignity. Humanity was supposed to progress, not just materially, but spiritually and morally as well, and the existence of degrading and immoral dungeons like the jails of the times did not fit with this plan.

The penitentiary ideal has fallen apart in the 20th century for a variety of reasons. For one thing, the moral absolutes of the 19th century no longer exist. How can people be reformed to fit a moral code when no one can agree as to what that moral code is? Secondly, we see ourselves today as being so overwhelmed with crises that unless there is a "quick fix" to a problem it's best just to forget about it and move on to the next one. So society isn't perfect; let's just patch it up, hide the evidence of our failures, and move along.

Today's "pens" are our main places for hiding the evidence. They are the storehouses of our failures. Unemployment is such a problem that labour would scream blue murder if "cons" were put to work at even the most menial tasks to help repay their debt to society. So the prisoners are left to sit and rot, and if any of them are reformed, it is in spite of

the system, rather than because of it.

We have come too far from the 19th century ideal to go back to it. But something must be done to deal effectively and constructively with those who step beyond the bounds of society's rules.

Better yet, we can start working on a society where there's enough justice *outside* the prisons that it no longer has to be enforced *inside*.

With over 250 penal institutions across Canada and at a cost per cell of \$257,000, you wonder whether something more beneficial can be done for prisoners and, ultimately, society.

People resort to crime to better their lives. The money used to build bigger and better maximum security penitentiaries could be used to better people's lives before they become criminals.

Letters

Hawerchuk?

To the editors,

Once again Mark Alberstat's column has proved to be wasted space. Mark shows an uncanny grasp for the obvious by picking the Edmonton Oilers to finish first, but his statement that Gretzky would be ignored in favour of Dale Hawerchuk, if Hawerchuk played for Edmonton, shows his ignorance. In terms you might understand Mark; comparing Gretzky to Hawerchuk is like comparing "The Last Supper" to your supper. I do admire your uniqueness. No one else in the sports media has dared to mention Hawerchuk's name in the same breath as Gretzky's. It is an undisputed reality that Gretzky is the greatest hockey player of modern time; every hockey country in the world studies him and uses his style of play as a template. Mark's denial of this reality and his inept perception of the Gretzky phenomena leads me to believe that he is the most obtuse sports writer I have ever read.

Andrew Kimball

Who's Hawerchuk?

To the editors,

While I don't want it to seem like I have a personal vendetta against Mark Alberstat, I feel that the continued publishing of his column demands rebuttal. You see, the whole problem with his column is that it doesn't tell us anything, with the exception that Dale Hawerchuk is a better hockey player than Wayne Gretzky, which is news to me. His picks in the Adams division are not picks at all. He picks Quebec



to finish first and Hartford to finish last, but virtually anything can happen in between.

The second fault with Mark's column is his style. I don't know if the Dept. of Psychology requires him to take a writing course, but I think it would be in his best interest.

Mark, if your guesses aren't educated, what is your column doing in the papers?

Derrick McPhee

Compliment and comment

To the editors,

I have a complement and a comment which have been weighing on my mind for some time, but it has only been now that I have found time to put them to paper. The compliment addresses itself to the editorial and reporting staff of the *Gazette*.

I was a student at Dal from 1975 to 1980, before a four-year stint as a teacher. In those days the *Gazette* was almost always anti-Government, anti-Establishment, anti-everything. It was very rare to find articles that were positive about something so "close to home" as the University.

However, even though I may disagree with some of the people writing articles appearing on your pages, the coverage and tone is much more fair, much more

even. As a result, rather than being a soapbox for a few people to pontificate on a narrow theme, the *Gazette* has matured into a balanced voice for the Dalhousie students. Well done!

The comment is addressed towards a letter in your "Letters" section talking about disarmament. I personally feel that nuclear weapons are an enormous threat to everyone, BUT... the writer of one letter talked about handguns at heads. First they were removed from the two parties' heads, then unloaded. I (pessimist that I am) add this rider: after unloading my gun the other person turns on me, smiles, and says, "Oh sorry, I seem to have left one bullet in my gun!" (Bang).

Another possibility is to have the other person pull a sword and run it through you. It would be nice if we could trust either side in the nuclear frame enough to disarm, but both the United States and the Soviet Union distrust one another so much that the first mentioned scenario worries the officials greatly. The second scenario is more appropriately pointed at the Soviets, as they are the ones with the enormous armed forces. If a totally conventional war was fought between the US and USSR (with their respective allies), the most likely outcome would be a Soviet win, given the much larger forces available to them. In other words, as long as the Soviets have such a large conventional force, the nuclear weapons are serving as a

deterrent; when (hopefully!) they are removed, we will require much larger armies to prevent a non-nuclear war. After all, Hitler did not have atomic bombs, but still came VERY close to conquering the world, didn't he?

L. Patrick Findlay

Shock tactics defended

To the editors,

I recently read the Oct. 31 publication of the *Gazette* and was interested to see a letter from a Howe Hall resident voicing his disgust over a number of graphic pamphlets concerning abortion by Pro-Life group called Christians Concerned For Life.

First of all I would agree that meal time is not the appropriate time and the dinner table is certainly not the appropriate place for an organization to place available literature. However, in my opinion, and I am dealing with the Pro-Life, Pro-Choice issue, people need to become aware of the facts about abortion. Graphic or disgusting as those facts may be, the fact is that not enough people are aware of all the facts.

Brought to our attention at a public appearance by the Wilkes in the MacInnes Room that, even though the Victoria General has a device which enables the record-