

Is there justice for ex-cons?

by Shorty Martin

I will begin my discussion by stating that first of all to be in a federal prison, you have to be sentenced by the courts to a term of at least two years. The reason I am writing this above statement is because there are many people who do not have a proper understanding of the justice system in Canada. Having been a victim of it I can say honestly that a prison is a very oppressive and racist institution. The point of this article is to outline the problems which we face upon our release and the many barriers that we are forced to overcome.

A few of the main problems are finding employment and attempting to become readjusted to society.

I am speaking of my experience, but it also applies for all Federal prisoners upon release, both men and women. There are various reasons why it is very difficult for us to become once again integrated with society, and they are based on the conditions in the prisons. In particular these are lack of proper rehabilitation, the racist attitudes of the prison administration, (security, classification officers, the staff of an Institution,) as well as Regional and Federal Penitentiary Officials; the lack of preparation for Mandatory Supervision, and National Parole when we have completed our Court sentences.

I shall now try to explain one basic we face which is unemployment. When a Federal prisoner is released he or she has virtually no chance of obtaining employment. What should one do in order to avoid returning to prison? That mainly is why the majority of people are returned to prison soon after being released. This largely is a result of a lack in organizations qualified to assist people newly out of prison. The prisoner soon becomes drawn back to the environment that he or she was familiar with, often being the same milieu from which he or she was sent to prison.

Becoming adjusted to society is, in my opinion, the worst situation which an ex-convict has to face upon release from prison; for the following three reasons; 1. that we have become accustomed to prison life which is totally different from the way in which we used to live on the street; 2. the city in which we shall live in, upon our release, has probably changed while we served our sentences and finally released into society. (I myself was just released from prison and Halifax has changed drastically itself.) 3. we as ex-prisoners find it difficult to integrate back into the mainstream of society because of the lack of efficient re-orientation organizations to help us. By the lack of organizations, I mean, those for dealing specifically with our problems on the outside such as employment, Family, and finances.

For instance, I just read an article in the April 7 edition of the Dalhousie Gazette about the withdrawal of financial assistance to the Coalition and Support Services, C.S.S., which was an organization built around assisting Ex-convicts following their release. Without such services it is no wonder that we come out of prison with a lot of bitterness and anger. According to the C.S.S. production supervisor John Barron, "the program does not qualify for any Government department funding, and this is the reason that the Government has not refunded the project." This occurred despite the statement by the Solicitor-Generals Deputy minister who said, "It is the most effective

and best directed project in Canada". This brings me to ask the following question. If it was the most effective and directed project in Canada, why did the Government refuse to give the necessary funding to the Halifax organization of Coalition and Support Services? It was the only such organization of its kind to meet our needs.

From my perspective, it appears that ex-convicts will have even a more hopeless situation to face upon their release from either the Dorchester and Springhill Penitentiaries. This will force the criminal element into more violent crimes of which I as, a recently released Convict, can see it happening in the Atlantic Provinces, for the reason that the present Government is out of touch with the people of Canada. Also they refuse to seriously try to rehabilitate the present prison population. The net result of this will be to support the Liberal Party's policies regarding the new Criminal Laws which involve longer prison sentences just recently passed in Government last year. All we as prisoners are asking for is a chance to make good in this Society, or is that too much to ask? I sincerely hope not!!

At this point I request that you and your friends write letters to the Solicitor-Generals office, in Ottawa, and also to the main Canada Manpower office in both Halifax and Ottawa, as we, as released prisoners would appreciate the continuation of funding for the Coalition and Support Service. The organization not only increases the possibility of employment for ex-cons., in the cities of Halifax and Dartmouth, but it also cuts down on crime to a certain extent. The Federal Government's refusal to grant the C.S.S. additional funds in the first place, adds to the unemployment, and creates a higher rate of crime. If the Government's real aim is for crime to skyrocket in the Halifax area, then the Government is just as **guilty** as the person who commits a robbery, I myself believe they are more **GUILTY**, and therefore are making a mockery of the Laws that they themselves make.

The Liberal party promotes a myth that has fooled the people of Canada, and there are many more as well. The one I shall discuss is that the criminal elements are nothing but animals. I hope to destroy that myth by saying that we as prisoners (both men and women) are in fact **Humans** who have feelings and emotions like other people. We are not necessarily the cold heartless animals which the courts, the penal system, the news media, and most of society's conservative elements would have you believe. All we desire is respect and the right to live the way we choose after serving our sentences without the harassment which we still experience daily. After all, this is supposed to be a free country isn't it? It really makes me wonder. **Why We Return To Prison?**

I shall now explain briefly why so many prisoners return to prison time after time. Presently the rate of return is 85%. One reason is the lack of proper rehabilitation programs in prisons. Can you imagine how beneficial repairing GOV. mail bags are for rehabilitation. I find it hard. Where in society do people repair mail bags on the street? And how does that prepare us to get a job on the outside? In addition how does Isolation rehabilitate people? (In my opinion, and it is shared by prisoners, lawyers, and other people) it is not helpful. It is, in fact,

a very destructive process and by that I mean mental deterioration as well as the physical debilitation. Also, how does a person become rehabilitated when he is living in an

environment which is violent and he or she is faced with cultural bias? By that I mean the racist attitudes which exist between the prison continued on page 7

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