

The Prison Labor Question

History of the Contract System in the Toronto Central Prison—
A Record of Continuous Failures—The Outlook for the Future.

In speaking to a resolution on the subject of Prison Labor moved by Mr. Preston (Brant), Hon. W. J. HANNA said:—

I am glad that the member for South Brant has made this motion. It brings up the whole question of prison labor. It is a most important question. This Government has recognized that from the outset. In the speech from the Throne this session, His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor said:

“My Ministers have for some time past been considering the question of prison labor with a view to avoiding all possibility of its being put into competition with free labor. It is a subject of the utmost importance and cannot be dealt with hastily. Some facts with relation to it will be laid before you.”

Some of those facts I venture to present now. The importance of the question is not a matter of recent growth or sudden development. It has been equally important during all the thirty-two years of the Government that we succeeded. If that Government failed to solve it, our friends of the Opposition will, I hope, feel at liberty to tell us why. It is one of the unwelcome legacies that we inherited.

BACK IN HISTORY.

In coming to the consideration of the resolution it may not be amiss to refer briefly to the origin of prison labor and its introduction into Canada and this Province. Time was within living memory when society dealt with its criminals as a class only to be punished and, if necessary, exterminated; when in English-speaking countries an assize seldom passed without many death sentences being inflicted for what to-day would be minor offences; when idleness was enforced, when torture was substituted for reform. Time came when it was recognized that the merely punitive policy had completely failed, that torture should be abandoned, and that enforced idleness was as cruel as bodily torture. Idleness meant that the prisoner's physical and moral health was ruined, disease was introduced, insanity became frightfully common, and, in addition, the prisoner was disqualified for work when released. At first, as a remedy, resort was had to labor merely as a means of punishment. Prisoners were set to exhaustive work without any regard to its being productive. This was the age of treadmills, of loaded cranks, of shot drill, and the carrying of heavy loads from place to place. In time, the failure of those as a reformatory measure was admitted and the necessity for productive labor was advocated.

PRINCIPLE IS RIGHT.

To-day it will be only extremists who say that prisoners should not be employed at productive labor. Everybody else but extremists is agreed that from every point of view, physical or moral, practical or humane,