

Fewer prisoners fewer tensions

A reduction of more than 6 per cent in prison population in 1974 has resulted in less tension in Canadian penitentiaries, federal Commissioner André Therrien stated recently.

The decline is a reversal from the figure in 1973, when the number of inmates climbed more than 10 per cent, jamming prisons and creating conditions that led to high tension.

At the end of December, the federal prison population was 8,636, compared to 9,219 at the same time the previous year — a reduction of 6.33 per cent.

The only increase was in community corrections centres — “half-way houses” operated in cities; the population increase of almost 10 per cent in these reflects the increasing number of such centres being established.

Wind power

British Columbia Hydro has ordered a pair of windmills for experiments aimed at using alternative energy sources.

A spokesman says that the two 2,000-watt units will be located in Clinton, B.C., and in Massett, on the Queen Charlotte Islands, and will be mounted atop 40-foot steel towers. They will include a battery storage system and be equipped with instruments to measure wind-power potential.

“Windmills would have application in areas where you have substantial wind on a constant basis,” the spokesman says.

But, he adds, it's unlikely they would ever be used in the Vancouver area. “You'd have to have the whole city surrounded by them.”

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New machines to help the blind

Canadian Press (Vancouver) reports that a University of British Columbia professor has developed two machines to bring blind persons into closer contact with the world around them.

Professor Michael Beddoes, of the university's electrical engineering department, has produced a talking typewriter, which speaks each letter as the operator types it, and an electronic reader, which gives a blind person access to material not published in braille.

The typewriter's voice, which has a clipped, somewhat mechanical accent, gets information required to make the sounds of 45 letters, numbers and special characters from storage in two inch-square solid-state “chips” similar to those used in computers.

To squeeze in all the information, engineers recorded separate speech sounds and, using a slowed-down playback, simplified and edited the sounds.

If the typist hears an error, it can be corrected by pressing two keys on the typewriter, a standard IBM erasing model.

The reader, similar in size and shape to a cassette tape recorder, uses a tiny camera to pick up the image of a printed letter. The image is transmitted to 144 pulsating pins that form the outline of the letter which the operator “reads” with his finger.

The machine, called on Optacon, short for optic to tactile converter, allows a blind person to read printed material without using braille or relying on outside help.

So far, only a few have been able to take advantage of this new technology as cost prevents it from being accessible to all blind people.

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind recently purchased five Optacons for \$18,975.

Senate TV debut

For the first time in history, television cameras were allowed to film regular proceedings of Canada's Parliament on March 4. As a result, footage of the Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, which was reviewing a bill to lighten penalties for the possession of marijuana, was shown on the national news broadcast.

Law of the Sea Conference

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ocean as a major thoroughfare for commerce, communications and general exchanges between nations, the time of unfettered freedom which has so often led to abuse is over. Navigation, fishing, research and exploration must be permitted and encouraged but they must also be made subject to appropriate controls, rules and standards.

Much of the debate that is going on has to do precisely with the reasonableness of such rules, their source and their enforcement. Canada has led the way in the protection of the marine environment. We have already legislated to control pollution in the Arctic and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the Bay of Fundy, Queen Charlotte Sound, Dixon Entrance and Hecate Strait. For all practical purposes we are already managing these coastal areas as we would like to see economic zones managed. We hope that the conference will endorse these concepts and will apply them universally, taking into account the interest of the world community in international navigation and the special ecological or geographical circumstances that prevail in certain parts of the world.

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...What we are seeking is an internationally-negotiated solution to a series of interrelated problems of great political and economic importance. Such an international solution is by far preferable to unilateral or even regional action. But time is of the essence, not only for Canada, but for a lot of other countries.

We will not stand for a simple referral of the issues to one or more sessions unless we have reason to be confident in an early successful conclusion. That is a judgment which the Government will have to make at the end of the Geneva session. As my colleagues and I have said repeatedly since Caracas, should the conference fail or procrastinate, we will reassess all options and decide how best we can cope with our most urgent problems — and the fisheries question is obviously high on the list — in the light of prevailing circumstances.

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