



# Set the prisoners free

*IN THE CORNER OF A 9-by-6 foot cell that smells of human excrement, an unwashed body crouches, alone and silent. She waits for nothing more than a tasteless meal with few nutrients to fill her listless form. The shackles on the door handle herald the entrance of the food. The door shuts and the prisoner is alone again. The plate remains untouched and the cell witnesses yet another suicide...*

"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."

Speaking is Claire Culhane, activist, anti-authoritarian and abolitionist. She wants me to interview her outdoors, under the warm, bright, noon-hour sun in the middle of a Halifax October day. "I have been indoors too long today and the sun is so warm," says Culhane.

She has just finished speaking to a class of 60 criminology students. Outdoors, on the steps of the Dalhousie physics building seems like an appropriate place to discover the motivation of the woman who wants prisons outlawed.

Even with a whirlwind schedule that would turn the head of any reporter, Culhane, 67, has time to talk. She particularly wants to talk about her cause, the abolishment of the prison system.

"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.

Culhane says the government is to blame for the prison system. She says there is no government anywhere, east or west, capitalist or communist, that does not have full control of the army, the armed forces, the police department and the prisons 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 rea-

sons why all the terrible things go on. Nobody really cares: all they're doing is maintaining society."

Culhane, author of the books *Barred From Prison* and *Still Barred From Prison*, is touring Canadian universities with her messages about society. In *Still Barred*, the white-haired author wants her readers to reject the society in which they live; the one that repudiates violence in the streets but condones violence against the unfortunate held in custody.

*There is no natural light  
In the void*

*black runs on and on  
and back into itself  
it is*

*a black hole, absorbing  
like a sponge  
and a drop of water*

*wiped up and dissipated  
throughout the strands  
until there's nothing left  
of the drop  
once held a sparkle.*

(from *A Valedication to Shaun*, by Tom Elton, Kent Institution, February 1982)

Reprinted from *Still Barred From Prison*, by Claire Culhane.

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 breach birth and I put my foot in it right from the start."

Trained as a nurse in Ottawa, she was told never to sacrifice the soul of her work for technique, 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 banned from the House of Commons since 1971, when she chained herself to a chair in the House to protest Canada's actions in Vietnam. She was told never to return.

In 1976, during a hostage-taking incident at the BC 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 of the penitentiary; 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 BC 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. Every time she enters an institution her anger towards the whole prison system grows and she is much more willing to promote her cause.

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.

In her tour she hopes to promote her new book, *Still Barred From Prison*. Her language is simple and she does not apologize for the explicit details of the prison system's horrors.

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

"People have asked me," say 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.

*Claire Culhane,  
Canada's controversial prison  
reform advocate  
recently spoke  
at Dalhousie.*

By Mary Ellen Jones