

## AS I SEE IT



**By Martin Hattersley**

*"One thing I am grateful for is that I was sent to jail, because there I have received courses and counselling from caring people, that have made me able to turn my life around."*

Those words, spoken by an inmate participating in a recent Alternatives to Violence course at the Edmonton Institution for Women, came as a surprise to me. A lawyer doesn't very often meet clients who are grateful for being sent to jail. Yet I hope that it will bring a glow of satisfaction to the upper echelons of Correctional Services Canada, to know that some of their initiatives are beginning to bear fruit.

As a member of the Citizens' Advisory Committee of the Edmonton Institution (itself a "best practice" of CSC), I get to see the inside of the prison system in a way that is not given to everybody. Indeed, I get so deluged with information, research reports, minutes of meetings, pamphlets, updates to Standing Orders, as well as the chance to visit the institution and meet personally with inmates, staff and administration, that it is hard for a mere volunteer to keep up with the flow.

What I see impresses me. One quarter of the persons in prison in the whole world are in the United States - Canada's rate of imprisonment per thousand population, even though double the European average, is one fifth of the U.S.A. rate. The number of violent crimes committed in Canada has been declining for seven years now, and is far below the level of the U.S.A., even taking differences in population into account. The proportion of federal offenders who complete their parole without incident is over 85%. The number of federal offenders who go on to commit another offence is now half of what it was twenty years ago.

The key to all of this has been introducing the concept of "dynamic security" - securing public safety not by locks and bars, but by giving the offender the tools to relate effectively with other people, and so reintegrate safely back into the community. Instead of simply being warehoused, the newly sentenced federal offender is expected to follow a "correctional plan" suited to his or her assessed "criminogenic needs", usually including such things as cognitive skills, anger management, alcohol, narcotics and life skills education: frequently also, aboriginal cultural and spiritual observances.

This process also means an emphasis on parole, with close supervision and control, rather than incarceration. The offender learns to manage in society, rather than in the regimented and artificial community behind bars. It involves risk and it involves responsibility, but when one considers that five thousand people go into federal institutions each year, and five thousand are discharged - that eight hundred people are on parole in the North Alberta district alone - it is impressive how few incidents actually take place that involve danger to the public.

The obstacle to all this progress is the entirely different and punitive attitude towards corrections taken particularly by the Ontario and Alberta provincial governments, "Alberta Report", the Alliance party, TV crime shows, the typical phone in radio talk show, and the public misled by them, who all seek to follow the United States model.

The idea that we are all in incredible danger from crime, and that by being brutal we can somehow teach brutalized people how not to be brutal. The idea that a "criminal" is incapable of reforming his or her ways, and is a different kind of creature from the rest of humanity. The idea that long prison terms, harshness, "boot camps" and the like actually are effective in reducing crime.

The trouble is that these fancies may make good headlines and sell papers and politicians, but they simply are not true. They make a lot of lives miserable, prevent reconciliation of victim and offender, and are immensely expensive to the taxpayer.

What irks me even more is that this attitude is so often advanced in the name of a "Christianity" that seems to me to have principally come from the Old Testament and certainly stopped short before it reached the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus taught us to "go the second mile". He did it for a very simple reason. It brings reconciliation to the world. And it works.

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*(c) May 2000: J.M.Hattersley - (jmartinh@shaw.ca)*