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A new look at jails BARRY MATHIAS

Our present jail system does not work. Mr Harper wants to 'get tough on crime', which simply means building more jails as a preparation for adopting the American system. In other words, he will privatize them.

The USA has the largest number of prisoners per capita in the developed world, yet has not decreased its crime rate. The building, staffing, supplying and maintaining of its jails is very big business in America, in spite of its obvious failure. The cost to society is huge and ongoing.

I would propose that only violent people go to jail. All others would have a custodial sentence in dollars, not in years, and would spend their time in supervised work camps. An example would be a man who might have been sentenced to three years in jail could, instead, be sentenced to earn \$9,000 in a work camp. He would be paid a fixed rate that would decrease his debt each week until he had reached his \$9,000 penalty. Upon completion of his time, one third of his earnings would go to the victim/s of his crime, one third would go towards the cost of his accommodation, and the last third would be his, to help him avoid having to resort to crime in order to live.

The work camps would be graded as to the physical or intelligence level of the prisoners. Young, fit individuals would be given the chance to work in lumber camps, road or building projects, or might take on the more demanding aspects of farming. Those who were older, or lacked physical ability would work with animals or in horticultural camps. Some camps might focus on light engineering. The main point would be that those found guilty of non-violent crimes would be required to perform meaningful jobs, and would have the opportunity to learn new trades and increase their education.

Under the present system, it costs our society thousands of dollars a year to incarcerate a person. Often

our jails serve merely as colleges for crime, where many are serving their second, third or fourth sentences. Our present system encourages recidivism, drug addiction and provides little opportunity for first time criminals to change their lifestyle.

Many victims of crime are often ignored in the complexities of our legal system, and it would seem beneficial to them if criminals were compelled to repay some, if not all, of the financial loss they have suffered.

A large proportion of those in jails have been convicted of drug crimes. Work camps would allow them to renew their health, have access to detox facilities and experience a variety of meaningful occupations. Many prisoners suffer from mental disorders, and prisons have become the new alternatives for the psychiatric homes that recent governments have closed. It would be possible, under specialized work camps, for these people to receive the help they are sadly lacking in the present system.

If rates of pay were equivalent to the basic rate in society, it would be easier to establish government-run organizations that would not compete unfairly in the market. Those who refused to work conscientiously would spend longer in the camps, and would only be released when their debt had been repaid.

It will be argued that such an idea would be immensely costly to introduce. I agree, but the present system is also immensely costly, and is increasing each year. If Mr Harper has his way, we will soon be paying hundreds of millions for more jails, when we should be reducing their number. If we began by establishing a small number of camps that would take all of those who are recently convicted, it would be possible to begin to reduce the number of overcrowded jails at the same time. So, the cost of this new approach to incarceration would not be excessive. However, the benefit to society could be

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priceless.

This is merely an idea that I have painted with broad brush strokes. It is the starting point for a discussion, and its premise is that something new needs to be tried to change the moribund attitudes that governments have displayed for centuries regarding how to treat criminals. We need to restore self-worth to first-time offenders, not confine them to a life of boredom, drugs and an education in crime.

Surely, in the twenty-first century we can take a fresh look at the problem of crime and punishment, and not continue a policy that does not work, merely because our government is locked into the failed, but lucrative, jail system practised in the USA. ☞

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