

Incentive to Scrutinize

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In pattern with the army of changes which the Correctional Service of Canada have been marching forward with as part of their “Transformation Agenda” on the government-endorsed “Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety,” the topographers themselves have decided to carve out yet another jagged valley for prisoners to traverse through. As of October 1, 2013 federal prisoners will now be required to pay a sizeable percentage of their already meager inmate employment earnings towards food and prison cell accommodation. Concommittantly, prisoners employed by the Crown special operating agency CORCAN will no longer receive incentive pay in exchange for the many hours of labour that they contribute towards the production of goods and services used by CSC, other public institutions, and purchased through private corporate contracts. These “accountability measures,” along with others announced by former Conservative Minister of Public Safety Vic Toews in April 2012, were then branded as an attempt to usurp a few million extra dollars per year in savings from the nearly three billion dollar annual CSC budget.

As it stood prior to the changes, prisoners would receive a maximum of \$6.90 for one day of prison work in areas such as food service and prison maintenance, while CORCAN employees would receive this same base pay along with an additional \$2.20 per hour. With the proposed changes in effect, prisoners will receive 30% less per day and the CORCAN incentive pay will be eliminated altogether, meaning essentially that the rate of pay would be reduced to \$4.90 per day for a basic exchange of labour. Meanwhile the more complex skills-based labour at CORCAN will no longer be expressly remunerated at all above the base rate. While the treatment and waged status of prisoners is no doubt low on the public list of priorities in these austere times, when even many law-abiding citizens are feeling the effects of government cutbacks, this issue is one that deserves attention and must be looked at in terms of the broader interests of public safety that it implies and the future state of Canadian corrections.

It is interesting that the former Minister of Public Safety advertised these measures in terms of the financial benefits to be reaped with their implementation and the implicit message of accountability that it would send to prisoners. In actuality, these measures will likely have the exact opposite effect. A prison is essentially a miniature society, and naturally one with few comforts and many deprivations. With such scarcity, access to basic goods which are already tightly regulated take on extraordinary meaning for the individuals living under such conditions. One of the ways that prisoners access these goods is through the inmate canteen where prisoners can purchase items with the payments they receive for their work assignments. This creates a level playing field so that those without family members in the community able to provide them with financial support can still purchase things like stamps, hygiene items, the occasional chocolate bar, Tylenol, or place money on their inmate telephone card.

In keeping with the analogy of the prison population as a micro-society, it is the access to and control of scarce resources which generates the most competition and conflict. By severing prisoners further from their ability to access these resources, the prison environment will naturally become more hostile, prisoners will more often come into conflict with one another, and they will also be more inclined to find illegitimate means of satisfying the deficit through participation in the underground economy of the prison and/or – although CSC will vehemently deny their availability – with the importation and trafficking of illicit drugs in the institution. From a financial perspective, these new security threats will likely generate for each of the 57 institutions which CSC manages, hundreds of thousands of dollars in both static and dynamic security measures each year, dwarfed only by the additional costs of managing

prisoners who end up in administrative segregation, the many extra hours of security intelligence officer investigations, and the substantial increase in prisoners being reclassified as maximum security inmates.

In terms of accountability, altogether eliminating the scant \$2.20 per hour payments which CORCAN prisoner-employees received for their productive labour, sends an entirely opposite message to the worker. If anything it sends the message that one is being exploited. Part of the reason that CORCAN jobs were attractive for prisoners was for the fact that meaningful labour could be exchanged for, in addition to the development of skills, a little extra money which could be sent home to family members, used to finance post-secondary education, or put away for an eventual release. Of course, the incentive component also ensured that CORCAN had a steady supply of willing prison labourers to contribute to things like the \$60.5 million in sales the agency generated in 2006-2007 (CSC Review Panel 46).

With the elimination of incentive pay for CORCAN prisoner-employees, one might ask why a prisoner would still be willing to work there. The obvious answer is that they most likely would not, which is why one must read this measure along with the 30% reduction in inmate pay, as a part of a much larger measure to emulate the draconian and failed American style of federal corrections (CBC News, September 24 2009). If one reads the unfolding of this agenda as such, it becomes ever clearer that the groundwork is being done for the implementation of still more of the uncritically-endorsed transformative recommendations found in the partisan policy-pushing “Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety” chaired by Harris-era private prison politician Rob Sampson, which will Americanize the Canadian correctional system, linking more prison discipline and increased structure through mandatory work programs tied to the Canadian economy, with the eventual abolition of statutory release, and a system of coercive earned parole. (Jackson, M. and Stuart, G. 2009).

The expediency with which the government seems to be preparing the ground for their transformation agenda is indicative of their haste to meet the deadlines of the next election while they still have the legislative power to redefine the reality of Canadian federal corrections. Therefore, all activities that derive from this agenda can only be understood as stepping stones towards a Canadian prison-industrial complex and should be thoroughly scrutinized.

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References

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