

Industry in Canadian federal prisons: Glimpses into history

In the early 1990s, a considerable amount of historical information about Canadian federal corrections was assembled by Dr. Gerry Woods after his retirement from the Department of the Solicitor General (Canada). The following timeline was prepared in 1994 from this material for the purpose of briefing new members of the CORCAN advisory board.

1833: Kingston-area artisans and skilled labourers organize a successful protest against prison-made goods. As a result, prisons begin to avoid competition with "real-world" labour.

1834: A statute directs the warden of the Canadian federal prison to furnish inmates with employment. Despite this full employment policy, no more than 50% of inmates are generally employed.

1867: Inmates begin to be employed by several private-sector firms.

1870s: The Canadian Public Works Department and militia begin to order significant stocks of materials (such as iron work, boots and uniforms) from prison industries.

1883: The labour contracts with private-sector firms end and available inmate work declines.

1913: Strong opposition to competitive prison industries reduces inmate work to making twine, wooden pails, mops and brooms, and institutional clothing and footwear. The MacDonald Commission describes prison industrial programs as "a disgrace to the Dominion" because of the lack of "healthful purposeful, profitable work."

1919: Superintendent W.S. Hughes states in his annual report, that "proper employment for the inmates has long been recognized by those in control as a dire necessity. To keep men in enforced idleness would... be most inhuman... The inmates... are the wards of the Dominion Government and there is no valid reason why goods required for State use... should not be made, in so far as is possible, in the penitentiaries."

1921: The Biggar Committee proposes amendments to the Penitentiary Act to compel government departments to use penitentiary-manufactured products wherever possible-at no cost. A watered-down Order in Council is eventually passed. The Minister of Justice does state that it is "expedient and advisable that any good, articles or repairs required for the use of the Government... which can conveniently be manufactured, produced, or made at the penitentiaries... should, to the extent of the capacity, be made... at the penitentiaries so far as this can be done with equal economy." The only result was contracts to produce post office mail bags.

1939-45: Most institutions have a surplus of work.

1945-49: Inmate work dries up as the prison population increases by 34%.

1960: Institutional industrial activity is given precedence over vocational training.

1966: The Treasury Board approves a plan to give training precedence over industrial activity and merge the two. The plan contains no provision for marketing products and no capital for launching new industries.

1968: Commissioner MacLeod admits his disappointment with the plan. There is a rapid turnover of inmate workers.

1969: The Ouimet Commission repeats old arguments: working conditions should match, as closely as possible, the working conditions in private industry; top-quality machinery, methods and instructors should be used; government (including international aid programs) use of prison products should be increased; and the public, unions and private industry should be informed of the need for inmate employment as part of their rehabilitation.

1977: The Bureau of Management Consultants Report emphasizes that prison industry conditions should closely match real-world work conditions. The MacGuigan Parliamentary Sub-committee recommends improved inmate training, the establishment of a national prison industries corporation, the introduction of inmate incentive pay and bonuses, and enlisting the full cooperation of business and labour in moving toward increased inmate work opportunities. CORCAN is launched.

1981: CORCAN production reaches 80 separate products.

1984: The Carson Committee cites the progress of prison industries - reorganization, tripled output and the use of a graduated pay scale.

1989: The comprehensive, high-grade, incentive-based industrial program recommended by the MacGuigan sub-committee is in place in an experimental setting at Collins Bay Institution.

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