PETER TAYLOR

COVER STORY

Alberta's booming prison business

With a high-priced system in disarray, the army's bread-and-water jails suggest an interesting alterrnative

Major Gille Nault is commandant of the Edmonton-based Canadian Forces Service Prison and Detention Barracks (CFSPDB). Sometimes, he says, he feels like the lonely Maytag repairman in the TV commercial. Though Canada's only remaining military prison can house up to 116 offenders, the commandant and his staff now handle a skeletal contingent of six. The opposite is true of civilian correctional facilities, however. Per capita, Canada puts more people in jail than any other industrialized nation in the world except the United States, more even than countries normally considered harsh such as Spain and Turkey. Federal stistics released last month show that the cost is high and rising steadily. Depending on the institution, up to 80% of inmates in most prisons are repeat guests. Evidence proliferates that the increasingly costly system does not work.

Prisons have moved a long way in the 157 years since the British colonial government built the first Canadian penitentiary at Kingston. In 1834 jailers enforced a strict and, by most accounts, excessive regimen. Talking earned an inmate six lashes with the cat-o'-nine tails. Prisoners served sentences in full. It was not until 1868 that an early release based on good conduct could be granted. In the early 20th century, the new "social sciences" of psychology and sociology began trying to treat the prisoners' mental problems and attacking the injustices in society. The 1938 Archambault Report recommended inmate pay, improved prison recreation, parole and probation. (Convicts can now obtain day parole after one sixth of their sentence and full parole after one third.) The National Parole Board began in 1958 and prisoner programs expanded in the 1960s.

Since the 1960s prisons have changed enormously. According to the latest common theory, called the "opportunities model," jail is to be an environment where each inmate's individual needs are accommodated. Prisons are now designed with a minimum of oppressive bars and steel doors (see sidebar). Except in maximum security, freedom of movement is encouraged. Recreation facilities are ample, workloads light, and study encouraged. Prison uniforms are worn only during working hours. The old cell-block system has given way to a "range" and "house" model. Psychological and life skills counselling opportunities are abundant for those who want to earn parole points.

The average daily cost of a prisoner in maximum security is $185. By comparison, a deluxe room with a view at the Banff Springs Hotel costs $150 a day.

The results are not encouraging.

The federal government is responsible for criminals with sentences of two years or more. This year it expects to spend $927 million. Per prisoner, it works out to a daily cost of $140; the average daily cost of a prisoner in maximum security is $185. (By comparison, a deluxe room with a view at the Banff Springs Hotel costs $150 a day.) Inmates sentenced to less than two years or probation, as well as young offenders, become guests of the provincial government. Its prison budget this year is $112 million, which works out to a daily average in Alberta of $85, compared to $133 in Ontario.

Although there have have been no prominent studies of recidivism rates (ie. the number of first-time offenders who return to jail), it is clear that many prisoners do keep coming back for more. Estimates vary, but nobody puts the figure below 40% of the current prison population, and many think it's as high as 80%. In other words, most of the nation's present prisoners didn't learn their lesson the first time round.

Such is not the case at Major Nault's

Canadian Forces prison barracks, where the regime is one of iron discipline and the recedivism rate is so low it isn't worth calculating. The facility, built in 1958, houses two kinds of offenders: detainees who have broken military rules (such as going AWOL) and servicemen who have been sentenced by a military court. Sentences range from 15 days to two years.

For Maj. Nault, CFSPDB's job is to "correct the mental attitude of the inmate, teach him to respect discipline, and understand its value. The tried and true approach is to reward good behaviour and punish misconduct."

That starts on the inmate's first day. After passing the iron bars at the entrance, he is ordered to face the wall for about 20 minutes, and he studies a statement by Napoleon: "In the end the spirit will always conquer the sword." This is to inspire in the inmate appreciation of the importance of character, according to Maj. Nault. From then on "he knows that in here we call the shots. His job is to respond." And he does.

PETER TAYLOR

Nault (L) and Robichaud: *'They have to pay the price.'*

The inmate may not smoke. The inmate may not talk, unless permitted by an officer. The inmate will receive no visitors.

His five-by-eight-foot cell offers only a thin single mattress on a steel frame and a small piece of metal, called a "writing table," bolted to the wall. He is wakened at 5:30 a.m. and his lights are shut off at 9 p.m. At all times in between the inmate's kit must be neatly laid out and available for inspection: Bible, boots, suspenders, belt,

Great expectations at Hobbema

Both federal Justice Minister Kim Campbell, who supervises the court system, and federal Solicitor General Doug Lewis, the nation's head prison guard, deny they are contemplating setting up a separate (or "parallel") judicial administration for natives, even though Indian leaders are loudly demanding one. It was odd, therefore, that when three weeks ago Mr. Lewis announced construction of a new 60-bed, $8 million minimum security penitentiary at Hobbema, 55 miles south of Edmonton, he denied that it could be construed as "parallel," even though Indian healing and spirituality (sweat lodges, drum groups, and sacred circle ceremonies) will form the heart of the prison's rehabilitation program. The Indians see it as exactly that.

Assembly of First Nations (AFN) grand chief Ovide Mercredi declared that fewer Indians would return to jail if they could learn more about their native heritage while serving time. "Give our people a chance to prove healing can happen within a correctional facility. [It] will break a pattern of doom our people have experienced for far too long."

Solicitor General Lewis: *"Parallel."*

Chief Mercredi's sanguine sentiments were echoed by Westaskiwin MP Willie Littlechild, himself an Indian from the area, who insisted that self-governing native prisons would enable troubled Indians to take control of their lives. Once they had control, problems of drug and alcohol abuse, the cause of most crime committed by natives, would all but disappear.

Officials in Mr. Lewis's department deny that the Hobbema facility will be softer than other federal prisons or that it is the beginning of a parallel justice system. Jacques Belanger, a communications officer, insists the native prison will have to conform to all federal prison standards. "It will be a transition facility to ease the return to society of offenders who are nearing the end of their sentences in traditional correctional institutions."

Chief Victor Buffalo of the Samson band, one of four at Hobbema, confessed that many of his members have reservations about their own ability to manage safely a prison for their relatives and friends. "Some of our people are protesting because they are afraid of murderers and violent criminals being at large on the reserve." But the chief backed up federal claims that the prison would not cater to dangerous inmates, nor fall below Ottawa's minimum safety standards.

The chief contradicted federal officials, however, when asked if the prison was a first step towards a parallel justice system. "Absolutely. If this project works, in five years we will be able to go to Ottawa and insist that they set up independent aboriginal policing, courts and prisons." Then, according to Mr. Buffalo, when an Indian commits a crime, no matter whether the offence is large or small, or whether it is committed on or off Indian land, or whether the victim is Indian or not, the native criminal would return to the reserve where he "can be dealt with by a system that understands his culture and his special needs."

Federal prison officials admit that they have no model, and little research, that proves native healing works as a form of rehabilitation. Yet they insist they would eventually like to see all Indian inmates in a prison like the one being planned for Hobbema. That would be a daunting task, especially in the West. Of the nearly 3,000 federal prisoners from the prairies, more than one-third (1,035) are Indians.

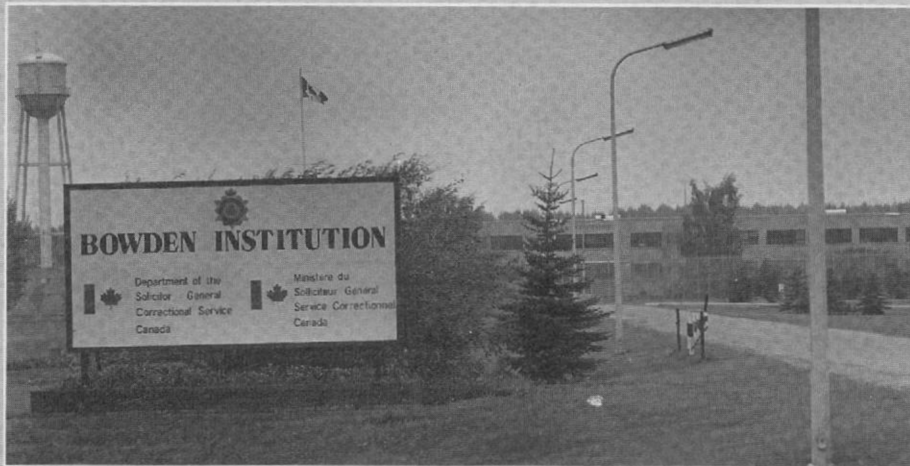
One native spiritual healer also cautions against completely replacing time in a traditional prison with native spirituality. Bev Boone, who runs the Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee) Nation Spirit Healing Lodge on the southwest outskirts of Calgary, likens native healing to restoring a demolished house. "It only works when you have given up the old ways entirely. Some people have to do hard time—they need federal incarceration—before they can benefit from healing."

—Lorne Gunter

'A small, boring town with a very big police force'

The traditional image of armed guards patrolling an iron-barred cell block does not really describe the laid-back comfort of Alberta's 490-inmate medium-security Bowden Institution. This 17-year-old federal prison exemplifies the current correctional theory.

There are 287 employees at the prison: one worker for 1.7 inmates. Inmates awake at 7 a.m. Though each door is electronically controlled by a master switch, it is only on during the twice-a-day count of prisoners and during the night. The rest of the time the inmate is free to go in and out of his room (more commonly known as his house) by using his key. The room is seven feet by nine feet. Inside is a single size mattress on a steel frame, a toilet, sink, desk and closet. The rooms can include TV, stereo and computer bought at the inmate's expense. Bars are rare.



Bowden: *Squash court and mini-golf.*

Cafeteria-style breakfast follows in a dining hall nicknamed McDonald's. The breakfast includes a choice of beverage: juice, coffee or milk. Depending on the schedule, the prison serves cereal, French toast, pancakes, and bacon and eggs.

At 8 a.m. about 70% of the inmates go to work, earning from $4.65 to $6.90 a day. This pays for items from the canteen, such as $2.50 a pack cigarettes. (Inmates do not pay federal sales tax.) Work consists of cleaning, helping maintenance tradesmen or going to school. Those who work well get pay raises. There aren't enough jobs to go around so some prisoners sit in their rooms during work period and watch cable TV. They are on prison welfare and get $1.60 a day.

At 11:30 the working prisoners return to their rooms, the doors lock and the guards do a count. Lunch is then served: soup, a sandwich and a main course that could include roast beef, pizza or baked ham.

Work or school continues from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. The inmates then change out of their standard-issue work clothes into their own jeans and T-shirts. The guards count again and it is supper time. Last Friday's menu consisted of fish and chips with tartar sauce, cole slaw, vegetables and dessert. Then the inmate can wander back to his room, go to the gym or squash court, pump iron in the weight facility or play mini-golf outside, weather permitting.

Room doors lock at 11 p.m. In his room the prisoner can watch more TV until he decides to switch off the lights.

Bowden's watch towers hold guards with no weapons. The only armed guards are one at the front gate and another who drives a surveillance truck in circles around the prison yard 24 hours a day.

It is, as one inmate describes it, like "a small, boring town with a very big police force."

—R.B.

pack with brass buckles, a shoe polish tin and latrine bucket. All metal and leather must be shined to perfection. The day consists largely of drill, physical training, cleaning and lining up at attention. There is no walking. All movement is done at a fast march of 140 paces a minute.

Though hard, says Maj. Nault, this routine has a purpose. While instilling self-discipline through endless and mindless drill, it gives the inmate time to think. "Their bodies may be busy but their minds remain free to ask the obvious question: What am I doing here?"

Privileges or early release must be gained by earning marks. Each day the inmate can receive a maximum of eight, but deductions are made for incorrect behaviour. An improperly shined bucket, for instance, costs two marks.

If all goes well, after 14 days the inmate has earned 112 marks and may smoke three cigarettes a day, put two photos on his writing table, talk for 10 minutes after each meal and request permission to receive visitiors for one hour on the weekend. After another 112 marks he gets six smokes and 30 minutes of television. The final level is, in the commandant's words, "like dying and going to heaven." Nobody currently at the facility is at this level. After an additional 224 marks the inmate receives eight cigarettes a day, as many photos on his writing table as he wants, no kit layout and a later lights-out time.

The mark system, of course, can go the other way, too, and return the inmate temporarily to the first "no privilege" stage, solitary confinement or a punishment diet. In the last option, he gets a bread-and-water breakfast. Dinner and lunch each consist of two ounces of oatmeal, two ounces of peas or beans, five ounces of lard and eight ounces of potatoes. In extreme cases an inmate gets bread and water only.

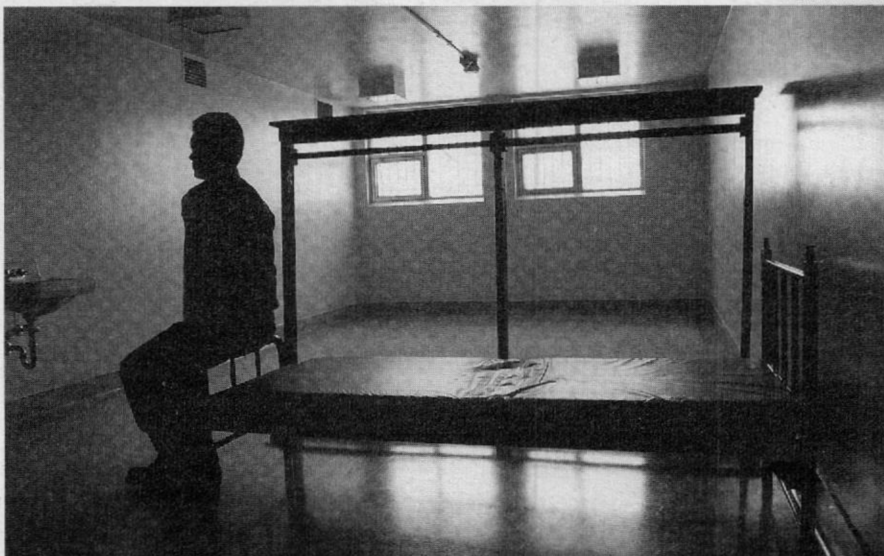
Even amid the facility's rigour, inmates sometimes test the rules. One tried to smuggle in hashish muffins. Another tried to transport LSD on the glue of an incoming envelope. Some make rudimentary weapons. These instances happen rarely, according to the commandant.

The reason the system works, explains the facility's chief disciplinarian, is that "we break everything back down to the basics, to the simplest of tasks." Chief Warrant Officer Ernest Robichaud, in his third year at CFSPDB, believes that "prisoners have to gain self-discipline and learn to say no to some of their impulses."

"It's fine to try rehabilitating people," adds Maj. Nault, "but not at the price of forgetting about punishment. When someone does wrong they have to pay the price." Such a moralistic assertion, he knows, is foreign, indeed hostile, to the insights of modern penology. But it works. "I don't mind being a dinosaur. I believe that what we are doing is right. And as the old saying goes: If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

It also seems to work for civillians as well. Various American prison authorities have been experimenting with it. Since 1983, the Oklahoma State Corrections Department has run a Regimented Inmate Discipline (RID) unit in an 1860s cavalry post called Fort Supply. The program, costing slightly more than Oklahoma's average daily prison cost of about $38, takes young male, first-time offenders, usually convicted of nonviolent crimes against property, and runs them through a boot-camp style "shock incarceration" for up to 120 days.

PETER TAYLOR



Inside Canada's only military prison: *Few repeat offenders.*

Upon arriving at Fort Supply, prisoners start in the third platoon learning how to shine shoes, march, stand to attention, maintain property and clean the area. Through merit, inmates can gradually move to the second platoon and then the first, gaining increasing privileges and responsibilities as they go. When they have finished at RID, they return to court for final sentencing. If they have done well, they may go free, or the judge may reduce the sentence he would otherwise have imposed.

Charles Baker, a 24-year Marine Corps veteran, explains, "This particular program is highly touted throughout the state." In fact, Oklahoma now has other "shock incarceration" programs as does Arizona, Louisiana, Georgia, Arkansas and even liberal New York. Criminals, he says, are those who do not tolerate restraint, and often have never lived in a self-disciplined environment. Shaking them up with a tough regime shows them how to control their tempers and to tolerate annoyances.

University of Alberta criminologist Jim Hackler does not care for Oklahoma's approach. "Systems that use prison as a way of solving problems actually increase the problems. Some people think boot-camp methods are a panacea for prison problems. It's a myth. It doesn't make any difference." Prof. Hackler suggests Canada follow Japan and Scandanavia where "prisoners are made to feel ashamed and then are brought back into the dominant society." When asked for evidence that the soft approach works better, he answers, "That's the wrong question. You're asking for a whole course in criminology."

NATHAN KHO

AFPA president Dungey: *Send them to the high Arctic.*

But the people most directly involved with criminals every day would like to see prisons take a much tougher stance. Alberta Federation of Police Associations president Michael Dungey, a Calgary Police staff sergeant, asks: "What is the purpose of giving a bad guy a slap on the wrist? People who bring terror on society should be punished hard. Instead they get steak dinners and TV. And if they don't get what they want they strike. Then the namby-pamby bureaucrats kowtow to the prisoners' demands and it's back to steak and lobster dinners. Instead the bad guys should go the high Arctic."

Staff Sgt. Dungey says that police are "incensed. In this job you fight upstream like a Kokanee salmon against all the legal hurdles. Then, if a criminal is finally convicted, you see him playing at your golf club on an escorted leave three months later. Something is terribly wrong."

For some the system's underlying values are suspect. Roy Farran, Alberta's solicitor general from 1974 to 1979, has "little faith in social workers giving prisoners lectures on life skills." His suggestion: Turn the wrongdoer around as early as possible and teach him "the virtues of fortitude, courage, endurance and making the best of a bad lot. After all, deviant behaviour really comes from the natural impulse of a young ape to stand up and pound his chest." Unfortunately, laments Mr. Farran, "teaching the manly virtues is not held in much esteem because we are fast becoming a matriarchal society."

Getting tough with offenders, particularly in the early part of their criminal careers, is important, even in the view of one person serving a long stretch in the federal medium-security Bowden Institution, an hour's drive north of Calgary. Steve Lesway, a former Kingston morning radio host, has served 13 years of a life sentence for second-degree murder and now edits the prison newspaper *The Insider.*

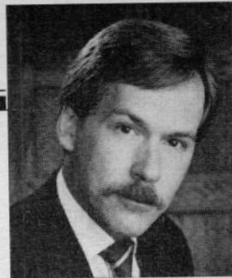
"Right now the only deterrent in here is the loss of freedom. We even get cable TV. Maybe if the kids doing their first sentence who think they're tough were shown a tougher set of rules they might not come back."

The main motive against the idea, he suspects, comes from the fact that a lower recidivism rate would cause serious unemployment among the thousands of people who run the jails. "You have to realize that the prison system is a business," he postulates. "For the system and all the people working in it to survive, John Q. Convict has to come back."

—Rick Bell

LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

The trouble with our prison system is that we don't treat criminals with respect



In the same newspapers which reported last week that Principal Group founder Donald Cormie is not going to jail for false advertising, we also read that a young man named Joseph Morin *is* going to jail, for the heinous crime of drowning two kittens he didn't want. Edmonton's local SPCA animal rights fanatics convinced a judge that he should have paid a vet to inject them, instead of resorting to the cheaper but traditional submersion method. So for no good reason Mr. Morin is a guest of Alberta's solicitor general for the next month, where he will cost provincial taxpayers $85 a day.

If nothing else he is left with the meagre consolation that the worst harm he will suffer in jail is utter boredom. Nobody does much actual work in prison, nor does anybody receive any punishment; they simply go there to be counselled and cured. "Curing," of course, will be difficult if Mr. Morin isn't ill, and there is nothing on the face of it to suggest he is. He is merely frugal, which is apparently now a crime.

I do not understand why we are so determined to trivialize all those things which ought to be large and significant. By using criminal law to sate the zealous sentimentalities of neurotic animal-lovers, we trivialize criminal law. By turning prisons into badly run health spas, we trivialize prisons. (Imagine poor Mr. Morin having to explain to his cell mate why he's there.) By elevating the moral status of animals we trivialize humanity. By legalizing abortion we trivialize babies. We have reduced ourselves to a culture of contradictory emotive banalities.

We need only examine the almost total destruction of the prison system since the 1960s to appreciate the point. What, after all, is the purpose of prisons? To punish people, says the ordinary, sensible layman. And what is the purpose of punishment? It is two-fold—primarily to pay a debt, but also, if possible, to dissuade similar behaviour in future. Prisons should therefore aim at (a) punishment, and (b) cure. The two work hand in hand. So says common sense.

In a sane prison system, inmates would drudge long and hard, would not talk back, would have none of the common amenities of normal life and would be required to conduct themselves as model citizens or face even harsher penalties. This would serve the dual aim of punishment and cure. (This not purely whimsical. The Texas state prison system operated on this logic very effectively until the 1980s, and many states are returning to it.) Because the regime is hard, the criminal would learn self-control and a measure of tolerance (which means putting up with things we don't like), and therewith a degree of respect, both for himself and for the society which sent him there.

But all this contradicts the bizarre "science" of modern criminology. The reason the criminal knifed or raped someone is not because he's a bad person, says the liberal, but because he lacked adequate recreational facilities as a child. It's all society's fault. Society now owes it to this poor man to "fix" him, by talking to him about "self-esteem."

Perhaps if our prisons weren't three-quarters full of repeat offenders, and perhaps if this tender approach didn't require more than one staff member per two inmates, costing Canadians some $2 billion per year, we might go along with it. But those are its results.

No doubt the system, such as it is, will persuade Mr. Morin next time not to drown kittens (or at least to drown them in the country, where people have been doing it for thousands of years and will probably be doing it a thousand years hence). But it doesn't seem to be persuading most of the criminals who are actually in jail for real crimes.

There is no mystery as to why. If a man goes to jail for, say, armed robbery, he knows very well that he did a very bad thing. If the courts and prison system treat it as morally inconsequential—that is, if they don't exact due suffering as punishment—the man is insulted. His significant crime has provoked a trivial, knee-jerk response. He will therefore do it again. The liberal is wrong to suppose that he is reaching out for love. More probably, he is demanding respect, and he should get it. All humans are dangerous and worthy of respect. So put him on a rockpile and give him a sledge hammer. He has earned it.

—Link Byfield