

Stephen Harper and the Caging of Canada

The *Safe Streets and Communities Act*: Neo-Conservative Crime and Cruelty

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Law and Order

2010 closed with the 33rd consecutive annual drop in both the rate and the severity of crime across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). Despite this, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's conservative government has reintroduced their much-anticipated law and order agenda in the form of one colossal crime bill.

Bill C10, the *Safe Streets and Communities Act* (Parliament of Canada, 2011) combines nine of the former bills that had failed to pass into law due to opposition and repeated prorogues of parliament. Still other criminal law bills that failed to pass previously have been introduced separately. They focus on tightening both our online freedoms and Canadian immigration law.

Safe Streets and Communities: Who Wouldn't Want That?

Despite how widespread the resistance to Bill C10 has been, it has thus far been fu-

“[People] fight for freedom, then they begin to accumulate laws to take it away from themselves.”

— *Author Unknown*

tile. It seems that there is no bridging the gap between conservative ideology, and the truth behind the causes of community harm. The causes of course are poverty, unemployment, inequality, and trauma. Addressing these issues requires thoughtfulness and a commitment to evidence-based practices which reflect a human rights framework.

Precisely because Bill C10 ignores evidence and human rights, all manner of people have resisted it, from the opposition parties and experts in the field to ordinary citizens. These include the 37,000 members of the Canadian Bar Association, 563 doctors who signed the Urban Health Research Initiative's letter opposing Bill C10¹, the Canadian Foundation for Drug Policy, Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, NORML Canada, Toronto Harm Reduction Task Force, Pivot Legal Society, Canadian Civil Liberties Association, and others representing thousands of social workers, healthcare providers, teachers, and clergy who

recognize the hyperbole for what it is, partisan ideology, greed, and fear.

Ideology and Greed

Harper's political base doesn't care much about sound statistics and proven best practices. Not if these are competing with the satisfaction obtained through retribution and high profit margins. The hang 'em high approach has been used successfully in the past. The Harris government in Ontario in the 90s made "war on the poor" by demonizing us (no more free rides for these lazy, drug-addicted, criminals) while simultaneously cutting the services and welfare rates, which could prevent many from becoming addicted and criminalized in the first place. Harris' ability to dehumanize and criminalize the poor was a successful tactic used to elevate his political popularity. It was successful because he was seen by many to be demanding nothing more than the revered traits of self-sufficiency and hard work, held dear by many Canadians, and often used as a measure of an individual's worth and respectability. However it's important to remember that the majority of the poor, including those on social assistance would rather not be in that situation. And much like more privileged Canadians, the poor are seeking ways to improve their circumstances and those of their families.

Neo-Conservative Agenda = Increased Crime and Less Safety

Stephen Harper has claimed that Canadians are unsafe and that only by restricting our freedoms further will we achieve safety. In fact what the Harper conservatives will likely achieve is not increased safety but an increase in "crime". As our freedoms are increasingly made illegal, and social programs which stave off desperation are defunded, our "crime" rates will soar, thus justifying the prison building boom and tough-on-crime rhetoric. The people of the USA have learned this the hard way. Decades of "tough-on-crime", "war on drugs" ideology translated into programs of mass incarceration.²

Communities of colour and those living on low incomes have been impacted most harshly as a result. Studies found that those communities which were most impacted, suffered increasing, as opposed to decreasing rates of "crime". It was found that removing income contributing adults from already struggling households increased desperation, and provided even fewer choices within those homes and throughout those communities. People were forced more often to make choices between seeing their children do without necessities, or engaging in that which we refer to as "crime" in order to provide for them. (*Hagan and Petty, 2002*) These factors add up to ever increasing rates of "crime" in communities which are heavily impacted by criminalization and imprisonment.

If criminalizing and incarcerating people are known to make us less safe then why are the conservatives doing it?

Those warehoused under the new conservative regime will become the raw material for a profitable industry popular in the USA: privatized, for-profit prisons. "Crime" must be increased to keep the bodies flowing on a pay per capita basis. Then once locked up, those bodies can be transformed into even more profit in the form of prisoner labour. Free labour will be sold to third parties at discounted and very profitable rates. Corporations able to win prison contracts will have a serious one-up on the competition. Prisoners are typically paid between \$0 and \$4.75 per day. (*Coalition for Prisoner's Rights Newsletter, 2011*)

The History of Privatized Prisons in Canada

For profit prisons were attempted briefly by the Harris government in the form of a comparison experiment between two of the then newly constructed super-jails. These new jails were devised by the Harris government to warehouse human beings as sparingly as possible. (*Roslin, A, 2007*) The Central East Correctional Centre in Lindsay was owned and operated by the government of Ontario while the contract to operate the Central North Correctional Centre in Penetanguishene was awarded to a private

US firm called the Management and Training Corporation. While the US contractor was indeed able to save the province money on the front end, the privately run prison had inferior security, health care, and increased repeat offender rates. The outcomes were so poor that operation of the private prison was transferred back to the state.

Neo-Conservative Fear

Privatization of prisons and expansion of the so-called law and order agenda is but one small piece of a much larger picture. The neo-conservative agenda has long been to privatize public resources and slash social services, while increasing government control and providing complete freedom for corporations. Because there are substantial disadvantages for most of us in these methods, and because of the potential for resistance on the grandest of scales, the neo-conservatives fear us – we the true majority. Because of this we are seeing greater restrictions to civil freedoms including worker rights, the right to dissent, and a focus on law and order, accompanied by prison expansion on a scale unprecedented in Canadian history.

More Canadians Criminalized

One in ten Canadians currently has a criminal record. (*Canadian Criminal Justice Association, 2010*) The majority of them suffer the consequent and ongoing emotional, social and financial impacts related to criminalization. Their families are affected right along with them. As more Canadians are criminalized and experience encroachments on freedoms, as well as expanded cuts to social services, the more desperate and angry people will become, and

consequently, the more ready they will be to resist. We should not have to go through this.

To ensure plans for fortune and greed are not thwarted, social control must be continuously ramped up. Judicial and prison expansion agendas, accompanied by deregulation, ensure that profits through prison privatization are freer to flow. Prison privatization is attractive to corporations because they are able to attain certain freedoms they could only dream of elsewhere in “free” society. Prisoners often don’t have to be paid, nor are they permitted to form unions, and further many are restricted politically, forbidden to vote. These are gifts to those who wish to see capitalism entirely unrestrained by “irritating” controls like progressive taxation, good wages, and human rights.

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Capitalism at Work

Contracts awarded to build and run the prisons are not the only ones allowing firms to profit from mass criminalization. Corporations also bid on service and supply contracts, which can and in some cases already do include inmate canteens, food, and telephone services, healthcare, and for-

profit substance abuse programs. (*Stark Raven News, 2004*)

Our government (like most governments) is highly adept in the art of “spin”. The major media outlets are owned and operated by just a few large corporations in Canada, which greatly restricts the diversity of news we receive. These news conglomerates are often but one piece of a much larger pie. They are mostly owned by huge multinationals and used by their owners to influence public opinion in their own favour. They have been allowed to gain far too much political clout through unrestrained growth and expansion, sometimes becoming so large

and influential that our own governments become cowed.

Independent and Alternative News Media

It becomes apparent then that as individuals our own best interests compel us to explore independent sources of news and information. Citizens are wise to question and monitor our governments, whether they are selling off public assets, locking up those with addictions, or allowing warrant-less searches into our online activities. We are wise to ask ourselves who stands to benefit or to lose from a particular initiative or policy change? Equally we are wise to listen closely to opposing voices, in particular those voices which government and corporate interests invest precious resources attempting to discredit or silence.

Most of all we must fight our tendency towards complacency. We can never assume that new laws or greater restrictions (on privacy, for example) won't affect us personally. Insisting that intrusions into our personal sphere are OK because as law abiding citizens we have nothing to hide is rather short sighted. Where do these encroachments end? How far can we allow our government and police forces to expand into the private realms of others before we too are affected? The rights we now enjoy freely could suddenly be taken away and made illegal. New invasions on our freedoms, when not challenged, have a way of gradually intensifying, until it becomes clear that we are no longer free.

Update on Bill C10

Though the conservatives insisted they would have Bill C10 passed into law within the first 100 sitting days of parliament, it seems suddenly to have become less of a priority. The Bill passed the final of three readings in the House of Commons this December. Despite pressure from the Tories

***“Locking people
in cages can never
make a healthier, nor
safer place for any of
us. Thankfully, there
are many smarter
alternatives”***

– Sheryl Jarvis

to have it also sail through the Senate, our Senators have insisted that the Bill be given adequate time for research and investigation. This may have had as much to do with political pressure from voters as with democratic and moral obligation. There have been many campaigns, rallies, and petitions against Bill C10 and all of its earlier incarnations. Current initiatives at Lead Now (<http://leadnow.ca/>

keep-canada-safe) involve rallies at offices of MPs across the country, a petition opposing C10, and a letter writing campaign directed at Senators asking them to give appropriately a fair consideration to the Bill.

The Safe Streets and Communities Act (C10) has passed second reading in Senate and was expected to pass into law sometime in February 2012.

References

1. Mandatory Minimum Sentences and other changes to the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*. Now 1 out of 9 bills rolled into the so called *Omnibus – Safe Streets and Communities Act*.
2. See www.drugsense.org/cms/wodclock for up to the minute dollars spent and numbers incarcerated for US drug war.

Sheryl Jarvis is a middle aged, white, single parent, a woman with a history entrenched in poverty and violence. She has firsthand knowledge of the issues surrounding problematic drug use and imprisonment, having survived both. She is a recent college graduate, and studied social work within a philosophy of critical feminist theory and anti-oppression. Issues important to her are harm reduction and prisoner rights, for which she advocates through community organizing, committee work, and critical writing.

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