

~ The Fallacy of Life ~

No. 6 The newsletter of "INFINITY" the Lifers' group of Collins Bay Aug.22/88

Ex-Tvevangelist wants to Ex-cons

--They called themselves the party of inclusion - the right wing had its voice and platform.--

There he stood on the podium at the Republican National Convention, grinning like a barbary ape and spouting a dilute venom. Pat Robertson had to be careful this time out, the media were recording every syllable of his philosophical invention. He spoke his contradictions well. We watched with fascination as he predicted a time and place where all criminals would be swept from the streets and imprisoned - yet with the same breath promoted the concept of equal opportunity for all citizens. Who those "criminals" might be he left a moot point. In my view, a book-burning fanatic, of any political stripe, would require some extremely spacious jails to house all of his opponents. And opponents is exactly what he means; Mr. Robertson certainly excludes prisoners from the category of Citizen and Political Ally.

Pat's only detectable surrender to liberalism was in calling for mandatory life imprisonment for convicted drug dealers. I call this stance liberal only in comparison to the stated position of most American conservatives on the issue - they support the death penalty. What this comment tells me about Pat Robertson's philosophy is that it is morally and intellectually bankrupt and heavily reliant on imprisonment, exclusion and force as the appointed cure-alls for the ills of society. His is a sterile restatement of that perverse notion that "criminals only understand violence and harsh treatment." There are Canadian parallels.

He speaks of equal opportunity, but neglects to consider that the very people he intends to separate from society for its protection will return to that same society on completion of their sentences. He neglects to remember that we are not born convicts, we were typical citizens until convicted of a crime, we cannot be weeded out from birth. Prisoners and ex-prisoners must be fully included in the processes of social opportunity. If not, the programmed separation of ex-offenders within systems of imprisonment and release and public stigmatization will continue to make it extremely difficult for them to function in society-at-large. By forcibly excluding ex-cons from the normal rights and privileges of citizenship, society will return them to prison. The concept of force has not and will not reduce crime. It has and will continue to impel people to re-offend. Brand them criminals, confine them, deny their voting rights, prevent them from re-entering society by inflaming prejudice against the criminal label and through the assiduous application of sanctions against the parolee (the so-called potential re-offender), limit their options and keep them under constant, unrelenting suspicion, then set this brew to boil and watch that much prophesied "revolving door" spin in the resultant blasts of steam.

Are there any alternatives? I believe the key to change is a shift in attitude. If the public could be shown that prisons are not filled with criminals, but with people who have committed crimes - normal citizens, not strange and ferocious animals - then we could begin to create a climate wherein some positive steps could be taken to block the revolving door.

Two recent events held at Collins Bay Inst. illustrate that prisoners do understand and respond to love and respect. The Exceptional Peoples Olympiad and Gospelfest break down the barriers between those within and those without prison walls. And it does indeed go both ways. Some prisoners bear a prejudice and resentment against average citizens, perceiving them to be in league with those who would keep us behind bars. Nevertheless, it is the average citizen who, after only a few short hours, begins to see the person first, then the convict. At first many outsiders are nervous around us, and many a prisoner distrusts them - but, we mix. Direct and congenial interaction soon convinces most prisoners that these street people pose no significant threat. Gospelfest and Olympiad are relaxed, cordial, joyous events - even Cabinet Ministers were to be seen roaming about in the crowd, seemingly without fear. We became faces, not mere headlines.

Canadians need not take Pat Robertson's advice. We need not attempt to assuage public fear by thrusting people problems out of our daily experience; angrily seeking to erase them from all existence. That is illusion. Our communities can be reconciled and positive solutions discovered. Barriers can come down.

The shift in attitudes toward the developmentally handicapped, which made such events as the Olympiad possible, is a recent phenomenon. The excluded have been brought into the mainstream. It is the fervent hope of Infinity that we, as a society, can forge the will to include all Canadians.

-- John Rives

Crime

When someone breaks a law the wheels of justice are set in motion. An infraction will lead to arrest, prosecution and the dispensation of a penalty set by the court. The public relies on the justice system to act justly and efficiently with law-breakers. This expectation with regard to the courts exists to such a high degree that the public has come to believe that the law is separate from them. It is left to the discretion of officials to deal with those who break any of society's laws. The public tends to rest complacently in the belief that the court is infallible and that its workings are not their affair. They also seem to believe that lawbreakers should be kept separate from the public-at-large. There is no problem with that, as most people realize that the possibility of incarceration is quite high once one has chosen to break a law set down by others.

But what cannot be incarcerated is the reality that laws involve all

of us, whether they are being adhered to or broken. The public cannot separate the effect that laws create in our societies. Many would like to believe that prison will act as a magic trick and make the reality of broken laws disappear. For some reason, many have accepted this false impression and have decided to wear the mask it offers. This is supposed to disguise their potential for the same behaviour. Somehow, they believe that if we lock the problem up and don't look, it will go away. Society has created a monster and now fears its own solution. By denying that we have a problem, we can allow ourselves the illusion of having things under control. Why wait till someone you love is jailed - face it.

Just recently, in an attempt to "buy" votes, Solicitor General James Kelleher promised to include tougher sanctions against offenders in a revised parole act. Longer sentences and periods of incarceration within those sentences can only lead to additional problems within our already overcrowded and out of control penitentiaries. Getting tough on prisoners is Kelleher's sales pitch. He hopes to satisfy those elements of the Canadian public who continue to separate themselves from the whole problem of crime. James Kelleher not only resembles "Mr. Haney" of the 60's sitcom Green Acres, his bargain solution comes with the same bogus guarantees. His snake-oil solution, "Got a problem with penitentiaries? Give the convicts more time to serve - keep them in longer!" Obviously if 25 years isn't working perhaps 50 will.

Getting tough on the problem is right, but not at the expense of those few who are already carrying the burden of society's mistakes. If society desires to rid itself of the difficulties generated by laws which are poorly conceived, unfairly applied and administered, it must first begin to accept that the problem exists and that it effects everyone. Locking people up behind planned secure sceneries does not eliminate the problem. Prison cannot do what people need to do. We must open our eyes and accept the fact that we have major problems with our laws and the ways we have chosen to enforce them. If the public insists on refusing to deal with this and decides to create new laws and penalties without balance and honesty, then we will continue to add to this catastrophe. And that is a crime.

-- Ron Dube

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
 After the the frosty silence in the gardens
 After the agony in stony places
 The shouting and the crying
 Prison and palace and reverberation
 Of thunder of spring over distant mountains

He who was living is now dead
 We who were living are now dying
 With a little patience

T. S. Eliot
 from The Wasteland

All correspondence to:

Lifers' Group
 Box 190
 Kingston, ONT.
 K7L 4V9