

Stuff learned

Tom Allen

Save the prison farms

Last Updated: Wednesday, April 8, 2009 | 6:28 PM ET [Comments58](#)[Recommend99](#)

By Tom Allen [CBC News](#)

In late February, the Correctional Service of Canada announced it would begin closing down its six prison farms.

We've had prison farms in this country since the 1880s. There is currently one in each of B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick, and two in Ontario. But now the entire program is to be shut down by 2010, with the two in Ontario, both in the Kingston area, the first to go.

The idea of a prison farm is an elegant one. Inmates work to produce the food they eat, easing the burden on the public purse and, in the process, gaining experience that they can use when they get out and need to find a good job.

But these days, says Correctional Service, very few former inmates end up working on farms and the thinking is that training prisoners in more contemporary occupations would be better.



A giant raspberry to the idea of shutting down the dairy farms at Canada's prisons, our columnist says. (Associated Press)

What are these contemporary occupations? We've yet to hear any specifics but I have to confess the possibilities make me nervous.

Computers are one choice and an obvious application would be finance. It seems to me, though, that right now we have enough questionable experience in that employment sector.

Besides, there's a good chance that some prior experience with financial manipulation is what put this particular student body where it is today.

A tough row to hoe

Crime is what happens when ambition and opportunity bump into each other just as integrity happens to be out of town for the weekend.

It seems to happen all the time, whether you're an energy trader or a mortgage broker or a convenience store cashier. The job of a prison program ought to be to limit opportunity while giving integrity every reason to come back and stay

Farming may be old fashioned, but I think it does just that.

For one thing, farming is daily work. When you're looking at months or years without being able to go anywhere, daily work passes the time in a very healthy way.

There's no quick payoff or shortcuts and the results of your work, if you're diligent and consistent, are tangible.

Farming also has a handy assessment tool: the harvest. Sins and omissions might go undetected for a time, but by the end of the season they all come back into view.

If it's your own and your neighbours' lunch you are supposed to be producing, the consequences are all too clear.

We may not be the agrarian nation we once were, but there's a reason the expression "You reap what you sow" still has currency.

Pigeons home to roost

This is not to say farming as a profession is free of questionable opportunities. In recent years, for example, hundreds of Canadian farmers converted their operations in order to breed pigeons.

They had been wooed by an Ontario-based operation called Pigeon King International, which promised to buy back chicks at lucrative prices, even though it wasn't entirely clear that there was a market for all those birds.

The money was there in the beginning, but when Pigeon King declared bankruptcy last summer, it took the life savings of 1,000 farmers with it and left behind some \$40 million in debt.

Canada's prison farms, you have to assume, aren't big on get-rich-quick schemes. And as the corrections authorities have pointed out, these farms aren't really training farmers in any event.

But that doesn't mean they aren't training people.

A powerful message

The Frontenac farm, near Kingston, enjoys 455 hectares of some of the country's best farmland.

It's a dairy farm that feeds its own population and contributes to the kitchens in the rest of Canada's prisons as well. According to news reports, it has about 130 cattle and produces 4,000 litres of milk per day. In terms of productivity, the herd ranks in the top 20 per cent in Ontario.

Frontenac is an imposing place, beautiful in its way, with red steeples charging into the sky.

Sixty prisoners work the fields behind those towers. I have no idea who they are or what they want to do when they've done their time.

Still, there has to be value in getting up early to nurture a field of grain, to see it rise up from nothing, little by little, until it yields a crop that will feed a herd of cattle through the winter. For someone about to head back

out into the world, I imagine that could carry a powerful message.

It's a message that you hope would stay with someone, even when a questionable opportunity comes along.

The opposition is claiming the government is shutting down the farms to sell the land, which could be worth a fair amount of money.

That is an opportunity as well.

You wouldn't expect a bunch of smart guys from Ottawa in expensive suits to come down to Kingston and walk out through the spring mud to ask 60 convicted criminals what they think of the decision to shut down the prison farms. But we can always hope.

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[FISHERMAN27](#) wrote:Posted 2009/04/13

at 11:41 AM ETKeep em busy less chance for trouble and cuts down on the cost a win win I think?

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[Gretef](#) wrote:Posted 2009/04/13

at 12:04 AM ETI really don't see the need to close farms so that we can build more houses on farm lands.Farms do provide valuable work experience; Modern farming uses heavy equipment and hazardous wastes for instance, the use of which is part of our normal work culture.

I also believe in the value of work as a way to improve self esteem.

Why not offer the farm work to those who do recieve prison terms and treat it as a form of contract for rehabilitation. Courses in land management could be offered as well as computer skills[They are very valuable to farmers]. Farms are businesses... why not offer business courses. The persons involved would have to work for their rducation, just like the rest of society and they would be doing something productive with their time.

Locking people up and not offering help to adjust to society is old-fashioned and foolish. Farms already in situ can bring us to the 21st century, if we let them.

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[John AM](#) wrote:Posted 2009/04/12

at 7:21 PM ETWhy has this subject come up now? Is there pressure from retail stores who feel they are loosing business or is this the idea of some government bureaucrat trying to make a name for themselves? The other possibility is greed by those wanting the properties. If this gets the go ahead then what outdoor physical activity will the inmates get? This is a productive experience. Do we want to have inmates who are then put on drugs to keep them under control when some fresh air and productive physical work would do the same thing?

Have the inmates been brainwashed by psychologists and sociologists into believing that they don't have to do any work, that this is against their rights? Inmates should, as much as possible, pay their way; they have a debt owed to society. We should also be training them to return to society with a high probability of success. You can have both if proper programs are implemented

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Dukeboy wrote: Posted 2009/04/12

at 1:54 PM ETA powerful message

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Frontenac is an imposing place, beautiful in its way, with red steeples charging into the sky.

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And you had better believe that a friend of a friend of this right wing government is licking their lips in glee when they envisage owning this very valuable farmland which they would buy a sale prices!!

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Dukeboy wrote: Posted 2009/04/12

at 1:47 PM ETI think you will find that, along with the idea recently floated in Western Canada, particularly in BC and Alberta about special prisons for gang members, that these are the opening shots in a war to PRIVATIZE the prisons like they did in the US! Especially in California. First you privatize the prisons and then you bring in laws like the California 3rd strike law to keep the prisons filled. The whole concept is to MAKE MORE MONEY!!

This whole process is corporate driven with corrupt governments to take the people again! They will promise that the privatized prisons will cost a lot less to run but they are lying!! Again!! The right wing hidden agenda is to sell off and privatize the peoples assets to their friends in the corporations who will then sell the people their services at a much higher rate. Campbell is doing it to the people in BC by selling off the rivers to corporations for \$10,000.00 dollars who will sell the electricity back to the people for double the rates! It is incidious and must be stopped.

The process was started by Milton Freidman in the 1970's and sold to the IMF and World Bank. Chile was their first experiment when they took down Allende and put in Pinochet with the help of the CIA! Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay and Indonesia fell in that order in the 1970's. They are only now beginning to recover! Central America and Africa came next. It is still going on and our elected right wing officials have boiught into it unfortunately for the people!

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