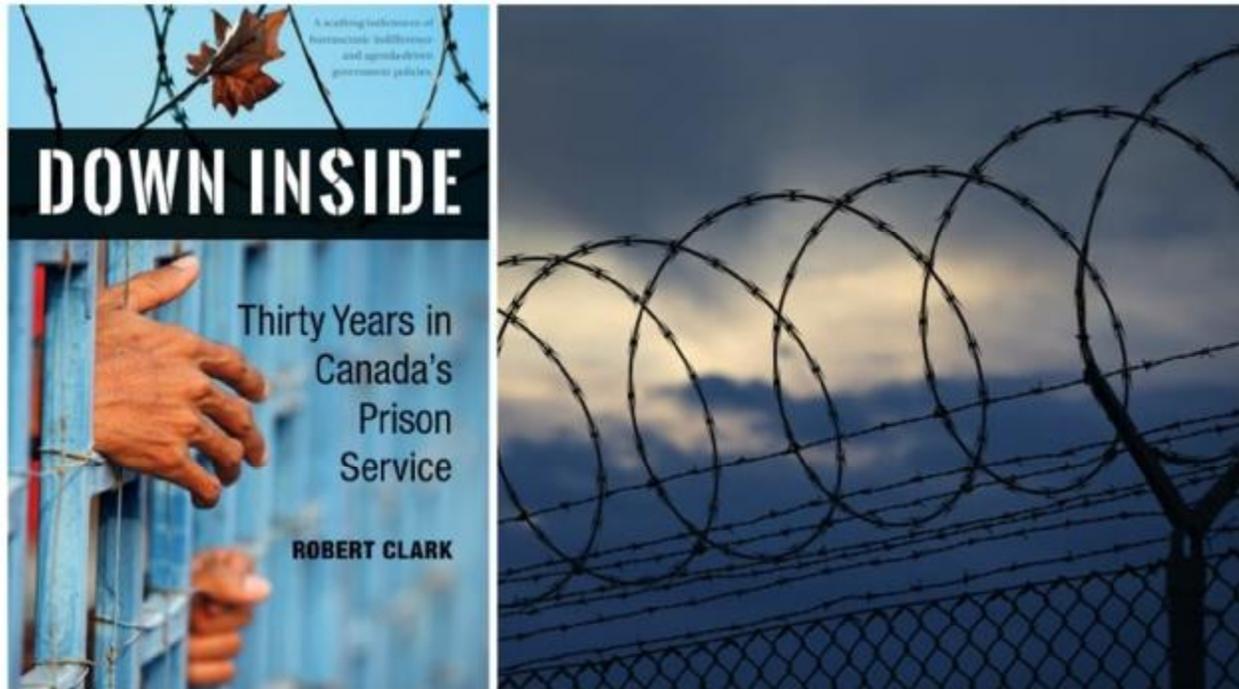


A scathing indictment of Canada's prisons, after 30 years working 'down inside'

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*Robert Clark's new book Down Inside: Thirty Years in Canada's Prison Service.*

"We must begin by unlocking doors and discovering who and what we are really dealing with."

That is one sentence, just one idea, from an extraordinary book about the inner workings of Canada's prison system.

The author held a variety of positions at all levels of security, in seven different institutions — including the notorious maximum security prison at Millhaven and the now-defunct Kingston Penitentiary.

Robert Clark's career began in 1980, at age 24. It was at the Joyceville Institution, located just outside the city dubbed the "Incarceration Capital of Canada" — Kingston, Ontario.

Over the course of three decades, he worked his way up to the position of Deputy Warden at a Regional Treatment Centre, for prisoners who are mentally ill.

Throughout his career, he interviewed hundreds of prisoners, his life was threatened many times, and his job took a toll on his personal life. He experienced stress leave, alcohol abuse and divorce.

Robert Clark has documented his experiences and shared his perspective on what is right and wrong about our prisons.

His book is called *Down Inside: Thirty Years in Canada's Prison Service*.

*Michael Enright: The title 'Down inside.' What does it mean?*

Robert Clark: That's a term that is somewhat antiquated now. It refers to the part of the institution which is predominantly housing prisoners.

In my book I explain that as a student volunteer I contacted the Millhaven institution to commence community volunteer work there. And when I asked for the person whose name I'd been given, I was told he couldn't speak to me because he was down inside.

*ME: You're very particular about the language you use and the terms you use. For example, you use the term prisoner, not inmate — and you're talking about solitary confinement, not administrative segregation. Why is that?*

RC: My feeling, based on my experience, Michael, was that prisoner was a more accurate description of the relationship between the prisoners and the staff — the keepers and the kept. It's a highly involuntary relationship. So the term prisoner I felt was a more accurate description.

*ME: You write that what prison really boils down to is the locked door. And you say the locked door gives the rest of us the illusion of safety. Why is that illusory?*

RC: Work[ing] inside of a prison in all the capacities that I did, I observed a lot of instances where locked doors prevented us from making a difference. A locked door prevents us from getting to know our clients. A locked door prevents us from understanding each individual's personal story.

My concern about locking doors is somewhat metaphorical. I'm suggesting that the best way to run a prison safely — the best way to ensure that we're accomplishing our higher goals — is to interact with the prisoners as much as possible in a pro-social way. And my experience was those prisons that had the fewest locked doors also had the fewest problems.

*ME: What do you see as the goal of the prison system? At one point you say "any interest in a prisoner's well-being and chances for becoming a law abiding citizen is almost non-existent."*

RC: My feeling is that the reality of prison is starkly different from the stated corporate goals. The organization is very adept at painting a picture of a rehabilitation model where staff are held to account and we're unbiased and conduct ourselves with a high level of professional decorum. The truth is that the reality is much different than that.

Many of the staff start to see the prisoners as something less than a human being and their treatment of them tends to reflect that and it takes the form of emotional abuse, verbal abuse, racism, at times physical abuse. And, as I've mentioned in the book, sometimes just unethical behaviour such as turning people down for things that they should have been considered more carefully, or saying no when the right answer may have been yes.

*ME: You said that any government policy that does not make rehabilitation the central focus of the system is doomed to failure. Is our system doomed to failure?*

RC: I hate to speak in terms of absolutes but I must confess to a certain amount of cynicism and, as I mentioned in the book, there's ample examples of the system failing to learn from its mistakes when legitimate criticisms are raised from outside the system. There tends to be a culture of denial and reinforcing the status quo.

The prevailing culture inside is what I call a culture of collective indifference.

*ME: Let's talk a bit about life down inside. Back in the mid 70s, there was a parliamentary committee that went across the country looking at prison conditions. And I was a writer for Maclean's magazine, so I've been in every federal institution in the country and the thing that struck me first of all was the noise — the extraordinary noise in these places. What is that all about?*

RC: That may have been as a result of the prisoners being aware that there were people in the institution or politicians coming in. Normally that is not how prison runs. It tends to be quieter than that.

*ME: What about the violence?*

RC: In my experience, 99 per cent of the violence in prison occurs between prisoners. Violence on the part of a prisoner against a staff member is extremely rare. There are others who would disagree with me and say, 'No, I work in maximum security where every single day these guys want to get me.' I believe that reflects the culture of that particular institution.

*ME: How do they get these inside the prison?*

RC: It has to do with the way the prison functions. If you have people coming down to get meals, they are generally provided with cutlery. Even if the cutlery is made of plastic, it can still be made sharp. If there are occupational shops where they can learn a trade. One prisoner told me he just carries a Bic pen with no top on it because that will put a hole in somebody.

*ME: How do drugs or alcohol get into the prison?*

RC: They tend to get in through visits. We have instances where we've caught staff bringing drugs. Alcohol generally tends to be homemade and that's not hard to do. There are prisoners who we call brewmasters who can make alcohol out of almost nothing — a green garbage bag, some bread for the yeast and just fruit. Not something the average person would choose to taste. But something that may appeal to somebody who has very little else.

*ME: I want to talk now about the guards. I would argue, and you can correct me, that the majority of problems caused inside our prisons are, in fact, caused by the guards.*

RC: I would agree with that statement. Being a guard is probably one of the hardest jobs of all, even though the day to day duties are often mundane. But what makes that job so hard is that it's hard to stay motivated because most staff don't hold the uniform officers in very high esteem. They're seen as being somewhat detached from the rest of us. Their job is unglamorous at best. There is a very tight knit culture within the guards staff, and it has to do with being the people who are expected to enforce rules. The people that are most likely to experience verbal abuse, physical abuse and the people who we expect to go in when things are going wrong and take back control.

*ME: There was a report in June of the Edmonton institution where a small number of guards were engaged in the ill-treatment of prisoners, abuse, using a phone for sexual harassment of female guards. How does something like that happen, and how does it continue to happen?*

RC: Well first of all, I would say the situation at Edmonton institution you're referring to is not unique. Similar situations occur in many prisons. The reason it's not curtailed is in fact because of this code of secrecy that we've referred to as the 'blue wall'. Staff stick together; the guards stick together. Even under the most egregious situations.

*ME: Tell me about your experience with 'correct zero' — 'zero' being the Kingston Penitentiary. There were a handful of guards there that were pretty much running things. Tell me about that.*

RC: I should probably qualify by saying what the police called it was '0 Correct', but in the media it was called 'correct zero'.

'Correct zero' was an undercover police operation at Kingston Penitentiary which was intended to uncover staff corruption. They had an undercover police informant who they placed in the prison in a cell and he had a cell phone and he was reporting to the police what was going on.

He was able to induce a number of staff to engage in illegal activity on his behalf, such as bringing in drugs in order for money to be provided to them in exchange. And as the investigation continued, it began to reveal a larger more complex web of wrongdoing by staff.

In the book I've said the five were fired. Turns out there were seven fired. But the number of staff that were involved in wrongdoing was much higher than that. It was a matter of what could be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

*ME: One of the things that you stress in the book is the importance of what you call a meaningful contact between prisoners and guards, and the kind of things that you did. You used to walk down the range without any protection and you talked to people. How were you viewed by your colleagues?*

RC: Well at that time all of the other staff were doing the same thing.

*ME: What changed?*

RC: That's really hard to say. It seems that over time the perception within the system is that we should be moving more to a militaristic approach to dealing with people — that is, instead of talking to someone for 20 minutes to get them to comply with us, we simply get pepper spray and batons. And this is seen all over now.

When I started the system, we were led to understand very clearly that the use of force is always the last resort.

*ME: There are people inside that you don't want to see outside — ever. And one of them is Paul Bernardo, the serial rapist murderer. You met him. That must have been a rather unsettling experience.*

RC: Yes, it was. It was a test of my objectivity, to say the least. And I've spoken a little bit about that in the book. My recollections of Paul Bernardo was that he was a very self-absorbed person. He was very much consumed with the fact that his wife got such a short sentence — Karla Homolka.

At that time he was in deep solitary and he couldn't be brought outside the solitary confinement unless all of the other prisoners were locked up. So it made sense to interview him at a time when that would be the case regardless. So at the 12 o'clock count everybody else is in their cell, so that was a good time to interview them.

*ME: Would it have been a waste of your time and others to try and rehabilitate Paul Bernardo or people like him?*

RC: I would say that there are many prisoners who should never get out. People who are just so violent and so explosive and unpredictable that it just would not be safe to release them.

*ME: The question that keeps coming up time and time again — why are we so far behind what's going on in Europe, Scandinavia and other places? Why is Canada back in the Dickensian era?*

RC: I wish I knew. With all that we know now about the things that we've done for so many years that don't work, and the things that we're doing that we know are wrong morally and legally and ethically — it is beyond my comprehension that we haven't seen some significant changes.

Solitary confinement is sort of a hot button topic right now. You see more and more in the media's discussions about the effects, and individual cases where someone takes their life or hurts themselves badly. We find out they've been in solitary for three years or two years and... it's just beyond my comprehension why we haven't evolved farther than we have.

*ME: Is there not a large population within the prison system of people who are mentally ill?*

RC: Yes. Correctional Service of Canada numbers in 2014 indicated it was 38.4 per cent. But in the same sentence it was acknowledged that there is a significant degree of under-reporting in self-reporting because of the stigma attached to it and the unwillingness of prisoners to admit to things like that. When they closed some of the mental health facilities and went to outpatient treatment...

*ME: Why would they do that? Why would they close those things? Why would they cancel the farm program? Cut back on everyday ordinary things you'd expect?*

RC: Yes, well, I'm equally baffled. The farm program itself is another example of a place where someone with no self-esteem could begin to gain a little by just hard work — you know, going to work every day and earning your pay and feeling like you've done something. And you'll probably recall the reason they gave at the time was that they have realized that very few prisoners end up employed in the agriculture sector. That was not the point at all.

*ME: When politicians say things like — and this was all through the Harper regime — protection of Canadians comes first. If you do the crime, you do the time of thing. What do you think about when you hear those things?*

RC: It is to my mind so contrary to what we know works. And what works is rehabilitation. The vast majority of them will be released at some point. So I think we need to decide what kind of system we want to have. Do we want to have a penal system where we feel that we're getting our pound of flesh, that these people will suffer to some degree for what they've done — or do we want to say to ourselves, 'If the best way to reduce their likelihood of returning to crime is through rehabilitation,' isn't that the way to go?

*ME: Is it possible to reform and change the system that we now have without a complete overhaul and a complete change in the management of Corrections Canada?*

RC: I would say no. The people at the very top right now are more interested in defending the status quo than seeking to improve.

*ME: After you retired, you sent a letter to ten members of parliament, outlining your concerns about the Harper tough on crime nonsense. There was only one member of parliament who replied to you.*

RC: That's correct.

*ME: Who was that?*

RC: It was Justin Trudeau. He was an MP.

*ME: He's about to finish his second year in the mandate. Has he and his government lived up to your expectations?*

RC: I would have to say, at this point, I am optimistic. It's a hard thing to make real change but certainly it appears that this government is seriously looking at these problems. They're doing it in a way that's honest. And they are seeking to make the system better. The fact that they're willing to address the problems of solitary confinement and to acknowledge the harm that can be done is a huge gain over anything I've seen in the past 40 years.

*ME: Are you concerned at all that with the book that Corrections Canada, guards, people you know worked for are going to come down on you like an anvil?*

RC: Well, I really haven't had too much negative reaction to date. I don't know if it's because people have chosen not to read it. Most of the reaction I've got has been positive, especially from senior managers such as former wardens and so on.

A few uniformed staff told me they didn't like it but only because it was too honest. They said, 'You really shouldn't be saying those things, even if it is true.' But so far the world hasn't come crashing in.