



Invested in Prisons: Prison Expansion and Community Development in Canada

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ABSTRACT *This paper critically examines the claim made by Canadian Conservative politicians that prison expansion is likely to produce economic gains for Canadian prison towns. Such claims raise many questions about the actual beneficiaries of prison construction, and the depiction of prisons as “infrastructure” serving some public good or even promoting social justice. After reviewing relevant literature from American debates on this topic, I focus on more specific Canadian conditions, and use public tendering data to trace the path of prison spending. The evidence suggests that prison expansion is unlikely to benefit surrounding communities, although interests elsewhere tend to reap major gains.*

KEYWORDS incarceration; prison expansion; community economic development; infrastructure; critical criminology; public policy; Canada

Introduction

Most activists have heard the argument that “there is just no money” to fund improvements in the social services, especially if it means hiring more staff. Such claims raise all sorts of questions about public priorities, taxation policies, the state of the global economy, and so on. At a more basic level, they highlight what economists call the “opportunity cost” of any action: using public resources in one area means they are not available for use elsewhere. This problem is important because some things that governments buy are fantastically expensive, and so displace many other options. For example, according to one estimate, the lifetime cost of a single F-35 fighter aircraft could fund over 45,000 childcare spaces for a year, or house every homeless person in Victoria, BC, for 27 years (Hyslop, 2012).

Few items concentrate spending power as intensely as major military purchases. But while Canada’s fighter program was eventually delayed, Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s Conservative government (2006-2015)

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proceeded with prison expansions worth substantially more than an F-35, and boosted spending on Correctional Services Canada (CSC) to about 10 times that amount each year. Even if one disputes exactly what this means in foregone childcare, homeless shelters, and the like, the sacrifice is clearly significant and persistent.

From the perspective of those who struggle for social justice, then, the cost of prisons is usually the cost of opportunities foregone. However, a competing narrative portrays prisons as instruments of a kind of social justice themselves. When government officials claim that prison construction will bring prosperity to local communities, they imply that economic growth will alleviate all sorts of inequities – or at least make them more tolerable. This is also, broadly speaking, the justification for using infrastructure spending as a tool of economic development – a strategy to which the new Trudeau government seems deeply wedded. But can prisons really be used in this way? Are they really a means of boosting local economies? And if so, are any resulting benefits worth the cost of all those lost opportunities?

This paper will consider the impact of construction spending related to the Harper government's prison expansion program, which was unveiled in a series of announcements prior to the 2011 federal election. A later statement by Public Safety Minister Vic Toews made the government's position clear. "There will be an increase in terms of construction jobs for the community," he said, "in addition to new hiring at the facility when the units are ready to be staffed. This is an important part of ensuring tangible economic growth for the communities located around CSC's institutions" (cited in Piché, 2015, p. 158). Toews and others also repeatedly claimed that "...the cost of a safe and secure society is an investment worth making" (CSC, 2010).

Borrowing arguments used in the United States, Harper's ministers suggested that initiatives of this sort could (a) enhance public safety, while (b) stimulating the economies of host communities with jobs for workers and contracts for local businesses. Similar claims have been investigated in the American case, focusing on how prisons affect community development. Insights from that research will be used here to trace the impact of Harper's program. The intent is also to expand the range of the US works, which focused mostly on American examples at the expense of prisons in other contexts.

After outlining the debate surrounding the previous US prison boom, we will deal briefly with the argument that prisons can enhance public safety, or at least deliver some sort of public good, as infrastructure spending is said to do. These claims are at least questionable, for reasons having to do with the nature of prisons, and the partisan considerations at work in this particular project. Evidence drawn from the Canadian government's public tendering process will then be used to show who won the prison contracts here, and how that relates to where the money was actually spent. The evidence suggests that prison towns were very unlikely to receive net gains from prison construction. The paper's final section considers how that fact might be used

to decouple private interests from prison expansion, and reclaim public space for better uses than prisons.

Lessons from the US

The idea that prisons could be used as a means of economic development became popular in the US during the 1980s and 1990s. The “conventional wisdom” of the era was that prison building, like other major works projects, would bring construction jobs and related contracts to the communities around the job site, and increase demand for local services at least temporarily (Genter, Hooks & Mosher, 2013). But unlike bridges or roads, prisons employed a fairly large permanent staff in jobs that were seen to be “recession-proof.” These were said to bolster the foundations of local economies when other industries were on the wane (Hatcher, 1994).

As prisons had to be resupplied on a regular basis with everything necessary to keep prisoners alive and contained, local businesses could expect contracts to serve those needs, and some might find a new clientele among the families and relatives who visited prisoners. Prisons would place more demands on local infrastructure (sewers, roads and so on), but the hope was that they would spur upgrades benefitting everyone.¹ Taxes paid by prisons would boost local government revenues, and prisoners would boost town populations for census purposes, meaning that per-capita grants from higher levels of government would also rise (Hatcher, 1994). Later research would show that few of those grants were actually affected by local census populations, but prisons did help to distort the political redistricting process – often in favor of conservative rural politicians who openly rejected any obligation to represent disenfranchised inmates (Hunter & Wagner, 2007). Prisoners might never see the community centres their presence helped build, or benefit from the enhanced political strength of surrounding neighbourhoods, but these were counted as important community gains (Whiteside, 2002; Hunter & Wagner, 2007).

Justified by claims like these – and of course many others related to prison’s alleged crime-fighting role – the American prison boom did not begin to slow down until the second decade of the 21st century. By this time, many studies seemed to show that community benefits were not as likely as prison proponents believed, and the latter were thrown into increasingly defensive positions.

Much of the newer research suggested that whatever economic effects prisons had, they were more muted or complex than some had initially hoped (Glasmeyer & Farrigan, 2007). In a large urban centre the impacts might be less noticeable, for example, while those in a small rural area might be more

¹ Similar claims are used to justify the huge expenses involved in hosting “world-class” events like the Olympics. But if we want better roads, why do we have to stage the Olympics – or build

evident (Besser & Hanson, 2005). Prison construction would produce few local jobs if outside companies won the contracts, and brought their own specialized workforce in to do most of the work (Genter, Hooks & Mosher, 2013). Prison staff might be fewer, more insecure and paid less if a private company ran the prison, and one study suggested that bad conditions on the “inside” could actually help drive down working conditions in the surrounding community (Mosher, Hooks & Wood, 2007). If the prison were publicly run, staff would likely be hired from a state-wide or national list, and locals were often at a disadvantage when competing for those jobs. And however they were hired, prison staff did not necessarily live in the prison town. Commuting staff took their “recession-proof” spending elsewhere when they bought a house, or groceries, or entertainment (King, Mauer & Huling, 2003).

Local businesses often faced frustrations similar to those of prison town workers. While prisons inevitably buy some of their supplies locally, many of the big contracts are handled centrally, so that bulk purchases are made on behalf of all the prisons in a state, or all those run by the same company. This usually means that local firms are forced to bid against much bigger operators to win contracts for a nearby prison (Hooks, Mosher, Rotolo & Lobao, 2004; Besser & Hanson, 2005; Courtright, Packard, Hannam & Brennan, 2010).

The prospects for local infrastructure upgrades tended to be undermined by bidding wars as well. In this case the participants were civic officials from various potential prison towns, who used subsidies of various kinds to attract a new prison. Often this meant paying for the enhanced infrastructure a prison needed, even at the expense of other local priorities (Mosher, Hooks & Wood, 2007; Madoc-Jones, 2009). Many local governments actually absorbed the cost of *building* private prisons and so the net benefit to their communities was even less clear (Besser & Hanson, 2005).²

Desperate economic times erode government revenues to begin with, but because many bidders promised tax breaks for private prison companies (most public prisons do not pay taxes in the US), tax revenues were reduced still further (Besser & Hanson, 2005). It might be argued that the potential benefits of prisons would have been greater if local governments had not been so desperate. But it may be equally true that only economic desperation could make prisons look like the best development opportunity available.

In the United States, prisons may have had marginal effects on census-based grants and they do give small prison towns more political clout than

² During the only Canadian experiment with a privately run adult prison, Ontario’s Conservative government under Premier Mike Harris (1995-2003) paid for all the upfront construction costs involved. This might be construed as a large public subsidy to the host community of Penetanguishene except that, as will be shown below, construction spending and other alleged benefits tend to leave town. In this instance (and others), such upfront spending might be better regarded as a subsidy to the prison management company (Management and Training Corporation), aimed at reducing its costs to make privatization appear more viable (McElligott, 2008).

they would otherwise have (Hunter & Wagner, 2007). However, surveys like the census can cut both ways. As a British observer pointed out, crime rates inside prisons, when added to those of the host community, may suppress local property values (Madoc-Jones, 2009). Perhaps this is why national crime statistics in the US now entirely exclude offences committed in prison, giving an artificial boost to the apparent success of “tough on crime” initiatives (Voorhees, 2014).

Problems such as these led Eason (2010) to try to reframe the debate. Eason argues that about 70% of the prisons built during the US boom were built in the South, usually in larger, more racially diverse rural towns characterized by “concentrated rural disadvantage,” and often nearby an existing prison (2010, p. 1025). To him this does not suggest that “Locally Unwanted Land Uses” are being dumped disproportionately on poor, racialized communities. Instead he makes the perhaps reasonable point that if introduced into struggling local economies, prisons can make important contributions by slowing their decline (Eason, 2010). So even if prisons have little impact on traditional measures of economic health, things might be worse in their absence. Of course, it is very difficult to know what might have been, and arguments like these can be used as a last-ditch defence for practically any policy option. But Eason does indirectly highlight the degree to which this entire debate has been waged on the familiar terrain of mainstream economics. Some of (the many) limits to this perspective will be noted below.

Linked closely to the claim that prisons offer “recession-proof” jobs is the assumption, common in many similar booms, that this particular bull market will never end. Prisons are easier to defend in economic terms if we expect demand for their services to follow a constantly rising curve. But as Lawrence (2013) points out, fifteen states actually closed prisons in 2011-12, giving rise to some ironic debates about how local economies might be stimulated by repurposing the sites of closed prisons. Inevitably discussion of such “post-carceral Keynesian” strategies gives rise to talk of condos (as they have in Kingston after the Penitentiary closed – see Ferguson, Lay, Piché & Walby, 2014) or penal museums (both the US and Canada apparently have more of these than any other country in the world – see Ross, 2012; Walby & Piché, 2015). But the fact that penal conversion strategies are being considered at all is grounds for optimism, and we will return to this topic in the conclusion.

A more serious limitation of the “local benefits” debate in the US is that prison town boundaries provide only an arbitrary and changeable way of defining where local benefits should be measured. Eason (2010) and Hooks et al. (2004) make a point of using county boundaries instead. But why not consider the regional or national implications of prison siting? Analysts using this broader perspective would be forced to consider the consequences of prison expansion on other communities – especially on those urban centres from which most American (and Canadian) prisoners are drawn – but also on prisoners, on the environment, and so on (Frost & Gross, 2012; Madoc-Jones, 2009; Lynch, 2007).

Mainstream economic analysis also tends to be vague about how wealth and income are distributed. If local economies receive some spinoffs, but prison building serves primarily as a way to enrich its financiers – as Buitenhuis (2013) says is the case with public-private partnership arrangements in Ontario – are these truly local benefits?

Prisons, Infrastructure and the Public Good

At this writing, the Liberal government that defeated Harper's Conservatives is unrolling its signature infrastructure program, promising to invest billions of dollars over the next decade in transit, social and green projects (LPC, 2015, p. 14). The party's platform justified all of these as efforts to "deliver the services we need, create jobs, and restore economic security to the middle class" (2015, p. 11). The inclusion of items like "early learning and childcare" (2015, p. 13) under the (social) infrastructure label shows how malleable its meaning has now become, but traditionally infrastructure has been associated with more concrete projects that involve construction companies and related trades. Harper's Conservatives tended to favor the traditional usage, and their spending priorities were different from those of the Liberals, but by treating prison building like an infrastructure program they too pushed toward a more expansive definition.

My focus is on prison-related effects in Harper's earlier regime, but because there is at least a rhetorical overlap with the infrastructure initiatives now unfolding, a few words of clarification are needed. Contracting scandals in either domain will not be pursued here – although the new Liberal program has already sparked warnings about these, and money wasted in this way would amplify the opportunity costs discussed above (Curry, 2016; Canadian Press, 2016). Rather, the point is to challenge the common assumption that funds earmarked for projects in a particular location actually benefit the people living there. Because the same industry (and often the same company) builds prisons, hospitals, bridges and highways, my conclusions might have wider application as well.

There is danger, however, in speaking of all these projects as if they were equivalent. As Amy Buitenhuis (2013) points out, prisons are not just another form of infrastructure, presumably serving some clear-cut public good. Saying "a prison is a hospital is a road" tends to depoliticize important policy choices, she argues (2013, p. 109). Considered only as a series of contracts where the goal is "value for money," the larger implications of prison spending are hidden.

On the one hand, choosing prisons means not choosing things like schools that might be better at both suppressing crime and creating jobs (Besser & Hanson, 2005). On the other hand, the choice of prisons may entail serious social costs and severe collateral damage. From the perspective of a long tradition of critical scholarship, prisons are destructive in their own right, as

their rehabilitative efforts consistently fall short of their propensity to create crime, and their toxic by-products (racism, gang violence, family trauma and so on) undermine their net contribution to any public good (Foucault, 1995; Christie, 2000; Parenti, 2000; Stern, 2006; Gilmore, 2007; Drucker, 2011).³ By some accounts, the balance here is so skewed that prisons are comparable not to bridges and the like, but to weapons of state like the F-35 (Morris, 1995; Davis, 2003). At the very least we can say that prisons' contributions to a public good (like public safety) are not as clear as those of other projects that fall under the infrastructure label.

A stronger position might be that prisons are so deeply inscribed with injustice that they can never build social justice, even indirectly. Prisons serve many purposes, and some of these are defended by powerful interests even if they do not serve a recognizable public good. One frequently highlighted in the critical literature relates to prison's role in reinforcing (often highly racialized) labour market discipline (Ignatieff, 1978; Mancini, 1996; Oliver, 1998; Rusche & Kirchheimer, 2003; Alexander, 2010). The 2007 report of the CSC Review Panel (*A Roadmap to Strengthening Public Safety*), which helped to shape the federal prison expansion program, stresses goals related to that purpose, and in turn reflects the influence of the "common sense revolution" attempted by the Mike Harris Conservatives in Ontario (1995-2003).

Harris's militantly pro-business government had combined sustained attacks on labour, the poor, and other social groups with legal changes that made it easier to degrade jobs and intensify work. It also undertook ambitious efforts to consolidate bureaucracies and local governments into much bigger, more centralized operations (McElligott, 2007). Everywhere the Harris Conservatives displayed an extraordinary faith in the capacity of buildings and machines to change people's character. This "Tory high modernism" was particularly evident in the reorganization of the province's jails (McElligott, 2008).

Some of the Ontario players were later active at the federal level – on the Review Panel, and in Harper's Conservative cabinet. Their harder line on prisoners was embodied in the Panel's call for a rebranded system of "earned parole" (CSC RP 2007, pp. 114-18). Earned parole would use economic pressure (longer work, lower pay, and more deductions) to make "privileges" like decent housing dependent on prisoners' attitudes to work, obedience, and self-improvement (CSC RP 2007, pp. 47-49). Parallel legal changes should reduce prisoners' Charter rights, the Panel argued, in order to compel "active" participation in programming, reinforce respect for prison authorities, and curtail "frivolous and vexatious grievances" (CSC RP 2007, pp. 6, 16-17, 62, 168). The rationale for this arrangement was that it better reflected the harsh

³ A widely quoted US report concluded in 1973 that "the prison, the reformatory and jail have achieved only a shocking rate of failure. There is overwhelming evidence that these institutions create crime rather than prevent it" (cited in Alexander, 2010, p. 8).

realities of the outside world, where participation in the legitimate labour market purportedly guaranteed self-sufficiency and other rewards (CSC RP, 2007). But given the context in Ontario and elsewhere, the effect would likely have been to make those realities even harsher – by driving down work expectations among prisoners, former prisoners and other marginalized workers (McElligott, 2007).

These proposals are relevant here not only because they cast further doubt on the idea that prisons can be treated like politically inert infrastructure. They also produced a recommendation that CSC's 58 prisons should be consolidated into a much smaller number of "regional complexes" (CSC RP, 2007, p. 157; McElligott, 2008). Each of these would confine 1,500-2,000 prisoners – about the size of Ontario's new "superjails" and about three to four times the size of the biggest CSC prison at the time (CSC RP 2007, pp. 157-158, App. A).⁴ Putting minimum, medium, maximum and "special handling" units within the same walls would save on operating costs and make drug interdiction easier, according to the Panel (CSC RP, 2007, pp. 27, 61-62, 156-157). Ranging all the security levels in plain view – from least uncomfortable to exceptionally horrible – was also meant to enhance internal discipline, as prisoners would be given a visible incentive to work and behave, and could be more easily transferred if they did not. As the Panel argued, the regional complex design would allow officials "to reinforce an overall correctional management model that stresses offender accountability" (CSC RP, 2007, p. 158).

The Panel offered few suggestions about the internal organization of these complexes, but in Ontario and elsewhere the new centralized prisons followed the "tough, no frills" model of the US supermax (Hannah-Moffat & Moore, 2002; McElligott, 2007, 2008). The huge size of these buildings, and their heavy reliance on walls, automation, and other impersonal forms of control, meant that every prisoner – regardless of their security level – would likely be treated more brutally than in older institutions. Prisons of this sort are also consistent with the designs favoured by private prison operators and financiers, but, as will be seen below, private interests have a major stake even in nominally public prisons.

⁴ Provincial prisons, which hold people who are awaiting trial or serving shorter sentences, contain more prisoners and are themselves going through similar reorganizations (see Piché, 2014).

Partisan Considerations

Although the Conservative government expressed support for the Panel's vision (CSC, 2008a), the building boom that followed the 2010-11 announcements seems, at first glance, to have taken a very different form. Rather than the mass reorganization implied by the Panel's regional complex plan, which would have involved many prison closings and intensive rebuilding in a few select areas, the government committed itself to expanding about two-thirds of the existing CSC prisons. These expansions, however, were arranged in a way that contributed to the creation of a more gradual and less centralized version of the regional complex idea.

Many CSC prisons already shared their grounds with one or more facilities of different security levels. The units that were added (usually 96- or 50-bed buildings) tended to bolster such multi-level sites, or to begin others (McElligott & Piché, 2012; CSC, 2012). The "mini-regional complex" model that emerged seems to be capped at about 500 beds, which is in line with the advice of an internal CSC report issued after the Panel's (CSC 2008b, par. 5.1.2). It has the virtues of avoiding the huge and concentrated spending commitments – up to \$1 billion for each 2,200-cell complex – that would have been necessary with the larger model (CSC RP, 2007, App. F, p. 15). Three older prisons were closed in 2012 (including Kingston Penitentiary) and a new policy has all facilities in one site sharing a single name. So, by 2015, CSC's web page listed only 43 prisons in its jurisdiction – down from 58 when the Panel issued their report (CSC, 2013; CSC RP, 2007, App. A).⁵

As we were reminded in both the 2011 and 2015 federal elections, spending on prisons and infrastructure items can have important political implications (Curry & Hannay, 2015; Piché, 2015). Crucial decisions about the shape of CSC prison reform were made while the Harper Conservatives were an insecure minority government (2006-2011). During this period, their signature punishment bills were being held back (perhaps by design), making estimates of future prison populations even more uncertain and controversial than usual. And, like any minority government, the Conservatives were trying to secure and expand their political base. In this context, it probably made more political sense to spread the new spending across many prison sites (and ridings), rather than focusing it on a few super-sized regional complexes. The government certainly tried to gain political traction with the funding announcements, as Public Safety Minister Vic Toews and other prominent Conservatives participated in a carefully orchestrated series of media events in the last few months before the 2011 election (see Piché, 2015).

⁵ The following prisons have now been lost, mostly due to renaming: Westmorland; Leclerc (closed); Montée Ste-François; Saint-Anne-des-Plaines; Kingston (closed); Frontenac; Pittsburgh; Fenbrook; Riverbend; Rockwood; and Ferndale. The CSC website still lists Ontario's Regional Treatment Centre, but notes it has been closed (CSC, 2013).

Region	Federal Prison Ridings (Promised New Funding)	New \$ (million)	2008 Results vs. 2011 Results				
			C	L	B	N	I
Atlantic	3 (3)	\$85	1 2	1 1			1
Quebec	8 (5)	\$133			7	8	1
Ontario	5 (4)	\$140 ⁵	4 4	1 1			
Prairies	12 (8)	\$150	12 12				
Pacific	4 (4)	\$92 ⁵	3 3	1		1	
Totals:	32 (24)	\$601	20	3	7		2
			21	2		9	

Table 1. Prison funding announcements by CSC region, and federal election results, 2008 & 2011

Note: “New \$” refers to the value of prison expansions, as announced in late 2010 and early 2011. Party labels are C=Conservative; L=Liberal; B=Bloc Québécois; N=NDP; I=Independent. The author would be happy to provide a more detailed breakdown by riding on request. Sources: author’s calculations based on Canada (2005-13; 2008 & 2011); CBC (2011); CSC (n.d.); CSC RP, (2007, pp. 171-172); Google Maps (n.d.); Piché (n.d.).

Some inkling of the political impact made or intended by these announcements can be seen in Table 1. In the 2008 election, the Conservatives won 20 of the 32 ridings containing federal prisons. Three years later, after new money had been announced affecting 24 prison ridings, the Conservative score was 21 out of 32. The only major shift among the prison ridings was from the Bloc to the NDP in Quebec. Obviously larger forces were at work here, and it would be difficult to determine what role prison funding played in the election outcome. It is clear, though, that because Conservatives dominate most of the prison ridings, spending on prisons made political sense for them, especially if it was distributed widely among existing

sites. Even in opposition they likely still have an incentive to push for such spending.⁶ On the other hand, had they followed the Panel's advice and started building the first large regional complex in Kingston, they would have pumped all that money into one of the few prison ridings that consistently voted Liberal. Had they used the money for other purposes entirely, its distribution might not have been so politically useful for Conservative candidates.

So, partisan considerations likely influenced the shape of CSC's prison expansion, and certainly affected the way it was publicly promoted, even if the Tories seem to have made few direct gains from the program in electoral terms. It is possible that the parade of prison announcements served more symbolic ends – reinforcing the Conservatives' image as the “tough on crime” choice for voters – but any effects of this kind would be hard to trace. We do know that prior to the 2015 election – which they lost – the Conservatives tried to do something similar with the “Canada 150” community infrastructure fund. Critics suggested that the program was little more than “a ‘slush fund’ for good news announcements leading up to the election,” and frequent promises of local funding (albeit in smaller amounts) again filled the media (Boutilier & Davis, 2016, n.p.). A later analysis showed that Conservative ridings were much more likely to benefit from these grants, even though they were supposed to be awarded by non-partisan public servants (Boutilier & Davis, 2016, n.p.).

It is also possible that the influences here were not so much partisan as ideological. That is, prison-building might have been seen as an essential anchor for the coercive turn in criminal justice policy, to which the Conservative government was deeply committed. It is true that conservatives have a long history of relying on new buildings and machines to reinstate older social values. This is the “Tory high modernism” mentioned above, and its influence extends at least from the opening of Kingston Penitentiary in 1835 to the closing of that same institution in 2012 (see McElligott, 2008). The original “regional complex” idea fits pretty clearly into this tradition. The current version seems to have compromised Tory high modernism by embracing more pragmatic political calculations, and by appeasing those within CSC who defended smaller prisons (see CSC, 2008b).

However, Table 1 does show how much space still exists for partisan appeals that play up the supposed local benefits of prison construction. The 32 ridings containing federal prisons, if seen as one large “prison constituency,” elected more MPs than all but three provinces in 2011. Making similar calculations for provincial prisons and legislatures (even allowing for consolidation here) would spread this net even further, and make the penal constituency even bigger. Prison spending and incarceration rates in Canada still fall far short of American levels – as do those of nearly every other

⁶ The 2015 federal election took place under new riding boundaries, so comparable data is not yet available.

country in the world (Walmsley, 2015). Yet the size of the penal constituency here should serve as a sobering reminder that a large and growing set of interests may believe they have a stake in continued prison expansion. But what effect does prison funding actually have in all these ridings?

Despite the larger issues raised above, the rest of this paper will assess the claims of the Harper government from a narrow, “common sense” perspective. It simply asks whether the prison expansion project is likely to create local jobs, and contribute to local economic growth, as they promised it would.

Where Did the Money Go?

In the Canadian case, several things are clear from the outset. First, while the American debate focuses mostly on brand new prisons, the Harper Conservatives added units to existing prisons. So, a really accurate measure of the latter’s impact would consider only the net effect of the expansions, subtracting the influence of the prior status quo. This is why the data below focus on construction expenses. The Canadian additions tended to be large, however. Most often a prison would gain a unit with 50 or 96 beds, and in total at least 2,700 beds were added (with double-bunking potentially adding many more; see Piché, 2014, par. 73). This is the equivalent of creating four or five large prisons and then distributing them across the country in pieces the size of small ones.

CSC has not (yet) allowed private prison companies to operate its prisons, or finance their construction, although there were hints that a future wave of expansions might make both possible (Tencer, 2012). Among other things, this means that public service hiring rules still apply. Most new hires will be paid at union rates, selected through national competitions, and placed where need arises – not necessarily in their hometowns. Those who come from elsewhere and settle in a prison town might spend money locally, but those who commute from other places would be less likely to do so. And of course, any local benefits from increased staff spending would depend on there being more staff or higher wages. Because CSC, like other large employers, is committed to labour-saving technology and work intensification, neither of these can be assumed. Given staff reallocations due to CSC closings in Ontario and Quebec, there are no guarantees that job competitions will even be open to prison town locals. The fact that CSC is projecting absolutely flat staffing levels until 2017-18 is not encouraging in this regard (Canada, n.d. b).

Similarly, CSC and other federal departments are obliged to send all major outside purchases through a national bidding process that now happens

mostly online.⁷ Companies near an expanding prison are forced to bid against other national (and sometimes international) firms in order to win a local contract. There is some evidence that informal quotas exist in tender decisions, as contracts for items such as dairy products are often split between national and local suppliers (MERX, n.d.). But the value of even the largest of these pales in comparison to the construction contracts, as will be seen below.

Overall, CSC continues to spend most of its budgets on personnel costs – averaging about 67% from 2009-13 (Canada, n.d. a). Because these are still mostly governed by collective agreements with unionized staff, there are very few opportunities for local businesses to win contracts in this area. Other CSC purchases are internal, from government agencies such as Public Works. But CSC has turned to outside suppliers at a dramatically increased pace since the Conservatives took power. In fact, the nominal value of CSC spending on private providers doubled from \$362 million in fiscal year (FY) 2005-6, to \$737 million in FY 2012-13 (Canada, 2005-13a, b & c).

CSC tenders contracts for a variety of reasons, and not all are directly related to prisons, but the biggest ones by far are construction-related. Public Accounts figures show that capital spending as a share of total CSC expenses rose 45% from 2009 to 2012 – from 8.6% to 12.5% respectively (Canada, 2013), and much of this would have gone to private companies involved in construction projects. So, while CSC continues to spend the vast majority of its budget on personnel and other operating costs, opportunities for private profit making have increased dramatically for those who wish to supply, and especially to build, its prisons.

The claim that new prisoner populations could boost census counts, and therefore grants and representation for prison towns, has been made at least once to justify prison expansion in Canada (Drumheller Mayor Bryce Nimmo, in Zickefoose, 2010). But in fact the situation here is more complex than it appears to be in the US. The Canadian census counts prison as someone's residence only if they spend at least six months there; otherwise they are counted at their last address (Canada, 2009). This means that provincial prisoners would rarely stay long enough to be counted (because most are on remand or serving shorter sentences). Federal prisoners (who all serve at least two years) would be counted as long as they had arrived six months before the census date, and as long as census enumeration was adequate. Per capita transfers would be based on these numbers.

However, municipalities receive only about 20% of their revenues through various federal or provincial transfers, and these transfers are not necessarily calculated on a per capita basis (Slack, 2009). Federal institutions like prisons do not pay property taxes to municipalities, but they may pay “payments in lieu of taxes” (PILT) which are more discretionary, and fluctuate as priorities change in Ottawa (FCM, 2008). PILT statistics are available from 2010 on,

⁷ First through MERX and since June 2013 through Buyandsell.ca. Some 30,000-50,000 tenders for all federal departments are listed there each year.

but they are not broken down by federal department (Canada, 2015). Yet a cursory analysis suggests that PILT growth has little connection with prison expansion. Of four prison towns that were some of the biggest prison contract winners, only one (Springhill, NS) saw a consistent rise in its PILT payments for all federal buildings between 2010 and 2014. In two others (Mission, BC and Kingston, ON), increases were inconsistent or marginal. And the prison town that won the most valuable contracts (Abbotsford, BC) actually experienced a decline in its PILT payments over the same period (Canada, 2015). So, the local tax benefits of hosting a prison in Canada are less certain than in the US, and the possibility of incremental gains through prison expansion seem to be unpredictable at best.

As noted above, the Conservative government promised just over \$600 million in expansion funds to 24 prison ridings in the run-up to the 2011 federal election. They claimed that construction jobs and permanent hiring, along with new business opportunities, would help stimulate local economies. This section has already cast doubt on many of these claims, but what about all those construction contracts?

Details regarding tendered contracts can now be found in Canada's Public Accounts. Most federal contracts are multi-year (usually three years), and many change in value as work progresses (or stalls). But taking the last published value of each contract gives some sense of what the government actually paid each contractor, and allows us to compare total commitments here against what was promised. There is uncertainty in the data, because not all contracts are clearly labeled. A CSC contract that says something like "96-bed living unit, Ontario" clearly relates to a prison, but does not specify which one. Other labels are more vague, or relate to construction in CSC offices (regional or national headquarters, probation and parole, etc.). For purposes of this paper, only contracts with a clear prison connection were considered, and those with a clear connection that did not name a particular prison were categorized as "unspecified" in each province. A more elaborate study might quite reasonably allocate some of these other expenses among the prisons, however.

Timing is also an issue, as some construction contracts started before the announcements, and some announced construction (especially in Quebec) had still not been tendered when the data was gathered in the spring of 2014. To deal with this problem, data were included from all CSC construction contracts tendered since the Conservatives first won power in fiscal year 2005-6, and extending to 2012-13, the latest available at the time. As can be seen from Figure 1, however, the value of CSC construction commitments rose dramatically after the 2010-11 announcements, and the vast majority of contracts since 2005-6 seems to be related to them. In any case, considering all the contracts over the longer period should make any local benefits more, not less, visible.

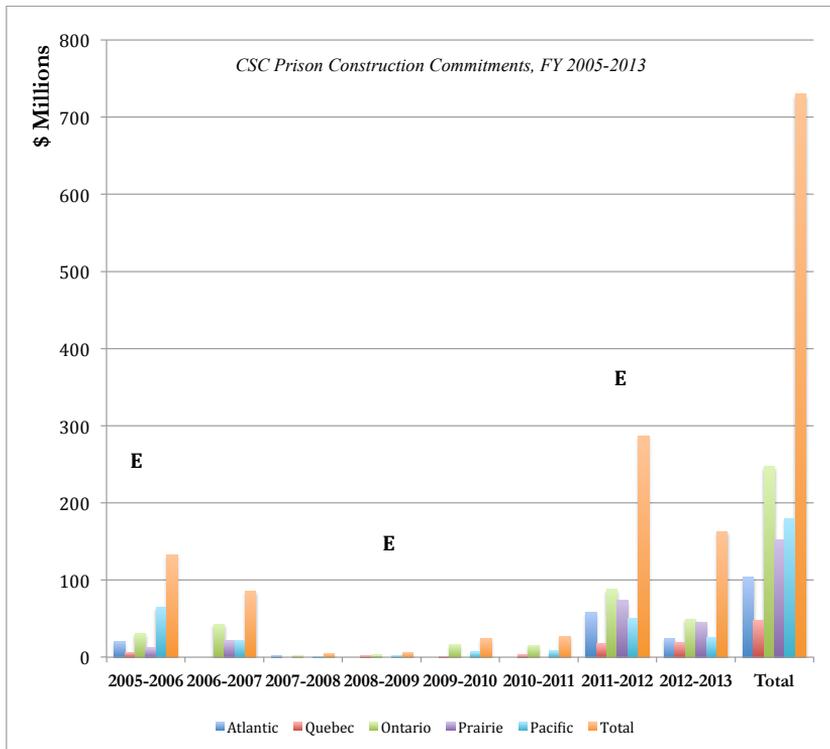


Figure 1. CSC prison construction commitments, 2005-2013

Note: These figures are in nominal dollar values and only cover identifiable prison contracts in the “Acquisition of land, building and works” category. Contracts are counted in the year they first appear, and by the total government commitment (not annual expenditures) given the most recent values for each. E = election year. Source: author’s calculations based on Canada, 2005-13c.

The final total in Figure 1 (\$729,782,124) provides a conservative estimate of the total value of all CSC prison construction contracts (over 200 of them) made public between 2005 and 2013.⁸ Figure 1 also gives some indication of where the money went, but this question is trickier than it seems. On the surface the contracts concern changes to prison spaces, and so the expenses will leave physical traces in each prison that received an upgrade. Thus, it may make sense to display the results in something like Figure 2, which

⁸ In addition to the exclusions previously noted, this figure does not include, “smaller contracts” (360 @ \$140m in 2012-13), or the services of architects and engineers, which have totaled up to \$5 million a year but are listed separately. Smaller contracts (“Contracts under \$250,000 and cost plus contracts under \$25,000”) were listed separately in the Public Accounts data after 2008, but only grand totals were given, with no details on the contracts. Thus, it was impossible to consolidate these figures, or locate the contract winners. See Canada (2005-13b, 2005-13c).

shows how roughly \$730 million was distributed among the federal prison towns.

Total Prison Construction Commitments, FY 2005-2013

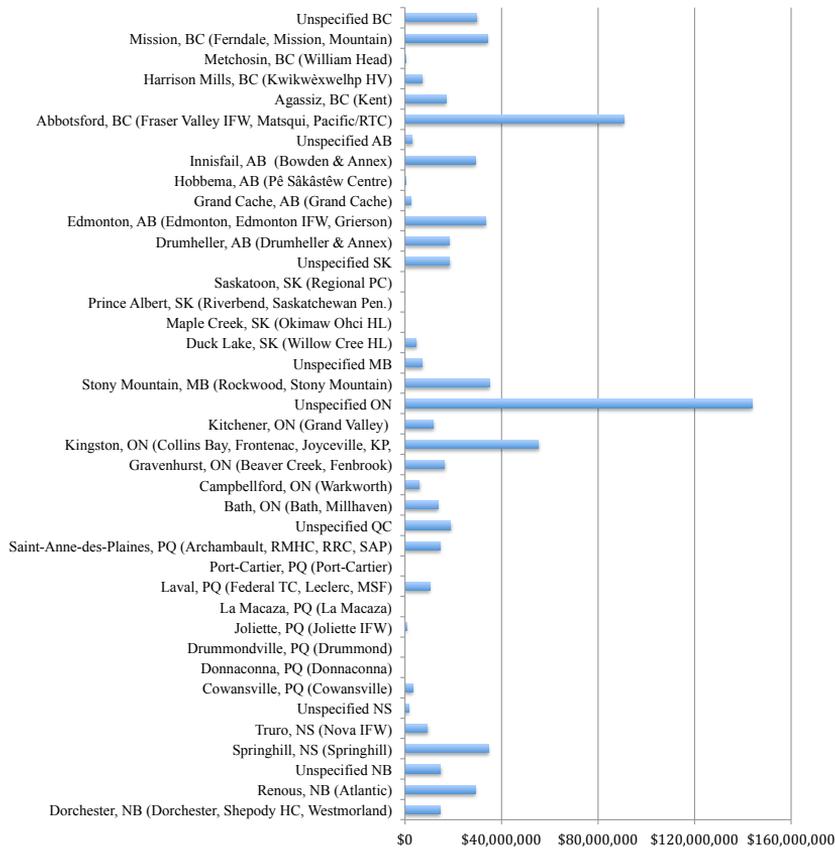


Figure 2. Total prison construction commitments, 2005-2013

Note: A few of the contracts list two or three prisons where the work will be performed, without specifying the breakdown. Figures in such cases were split evenly between all the prisons involved. Source: author’s calculations based on Canada, 2005-13c.

Figure 2 shows that of the 32 towns containing 54 prisons, construction was planned in at least 25 towns, although there are broad disparities in the amounts each town received. These are presumably related to the number of prisons in each town, their degree of need, their significance in CSC planning or some partisan political calculus. However, given the doubts noted above about whether prisons are really infrastructure, we cannot assume that expanding them will actually serve a public good (the case might be clearer for hospitals or roads). Doubts about prisons’ effectiveness in fighting crime

could lead to similar conclusions (Mathiesen, 1990). So, what about jobs and local contracts, the benefits that were promised?

Mosher, Hooks and Wood (2007) observed that when American prison-building was undertaken by “outside” companies, the latter were more likely to bring their own specialized workforce with them, so that local construction hiring would be minimal to non-existent. If we assume that locally owned companies are more likely to hire locally, then the prospects for local hiring would be better in the Canadian case if prison contracts were awarded to firms that came from the same prison town. The Public Accounts data lists the corporate offices of all contract winners, so it is relatively easy to determine their origins.⁹

<i>Prison Town</i>	<i>Value of contracts won by local companies as % of local contract dollars available</i>
Laval QC	122%
Edmonton AB	107%
Kingston ON	43%
Abbotsford BC	34%
Bath ON	13%
Kitchener ON	9%
Drummondville QC	NLC
Saskatoon SK	NLC

Table 2. “Local benefits” by prison town, 2005-13

Note: The percentages represent the value of local company contracts versus the value of all contracts for that town. Some can exceed 100% if a company wins contracts in other prison towns. NLC = No Local Contracts. Source: author’s calculations based on Canada, 2005-13c.

The results, however, are shocking. While 25 prison towns had tenders for work in their area, in only eight did local companies win prison contracts

⁹ National head offices were used when the data listed regional head offices of national companies. There was also at least one joint venture, and this data tells us little about corporate ownership structures, subsidiaries, and so on. So conceivably this task could get much more elaborate.

(Canada, 2005-13c). And even these were not clear-cut success stories. As can be seen from Table 2, companies in only two of these towns (Laval and Edmonton) won more than 43% of the contract dollars available for their town. In fact, these two won contracts worth more than 100% of the local contracts' value by also winning contracts in other prison towns. Drummondville and Saskatoon companies won all of their contracts in other towns, but could not bid locally because there were no tenders for local work. And despite all the money being poured into Kingston and Abbotsford, local firms won relatively small portions of the contract dollars available there. In 17 other prison towns with construction work available (68% of the total), local companies won nothing. It is possible that these statistics would be different if we knew more about those unspecified contracts, but it is unlikely that a very different pattern would emerge. So, if outside construction companies do tend to rely largely on their own permanent workforce (rather than subcontracting or hiring locally), then prison town locals probably had little access to these construction jobs.

Since we have acknowledged that "local" boundaries are somewhat arbitrary, Table 3 makes similar calculations for wins by provincial, if not local companies. So, if an outside company wins a contract for a local prison, what are the chances that the "outsider" is at least from the same province? Considering provincial company wins as a percentage of contract values available in the province, it seems the news continues to be bad for those expecting benefits close to home. Four provinces and territories (Newfoundland, PEI, the NWT and Nunavut) have no federal prisons and so received no benefits at all from these contracts. Manitoba did very badly (6%), New Brunswick and BC/Yukon broke the 50% barrier, and Nova Scotia and Alberta scored in the 80-90% range. Quebec and Ontario both managed to score around 125%, indicating that their companies won contracts in other provinces as well. But the real winner in this regard was Saskatchewan, whose companies hauled in over two and a half times the contract values available in their province. What the pattern suggests, then, is that contract money is slightly more likely to stay in the home province than in the local town. But the distribution here is very uneven, and clearly not related to the number of CSC prisons in each province (see Table 3).

A closer examination of contract winners by corporate office shows that these tend to be concentrated within a few large centres in each province. The left column of Table 4 shows the 10 towns and cities whose companies won the most contract dollars during the period studied. Even within this group, there was a big gap between the top town and the bottom one – Concord, Ontario won nearly four times as much as Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. But as a group, these 10 centres took over 56% of all the contract dollars available. Sixty-four other towns had companies win contracts, but those top 10 won more than all of them combined.

<i>Province</i>	<i>CSC Prisons in the Province</i>	<i>Value of contracts won by provincial companies as % of provincial CSC contract dollars available</i>
Saskatchewan	5	260
Quebec	13	127
Ontario	12	124
Nova Scotia	2	88
Alberta	7	82
BC/Yukon	9	59
New Brunswick	4	56
Manitoba	2	6
Newfoundland	0	n/a
PEI	0	n/a
NWT	0	n/a
Nunavut	0	n/a

Table 3. “Local benefits” by province, 2005-2013

Note: This list does not include contracts won by CORCAN, CSC’s prisoner work program. CORCAN is included in the prison town figures because its spending has local effects. It is separated in the corporate office figures because, as an agency (a Special Operating Agency) of the federal government, it is not a direct producer of private profit, and presumably nearly all jobs created would be for prisoners. Source: author’s calculations based on Canada, 2005-13c.

The disparity is even greater if these winning towns are arranged into some common regions or metropolitan areas. As can be seen in the right column of Table 4, the Greater Toronto Area is the big winner in this scenario, as companies within its boundaries won over \$200 million in contracts – about 28% of all the money available. But altogether, the top 10 regions took nearly 79% of the funds, leaving 31 other regions to split the remainder.

Clearly many factors come into play to determine a town’s chances to win these contracts. Not only must they have relevant construction-related industries, but these firms must also be competitive (usually meaning large),¹⁰ the tender process must be fair (without rigged bids or political interference), and so on. The evidence so far suggests that what Harold Innis (1933) called the traditional “metropoles” of Canada’s political economy continue to

¹⁰ Anecdotal evidence suggests that large government construction contracts tend to come with elaborate paperwork and monitoring requirements that can only be met by larger companies.

dominate this field, as they do so many others. Consequently, prison towns – unless they are in the metropolises – are unlikely to win the contracts on which those construction jobs depend.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>By City (of 74)</i>	<i>Value (\$m)</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>By Metro Area (of 51)</i>	<i>Value (\$m)</i>
1	Concord ON	85⁶	1	GTA, ON	206⁴
2	Mississauga ON	63²	2	Lower Mainland BC	57⁹
3	Saskatoon SK	36⁶	3	Greater Vancouver BC	47⁸
4	Edmonton AB	36⁰	4	Halifax-Dart. NS	38²
5	Calgary AB	32³	5	Saskatoon SK	36⁶
6	Ottawa ON*	30⁹	6	Edmonton AB	36⁴
7	Abbotsford BC*	30⁹	7	Montréal/Laval QC	33²
8	Chilliwack BC	26¹	8	Calgary AB	32³
9	Regina SK	23⁷	9	Ottawa ON	31⁰
10	Dartmouth NS	22⁸	10	Regina SK	23⁷

Table 4. Top ten tender winners by location of corporate office, FY 2005-2013

Note: This table excludes CORCAN, and figures are rounded nominal dollar values. Source: author’s calculations based on Canada, 2005-13c.

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Company & Corporate Office</i>	<i>Total Won (\$m)¹</i>
1	Bird Construction Company (<i>Mississauga ON via Winnipeg MB, Richmond BC</i>)	63²
2	Bondfield Construction Co. Ltd. (<i>Concord ON</i>) ²	60⁹
3	CORCAN (<i>Ottawa ON, via Kingston ON, Abbotsford BC & Riverview NB</i>)	39⁵
4	Graham Construction & Engineering Inc. (<i>Saskatoon SK</i>)	32⁵
5	Maple-Reinders Inc. (<i>Edmonton AB</i>)	26⁰
6	Elite Construction Inc. (<i>Concord ON</i>)	24⁶
7	PCL Construction Management Inc. (<i>Regina SK</i>)*	23⁷
8	Maxim 2000 Inc. (<i>Dartmouth NS</i>)	21⁴
9	UPA Concept a Joint Venture (<i>Calgary AB</i>)	20³
10	Pomerleau Inc. (<i>St-Georges QC</i>)	19⁹

Table 5. Top ten (of 125) corporate winners, 2005-2013

Note: Figures are in rounded nominal dollars. Bondfield also built Ontario’s South-West Detention Centre. Source: author’s calculations based on Canada, 2005-13c. A complete list of all 125 corporate winners, and the amounts they won, is available on request.

This pattern of highly uneven gains continues when considering the companies themselves (Table 5). In contrast to purchasing for items such as

food, counselling and medical services (which tends to be widely distributed, though in much smaller amounts), prison construction contracts have gravitated in large chunks to a few big firms. Thus, Bird Construction Co. of Mississauga, the top scorer here, won prison contracts worth about \$63 million over eight years. With one exception, all the other firms on this list are high flyers in the construction industry. In fact, to be on this list would probably make any company a high flyer, since it usually involves winning one or more contracts worth about \$20 million apiece.

Names like Bondfield, Graham, and Maple-Reinders should be familiar to anyone who has ever passed by a Canadian construction site or highway project. PCL was in the news recently because its CEO made a point of telling his employees not to vote NDP in the 2015 Alberta election (Maki, 2015). Most provinces – including Alberta until recently – put few restrictions on corporate political donations, and it is easy to imagine that links forged at the provincial level might follow politicians who travel to the federal one (Editorial, 2015). These connections point to the need for a broader study of the economic power and political influence of the construction industry in Canada. But for now, it can simply be noted that these top 10 companies won 46% of all the prison contract dollars available, leaving the remainder to be split among 115 other companies.

CORCAN – the federal agency that manages prisoner work programs – is the exception noted above, as it is not a private company. But its success in this area is a testament to CSC's continuing attempts to make prisoners into useful workers. CORCAN's website highlights the historical precedents for having prisoners build prisons, starting with the construction of Kingston Penitentiary in 1835 (CORCAN, 2013). The CSC Review Panel urged Ottawa to adopt a more work-focused version of rehabilitation for prisoners – including apprenticeships with construction companies in particular (2007). So, mobilizing a very low-paid workforce to help with the prison expansion, in the guise of enhancing their work ethic, is a strategy that seems entirely consistent with Conservative penal policy. But neither the extreme concentrations noted above, nor the plan to have prisoners build their own cages, is likely to improve a prison town's chances of gaining local construction jobs.

Conclusion: Decoupling and Reclamation

Echoing the logic of the “conventional wisdom” in US prison debates of the 1980s and 1990s, Public Safety Minister Vic Toews had promised that prison expansion would lead to local jobs and contracts. As has been shown above, later American evidence undercut that wisdom and cast doubt on the economic case for prison building. In Canada, the case for local benefits is similarly weakened by the public service's centralized hiring and purchasing practices, different tax and transfer payment arrangements, commuting prison

staff, and by the decision to add to existing prisons, rather than building entirely new ones.

Two elements of the “conventional wisdom” received little coverage above. The prospect that prison building might improve local infrastructure was not really investigated. But it was noted that prisons themselves are not infrastructure, as it is commonly understood. Related improvements probably vary from prison to prison, and if inadequate measures are taken they can actually harm the local community by overloading sewers, roads, etc. (McElligott, 2007). In any case, this kind of work was tallied with the construction contracts considered above, and, like them, was reduced by the decision not to build new prisons from scratch.

Another neglected source of potential benefits was the surge in prison visitors that might bolster local retailers. Again, the incremental nature of Canada’s prison construction reduced the new business potentially available from this source. If the system becomes further centralized (making visits more onerous), or if it follows provincial trends in adopting video visitation (possibly online, making travel unnecessary), gains from this source will be further reduced. But fundamentally this issue, like the infrastructure question, requires further study.

The construction contracts analyzed above are clearly directly related to prison expansions, and they provide the best data available so far on incremental effects. Non-construction tenders, as was mentioned, are much smaller than construction ones. Total values for construction tenders were about 12 times higher from 2010-13 (MERX, n.d.; McElligott & Piché, 2013). Considering only the incremental effects of non-construction expansion (the additional amounts now required for food, clothing, etc.) would have meant dealing with even smaller numbers and much less reliable data. But what do the construction contracts reveal?

As has been demonstrated above, construction contracts appeared to flow to about 25 of 32 prison towns, and government spokespeople played up this appearance. But very few of the companies who won the contracts were from the same prison town, and usually they were not even from the same province. In fact, construction contract winners were very concentrated in a few large metropolises and a few large companies. It was assumed on the basis of US experience – and this assumption might well be tested by future research – that outside ownership made local jobs and subcontracts much less likely. But this combination of apparent local benefits and more substantial outside ones has the effect of widening the web of interests with some connection to prison building. Rather than just 25 or 32 prison towns, we can now count at least 125 companies with head offices in 74 towns in eight provinces and one territory. Each of these can be said to have some sort of connection with prisons.

More to the point, we can say that key parts of the construction industry, and many related ones, seem to have bought into prison expansion. The primary beneficiaries of their involvement are likely to be the CEOs and

owners of those companies, but, as ever, they will focus attention on job creation rather than profit levels. Obviously not every contract dollar goes to CEOs, but in recent years this group has been very adept at securing for themselves the greatest, and fastest-growing, share of whatever surplus is created (Mackenzie, 2015). The fact that so many other towns and jobs appear to benefit only helps to legitimate their position, and that of the Conservative politicians who see prison as the answer to so many social problems.

It is important to note that all of this has been accomplished without the overt involvement of any private prison company. “Public” prisons, it turns out, have always been reliant on the private sector, and construction projects clearly amplify this effect. But because the Canadian companies involved are active in other fields, two interesting possibilities arise.

First, it is clearly possible to shame corporations that are involved in unsavoury activities, but first they must be identified. In this case the next step would be to re-politicize prisons as “not just another infrastructure project,” so that prison building becomes a recognizably shameful activity. Construction companies presumably care little what they build, as long as it is profitable and relatively practical. So why not make prison building uncomfortable, and encourage builders (and related interests) to focus on other projects? Groups like End the Prison Industrial Complex (EPIC) have already done substantial work in this direction, and EPIC inspired the research for this paper (see EPIC, n.d.). Broadly speaking, the task here is to decouple prison expansion from the private interests that support it.

Decoupling in the context of something like the current Liberal infrastructure program would obviously be easier for the affected companies to accept. If billions of construction dollars are raining down in other areas, there would be much less reason to focus on prison projects. On the other hand, if prison funds were re-routed to building pipelines or military bases, this would not be much of a victory for those concerned with social justice. And in fact, if the results above had turned out differently, and prison funds actually stayed in the local community, this would not have been much of a step forward either. In that case, more communities would have had a deeper stake in the perpetuation of an expensive, unjust and destructive system.

Yet even asking about alternative uses for prison funds means dealing seriously with the opportunities foregone when billions of public dollars are pumped into prisons. Hospitals, schools, recreation centres, roads, sewers, green energy – any of these might conceivably engage a constellation of interests similar to those now supporting prisons, and many would be more effective at preventing crime, reducing victimization, or serving other public goods. A more serious effort at decarceration and sentencing reform might envision reclaiming prisons as socially useful public spaces. Conversion and retrofitting could occupy the building trades, and likely direct more traffic to local businesses. A group called Yes, in My Backyard is cataloguing the wide variety of conversion projects now underway in the US (see YIMBY, n.d.). These are remaking prisons into drug rehab, training and community centres,

homeless shelters, sports facilities, affordable housing, theatres and so on, but many other possibilities are conceivable. And projects of this sort are likely more amenable to community input, and thus more conducive to creating real local benefits, than any prison initiative.

In short, the prospects for social justice in this field depend on decoupling interests and reclaiming existing prison sites. The counter-narrative offered by the Harper Conservatives, which tried to engage prison towns with stories of local contracts and local benefits, is misleading in both respects.

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