

Dialogues of Martha, Howard and Skippy (© Stephen Goldsmith 1986 Urban Design Coalition SLC, UT RB+SG) **in Ottawa Canada, re prison expansion issues – written by Stephanie Coward-Yaskiw for The Church Council on Justice and Corrections – for permission to quote 613 563 1688.**

1) Deterrence:

Howard: I'm so glad we came to visit your cousin, Martha. It's good to come back to Canada. It's been too long.

Martha: Yes, Howard, it certainly has been. But, I heard that the government here is thinking of doing what we've been doing back home in the States as far as crime goes.

Howard: What do you mean?

Martha: You know, longer minimum sentences, harsher penalties, that sort of thing.

Howard: Yes, but that's going to make people safer isn't it, Martha?

Martha: Now, Howard, I don't know about that. I read the other day that the US has more people in prison than any other country in the world – even China!

Howard: Yeah, I saw that, too. In the States, we have more prisoners than farmers and more prisons than Walmarts!

Martha: But, our crime rates are still higher than in Europe and here in Canada, too. So, what does that mean?

Howard: Well, and remember when Governor Terminat...er...Schwarzenegger in California actually ordered a state of emergency because of prison overcrowding?

Martha: Yeah – and even sending that many people to prison didn't seem to keep people from going back to jail after they got out, either – 70% of them!

Howard: Maybe minimum sentences don't work to keep us safe. Haven't they found that it's the likelihood of getting caught that makes a

difference? You know, policing? Not the sentence?

Martha: Well, all I know is that we've already begun to change our laws back in the US to get rid of mandatory sentences. I sure hope people here ask questions. Because if those types of policies don't actually work to keep people safe...well...it'd be a shame to repeat our mistakes.

Skippy: Woof!

Howard: Even Skippy agrees!

2) Cost of longer sentences:

Martha: Ottawa's such a beautiful city, isn't it Howard?

Howard: Yes, in a beautiful country. It's good to visit again.

Martha: It would be too bad if some of that beauty faded because the govt wasn't using its money very smartly.

Howard: What on earth are you talking about, Martha?

Martha; Well, I heard on the news the other day that they're trying to bring in this bill that would send more people to prison for a longer time – and for some things that wouldn't have gotten prison time before.

Howard: Well, what's the matter with that, Martha? If that's what it takes to keep people safe -- seems like common sense to me.

Martha: Except that it doesn't keep us safe. All that money, Howard for something that doesn't really work? Last year, back home in the States, we spent \$44 billion on state prisons – that's 4x what we spent even 20 years ago. Four times!

Howard: Well, that's because we started getting tough on drug dealers and repeat offenders – you know three strikes laws and that kind of thing. Not that it worked. Those laws ended up filling our prisons with small-time drug offenders and non-violent petty-offenders – you know, someone whose third strike was stealing a bunch of videos. And, the thing about drug crime is that as long as there are people to buy the drugs, well, you take one dealer off the street and there's another one to take his place. Putting more people in prison doesn't help solve our drug problems.

Martha: And, here in Canada, they spend almost \$2 billion a year on federal corrections alone – that's not even including the provincial prisons. How many more billions will Canada spend if they send more and more offenders to prison for longer, like back home?

Howard: And, what's that going to take the money away from? I mean, some of our states spend more money on corrections than they do on higher education. Surely, that's not going to help prevent crime? And, what about the victims of crime? Couldn't that money could be put into support programs and compensation for them?

Martha: Well, now, Howard, that's a good question, isn't it.

Skippy: Woof!!

3) Money away from Prevention:

Martha: It was interesting to be visiting here in Canada and hear the federal budget, wasn't it Howard?

Howard: Sure was, Martha – see how our friends to the north do it.

Martha: Not so differently, apparently.

Howard: What do you mean?

Martha: Well, did you notice that they're giving about 20 million dollars over the next two years to crime prevention.

Howard: Well, yes – that's a good thing, isn't it?

Martha: Yes, but they spend almost 2 BILLION dollars a year for dealing with crime after it happens...

Howard: A hundred times more???

Martha: Yes and that's just in the federal system alone, not even the provinces. Doesn't it seem a bit odd to end up spending so much more for dealing with a crime after it happens than preventing it in the first place?

Howard: Well, not so odd for us – that's how we've been doing it back home in the States for years – not that it works. Tougher sentences mean more people in prison, which means more money on building prisons and keeping people there, instead of dealing with less serious crime in the community. And then doesn't that mean less money for the programs that really do work – you know, like helping teens stay in school, or investing in early childhood programs, or even putting more money into the housing crisis? We know that lack of housing is a big factor in crime.

Martha: Not to mention the money that could be used to give victims of serious crime what they need – maybe financial compensation and good support programs?

Howard: Exactly! At least we're beginning to figure it out, though. Remember when we went to Oregon? One county cut its youth prison population by almost three quarters by keeping all but the most violent in the community. Saved \$17,000 per kid and invested that money back into

schools and drug treatment and other programs. Saved money and still made the community safer.

Martha: Maybe that's the kind of thing Canadians should consider. After all, the polls show that Canadians want their governments to address the root causes of crime. If imprisoning more and more people only wastes money and doesn't work to keep people safe, maybe it's time to question these policies up here, too.

Skippy: Woof, woof!

Howard: Thank you, Skippy, for sharing your opinion!

4) Court backlogs:

Martha: Oh, Howard, did you hear on the news last night? The Canadian government is trying to increase mandatory minimum sentences and harsher penalties – just like back home in America.

Howard: But, that's just going to cost them way more money.

Martha: Yeah – up to a \$1 billion.

Howard: A billion dollars?! That's a lot of money! Bet ya hospitals and schools could use that.

Skippy: Woof!

Martha: And, if it's anything like it is at home in the States, it's gonna gum up their system pretty tight.

Howard: Yeah – Even the Community Foundation of Ottawa gave that a bad mark. They did this report called “Vital Signs” – sort of like a report card on how Ottawa's doing for its citizens and they actually named the backlog in Ottawa courts as a real problem. And, if it's anything like back in the States, it's just going to get worse.

Martha: Well, that's for sure. 'Cause we know that these laws mean longer and more difficult trials, more jurors, more court time, which all mean more costs, too. Not to mention more people in jail before their trial, which costs money, too.

Howard: Hm...maybe that's why the government gave some of Canada's prosecutors \$16 million a year in the budget. They know they're going to need it if these bills pass!

Martha: Well, and if the courts are backlogged with all these smaller cases that could be dealt with differently, what does that mean for the really serious ones? Does that mean that those victims and their families will have to wait even longer to move through the process? I can't even imagine!

Howard: Well, I know these policies can't be good ones because our Supreme Court in Washington told judges that they didn't have to impose “one-size-fits-all” sentences anymore. They think it's better if they make sentencing decisions on a case-by-case basis. So, obviously it can't

work all that well.

Martha: So, maybe it's not too late to change the approach here.

Howard: Let's hope so!

Skippy: Woof!

5) Who do these laws net:

Howard: Hey, Martha, I just heard someone talking about these crime laws you keep mentioning.

Martha: Oh, you mean the Canadian government trying to bring in tough new sentences and longer prison terms?

Howard: Yeah. I'm not sure why it's so important to you.

Martha: Well, because I care about Canadians – we do have family here, Howard – and I don't want to see them make the same mistakes that we've made back in the States.

Howard: What mistakes? Like 3 strikes laws? Don't you think it's good to get violent felons off the streets?

Martha: Except that, for the most part they don't -- they end up filling our prisons with people who are committing petty crimes like stealing videotapes or small-time drug offenders who are better off receiving treatment than prison.

Howard: Oh! That would be less expensive, wouldn't it?

Martha: And, more effective. It's not just about the money, Howard! Surely good policies are supposed to keep people from becoming victims of crime in the first place and these ones don't. And, don't even get me started on how these laws back home end up hurting African-Americans and other people of colour way more than the white population. Some people even think they make the system racist.

Howard: Yes, but this is Canada, Sweetie. It would probably be different up here.

Martha: Oh, I don't know about that, Howard. I read in an article just the other day that black Canadians are 3x more likely to go to prison than white folk. And, if you look at the Aboriginal population here, it's even worse – almost a quarter of the people in prison in Canada are Aboriginal – but they only make up about 3% of the population. Something's definitely not right! It's not just in America.

Howard: So, if these types of policies end up putting the wrong types of people in prison – and too many of them – and they don't even work to make our communities safer, shouldn't Canadians be looking at better

options?

Martha: Well, you're just full of good questions today, Howard!

Skippy: Woof!

6) Prisons bringing money into the community

Howard: There are some beautiful buildings in Ottawa, aren't there Martha?

Martha: Sure are – just like back home in the States. Well, except for all those prisons all over the place because of our crime laws.

Howard: Are you still on about that?!

Martha: It's important, Howard. I heard that people right across the river in West Quebec and even in Newfoundland are lobbying for prisons in their community – thinking it's gonna be good for them. But, our experience hasn't been good with all that prison building and I would hate to see it happen up here, too.

Howard: But, prisons are good for the local economy – that's why all the politicians want them back home.

Martha: Except that they're not, really. Remember the 90s, Howard? There was a time when we were building one prison a week in the States thinking that very thing. But in the end, the small communities they were built around ended up becoming even more poor.

Howard: Well, that just doesn't make sense, Martha.

Martha: Well, the jobs that everyone was expecting didn't necessarily go to the local people. Remember Uncle Joe and Aunt Roberta in Delano? They were all lined up to apply for one of the 1600 jobs in the new prison there. But only 79 went to local people.

Howard: That's true – and remember all those chain stores moved in after, too. Pretnear closed down the local businesses.

Martha: Oh, it would be a shame for that to happen up here, too. I mean wouldn't it be better to use more of those community sentences that have been more successful – and they're way cheaper, too! And then, for economic development in the community, maybe hospitals and schools would be a better investment.

Howard: Sure would. You know, prevention. Or, how about using that money for the victims of crime. Now, there's a thought.

Skippy: Woof!

7) Cost of prisons – transfers out of state:

Howard: You know, Martha, when you were talking about building more prisons not necessarily being a good thing?

Martha: Yes, Howard?

Howard: But, if we build more prisons, wouldn't that help keep inmates closer to their families instead of being transferred far away?

Martha: What do you mean?

Howard: Well, remember Libby's son, Jake, in California? They transferred him to Mississippi because of overcrowding and he hasn't seen his daughter in years – has 5 grandkids he's never even met. And that happens all over America.

Martha: Well, that may be, Howard, but it's really hard to find sympathy for them when you think of the pain they've caused their victims.

Howard: That's true, we need to be addressing that harm, for sure. At the same time, isn't it important to help inmates keep their family ties intact so they'll have more support to help keep them from committing more crimes?

Martha: Well, and I guess any programs that would help them stay out of prison would be interrupted with each move, wouldn't they? I've heard that some prisons don't have any at all and in others you have to wait a long time to start again, even if they do. That can't help them get ready for life back in the community, can it?

Howard: Hm, so maybe building more prisons is a good idea. Even if it does cost millions and takes money away from prevention. At least it would keep people near their own communities.

Martha: Or, maybe it would be better to keep some offenders out of prison in the first place? Or, if they do break the law, find solutions in the community instead, for the less serious crimes? Did you know that 27 states back home are backing away from harsh sentencing laws because they just don't keep communities safer and they're overcrowding all the prisons. It's just been a big, expensive kaffuffle.

Howard: Do you think Canada's going to reconsider?

Martha: I hope so, Howard.

Skippy: Woof!

Martha: So does Skippy!

8) Public Perception:

Howard: We've been hearing a lot about these new crime laws while we've been visiting, huh, Martha? I'm just not sure why Canadians would want to use them here when they've actually made things worse in the States?

Martha: Well, you know how it works, Howard! No politician wants to look soft on crime. Doesn't matter what party they're with!

Howard: Yes, we blame our own politicians back home for all sorts of decisions when often they're just following what they think the public wants. Obviously, Canadians are concerned about crime.

Martha: Well, of course there's concern about crime – everyone shares that. But, the number of Canadians who think crime is a really serious problem is actually at its lowest in 30 years. They're feeling pretty safe – at least not as unsafe as the government seems to think.

Howard: Well, and that makes sense, because the Canadian crime rate really is down – WAY down from, say 30 years ago – even if you wouldn't know it from watching TV!

Martha: Yes, TV does seem to make it seem worse. At the same time, those awful cases we hear about in the news do terrible harm to real people, Howard. So, we need to make sure that those cases, and all those people who are the victims, get the serious attention they need and the support.

Howard: Will that be possible if the system's so bogged down because of these harsher sentences for less serious crimes?

Martha: Good question! And, the other interesting thing in all of this is that many Canadians don't even want really harsh penalties. They want accountability and rehabilitation – which makes sense because they don't want it to happen again. And, they want all victims – of all crimes -- to get what they need. We really need to do more of that back home in the States, too.

Howard: So, why would politicians want crime laws that have been shown not to work? Especially if most Canadians are feeling pretty safe and are actually more interested in supporting the victims of crime and making criminals accountable rather than just locking them up and

throwing away the key?

Martha: Well, now, I'm not sure, Howard. I hope they ask.

9) General:

Howard: So, let me get this straight. Martha. Back home in the States, we've already spent years trying the tougher sentence laws that they're thinking about bringing in here in Canada.

Martha: Yup.

Howard: And, they basically cost us billions of dollars.

Martha: Yup.

Howard: And they didn't really make our communities safer.

Martha: Nope.

Howard: Because we know that programs that look at the root issues of crime and smart policing are what help to prevent crime.

Martha: Yup!

Howard: And, these laws have just overcrowded our prisons with non-violent, mostly small-time drug offenders or people who are back in because they violated the rules of their parole or probation, like breaking their curfew or something – not even for doing another crime.

Martha: Yup!

Howard: And, that's taken a ton of money away from keeping crime from happening in the first place that could have been spent in the community.

Martha: Yup!

Howard: And it's also taking money away from education and health care and the arts and even sports.

Martha: That's right!

Howard: And, there could be more money for support services for victims – except that that money's being eaten up by building prisons all over America.

Martha: Yes, Howard.

Howard: And, these crime policies have torn apart families and communities in

the meantime.

Martha: Yup!

Howard: To the point that over half of our states have looked at changing these laws.

Martha: Un-hun!

Howard: So, if we've basically tried it and it doesn't work, why would Canadians want to even consider it when there're plenty of other cheaper, better options for dealing with crime?

Martha: I don't know, Howard. Why would they?

Skippy: Woof, woof!

Martha: Thank you, Skippy, for your opinion! He said that Canadians should learn from us and be tough on crime – in an effective way -- without being tough on taxpayers.

Howard: Sure he did, Martha!