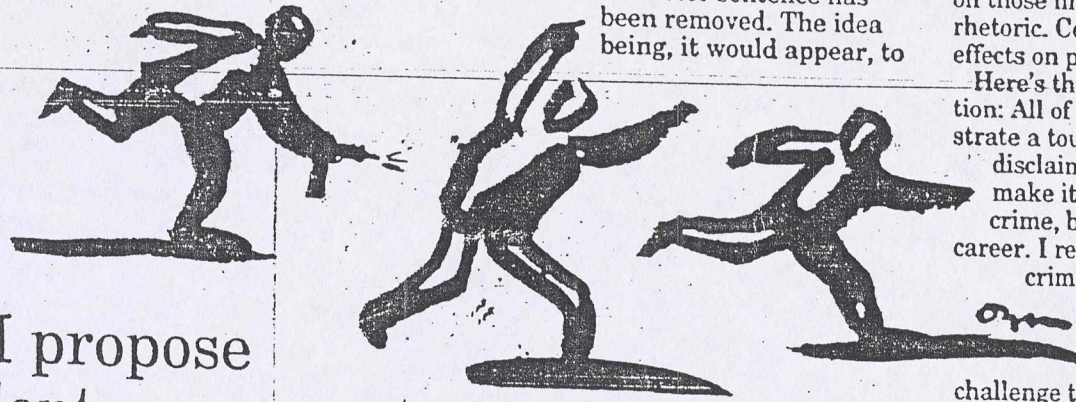


**T**ruth in sentencing? The latest twist demands certain felons serve at least 85 percent of their sentences, with no further time off for good behavior. I propose we also adopt "Truth in Legislation." A concept apparently alien to the fear mongers and blowhards in Sacramento.



For the past 14 1/2 years I have been serving a life term in the California Department of Corrections for a crime I committed when I was 19 years old. During this time I have witnessed the effect of the unprecedented politicization of crime from the inside. One politician after another has stood on the stump and proclaimed they were "against crime." Is anyone "for crime?"

In an endless procession they have promised to remove this scourge by a variety of hard-sounding proposals, most of which were either illogical or illegal. Like any frenzy, as this mania has become, it has reached its absurdest conclusion: To combat the "growing" crime problem, statutes have been rewritten that were enacted in the '60s and '70s to prevent the kinds of abuses that are endemic to the prison setting, whether in California, or anywhere else. In addition to taking away as much as possible, the chance to earn a shorter sentence has been removed. The idea being, it would appear, to

encourage civilized behavior prisons and jails will be allowed to revert to their former uncivilized condition.

The real problem is crime has a mind of its own, pretty much immune from the tinkering of politicians. The experts know this. What are the facts? The murder rate has not changed much in more than 20 years. The average length of a prison sentence is up, not down. Less than 5 percent of violent crime is committed by ex-cons. The overall crime rate is down in America. Most tellingly, the one category of crime that has shown a substantial increase is violence among young teen-agers. It seems the recent years of "get tough" policies have failed on those most impressionable, and have perhaps backfired.

This state has been in a prolonged economic downturn and the governor, having no real proposals to solve the underlying problems of

decreasing jobs and opportunities and increasing frustration and alienation, has turned to the tried and true: fear. Scare the citizens into stampeding away from efficient, humane and effective alternatives to the prison state, and instead, stop those convicts from watching television and lifting weights . . . that will take a bite out of crime!

What has actually occurred, and not been widely reported in the media, is a de facto declaration of war on prisoners and their families, in order to advance political careers. Caught in the middle are the men and women who work in the prisons, the majority of whom are trying to do a decent job. The governor and legislature are returning the prison system to the way it was before 1968, when he, and they, voted to extend a small measure of civil rights and humanity to prisoners. I doubt any of them have taken into consideration the reality of these decisions on the ground, or the effect they will have on those line staff who will be forced to enforce their rhetoric. Certainly they haven't considered the effects on prisoners and their families.

Here's the core of the "Truth in Legislation" position: All of these measures, introduced to demonstrate a tough attitude should from now on carry a disclaimer. It would read, "This is proposed to make it appear I am doing something about crime, but is really about advancing my political career. I realize it will have little or no effect on crime or the safety of the public." That would be the truth, for a change.

It is time to stop using the crime/victim/prison triad for political gain. I challenge the leaders of this state to sit down and enact measures that would have a real effect on the lives of the people. Increased use of community policing, reinstatement of slashed social services in the poorest of our neighborhoods, real job training and drug counseling for those inside the prisons, and an honest accounting of the criminal justice system's inability to deal successfully with its mission. Most importantly, devote serious resources, and real commitment, to reaching today's youthful offender before he becomes tomorrow's convict; that's just plain common sense.

Have the courage and moral integrity to stand in front of the people and be real, for a change. Truth in life, as well as legislation.

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