

Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley

Prison Reform: Why Not Now?



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There are currently more people incarcerated in the United States (2 million plus) than any other nation in the world. New York's state prison population contributes 54,000 to that total. This state also has some of the harshest prison sentences. If you receive 15 years to life in NY, chances are you will probably do 20 to 25 years, or more, before you're finally granted parole, regardless of whether you've

done everything required of you and stayed out of trouble in the process. There are no incentives to encourage positive change in prisoners. There's definitely something wrong with this picture.

Yet, in our neighboring state, New Jersey, someone could receive a 40 year sentence and be eligible for parole after 7 1/2 years, 9 1/2 at the latest. They could receive "life" and be released in between 12 and 16 1/2 years. At a time when incarcerating someone is approaching a cost of \$70,000 a year, it might seem a little strange that New York politicians continue to avoid the subject.

Truth be told, most NY pols are really not much concerned about how taxpayers' money may be wasted on prisons. What they're concerned about is maintaining the economy in upstate communities that depend on prisons for jobs. In essence, it's all about maintaining those jobs, not about rehabilitating the prison population. And, of course, don't forget the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association, representing 26,000 state employees and retirees. They guard the prisons and they vote.

The governor is aware of all this. Just look at some of his legislative efforts in the past year. He went out of his way to pass same sex marriage legislation, and then rushed into passing some of the toughest gun laws in the nation. Both of these moves infuriated many upstate residents. Now he seeks to recoup a little from those losses by avoid-

ing an honest look at the prison system and the reforms that are needed now.

Again, the special interests are at work on many issues. But there are interests on both sides of some issues. The governor pushes forward casino projects upstate, but so far has refused to allow fracking for natural gas. Newsflash from right here — people will be disappointed by casino salaries, mostly part time to avoid paying benefits. Everyone knows that upstaters need decent paying jobs, at least \$18 an hour to maintain a middle class lifestyle. And, of course, that's why the prison system is the "goose that lays the golden eggs."

So now we're talking about the 900 pound gorilla sitting right there in the corner — yes, genuine prison reform. Okay, the governor closed several prisons over the past two years, and plenty more will follow their demise. The prison population has been on a consistent decline in New York for the past decade, for several reasons, including repeal of the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Plus money is now being invested in alternatives to incarceration, such as crime prevention programs in New York City, which supplies a majority of the state's prison population.

So the supply is dwindling and prisons will close and, whether politicians like it or not, those prison jobs will go too. But what about those of us who are inside, caged up for decades on end? If politicians can ask and receive second, or even third chances (Spitzer, Weiner, etc.) then how about some forgiveness for us as well? We all have the ability to change for the better, and this is an era where most people believe everyone should get at least one second chance.

Alas, when it comes to prisoners, society is both predictable and contradictory. Thus, someone steals \$10 from a stranger and society is happy to lock the thief up for 5, 10, 15, "throw away the key" years. But hey, politicians and wealthy crooks on Wall Street regularly steal millions, often from you the taxpayers, and guess what... they're not in here.

What makes it so easy for them to ride above the law? Politicians should be held to even higher ethical standards. Maybe if more of them were in fear of doing real time in here they'd be more conscious of the need for prison reform now.