

PRISON SYSTEM OF OTHER DAYS

Possible Model For Future

By B. Coultman Smith

A STUDY of Lord Stanley's probation system, introduced in Tasmania in 1842 for the management and reform of English convicts, may have much to offer in the design of a new prison system for Tasmania. The system, expertly designed, was a failure, mainly because of inexperienced executives and an unprecedented number of convicts which flooded the Tasmanian labour market, but it certainly aimed at reform, and recognised the necessity of proper segregation.

THE system, it was announced from England, would be introduced with an almost unlimited expenditure of Government money, and promised to provide the settler with abundant cheap labour, and the transportee with relaxed discipline, better conditions, and early release for labour with payment.

However, it was doomed to failure from the beginning, for it was based on two sweeping assumptions—that there was a constant and pressing demand for labour in Tasmania, and that there existed a spirit of honour, appreciation, and reform in all the prisoners which would evidence itself with suitable treatment.

Five stages were planned for adult males: (1) Norfolk Island, for those with life or aggregated 15 years' sentences; (2) probation gangs, to work in opening up the country; (3) probation pass-holders, a semi-privileged class; (4) ticket-of-leave holders, to report to a magistrate periodically; (5) conditionally pardoned men, as free as the immigrant, but not permitted to return to their homeland until the original sentence had expired. Those not included in the Norfolk Island class were to begin at the second stage.

The convict spent two to four years at Norfolk Island, two years in the probation gangs, and was then given a probation pass, which entitled him to work for whom he pleased at a defined rate of pay. His wages were part

of a fixed rate of pay. His wages were part paid to the Government, his share increasing by stages until he received the lot.

When the scheme was announced in 1841, the settlers realised the danger of an overwhelming influx of prisoners, and the Press attacked it with warmth because of lack of proper accommodation, inexperience, and shortage of officers, and the class of men involved.

The forecasts proved only too true. Shipments of convicts were doubled, and between 1841 and 1844 about 16,000 arrived. Convict and semi-convict labour flooded the market, and immigration was stopped. Tasmanian free workmen fled as wages declined and unemployment increased. The exit reached stampede proportions in 1847, when 300 left for Victoria within a week, and 1,400 in three months. Thousands of unemployed probation-pass and ticket-holders accumulated at the convict hiring depots.

Protests to the home Government were unavailing, and it was the high-handed attitude met with that really spelt the death-knell of convictism in Tasmania.

THE probation system was wide in its scope. Whereas in 1841 the chief penal stations outside Tasman Peninsula were Marlborough, Nine Mile Marsh (between Ouse and Lake Echo), the Brickfields (Hobart), and Lake Echo, by the time the new system was in full swing more than 40 additional stations dotted the country. Darlington, (Mersey, Tas.)

more than 40 additional stations dotted the country. Darlington (Maria Island) which was reopened in 1842 as an agricultural centre, was held up as an ideal type of station. There was also a station at Long Pt. in the south of Maria Island, between 1848 and 1851. Darlington was again abandoned in 1850.

Other prominent probation stations were Southport, Dover, Oyster Cove, Lynnington, Wedge Bay (Nubeena), Port Cygnet, Nicholls Rivulet, Browns River, Bridgewater, Broadmarsh, Dromedary, Pontville, Bagdad, Parsons Pass (near Runnymede), Oatlands, Blackmans River (near Tunbridge), Jericho, Hamilton, Rocky Hills (near Swansea), Colebrook, Cleveland, Lovely Banks, Deloraine, Westbury, Mersey, Fingal, and St. Marys Pass. Each of these establishments housed a gang of 200 to 400 men, supervised by about eight officers, and the aim of the system was, as far as possible, to get the stations out of the settled districts.

Not only did probation-pass and ticket-of-leave labour swamp the market, but insufficient work could be found for the probation gangs to do, as their classes of employment were restricted by order of the Home Government. Many of the gangs were under lax discipline, had little or no work to do, and often were allowed to roam the countryside or visit the towns at night.

The course of moral guidance, in which so much confidence had been placed, just did not work out in many cases. Robberies by stealth, intimidation, and violence were of frequent occurrence. Many settlers' homes became stockaded forts, and no property was safe.

THE Tasmanian Press of the period has little criticism except that of lax administration. The following extract from the "Hobart Town Courier and Van Diemen's Land Gazette" at the end of 1841, when the system was being introduced, is interesting in the light of our present penal system:

"It has been a subject indeed of universal surprise and censure that a country conspicuous for humane institutions of every kind (England) should have continued to the present era utterly destitute in this respect, inasmuch that criminals committed for a first or slight offence for trial, or those committed under fallacious evidence and afterwards proved innocent are almost inevitably corrupted by the evil counsels of seasoned delinquents huddled into association with them until their several disposals.

"For the mental injury and enfeeblement of body which intelligent practical observers have declared inseparable from long imprisonment on its present basis, the probationary system substitutes vigorous exercise

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in a healthy atmosphere, and a course of instruction, combining together to invigorate both the intelligent and corporal faculties of those subjected to it. Cruelty, forsooth! The entire treatment of the convict is kinder than that of the unoffending English pauper under the existing Poor Law."

About this time, women felons were hired out to settlers for domestic work, or confined in the "Female House of Correction" at the Cascades, Hobart, according to their behaviour.

Point Puer was operating for the reclamation of erring juveniles, training them, and releasing them into Tasmanian life with a new chance and a new outlook.

THE probation system, for all its faults, had segregation and progressive reward for good behaviour and diligent labour—the essentials of any prison system. With departmental heads and the Government 12,000 miles away, it had little chance of success, and the ridiculously large number of persons it was expected to cope with ruined what little chance it had.

In Tasmania today we have the taxpayers, Government, and departmental heads on the spot, we have psychologically-experienced administrators, and we have small numbers to deal with.

Our prison reformers might well consider some system based on the same broad lines, for nobody can claim that a century-old building huddling together all and sundry penalised by the courts is an advance on Lord Stanley's system, for all its faults.