

# Taking on the System

## Claire Culhane

"I was a breech birth," Claire Culhane told a kingstons audience last week, "and I've had my foot in it ever since."

The words nicely evoke both her wit and her entanglement in political issues since she was a teenager. Claire Culhane, at 66, has radical bones. Look at what she had to say during an interview:

- "I'm into confrontation."

- "There are nuns (anti-nuclear protestors) in the U.S. doing two to five years. Eventually all thinking people will end up in prison under this system."

- "My concern is to keep the convicts alive so they can tear the place (prisons) down. Let's stop babysitting convicts and get into political action."

- Two slogans on her letterhead: "It is our duty to fight for our rights and our duty to win" and "Prisons are part of society. You can't change them until you change society. And that's a long and dangerous road."

Born in Montreal to Russian-Jewish parents, she supported the International Brigade fighting in the Spanish Civil War. In 1967 she became administrator of a hospital in Vietnam, an experience that led to her first book, *Why Is Canada In Vietnam? The Truth About our Foreign Aid.*

Back home she began teaching at a Vancouver community college and eventually got another "foot in it" — this time, Oakalla Prison. Her newest book, *Still Barred from Prison*, is the product of a 10-year hate relationship with a system that she says was meant to correct and rehabilitate but does neither.

Actively involved in international efforts to abolish prisons, Culhane argues that the \$4-billion criminal justice system in Canada is a growth industry that depends on "merchandise" — prisoners — for survival. Eighty per cent of prisoners are not violent, she says, and should be in the community doing restitution, not time.

"Some people want vengeance, if, for example, an impaired driver kills another man. It would be better to take away that man's license for life but leave him in the community where he could pay restitution to the widow and her children." She points to San Francisco, where community projects have shown that law-breaking can be handled locally. Culhane argues that of the remaining 20 per cent of the prison population only 1.1 per cent are truly violent and need to be imprisoned.

Culhane, in touch with prisoners across the country, has an inexhaustible supply of horror stories, a prisoner dying of multiple sclerosis, whose warden pleaded that

he be released. Denied. A blind prisoner in solitary confinement. One in constant agony from gunshot wounds has been denied crutches or medication; another swallowed 500 pills in a failed suicide attempt.

There is no law inside prisons, says Culhane, worse, there is no accountability. She urges that representative community groups — not Citizen's Advisory Committees, which are government-funded and, too often, government-controlled — spend time in prisons to monitor daily the situation.

Culhane believes that the existing system brutalizes 1/2 both keeper and convict. The stress on the former, especially those who simply want to do a good job, is overwhelming. "Con-lovers," she says, get their tires slashed; marital breakup among guards stands at 40 per cent. Culhane decries "groupism," a form of prejudice implying that all guards and convicts are cut from the same miserable mould.

Like all radical thinkers, Culhane challenges other definitions, especially such basic ones as *crime*. An assault on workers, she argues, is a crime, just as break-and-enter is a crime: "Eighty-four people died on the Ocean Ranger, through neglect. What if someone robbed a bank and killed 84 people? Wouldn't someone go to jail for that?" She quotes Bishop Remi de Roo of Victoria: "If people commit crimes through greed, that's worse than those who commit crimes through need."

History will judge whether Culhane and others like her are farsighted or mere cranks. But one has to admire her honesty. Some of her critics dismiss her as a grandmother basking in the affection of desperate people. To that, she says, "of course."

By Larry Scanlan

### UMKHONTO WE SIZWE



1:30 P.M. — 5:00 P.M.  
Kelley Building, Room 237  
"Human Rights of Prisoners of Conscious"  
Yusaf Saloojee seminar leader  
Please Note: A short break with free refreshments will be provided.

For further information contact the conference organizers  
Michael S. Zinck, Program Director  
Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce At  
(W) 892-3424  
(H) 566-5120

Carolyn Ryan, V-P Academic  
UPEI Student Union at (w) 556-0530  
UPEI Student Union Office

THE NETTED GEM

\* Prison Activist \* CLAIRE CULHANE \* Peace Activist \*

### INVITATION

The Women's Studies Group invites students and faculty to hear Clair Culhane, prison activist, peace activist, and author of *Still Barred From Prison: Social Injustice in Canada*. At this Family of Woman class, open to the public, she will speak on the reality of prisons in Canada, particularly women and prisons.

Date: Wednesday, 2 October 1985

Time: 7:00 — 8:30 P.M.

Place: RL-111 (Robertson Library Lecture Theatre)

"The intent of this book is clear — to link the prison abolition movement with other political struggles for fundamental change. A formidable task, but one which must be tackled — with creativity, with enthusiasm, and with a passion."

(Still Barred From Prison. p. 180)



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