

## Private-Enterprise Prisons?

PETER GREENWOOD

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## Why Not? The Job Would Be Done Better and at Less Cost

By PETER GREENWOOD

In the past month, people at the highest levels of state government have offered proposals for accommodating our expanding prison population, and now Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr. is proposing a quarter-cent sales tax increase to raise \$2.5 billion for that purpose. But bigger, newer prisons will not necessarily be better prisons. Only true innovation will address the larger problem of why our system of incarceration is such a mess. And when you're looking for innovators you don't look to government; you look to business.

Nationwide, our prisons are a disaster area, and a recent congressional study predicted that the situation will get worse in the next decade. Facilities are antiquated and overcrowded. The level of violence and racial tension is up. Few correctional facilities offer worthwhile correctional programs; most are nothing more than holding cages that warehouse criminals until their time of release. Post-release supervision and treatment are minimal.

Half the states are under court orders to upgrade their prison facilities, and a building boom has been under way for 10 years. There have been some bright spots, but fundamentally the system has not improved.

We need a better way to handle society's offenders—prisons that can provide decent living space and insure the security of the inmates; programs to teach inmates productive work habits and prepare them to return to society; better prison administrators and guards who will approach their work with some degree of creativity and human decency.

The government is not going to give us better prisons, better programs or better personnel. It has tried, but it can't. There are no incentives for the government to control costs or to do things better. And, under government personnel practices, there are few incentives for any but the least able people to make a career of correctional work. So it is time to get government out of the prison business.

Who could take over? The same people who run other large institutions, such as hospitals and colleges. The same people who have developed techniques for serving thousands of meals and for housing travelers. The same people who run most of the job-training programs in this country: private enterprise.

There is absolutely no reason why the operation of our prisons could not be contracted out, and there are plenty of reasons to believe that the job would be done better, at less cost.

There is nothing about running a prison that requires the government to be involved. If private agencies can run government-funded hospitals, drug- and alcohol-treatment programs and job-training programs, they can run prisons, too.

Private enterprise could be brought into the picture very easily. A state could simply announce that it was going to contract out the operation of its prisons, or just one prison on an experimental basis, for a limited time or on renewable terms. The successful bidder would be responsible for the secure housing, feeding, medical care and training of a specified number of prisoners.

State officials would still retain authority for all decisions about changes in custody level or time of release for individual offenders. They would also conduct hearings and assign appropriate punishments for disciplinary problems, as they do today.

Since private enterprise would take on the job only if profits were in the offing, contracts could be written to provide incentives for improved services. Contractors could be paid bonuses for reducing the average recidivism rate or increasing the number of inmates who successfully completed educational or job-training programs. Or they could be penalized for allowing escapes or attacks by one inmate on another.

What could private prison managers do that government can't? Quite simply, they would be free to innovate, to use the latest technology and management techniques as in any profit-motivated service industry. These might include closed-circuit monitors to increase inmates' personal security, numerous and easily accessible areas for quiet study or diversified entertainment, video-cassette devices for education and job training, fast-food services such as those that have revolutionized airline and hotel catering, and so on.

As we know, our prisons are a mess and getting worse. New approaches are imperative. Why not give private enterprise a chance?

*Peter Greenwood is head of the criminal-justice research program at the Rand Corp., Santa Monica.*