

# C U S J

## Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice

*A national faith-based organization founded in support of Unitarian values*

President, Katharine Im-Jenkins

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The Honourable Vic Toews,  
Minister of Public Safety  
House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6

Prime Minister Stephen Harper  
Government of Canada  
House of Commons, Ottawa, Ontario

January 10, 2010

Re: Closure of Prison Farms

Dear Prime Minister Harper and Hon. Vic Toews, MP:

The Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice (CUSJ) notes that the greenhouse has been closed down at the Pittsburg Prison farm and fears that your plans to close Canada's prison farms, and to cancel mandatory statutory release and accelerated parole review are happening too quickly without sufficient public consultation. These actions will reduce access to rehabilitation and training for inmates in Canada's prison system.

CUSJ believes that the prisoners benefit directly from their prison farm experiences, by caring for and nurturing animals, providing food for local consumers, following routines, running farm machinery and working outdoors in a healthy environment. Witnesses tell us that animal therapy is very effective for many people who have not managed to fit into society. The prisoners themselves talk about how much they value the program, how they willingly get up at 4:30 a.m. each morning to milk cows and perform other farm tasks. The positive interaction they have with the animals is a new experience for many of them. In this environment they learn many transferable work skills that apply to both farming and other employment opportunities. Prisoners are people with human rights and human needs, and the prison farms are one of our most powerful tools to rehabilitate people and ready them for coming back into society.

In addition, the prison farms are an integral part of the local economy in the areas where they operate. They provide farm products to local organizations, donations to non-profit groups and jobs to companies that provide materials for the farms. Closing the farms will mean that all the eggs, milk and other produce that the farms have provided will need to be obtained elsewhere.....where? from outside Canada? Currently, the prison farms provide much food to the inmate populations in our jails. It is hard to see how the government is going to save money by closing these farms.

Since an unjustly high proportion of our inmates in federal prisons are Aboriginal, we also believe that prison farms should not be closed without wide public consultation, particularly with First Nations communities. In the Aboriginal healing paradigm, prison farms provide three relational outcomes:

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1. They help the wrongdoer understand, on an emotional level, the value of creating caring and responsible relationships with husbandry, which is a transferable behaviour to people and society.
2. They help the wrongdoer work towards seeing different ways of relating so as to reduce the likelihood of creating future relational disharmony; and
3. They help the wrongdoer transform past dysfunctional relationships into respectful ones.

Why are we removing what is perhaps the most positive part of our prison system in order to replace it with an inhuman, American-style warehousing approach to our security problems?

Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the need for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Prison farms exemplify these values in relation to our inmate populations and we would like to see them strengthened rather than closed down.

I would appreciate a meeting with you to discuss this issue further.

Yours sincerely,

Katharine Im-Jenkins  
President  
Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice