

Reflections on Kingston Pen

Ricky Atkinson

I first heard of Kingston Penitentiary – Canada’s oldest icon to man’s inability to get along – as a child growing up in an Afro-Métis family of primarily migrants from Nova Scotia back 200 years. During my lifetime, we had the dubious distinction of having the most extended family members incarcerated at one time across this country for offences ranging from murder, robbery, prostitution, petty theft and drug dealing. When my father was alive, he experienced the hanging of his relative, Daniel Sampson, in Halifax in 1935, along with the subsequent hangings of his cousins George and Rufus Hamilton in New Brunswick in 1949. He in fact ended-up in prison because he defended himself against a white racist who didn’t want Black men working on a ship in Halifax harbour and attacked him. Things didn’t go well for the racist and my father was charged. Kingston Pen was a place to be feared. Deep within – from as long as I can remember – I knew it was a place anyone in our family could easily end up in. From colonial times our family faced the lawman, the judge, the hangman and lawless racist citizens enough for me to know the fragility of freedoms others took for granted.

I first saw KP in early January 1972 from the window of a 1959 Chrysler limo rented from a local Kingston funeral home. It was cheaper and easier for Corrections Canada to rent transportation periodically then to own a bus at the time before they required a fleet of buses to transport prisoners headed there. Having arrived at KP just months after Canada’s bloodiest prison riot and seeing the prison gates open, I couldn’t wait to get inside to see my uncles, cousins, friends from the neighbourhood, co-accused and future crime partners. I was only 17 years old and had just narrowly missed a life sentence for doing robberies for what I believe was the Black Panther Party under the guidance of Baltimore chapter founder Warren Hart who had been operating out of Toronto.

My first impression of KP guards was that they were well armed and strict but fair. I assumed fairness was imparted to them by new federal government policies under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s “Just Society” and the fact that a bunch of them were taken hostage during the deadly riot. Upon entering the Pen, I was offered a slew of assessments lasting six weeks to determine what prison and programs best suited me for the purposes of rehabilitation. There were nine in the area at the time. Due to my young age and aptitude testing, I qualified to go to university from Collins Bay (Queen’s) or college from Bellevues, also known as Warkworth (Loyalist). Warkworth was a new, level 3 security institution with less restrictions inside and less security around it. Post-secondary education was free for the very few prisoners who would take it.

While at a KP transfer board hearing, I was told that only seven Black people were allowed into Warkworth at one time and that I – as a level 4 security prisoner – would have to wait for placement. Once one Black prisoner left, I was instead sent to Millhaven to await transfer to Collins Bay to wait my turn to go to Warkworth. Collins Bay was called a “gladiator school” for its numerous fights and stabbings. There was a murder there over a \$5 debt the week I was supposed to be sent over. I ended-up at Millhaven maximum-security – a level 6 institution – to wait for a bed at Collins Bay while the murder investigation took place. I was glad to get out of old KP with its rats, vermin, heightened anxiety over the riot, and pockets of racist prisoners that had to be fought off. But that experience

embittered me and negated all the program assessments I had received up to that point. I then leaned towards Black radical anti-government politics and prisoners who espoused such beliefs. I gained a reputation for being a multi-racial prison leader who wouldn't easily back down in the struggle for prisoner rights.

I was eventually paroled to Montreal, where I became that province's boxing champion. I had hopes of settling there and not getting involved in crime again. I had broken the chains that bound many of my relatives, had the gift of athleticism and the willingness learn other things in school or on a job site. I couldn't say that my fleeting rehabilitation came because of my prison experiences starting with KP or in spite of them. The fact that the Government of Canada set me up with Black Panther Warren Hart and paid him to further criminalize me burned within me. I didn't want to hustle, rob or pimp to get by. I wanted to experience life as a square John and picked a strange new city to experience it. I was going to give a 'crime free lifestyle' a shot.

I then made a bad choice after getting into a car accident and needing to pay for car repairs. I decided to go back to Toronto to rob a bank and did. Feeling that rush and armed with new knowledge that Warren Hart was a government rat, I ignited the old Black Panther crew and we began to rob banks and crack safes, resulting in parole violations and more trips back to Kingston Pen. I returned there myself at least five times until 1983, when KP went full protective custody. I'd rather die like some of my crew did in shootouts with the police during the time when we robbed over a hundred banks, many jewellery stores, safety deposit boxes, earning a fierce reputation and picking-up the police moniker "The Dirty Tricks Gang" than accept being a goof.

By 2012, I suffered another parole violation and ended-up back at KP. Completing parole is the hardest part of doing a sentence. The Parole Board doesn't need you to actually commit a crime to lock you up. The reasons for yanking your freedom in the name of 'protecting society' often seem vindictive, idiotic, racist and counterproductive. My 2012 parole violation taught me who the boss was. I went to work painting a Mosque where my old co-accused was a teacher. He hadn't been in trouble for two decades, so I thought I was safe from the Parole Board, especially because at the time I was putting on a boxing charity event for a hospital my grandchild was born premature in and for a social enterprise called the Canadian Youth Project out of the Atkinson Coop named after my father for his stance against crack that I helped start with a military police sergeant who grew up in the same housing project I did. The Parole Board took exception that I was back in my neighbourhood helping kids. During my revocation hearing, one Parole Board member stated, "I don't believe you're in that neighbourhood helping people, but are there to start a new gang we won't be able to stop!" I brushed these racist fears aside and eventually got back out to do good in the neighbourhood.

At that point, I had spent over 32 years in prison, was still doing a 50-year sentence, and had the dubious distinction of being on KP's last TD (Transfer Detention) range before it closed its doors to guys like me. The short time I spent in KP in 2012 awaiting for the parole hearing was the worst time of all the many prison sentences I had done. The noise, unlike any of the other times I passed through its iron gates, the insanity, prisoners screaming and threatening guards as they had just before the old riot who had obvious mental issues with no help in sight, was all scary. There were divisions between racial and cultural groups that had intensified due to the greater variety of street gangs from all over the province. This created a different racial paradigm for new prisoners to navigate. There were also many sex offenders in general population, leaving a sour taste in the mouths of younger prisoners who had a negative impression of all older prisoners who used to be listened to or asked for advice. The

culture of doing time would be hardly recognizable to the group of convicts I first came in with back in 1972. The prison experiment that I was a part of, through successive governments over a 40-year period, was a failure. Nothing good can come out of the memory of KP, no matter what is done with it.

What do I think of this institution continuing to exist as a destination for tourists? They can read about KP in my autobiography or Roger Caron's books like *Go Boy! Memories of a Life Behind Bars* as well as *Bingo! The Horrifying Eyewitness Account of a Prison Riot*. We lived there, suffered there, learned to hate there, write there, and transform there. At one point during my odyssey in the Canadian carceral state, I was transferred to a penitentiary in BC. My daughter-in-law had bought a house on the grounds of the old BC Pen in New Westminster. At the time, there was a small museum and tourist spot. A co-accused and friend of mine who had done time in almost every pen in Canada had a girlfriend named Mary, who was the girl taken hostage in the very room that is now a tourist restaurant. The incident happened when her boyfriend and a guard were killed in an escape attempt. I asked her how she felt about it being a tourist spot, and the look in her eye was the look I give any idiot who wants to profit off the misery of so many people who either deserve KP punishment or not.

There is a museum right across the street from KP that depicts the real pain, instruments of torture and threats to public safety, which is run by former penitentiary system staff. This property, along with KP, should be turned into commercial land and housing with a reminder that attracts tourists not to the supposed greatness the Pen brought to the City of Kingston in low-paying jobs and wasted taxpayer dollars to run it, but to the stain on society KP and the carceral still brings.

Often I think of being back in prison, where my parole can't be yanked for nothing more than being on the wrong side of the street, talking to the wrong person like a former criminal, trying to get the right job with the wrong resume, and dealing with parole folks who have high paying jobs who got in the business of helping others transform for public safety whose skills are made impotent by the insanity of the institution they work for or who shouldn't be in the people helping business at all. I wonder what sense it makes to glorify the prison industrial complex and support the ideology of a failed system that doesn't do what it's meant to do at the cost that comes with it. We must move ahead with forward thinking programs and not look back drooling over the little amount of money one can make in the prison tourist business. It would be nice for our children to ask, "why did they build those huge stupid prisons in the first place?" We should be closing prisons, not building more, unless our Black and Indigenous folks still need to know who's the boss at such great expense in both financial and human terms.

To learn more about the life of Ricky Atkinson and the failures of imprisonment read:

Atkinson, Richard & Joe Fiorito (2017) *The Life Crimes and Hard Times of Ricky Atkinson, Leader of the Dirty Tricks Gang: A True Story*, Toronto: Exile Editions.