

CRIME IS NOT A PROBLEM

Ernest J. Farmer

J. Edgar Hoover, in the American Magazine for March, states that there are about six million criminals in the United States. Such a proportion, more than one in twenty-five of the population, indicates a serious degree of social demoralization. Canada has always been a comparatively law-abiding country, but since in this Dominion crime has been increasing some five times as fast as population, we must face the possibility of equal or greater demoralization. Indeed, Mr. C. F. Neelands, Deputy Provincial Secretary of Ontario, recently forecast a considerable crime wave during the next few years.

Under a wholesome social system, crime would be a rarity. One of the keenest of human desires is, to be of good repute. The average man is not keenly sensitive about anti-social behavior. He would not greatly mind being seen in the company of a company director known to have bribed public officials, for, although such bribery is actually a crime it is one for which the perpetrators are seldom brought to punishment. But he has a horror of "jailbirds" -- he would not like to be seen with one who had served 30 days for an offence much less serious than bribery. Still less would he risk such a sentence. There are indeed rare cases of persons who appear to be born with a perverted psychological make-up, showing itself in childhood, which prompts them not only to anti-social actions but to a defiance of authority, or more often to a belief in their own ability to escape detection. But allowing for such cases, if more than two or three persons in a thousand become criminals, it shows a serious defect in the social organization.

All laws limit people's actions in a way which may be irksome. Their only justification is, that they limit anti-social actions while promoting those which are generally beneficial. But governments have in countless cases acted perversely, making crimes of beneficial actions. At one time it was in several States of the Union a crime, punishable by two years' imprisonment, to teach a colored person to read, or to have in possession printed matter advocating the abolition of slavery. As regards this particular crime, the criminals were better men than the ones who prosecuted, judged and punished them.

Almost a century ago Patrick Edward Dove wrote, in his "Theory of Human Progression": "The act of transport in which the smuggler is engaged is one of the most legitimate modes of exercising the human powers. First, it is profitable to the foreign seller. Second, it is profitable to the merchant. Third, it is profitable to the carrier. Fourth, it is profitable to the home consumer; for if the goods were not more highly esteemed by him than the money, he would

not purchase them at the price. And fifth, it is injurious to no one. The first three are money profits; the fourth, a profit of convenience and gratification. But the moral effects are no less beneficial. First, the man who is engaged in lawful trading is well employed, and likely to be a peaceful and good citizen. Second, the fact of purchasing from a foreigner gives the trader an interest in that foreigner, and eminently tends to break down those national antipathies which have descended from the darker ages. The buyer and the seller are a step farther from war every bargain they conclude in honest dealing; and the iniquitous doctrine, that "a Frenchman is the natural enemy of an Englishman" must every day find its practical refutation in the substantial benefits of trade. First, then, the prohibitory law sacrifices all these benefits, and the law of restriction diminishes them to the full extent of its restriction. But what takes place? The contraband trader is created by the prospect of gain arising from the increase of price. The increase of price, instead of being a benefit to the legal trader, is his curse. It is neither more nor less than a premium held out to the smuggler to evade the custom and to undersell the legal trader, thereby tending constantly to reduce his profit as well as to diminish his sale. But this is not all. It is a premium to the reckless to break the law; and the man who lives in the breach of the law soon becomes a ruined character and a ruined man. There are, perhaps, few courses of life that end in ruin so so certainly as the smuggler's; and yet, barring the law, the acts in which he is engaged are perfectly innocent and perfectly legitimate."

The great evil of the tariff, however, is not that it makes criminals of a comparative few who are engaged in what is properly legitimate business, but that it contributes to the unemployment, the frustration, which overcomes the natural repugnance to crime and makes criminals of normal human beings.

The great fault of our social system, however, is that it artificially makes the most important anti-social practices profitable. Many persons in this country maintain slum dwellings -- dwellings so overcrowded and unsanitary that the inhabitants die off at twice the normal rate. The material and spiritual harm done each year by this practice is many times greater than that done by any of the practices punishable under the criminal code. Under a wholesome social system this practice would be unprofitable -- there would be nobody to pay rent for slum dwellings. But our system keeps many in such condition of poverty that they are compelled to inhabit such places. It further encourages the slum landlord by supplying public services to his holdings at a quarter or less of the cost, while compelling the owners of sound properties to make up the difference. The result is that the slum landlord's profits per acre are several times those of the decent landlord's.

Behind the slum landlord is the still greater social offender who makes slums profitable -- the land speculator. Holding land idle when it is needed for use is a most wasteful practice. Under a sane

social system the loss occasioned would fall upon the person responsible, so that land would be held wastefully idle only through miscalculation, for short periods. But our unnatural and illogical system allows this evil practice to be profitable. It has become not only a greater social evil than any one of the practices punishable as crimes, but greater than all such put together.

And so the victims of these evil practices come to be in such a parlous state that they desperately revolt and create a so-called "problem". Crime is not a problem. It is an evil which perhaps can not be entirely eradicated, but which can be reduced to a twentieth, a fiftieth or less of its present proportions by known means. The real problem is, how to overcome the opposition of the "respectable" but dangerously anti-social persons who profit by the social misdeeds which produce criminals.

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