

# Violent Us

By a PRISON GOVERNOR

LONDON—If criminals are to be punished even more severely (be it hanged or beaten or flogged or psychologically assaulted, humiliated, degraded, or broken as human beings) who is supposed to do the punishing?

Where will the wild men who advocate such punishment recruit those who will punish other men as their daily contribution to the health of society?

There are, of course, in every society, sick and perverted men and women who would gladly spend their lives as professional punishers, degraders, humiliators, hurters, torturers and killers of their fellow men—people who are fulfilled by psychological and physical violence against others. They exist in every society. But when any society legitimizes their perversion by employing them in numbers to degrade and punish and destroy, that society itself is sick unto death.

We know about the Gestapo, the SS and the concentration camps and the gas chambers. In our own time we see around us in this stricken world the same phenomena. God forbid that our society, sick though it is, should decide to employ professional punishers. When we do, if we do, civilization has gone ultimately from our society. These are not times in which we can afford to stand lightly by such matters.

The task of the Prison Service in our country is to ameliorate, as best it can, the appalling effects of imprisonment.

Prison staff are not employed to punish or to degrade. The only punishment the courts deal out in this respect is loss of liberty. Prison governors are instructed to hold in custody, not to punish prisoners. Loss of liberty is terrible enough for most men to bear without additional punishment.

Imprisonment — especially in the quite appalling conditions of over-

## *The Burgesses Would Turn Prisons Into Torture Chambers*

crowding which exist today and which will continue to exist for as long as can be reasonably anticipated — can degrade and dehumanize both prisoners and staff alike unless there is constant moral vigilance and an unremitting conviction that human beings, even in captivity, must be treated with respect as persons and accorded the highest degree of dignity possible in their circumstances.

Only such an attitude, and the behavior appropriate to it within the penal system, can preserve the fabric of civilized society. Civilization is a tenuous concept even in Britain today. If the present staff of prisons are forced to become, or are replaced by, professional punishers and degraders, society will not be helped.

I, for one, would want no part in a society which employed men for such a task and which legitimized violence of such a kind.

I am more afraid—and all of us should be more afraid—of the violence of those respectable burgesses who cry for death and blood and pain and degradation for criminals, than I am of criminals themselves—and I have known thousands of criminals. The violence of the frightened burgess is the most terrifying of all, and the most destructive of all.

What we need to recognize more than anything else in our disintegrating world is that violence is not a problem only of the criminal.

*This letter is excerpted from The Guardian of London, where it was published ten days ago. The author is Governor of an English prison who asked that his name be withheld.*

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See NYTimes 17 Sep 71, article titled "Violent Us,"  
by unnamed Governor of British prison.