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EDITORIAL

PRISON CONDITIONS.

In the House of Lords an interesting debate took place on March 3rd on Prison Conditions.

The Earl of Kinnoull drew attention to the conditions obtaining in his Majesty's prisons and asked whether any reforms were contemplated. He also asked whether the idea of imprisonment was purely a matter of revenge against a person who had broken the social code or whether the purpose was to reform that person. He referred to a recently published book, "Walls Have Mouths," by Mr. Macartney, an ex-convict, and said that if the statements in it were true a great many reforms were necessary. In connection with a reported incident at Parkhurst, the noble lord said that warders had no right to say to a prisoner that convicts had no rights. He referred to deficiencies in lighting and water services at the prison, and said that to-day we did not want old castles of the kind in which prisoners were kept 300 years ago and that out-of-date prisons should be done away with.

Another thing that must get on a convict's nerves was the unnecessary amount of nagging that went on. There were also the long hours of confinement, which must be perfectly dreadful and which seemed unnecessary. The Government would not spend money on having more warders. The convicts' food should be varied a little, and there should not be the terrible monotony in it that now existed.

Nearly all convicts had a mental kink and most of them would be far better treated by a psychologist or a doctor than by prison treatment. He could not understand why in a prison people were kept on the observation landing for years and, when let out, were promptly discharged to the county asylum. Other matters that needed reform concerned the length of visits to convicts, the practice of policemen making inquiries at the homes of people who were to visit convicts, convicts' access to books, and cases where money sent to a convict without the sender enclosing his name and address was sequestered.

Government Reply.

The Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, Lord in Waiting, said that he had never heard so many allegations made in one book by one convict without any attempt to produce evidence from outside sources. It would be a waste of time to go in detail into the allegations made by Mr. Macartney. He had referred to nagging by warders and had said that this led to assaults on them. The assaults on officers at Parkhurst during 1928, 1929 and 1930 were two, three and nine respectively.

Then there was talk of the long hours which the

prisoner spent alone in his cell during the week-end. The ordinary prisoner was out of his cell for at least nine hours over the week-end, and many men were out for a much longer period.

The Prison Commissioners, in their annual report for 1922-23, said that their purpose was not to make prisons pleasant, but to construct a system of training such as would fit the prisoner to re-enter the world as a citizen, and the results had proved that the ideals outlined by the Commissioners were directed aright. That present methods were proving successful was demonstrated by the fact that in 1910 the prison population of this country was just under 21,000, and at the present moment it was only 10,000, and that these methods were not forcing people who had been in prison back into a criminal life. The principle of solitary confinement had been practically done away with, and for both convicts and prisoners serving hard labour separate confinement was finally abolished in 1931. Every prisoner now, unless there was a medical reason against it, worked from the beginning of his sentence in association with other prisoners.

But association had its dangers. Contamination might easily follow if all classes of prisoners were allowed to mix freely together. Therefore the object of reform had always been to classify prisoners as clearly as possible. The first classification was the institution of Borstal, which had taken one-sixth of the prison population and put them in places where they could not be contaminated by older and more vicious criminals.

It was the firm policy of the Commissioners to reduce to a minimum the period during which the prisoners were locked in their cells, and they did that for the reason that if you wanted to fit a man to come out and take his part in life again it was important to approximate as far as possible the conditions of prison to the conditions of human association.

Women Officers in Male Prisons.

It is evident from this debate that the work of Elizabeth Fry and John Howard is still being carried on, and yet we could welcome a little more imagination in the treatment of criminals. How about Women Officers in Male Prisons? This is a reform which may come, but perhaps not in our time. But do not scoff at such an eventuality. As a child we once saw a man on the treadmill for poaching a pheasant. He was a rogue no doubt, but he shouted down a message of love to his wife left at home with eight hungry children. In a fury we demanded that the wheel should be stopped. That barbarity was swept away many years ago. Had Elizabeth Fry been Governor of that prison, we doubt if the sight would have burned into our consciousness for a lifetime.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)