FEATURE

Bringing a prison abattoir back from the dead

Public Safety Canada has reopened the door to a controversial operation that offers up federal inmate labour at an Ontario slaughterhouse, according to tender documents.

BY CALVIN NEUFELD

Public Safety Minister Gary Anandasangaree oversees CSC, which is seeking a business to independently operate a currently defunct abattoir at Kingston, Ont.'s Joyceville Institution. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

The 68-year-old abattoir is in extremely poor condition, even for its age, writes Calvin Neufeld. *Photographs courtesy of Calvin Neufeld*

Four years after the Correctional Service of Canada closed its last abattoir, a tender has been issued seeking a private company to lease the slaughterhouse at Joyceville Institution in Kingston, Ont., with the promise of free prison labour.

The proposed lease commits the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) to "providing a minimum of two eligible offenders at a time."The company will pay rent, but "is not responsible for any payment to CSC or the offenders for the training of the offender-trainees."

All meat will be sold commercially.

Built in 1958 to feed prisons, the abattoir was commercialized in 1995 and operated by Wallace Beef for 27 years under a provincial licence, which permitted meat sales throughout Ontario. The abattoir closed in September 2022 when the owner of Wallace Beef retired.

One potential bidder at the June 11 mandatory site visit I attended said they intended to seek a federal licence, opening interprovincial and international markets.

The free carceral labour, according to the potential bidder, was a welcome prospect since "no one wants to do this job."

Political-penal tug-of-war

While the abattoir has seemingly lain dormant since its 2022 closure, access-to-information records reveal four years of friction between CSC and its governing authority, Public Safety Canada.

The records are clear: CSC does not want to lease the abattoir.

After the closure, CSC's chief financial officer Tony Matson informed then-public safety minister Marco Mendicino that "we do not support the leasing of the abattoir."

"Maintaining the abattoir in our portfolio for the training of 2-3 inmates (as was the case in the past), goes against TBS [Treasury Board Secretariat] policy and is not appropriate stewardship of government resources."

CSC's senior director facilities François Sauvé added that their industry training arm, CORCAN, "has confirmed that they do not need the abattoir to provide vocational training to inmates."

CSC's "bottom line" was that any recommendation to reopen would violate government policy and "may invite scrutiny by TBS analysts."

As CSC began developing a "business case for divestment," the Liberals mobilized, making a federal priority out of this localized issue.

Spearheading the lobbying was Liberal MP Mark Gerretsen, who rallied farmers, industry groups, and allied politicians calling for the government to revive slaughter services at Joyceville Institution so farmers can bring their meat to market "ethically, and profitably."

Gerretsen scored a victory after bringing then-public safety minister Dominic LeBlanc to the abattoir in May 2024. Days later, LeBlanc ordered CSC to post an expression of interest (EOI) for leasing the abattoir.

CSC did not identify the abattoir in the EOI, describing it only as "a building(s)" for potential lease.

After LeBlanc was replaced by then-minister David McGuinty in December 2024, CSC prepared to notify bidders that "the Correctional Service Canada has decided against leasing the building(s)."

After McGuinty was replaced by now-Public Safety Minister Gary Anandasangaree in May 2025, CSC briefed Anandasangaree of its decision not to lease. That decision was overruled after Anandasangaree visited Gerretsen in July 2025 to discuss "management of federal properties owned by Correctional Service Canada."

When Conservative MP Scott Reid questioned the subversive steps towards a new abattoir lease in November 2024, the government answered: "ministers and politicians do not get involved."

A history of ministers and politicians getting involved

As per access documents, in 1997, two years into the "co-venture" with Wallace Beef, CSC terminated the partnership over violations and demanded an "orderly evacuation of the premises." For undisclosed reasons, this did not occur.

In 2003, the abattoir closed for investigations into improper slaughter, drug trafficking, money laundering, and other alleged activities "dramatically complicating security." A month later, the abattoir reopened under a "temporary agreement," with two significant changes: CSC increased security, and removed the meat from prison menus. Thenceforth, the prison meat was eaten only by "unsuspecting consumers" served by hundreds of Ontario farms, restaurants, and businesses.

In 2009, CSC decided to close the abattoir on March 31, 2011, but industry lobbyists persuaded then-Conservative public safety minister Peter Van Loan to overrule CSC's decision because, among other reasons, they said the abattoir allows farmers to "realize more profitability in their businesses."

In 2014, when the abattoir was dumping blood into the prison's water treatment system, CSC staff wanted "to cease operation of the facility" since "we cannot be policing the abattoir at all times." Instead, the operation continued because of "commitments made by the Commissioner to the Minister [in 2009] to keep the abattoir open."

Problems persisted, and in 2018, CSC prepared to notify Wallace Beef "of the lease termination." Instead, the lease was renewed "because of the unknown farm matters"—referring to then-Liberal public safety minister Ralph Goodale's as-yet-unfulfilled plan for CORCAN to milk thousands of goats at Joyceville Institution to supply a Chinese infant formula company.

Wanting to "distance ourselves," then-CORCAN CEO Kelly Hartle emphasized in internal communications that "the Abattoir is NOT part of the CORCAN agriculture program," and "we should not make any statement about CORCAN and the abattoir."

Under the old partnership, Wallace Beef paid prisoners $1.50 to $3.00 per hour, channelled through CORCAN. Since the closure, CORCAN has "no interest" in a new abattoir lease.

The new lease, which waives payment for prisoners, makes no mention of CORCAN.

Industry muscle and political machinations

Several politicians have joined the pro-abattoir chorus. Ontario Senator Robert Black supports the "profit-sharing venture," and Kingston Mayor Bryan Paterson says reopening will benefit "inmates and the broader economy" by "fostering a symbiotic relationship between farmers and the abattoir."

The relationship might be better described as parasitic.

Beef Farmers of Ontario resolved in 2023 to lobby Ottawa to reopen the abattoir, condemning the spread of "disparaging mistruths" about training prisoners to kill. The "mistruths" consist of peer-reviewed academic research establishing links between slaughter work and increased rates of aggression, domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, trauma, and substance abuse. The work also carries high risk of injury.

CSC staff were aware of the dangers of slaughter work, refusing to conduct medical and psychological assessments to place prisoners in abattoir jobs, citing "liability concerns."

Ignoring the evidence, Mendicino said slaughter gives prisoners "the tools, the experience and the skills that are necessary to safely reintegrate into their communities."

In May 2022, Reid questioned the carceral labour in Joyceville's abattoir. Then-Liberal MP Pam

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Damoff, Mendicino's parliamentary secretary, said she had visited the prison and "to my knowledge, there is no slaughterhouse." Not to be mistaken for ignorance, records show that weeks earlier, Damoff had passed along correspondence to Mendicino's office about the abattoir.

More dramatically, on March 18, March 21, March 22, April 19, and April 30 of 2024, Gerretsen presented repeat petitions to reopen the abattoir. Each time, he made a point of saying that the petitions are "from farmers primarily from the riding to the north of mine, which is Lanark-Frontenac-Kingston," and, "I do not know why the member for Lanark-Frontenac-Kingston [Reid] did not present this, but I will do it on behalf of his constituents."

This ignorance, too, was feigned. According to CSC's notes, the petition was Gerretsen's idea during an abattoir visit with farmers on March 6, 2024: "MP Gerretsen encouraged a group of the guests to submit a Petition through Parliament to lobby for the reopening of the Abattoir."

The tender was posted May 28, the day Public Safety's Talal Dakalbab formally replaced Anne Kelly as CSC's commissioner. Dakalbab has committed to "talk to the media" and promote greater transparency by CSC.

The Hill Times invited CSC to comment about the rehabilitative value of training prisoners to kill. Jordan Crosby, CSC's manager of issues management and media relations who drafted Public Safety's abattoir speaking notes, responded by terminating this journalist's media access.

Reality check

The 68-year-old abattoir is in extremely poor condition, even for its age. Its depreciated market value is $61,245.

Since 2022, CSC has spent up to $2.3-million cleaning, disinfecting, repairing, and maintaining the empty abattoir and assessing its condition (saving as much—$2.4-million—firing prison librarians). This includes $435,000 spent in 2022, $500,000 forecast for 2023, $678,401 forecast for 2024 and 2025, and $714,664.52 spent on reports assessing further costs of repairs.

Demolishing, by comparison, would cost between $738,000 and $955,000.

Despite the "minor" work that CSC has undertaken to "stabilize the building condition while options are explored," the abattoir still has visible rot, debris, pests, snakes, birds, and other "conditions that may interfere with its hygienic operation or contaminate carcasses," potentially making a new licence unattainable.

Further repairs are assessed at $2,557,101 for the abattoir and $2,514,409 for the adjoining barn, based on a visual review only, not including costs to "'upgrade' or 'modernize' to a higher level to match the standards found in a newer facility."

Under the proposed five-year lease, all such costs must be borne by the leasee, and CSC makes no guarantee that the abattoir could ever meet modern licensing standards.

CSC reserves the right to "terminate this Agreement immediately, without prior notice" if CSC determines, "in its sole discretion, that continued use of the premises by the Licensee is no longer compatible with CSC's operational, safety, security, or institutional requirements," or "other policy reasons."

Should CSC terminate at any time, for any reason, the leasee must vacate immediately and will not be compensated for any improvements.

The deadline for bids was June 19.

Who benefits?

It is clear CSC will not benefit from reopening the abattoir, and it is unclear how a private company would benefit from investing millions into a Crown facility without guarantees.

Farmers would certainly profit from an abattoir subsidized by taxpayers and carceral labour, and politicians might benefit from pleasing influential industry groups. Consumers, however, may not see it as a win for prison-produced meat to re-enter the market.

But those who stand to lose the most by the abattoir reopening are the ones it allegedly benefits: prisoners.

Shaun Shannon, incarcerated for 23 years, worked in an abattoir after his release: "I was pushing guts off the floor and I lost it after a couple of months. I lost it, I couldn't do it anymore, I lost it. How can you do that? I couldn't do it every day. I just lost it. I said 'enough is enough.' I broke down."

Regarding the Joyceville abattoir, Shannon said: "Somebody, an ex-prisoner such as myself, should talk to the media about teaching killers how to kill … they're teaching you how to kill cleanly working in an abattoir."

It is "one of the worst jobs a person can have mentally and emotionally," he said, adding that prisoners "are broken already, and they're putting them under the stress of doing this."

As for the people gunning to get prisoners on the kill line again, Shannon does not mince words: "They deserve to be in prison."

"And they called me an animal."

Calvin Neufeld is a researcher and investigative journalist. In 2022, he published Bloody Bad Business: Report on the Joyceville Institution Abattoir. *In 2025, he was awarded the King Charles III Coronation Medal for his work.*

The Hill Times

Liberal MP Mark Gerretsen has presented multiple petitions in the House in support of reopening the abattoir. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

OPINION

Feds should show low-income Canadians the same grace extended to yacht and private jet owners

CERB was a lifeline for many low-income Canadians, but for those deemed to have received an 'overpayment,' it has become an anchor.

Amanda Therrien & Leila Sarangi

Opinion

In 2020, one in four workers relied on financial support from federal benefits like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit to survive the economic shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of these recipients had pre-pandemic incomes of less than $50,000. Indigenous people, racialized women, refugees, and young workers were among those most likely to depend on benefits like the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB).

These benefits were not windfalls, they were lifelines.

The CERB actually decreased poverty rates in Canada by a significant margin during the first year of the pandemic. However, as emergency benefit programs were discontinued, these rates rebounded. Many industries did not fully recover following the pandemic, and, today, the ongoing global political instability, inflation, and persistent threat of tariffs continues to erode the economic security of some of Canada's most vulnerable people.

Bewilderingly, it's in this context that the government has elected to intensify efforts to recover overpayments related to pandemic emergency benefits, with Budget 2025 allocating $123-million to Employment and Social Development Canada and the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) for that purpose. The government framed this measure as contributing to a "more efficient utilization of public funds," but using public money to hound low-income individuals who received modest pandemic overpayments, rather than repairing Canada's fraying social safety net, is an example of extreme inefficiency and short-sightedness.

Additionally, the government's own impact assessment acknowledges that these collection efforts "could impose a burden on low-income Canadians." While the budget states that enforcement will focus on those with the highest likelihood of repayment, and that flexible repayment arrangements will be available, media reports indicate that the government is taking a far more aggressive approach, including wage garnishment.

While most pandemic benefit legislation technically establishes a six-year limitation period for the collection of overpayments, that period can be extended through broad exceptions, including something as simple as acknowledging the debt, even while disputing it.

Despite Budget 2025's suggestion that collection activities will continue until March 31, 2028, it's clear that, without a significant policy shift, debt collection could persist far longer, pushing already precarious workers deeper into poverty and undermining the very objective of these emergency supports.

What began as a lifeline risks becoming an anchor.

In that same budget, while the federal government set a plan in action to pursue largely low-income Canadians, it gifted a tax break to the rich.

The budget eliminated luxury taxes on aircrafts and vessels on the basis that they were "inefficient, costly to administer, and challenging for Canadian industries at a time of ongoing global uncertainty." Despite being framed as a move towards greater administrative efficiency, the impact assessment starkly outlined exactly which population would be most affected by such a change: "individuals who are disproportionately higher income and primarily men."

The contrast is difficult to ignore.

The government is prepared to forego revenue from those at the top end of the income distribution scale while pursuing repayment from some of the lowest-income Canadians who relied on emergency benefits during a national crisis.

Luxury asset owners are relieved of tax obligations on the grounds that enforcement is burdensome, while significant public funds are redirected toward recovering comparatively modest overpayments from low-income workers. One is framed as administrative efficiency, the other as fiscal responsibility, but the end result is that individuals who are struggling to stay afloat are forced back underwater.

Emergency benefits were delivered quickly because the crisis demanded speed over perfection.

Clawing them back years later reframes that urgency as error.

While the CRA claims that it is owed $10-billion in pandemic related benefits, the amounts being pursued at an individual level are often quite modest, even while the human cost is not. For many low-income workers, repayment demands can mean depleted savings, renewed debt, or missed rent.

Those who wish to challenge the CRA's decisions often lack the financial means to obtain legal counsel, and are, therefore, forced to navigate the complex judicial review process unrepresented.

The government can, and should, cease its pandemic benefit collection efforts. If not in the name of strengthening the economic security of low-income Canadians, then—as with their eradication of the luxury tax—in the name of administrative efficiency and simplicity.

It's time for the government to show low-income Canadians the same grace it extends to the owners of yachts and private jets.

Amanda Therrien is the senior staff lawyer at the National Association of Women and the Law.

Leila Sarangi is the national director for Campaign 2000: End Child and Family Poverty.

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