

inmates and what can be done to help reduce the number of crimes committed in our society.

However, it goes without saying that as far as preventive measures are concerned, one cannot expect, as the hon. member from Broadview (Mr. Gilbert) would imply, that this whole task can be accomplished thanks to the Criminal Code alone. It goes without saying that all the other governmental social policies must play a part in helping us meet this objective.

[English]

I would argue, Mr. Speaker, that the measures we have before us today are in keeping with these principles. They are aimed at keeping that delicate balance between protection of society and the rights of individuals while, at the same time, being responsive to emerging concerns about crime.

The Minister of Justice (Mr. Basford) has already outlined the proposals to you, Mr. Speaker, but as Solicitor General I would like to take some time to reinforce some of his points and to expand on some of the measures for which I bear a special administrative responsibility. I would like to discuss, first, the proposal in Bill C-51 concerning firearms, and if I repeat some of the themes and points of my colleague, the Minister of Justice it is because I share his very deep concern on this question.

Hon. members will, of course, have noticed a number of significant changes in the proposals contained in Bill C-51 as compared with those contained in legislation introduced last year. Reconsideration was given over the course of last fall and winter to the many suggestions made by MPs and by concerned groups.

As a result, several changes have been proposed, especially to the provisions dealing with the prevention of potentially dangerous users from gaining access to firearms. Instead of a universal licensing system, Bill C-51 provides for the screening of all new acquirers through the requirement for a firearms acquisition certificate. In addition, there is an element of what might be called "negative screening" for present owners who are shown to be demonstrably unfit in the opinion of a judge. The expanded potential involvement of provincial systems calling for competency testing, and the possibility of certificate equivalents in such circumstances, is an innovation which could very well lead to making the legislation even more effective.

[Translation]

And concerning that, Mr. Speaker, I think it is an innovation which has not been noticed until now by most commentators. It is obvious that as government we have the responsibility to make legislation under our jurisdiction over criminal law, and we have the authority to do so. In fact, the question of jurisdiction has been raised by the hon. member for Broadview (Mr. Gilbert). For him, it is the solution to the problem: that area is under the jurisdiction of the provinces. We have attempted in our bill to encourage provincial governments to exercise their authority, their jurisdiction, because we strongly

believe that stricter requirements in competency and firearms use training could only have beneficial effects.

[English]

But in saying this I cannot stress too strongly the point that the over-all principle is maintained in the bill we are discussing now. Nor can I emphasize too much the fact that action is required on this issue. I urge hon. members, Mr. Speaker, to ask themselves the fundamental question of whether it is acceptable that long guns continue to be as easily accessible as they are today to people clearly unfit to own them. This is the key concern I have; this is the key concern the government has.

The danger of a situation where someone may walk out of, or escape from, a prison or mental hospital and purchase a shotgun, rifle or semi-automatic weapon and ammunition with absolutely no questions asked was never brought home to Canadians more clearly, or more brutally, than last winter in the incident in Toronto described by my colleague. Other tragic incidents—in Brampton, Vancouver, Whitby—have shocked the public in the last several months.

I cannot but repeat the statistics cited by others in this debate concerning the rising toll of firearms deaths in Canada, up 27 per cent since 1970 to over 1,400 in 1974. Firearms murders have risen 46 per cent since 1970. Firearms robberies in 1975 increased by 53 per cent over 1974. We simply must make an effort to stop this shocking trend. The key to the problem, as I have said before, and as the Minister of Justice has said before, is the too ready availability of such weapons to the unstable and criminal. For this reason, the government is proposing measures directed toward three main goals: first, of reducing the access that potentially dangerous users have to firearms; second, of discouraging the use of guns in criminal activities; and third, of promoting responsible gun ownership.

In suggesting proposals to fulfil these objectives, the government is mindful of the need to balance the need to protect society with the need to protect individual rights and freedoms. Furthermore, care was taken to balance our aims with regard to reducing the misuse of firearms with those of providing services which maximize both efficiency and effectiveness. This, I believe, has been achieved by providing for the enlistment of already existing groups and agencies at the provincial level and in the private sector, and by cutting red tape and bureaucracy to the bare minimum necessary to accomplish the goal.

As Solicitor General, I might be expected to have the most enthusiasm for the measures which crack down on the criminal misuse of guns, and I do strongly support the provisions which impose stiffer penalties on people using firearms in the commission of crimes, including a minimum mandatory sentence of one year for a first offence and three years for a subsequent offence. Also, there are new penalties for use of a firearm while committing or attempting to commit an indictable offence. This sentence, which could be as long as 14 years, would run consecutively to a sentence imposed for the commission of the substantive offence.

Provision is also made for increasing the maximum penalty to five years for several other firearms offences, and to ten