

Government Orders

The federal government which contributes \$160 million a year to youth justice finds that \$130 million of that sum goes to help defray the cost of custody. The Department of Justice estimates that it costs somewhere between \$70,000 and \$100,000 a year to keep a young person in custody.

Surely the direction we must take is that plotted by Bill C-37 in this respect which emphasizes that in cases involving non-violent crime jail as a penalty must be a last resort. The emphasis in that direction flowing from the bill arises by the provisions that require those who prepare reports about young offenders, predisposition reports for example, to explain if they are recommending a custody term why all other dispositions are inappropriate. They call upon the judge sentencing the young offender to resort to custody only when other dispositions are not appropriate. Then they call upon the judge to state the reasons, if custody is the sentence, why other dispositions are not appropriate or available.

If we shift the focus through these changes in the statutory framework and if we follow up on this initiative in working with our partners in the provinces to ensure community based dispositions are there in a meaningful way, we will surely turn the page to a better day for youth justice in the country.

We encourage community based dispositions in the statute. These changes will advance that encouragement. Hopefully the money saved with the reduction in custody costs can be devoted toward the development, the funding and the administration of positive and helpful community based dispositions for non-violent young offenders.

Let me now turn to the question of records.

[Translation]

Through this bill, we are proposing changes, for example, to the provisions on offenders' records. These amendments will facilitate the difficult work of police officers who conduct inquiries concerning these offences, and they will enable authorities to retain for a longer period the criminal record of young offenders who are found guilty of serious crimes.

[English]

Surely the provisions with respect to records in Bill C-37 reflect common sense. Those young offenders who are convicted of minor infractions or the less serious offences for the first time should have their records kept for a shorter period so as not to stigmatize them or interfere with efforts to advance their education or their employment. At the same time those who commit serious offences should have their records retained for a longer period, and in the most serious offences some forever.

• (1550)

Those are some of the principal changes proposed in Bill C-37. I also emphasize that the bill must be seen in the context

of the general parliamentary review we have initiated through my letter last week to the chair of the House Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs, the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce.

In that letter I asked the chair of the standing committee, after considering and reporting to Parliament with respect to the bill, to undertake a comprehensive review of the Young Offenders Act and of the youth justice system in Canada in general; to look at present social circumstances; to examine our experience with the Young Offenders Act during the past 10 years; to engage Canadians in the discussion; to hear from a wide spectrum of persons with experience with the act; to examine how the youth justice system in general could be improved; to look at the cost, the purpose and the principles of the present act; to determine how to weave our priority for crime prevention into the system; to comment on how the youth justice system should reflect the changes we are considering in connection with special program review, on how we can get parents more involved in juvenile justice, and on how best to restore and enhance public confidence in the youth justice system.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, this review is essential, to allow for a more thorough examination of other aspects of the act and to get the public's reaction on juvenile delinquency in general.

[English]

It is essential that Canadians be involved in the process of reassessing this statute. As I made clear in my letter to the chair of the standing committee, I want the committee to look at fundamental issues surrounding the present act including the ages to which the statute applies and how best to deal with repeat offenders.

At the same time I tell the House there will be a parallel process in place involving the provinces and territories so we will have the views of our provincial and territorial partners in the process and we can look together at questions like cost sharing because they have the responsibility for administering the statute and we must be sensitive to their views.

I should also tell the House I have asked the standing committee to report on the second phase of its work by February 1 next. I have given the chair my assurance that the government will respond quickly to the recommendations the committee may see fit to make.

[Translation]

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, the government firmly believes that these changes will provide adequate flexibility to provinces, so that each will be able to administer and implement the act while taking into account its own specific situation.