

Penitentiaries

He said: Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of the motion before the House, which is a very straightforward and simple request and one which is of fundamental significance in looking at the penitentiary system of this country today. The motion is, quite simply, that the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs of the House of Commons strike a special subcommittee with representations from all parties to ensure that the recommendations of the special subcommittee on penitentiaries which was established in May of 1976 have been implemented or are in the process of being implemented.

I moved a similar motion on November 5 of last year. In fact, the wording was identical. At that time, I am very pleased to note, the representative of the Liberal party who spoke on that motion was the justice critic for the Liberal party which was then in opposition, the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. MacGuigan), who was also the distinguished chairman of the special subcommittee on penitentiaries.

The hon. member for Windsor-Walkerville rose to support the motion which I put forward that day in words identical to the ones I have put forward today. He indicated that he felt this was a very important motion which deserved the support of the House. Now that the Liberal party is on the other side of the House, in government and no longer in opposition, I am confident its members will still see fit to support this motion just as they supported the motion on November 5 of last year. The motion today is in identical terms calling on the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs to establish a subcommittee. Conditions have not changed such as to warrant the government's reversing its position on this important question.

Mr. Knowles: Don't hold your breath.

Mr. Robinson: Just as members of the Liberal party supported this motion on November 5 of 1979, I am confident they will support it today because I know that they share the feeling of the Secretary of State for External Affairs that these recommendations must be implemented—not in part, not by picking one and choosing another, but implemented in full. Conditions have not become any better since November 5 of last year, a little over a year ago. Indeed, if one examines the record carefully, it becomes clear that conditions in the Canadian penitentiary system have deteriorated substantially in the past year. One need only look at the series of incidents which have taken place in various regions of the country. In the Pacific region, for example, there was the incident at Kent Institution. I refer to the hostage-taking at Laval and the incident at Dorchester in which a prison guard, Mr. Bill Morrison, was tragically killed. Since the beginning of this year there have been over 13 suicides in the penitentiary system in Quebec alone. The record is a sorry one, and it has become worse since November 5 of 1979.

This being so, surely it is incumbent upon the government not to reverse its position and not to reverse the position the hon. member, who is now a minister in the Liberal cabinet, took at that time. It is even more imperative now that this House call upon the Standing Committee On Justice and

Legal Affairs to establish a special subcommittee to review the recommendations of the subcommittee on penitentiaries.

It is important just for a moment or two to look back to what motivated the House of Commons to establish that special subcommittee. In September of 1976 it was decided that the situation in the federal penitentiary system had deteriorated to the point at which there had to be a comprehensive study of the Canadian penitentiary system. There had been a couple of very serious incidents at Kingston and Laval and, of course, a major incident at the B.C. Penitentiary. This all-party committee studied the Canadian penitentiary system, travelled to other countries to examine their penitentiary systems, heard from witnesses throughout this country and finally came up with a report.

Hon. members should note that it was a unanimous report, although the subcommittee was made up of representatives of all three parties. The first recommendation surely goes to the heart of the reason we are here today proposing that there be some form of review. That subcommittee reported that a crisis existed then in the Canadian penitentiary system and that it could only be met by the immediate implementation of large-scale reforms. Recommendation No. 1 finally said, "It is imperative that the Solicitor General act immediately on this report as a matter of the utmost urgency." During the time the committee was holding its hearings and doing its work—and a very thorough and comprehensive job it did—the atmosphere in the Canadian penitentiary system improved markedly because those persons who worked in the system, who were prisoners in the system, who were involved at the judicial level or who were in any way affected knew, or at least hoped, that there was a possibility of real change there was a real crisis in the penitentiary system, and they had confidence that after establishing this special subcommittee the government would take its recommendations seriously.

Well, that was not to be. Unfortunately, the response of the government to the subcommittee report was, essentially, that it would take this recommendation and that recommendation and perhaps look at another and maybe accept it for long-term implementation. Those recommendations formed a package, Mr. Speaker. They formed a very important and coherent package, and it was never the intention of that subcommittee that the government should pick and choose. At least, if the government was determined to pick and choose, there were some essential recommendations of that subcommittee which the subcommittee insisted be implemented. Many of those key recommendations have been totally ignored by this government and, I regret to say, also by the Conservative government during its brief term of office. Those recommendations were ignored by both administrations. What we saw was a document tabled before the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs called the report on the implementation of the recommendations of the subcommittee. The Conservative party had been very critical of the reports which had been tabled and I had hoped that when hon. members of the Conservative party formed the government there would perhaps be some changes.