

Mr. Arnold Peters (Timiskaming): Mr. Speaker, I hesitated to rise because I thought the House leader for the official opposition party might have been able to arrange for the House to consider a subject in which I am particularly interested. However, I gather negotiations to that end have not been fruitful.

Bill C-191 seeks the addition to the National Parole Board of ten ad hoc members. This raises the whole question of what the National Parole Board has done over the years, what society has demanded of the Board, and whether or not the parole board has been doing what we hoped it would do in relation to the weeding out of the inmates in our penitentiaries. Looking back over the history of our penitentiaries, we find that no matter what the National Parole Board has done in relation to the prisoners the numbers of prisoners returned to custody after forfeiting parole has remained over the years relatively even. For the last ten years the level has remained relatively steady at around 10 per cent.

It is interesting to note that in 1958, in the first year of the board's operation, this rate was considerably lower. I asked some of my colleagues why it was almost half of the current figure. They pointed out that a lot of the people in the penitentiaries at that time were exceptionally good risks and that in the first year of its operation the board was able to draw from a group of prisoners who obviously would not have been there had the board been able to operate earlier. I think it is a fact that today there are too many people in the penitentiaries and too few people being let out on parole. It may be that parole is not a satisfactory arrangement. Obviously, people who are interested in penal reform are looking at systems alternative to the parole system we use in Canada.

It is fortunate that the parole board has the help of some blue chip organizations which operate in this field including the John Howard Society and the Elizabeth Fry Society in conjunction with community services run by provincial governments and others, to see that a prisoner who is released on parole has a chance of being accepted in the community. There are other steps which should be taken. I have been interested for a number of years now in an organization in Hull, Quebec, which refers to itself as Ex-Cons. I have never heard the hon. member for Hull (Mr. Isabelle) say anything about this organization. I have not heard him ask the Solicitor General (Mr. Allmand) for support for this organization. He may not know about it. If he does, he certainly has not been helpful. But this is an organization which is unique. It is made up solely of ex-convicts from federal penitentiaries, assisted by one or two pulp and paper companies, the provincial authorities and a large number of people who are interested in helping the ex-cons to help themselves.

● (1500)

Although this has been fairly satisfactory, every time I raised the matter with the Solicitor General (Mr. Allmand), the Minister of Justice (Mr. Lang) or any government department that might have money available to put into the organization, I was told it was too dangerous, that it obviously would not work. In Hull, which is not the biggest city in this country, they have an enrolment of at least 1,000 ex-cons and their record is exceedingly good. They have also assisted other prisoners in finding jobs,

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rehabilitating them in the community, finding housing, getting various projects organized, and they have helped themselves very well. This organization is not supported by the penitentiaries branch. It is not even supported by local members. But I suggest hon. members take a look at it because it has succeeded in creating for ex-cons an environment in which they can ask the questions they want to ask and get the assistance they need from people completely sympathetic to their position.

The parole board is very much like a pyramid with Mr. Street at its apex. People who have studied the National Parole Board over the past ten years will be well aware of the limitation of the chairman of the board in the field of public relations. If he reads in a newspaper that one of the decisions made by the board turned out to be wrong, he becomes scared: the whole parole board from top to bottom becomes scared—but nothing happens. According to the figures, every time there is an accident and a public outcry ensues because of a decision of Mr. Street, there is a great reduction in paroles granted that year. Yet there will always be accidents because these are people who have proven that on at least one occasion they were not compatible with today's society. This in turn means the Solicitor General will have to have more penitentiaries built, and once these institutions are constructed they are filled.

I remember the discussions that took place, long before St. Vincent de Paul was closed, about new maximum security institutions. In that penitentiary at that time there were very few people who were complete maximum security prisoners, confined in cells or in the hole, segregated from the others because they were dangerous to the population in the penitentiary and certainly to society if they were to escape. There were eight or ten of these people at St. Vincent de Paul, about the same at Kingston, and I suppose a few at other maximum security penitentiaries. A maximum security penitentiary was built in Montreal to replace St. Vincent de Paul. This was a maximum security prison accommodating about 350 persons, but obviously there was no need for the number of maximum security accommodations that were provided.

I should like to move a six months' hoist on the second reading stage of this bill because I am opposed to appointing additional people to the parole board just to fill more jobs. The whole question of parole should be examined to see whether we are accomplishing what we have in mind. I heard one of the hon. members from Calgary last night saying he was very much opposed to back-to-back temporary leaves. I also heard the Solicitor General say the same thing. But did either of these members ask themselves why back-to-back leaves were being granted? A leave of three days has another leave of two days added so these prisoners are allowed to work in the community. This was being handled by the penitentiary service because the parole board was not doing the job it was supposed to be doing. Do the minister and the hon. member from Calgary not know that this practice was established because of the failure of the parole board to meet the needs of the day?

I suggest that the members of this House seriously consider putting on the parole board some of the officials working for the penitentiary service who deal with prisoners. I have in mind officials from the classifications,