

Government Orders

by trying to protect society may in fact be pulling innocent people into the web. I see that my time has run out.

Ms. Judy Bethel (Edmonton East): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to participate in the discussion of Bill C-7 today, the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. In the long term it will be one of the most important pieces of legislation considered by this assembly. Canada needs a comprehensive drug strategy and Bill C-7 provides it.

If we talk with community leaders in any of our cities we will soon hear that our current laws are not effective in dealing with the drug problems they face. Police forces across the country have pointed out that new laws are needed to deal with the techniques now used by drug offenders.

Neighbourhood groups are really frustrated because the law seems powerless to do anything even when they and the police know about drug dealings on their streets. Community workers who are trying to help young people choose a healthy lifestyle are discouraged because the law is not a partner in their cause. Often it is a detriment. Ineffective laws also bring disrespect for the law in general, and this is certainly true of current drug laws.

For all these reasons I welcome and support Bill C-7. It provides important new tools for the police and communities to use in fighting the drug problem in the country. This law will make it easier for police to prosecute drug dealers and it provides stronger penalties. It will allow the courts to consider aggravating factors in sentencing such as the involvement of children and the sale of drugs in school yards.

Bill C-7 is a comprehensive drug strategy and a major improvement from existing laws. There is, however, one aspect of the modern drug trade that is not covered. I would like to see the bill amended to close this loophole. I am talking about the use of fortified drug houses to avoid police prosecution. This is already a significant problem in Edmonton and many other cities. It will become an even greater problem as police forces begin to use other features of the new law.

I will briefly describe the problems and propose possible amendments for consideration by the committee in its review of the legislation.

• (1540)

The first fortified drug house in Edmonton was appropriately called the Fortress, and that is exactly what it was. The plan is simple. Drug dealers rent an old house and fortify it through the addition of cement walls, steel doors, false entrances, trap doors and other obstacles. This delays police entry long enough to destroy any evidence of drug trade. The element of surprise, an important element in effective enforcement, is gone. These houses also allow for the exchange of money and drugs through

trap doors. There is no human contact between the dealer and the purchaser, eliminating other ways of catching dealers.

Over the years the Edmonton police service employed a number of tactics against the Fortress with little success. An appeal was made to the absentee landlord but he did not care as long he got his rent. In fact he legally challenged any moves by the city to close the place down.

The neighbourhood became very upset because the Fortress became a centre of undesirable activity. It ruined all their hard work to clean up their neighbourhood. Used syringes were discarded in nearby playgrounds where children could pick them up. Traffic noise and frequent street fights made the area unsafe. Older residents and families were forced to move away, adding to the cycle and the significant costs of inner city decay.

In response to the community the Edmonton city council tried applying every possible law relating to property and land use but ran into legal barriers at every turn. The fact is that there is no legislation to deal with this situation effectively. Drug dealers know it and openly flaunt the law.

I am told by the Edmonton police service there are now 12 fortified drug houses in operation in our city; some are sporadic operations and some are permanent. All of them present a major cost to communities and lead to more disrespect for the law.

In the United States the problem with fortified drug houses had to be dealt with through specific legislation. Some states like California have been successful. However we need to address this problem in Canada.

In order to make Bill C-7 a truly comprehensive drug strategy, I am proposing that it be amended to deal with the problem of fortified drug houses. There are three possibilities for amending the legislation to cover fortified drug houses. One is to include real estate in the definition of offence related property. Bill C-7 allows for the confiscation of property used in drug trafficking, but the definition specifically excludes real estate. Removing this exemption would be one way of addressing the problem.

A second approach is an amendment to create a new offence. The amendment would prohibit an owner, landlord or tenant from knowingly permitting a place to be used for the primary purpose of trafficking in illegal drugs. The Edmonton police service has drafted a proposed amendment which I will be pleased to provide the committee.

A third option is to establish a mechanism by which drug houses could be confiscated by the crown under specific conditions. Again the Edmonton police service has provided some suggestions which I will provide in writing to the committee.

Any of these amendments are consistent with the intent and the spirit of the legislation. They will address the significant problem of fortified drug houses which is not adequately