

Prisoners' Voting Rights

The question of granting the franchise to inmates of a federal prison has within it some inherent technical problems, which the hon. member for Lafontaine (Mr. Lachance) has raised, but which I think are not insurmountable. If prison inmates voted in the riding where a prison is situated that would mean that all of us who come from ridings containing prisons would have to spend much time there, trying to make sure our vote was solid, rather than doing other duties and this might be a problem. The absentee ballot, however, if it were incorporated into the federal elections act, would solve that problem.

The real questions we have to ask ourselves are whether we should deprive those who act in an anti social way and violate the laws of this country of the right to vote; the reason we deprive them of the right to vote; and whether giving them the right to vote will provide them with any assistance in their rehabilitation, or will give protection to society in any way. I would argue that by providing inmates of federal institutions with the right to vote we would start them on the very slow road back to a feeling of responsibility for society.

Most of those now in federal institutions have probably never bothered to vote. Very few of them cared enough about society before they were charged and convicted, and usually they have a long list of convictions. Very few of them ever bothered to exercise their ballot because they really did not care. One of the reasons they are in prison is that they do not care. Our duty, in terms of protecting society and rehabilitating these offenders, is to give them something to care about.

It is not mandatory that they vote, and they may still have that same attitude and decide not to vote. But there is no purpose, for the protection of society or to punish the prisoner, in denying a person the option of voting, whether or not he wishes to vote. To encourage an inmate to take some interest in the political process so that by the time he is released he has a chance to continue that interest, it seems to me does a great deal to improve conditions within prison to some extent, and increases the amount of liaison the prisoner has with society, which is one of the key questions in this whole problem of what to do with prisoners.

I am so tired of listening to people on open line shows talk about how we coddle prisoners in our institutions. I do not think they have ever gone and seen maximum security institutions, the segregated cells in the B.C. pen, or in Millhaven or St. Vincent de Paul. Those are places of horror of which this country should be ashamed.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Leggatt: We do not coddle prisoners in this country, but we do a number of things which I think are wrong. One of the things we do with prisoners in maximum security prisons is to bring social workers in to tell them that it is not their fault that they are there; that it is society which put them there; and that all the prisoner has to do is blame his problems on society and he will be fine. I think that contributes nothing whatsoever to the rehabilitation of those who have offended. The main reasons they are there maybe societal reasons. Perhaps they got a rotten break from society. It is our duty to improve

[Mr. Leggatt.]

those conditions which send people there, but once they are there it is no good telling them it is not their fault.

I believe that a person incarcerated, particularly in a maximum security institution, must come to the realization that he has a responsibility for his own actions. It is pointless for those involved in progressive penology to avoid the consequences of that particular issue, and it really is the issue of whether we ask those in jail to feel guilty for their sins.

I suppose it is almost a religious thing. The hon. member for Egmont might be interested in the religious significance. In any event surely it is time we ask those who commit offences against society to feel guilt and a sense of personal responsibility for what they have done. In that process surely it is incumbent on a civilized society to treat those people in a civilized way and to put them into institutions, if they have to be under security, under conditions which are reasonable and at least modestly comfortable, instead of the kind of dark ages institutions we continue to have across this country. These institutions contribute nothing whatsoever to rehabilitation, and in fact contribute to the terrible recidivism rate we have because if inmates were angry with society before they arrived there, by the time they are released, they are spitting nails.

● (1740)

I had the opportunity, along with Your Honour and several others in the House, to tour some of the maximum security institutions in this country a year or so ago. Mr. Francis Fox was with us and he said something which I thought was very astute—"We are bound to come to the conclusion that there is a war going on here, three groups at war within a single institution—convicts, guards and administration." It seems to me that communication between these groups is an absolute prerequisite. We should at least see that there is communication and a general acceptance of the approach we take.

The approach of the guards, in general, is punitive; they believe people are there to be controlled and to some extent punished. Incidentally, that view makes their job a little easier.

The position taken by the administration is often a very progressive one, but they lack the mechanism by means of which they could work out their ideas. I might point out, in this connection, that we are hiring guards at salaries which should make everyone in this House ashamed. We are hiring people to go into situations often of real danger at wages one would not offer to a hamburger stand attendant. No wonder some of these guards feel we are not interested in their situation or in their problems. They see themselves regarded merely as turnkeys, and that is what they become. Until we take a realistic look at salary levels, until those levels are substantially increased—and I am thinking in the range of 40 per cent or 50 per cent—we shall make no progress in the present system.

The bill before us calls for an important step in inculcating a sense of responsibility. It is valuable in terms of rehabilitation. Recognition of a sense of responsibility is an important step and voting is part of this process. In British Columbia, when dealing with juvenile offenders the intention now, is to divert the offender from the prison