

● (1632)

[English]

—the continuing pressure of the members of this committee on the Solicitor General and the Canadian Penitentiary Service that has led to a fuller acceptance of the report than was initially apparent. This pressure occurred in hearings on the supplementary estimates in November, during the private sessions of the Committee on its special reference in December, and in numerous outside contacts between committee members and those involved in implementation. The Solicitor General has publicly welcomed this process and has even looked forward to its continuance during the consideration of main estimates this spring. In this respect the substance of recommendation 65, that the standing committee should have a permanent reference to enable it to review the implementation of the report, has in fact been achieved, even though this recommendation was the one which was perhaps most strongly rejected by the Solicitor General from June 7 on. It is now clear for all to see that the minister's only objection to recommendation 65 was as to the form of review recommended, and that he welcomes continuing attention to the substance of the implementation of the report.

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, this is exactly what we are now doing in this debate. We are putting all the pressure we can on the Solicitor General and the Canadian Penitentiary Service to implement as a package the recommendations in the report submitted by the subcommittee on the penitentiary system in Canada. I would like to repeat that it has been a fascinating experience to work in such an environment, and I thank the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) for putting forward the motion now before us.

[English]

Mr. Elmer M. MacKay (Central Nova): Mr. Speaker, since I have come to parliament this is the most constructive and interesting debate in which I have had the opportunity to participate. As many hon. members have mentioned, it shows that the committee system of the House of Commons, if utilized properly, can indeed produce an outstanding piece of work, which is precisely what these recommendations are.

I would like to pay a personal tribute to the chairman, the hon. member for Windsor-Walkerville (Mr. MacGuigan), not only for the work he did in pursuance of the arduous and thorough way the committee under his direction went through their appointed task, but for some of the excellent speeches he made which sought to further the committee's work.

As other members have mentioned, the chairman spoke to distinguished bodies such as the 1977 World Congress for Mental Health and the Canadian judges conference and indeed to the centre of criminology here at the University of Ottawa on November 28 last year. These are not all of the speeches he made. They were excellent speeches and provided a valuable adjunct to the work that the committee was doing and sought to achieve.

I wish to pay my personal tribute to members of all parties who worked on this committee. I did not have the opportunity to do this, but I followed their deliberations with a great deal of interest, and as has already been said, the House of Commons and the country owe these dedicated members of parliament a real debt of gratitude for what they have done.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Penitentiaries

Mr. MacKay: I hope the new Solicitor General (Mr. Blais) will take advantage of the high degree of unanimity that exists in the House of Commons and will bring forward some legislation in the near future, although as is often the case passing legislation is a tortuous process. It seems to me, that if legislation were brought forward—and it is essential that that legislation embody all of the recommendations set out in this report—it could be passed through this House with unprecedented speed. It would be an opportunity to demonstrate to the House and the country that, when there is a need for good, constructive legislation, this chamber can provide that kind of expedition and provide it quickly. I hope the Solicitor General will consider this very carefully. It is obvious from the support he has for the concepts effected in the speeches of many members of parliament here this afternoon that he would be able to achieve something quickly which would be long remembered and would be useful to the country.

In her well written and sensitive book, "Kind and Usual Punishment—The Prison Business", Jessica Mitford points out that:

It is surprising to learn that prison as a place of confinement for the ordinary lawbreaker is less than 200 years old, an institution of purely American origin, conceived by its investors as a noble humanitarian reform befitting an Age of Enlightenment in the aftermath of a revolution against ancient tyrannies.

It is heartening to see that the efforts of this distinguished subcommittee were directed toward bringing some humanitarianism into what has become, a very degrading and brutal system in recent years. In order for this report to be effective I believe it ought to be accepted as a package. Accepting only certain parts of it will waste the thrust of the entire concept.

The key recommendation is the last one. It bears repeating that the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs should have a permanent reference during the remainder of the thirtieth parliament, and for the thirty-first parliament, to enable it to review the implementation of this report in the context of the criminal justice system. This continuing mandate would have a constructive and stabilizing effect.

While this committee was conducting its deliberations there was a marked lessening in hostage-taking incidents and the general state of unrest in the prison systems. As a matter of fact, as the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) has just pointed out, there were none. Surely the government can see the wisdom of allowing this committee, which has achieved such a degree of expertise and obviously respect from those people who are part of the prison system and, indeed, victims of it, to have some continuing and direct influence in such an important area of social and government policy.

● (1642)

There have been in the past great abuses in prisons connected with experiments in which inmates were used to test antibiotics, how they responded to psychiatric and neurosurgical techniques, and things like this. This is something, however, that has not been prevalent to my knowledge in Canadian prisons, or at least to the degree it has been in other countries.