

Security Bill C-157

by Michael McEvoy
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Svend Robinson hopes Canada will not survive to see 1984.

The New Democratic Member of Parliament is not referring to the calendar but to the 1984 that writer George Orwell had in mind.

The stern-faced MP says Orwell's nightmare might not be far off if the Federal Government passes its security service legislation, Bill C-157.

While every good journalist knows there are two sides to a story, it is hard to find anybody with much good to say about the Bill. It proposes to take responsibility for Canada's spy operations from the RCMP and give it to a civilian agency.

The legislation has drawn the wrath of groups like the Canadian Civil Liberties Association and from people like the Conservative Attorney-General for Ontario Roy McMurtry, who calls Bill C-157, a "Frankenstein's monster... unacceptable in a free society."

The government says criticisms that the proposal threatens civil liberties of Canadians are "totally off base." Robert Kaplan, Canada's Solicitor-General is the Minister in charge of the bill and he is showing signs the government may, at least for the meantime, backoff.

Ted Finn, one of Mr. Kaplan's chief advisors says Bill C-157 is the closest thing possible to a "100 per cent guarantee" that security agents wouldn't violate the law or abuse civil liberties.

Roland Penner, Manitoba's chief law enforcer has been in the forefront of criticizing the federal government proposal.

Penner says there are four main weaknesses of the Bill:

- the Bill's definition of what constitutes a threat to the nation's security is "impossibly wide";
- The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) is allowed to break the law;
- key areas of the Bill remove responsibility for Security from elected representatives and puts it in the hands of the Service's appointed director;

- the constitutional right of the Provincial Attorney-General in prosecuting wrongdoing is "brushed aside."

Definition of Security Threat Too Vague

The Bill defines "threats to the Security of Canada" in a number of ways including "activities...directed towards or in support of the threat or use of acts of violence against persons or property for the purpose of achieving a political objective within Canada or a foreign state..."

While this may not sound controversial, Alan Borovoy, general counsel for the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, says it is far too broad in scope.

"The language appears broad enough to permit surveillance against citizens simply because, for example, they are raising money to help rebels in Afghanistan throw the Russians out of their country," he says.

Roy McMurtry, who calls Bill c-157 a "Frankenstein's monster... unacceptable in a free and democratic society."

Svend Robinson said under this definition of a national security threat, "presumably the Toronto *Globe and Mail* would be under surveillance since they asked the people of Chile to dump President Pinochet in an editorial."

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