

Penitentiaries

reason, that reason should be found. If they do not change this, whatever flimsy amount of confidence there is now in the parole system and the operation of the Bail Reform Act, and it is flimsy indeed, will be washed away. That would be a tragedy for this country and for our civilized community. It will for a long time to come be the source of great injustice to those who under the present system could benefit from parole.

● (2330)

The subject we are considering transcends in importance many of the other issues which have been before us. I say to the hon. member for Sarnia-Lambton (Mr. Cullen) that we have no wish to return to the dark days with respect to our penal system. None of us has taken that position, and I think the hon. member was rather unfair to my hon. friend from Burnaby-Richmond-Delta (Mr. Reynolds) in criticizing the speech he made. But we do want to return to an age of reason when a civilized community can expect its government and the institutions operated by its government to protect it against whatever prompts criminal behaviour, against whatever causes some criminals to be incapable of reform.

If we accept the statement that all criminals are victims of their environment, we are saying that completion of a criminal act is a matter of accident. We all know that this is too sweeping a generalization. We want to take the mind of a criminal and change that mind by working on the conditions in which he finds himself. We want to give that chance to those worthy of a chance. At the same time, we want to protect society against those who are unworthy of such an opportunity. This should be the principle behind the committee's investigation.

I am glad it is to be a committee of elected members. I do not believe this work should be foisted upon judges. Judges, by virtue of their position, are not called upon to answer to the public. In a sense, therefore, they are irresponsible in a way in which a committee would not be irresponsible. I welcome the motion and I support the concept that the work be carried out by a committee of this House. The committee has the ability and will, I hope, possess the necessary expertise to inquire into these matters and ensure that society regains the confidence which is lacking today. Perhaps if this is the result, the attitude of society toward the important subject we were considering earlier will be changed as a consequence.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): Mr. Speaker, may I rise on a point of order? I rise simply to ask whether perchance the time has come at which there might be some discussion through the usual channels about the possibility of bringing the debate to a conclusion at a reasonable hour. If this cannot be done through the usual channels, maybe it can be done through some unusual channels.

Mr. Nielsen: There are not many left on this side of the House who wish to participate in the debate. I have six names on my list, and there is my own short contribution concerning the mechanics of this inquiry upon which the standing committee is about to embark. With the tolerance of hon. members, I think we should be able to conclude within the next hour unless, of course, there are speakers from the other parties who wish to enter the debate.

[Mr. Baker.]

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): We have none here, Mr. Speaker.

An hon. Member: Most unusual.

Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre): In light of what the hon. member for Yukon (Mr. Nielsen) has said, I wonder whether there could be some discussion, perhaps behind the Speaker's chair. Possibly we could reduce the length of speeches so that we might save some time while still allowing everyone to speak who wishes to do so.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Laniel): As the hon. member knows, that can only be done by unanimous consent. While these discussions are taking place, perhaps we can hear the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain (Mr. Beattie).

Mr. Duncan M. Beattie (Hamilton Mountain): Mr. Speaker, it gives me a great deal of pleasure to add my support to the motion proposed by the hon. member for Burnaby-Richmond-Delta (Mr. Reynolds), a motion which goes to the root of many anxieties which plague so many Canadians at this time. If we do not decide now that positive action is called for, and if we do not then take decisive action, I am afraid the whole question of who is the prisoner and who is the jailer will be academic. We are on the verge today of losing sight of who it is who needs and deserves the protection of the law.

Things are so bad today, with respect to the prison system, that if it were not for the fact that people who are walking out of our prisons almost daily were not hardened criminals, the situation would be hilarious. In fact, in light of the unfavourable publicity being directed to the department of the Solicitor General I am surprised he even allows some of these people into jail! However, the situation is anything but hilarious when we consider that some of these people are murderers, rapists and thugs, people who do not hesitate to use violence on anyone they may meet. We are familiar with recent examples of criminals escaping from prison to commit heinous crimes in order to get transportation, food or money or just to "get back" at the society which put them behind bars.

Contrary to the contention of many people, these prison inmates are not just a bunch of mixed-up kids. They were put in prison after being convicted of crimes, often crimes of violence; they were incarcerated only after exhausting all the many avenues open to them under our judicial system. The most disturbing aspects is that the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) and his appointees in the penitentiary service insist on discussing the situation merely on the basis of reform, rehabilitation and parole. This makes about as much sense as a speech by Jackie Onassis on poverty.

The fact is that it is ridiculous talking about reforming a prisoner unless he makes himself available to be reformed. It has almost reached the point at which a prisoner in a Canadian jail simply will not wait around unless he happens to like it there. If he likes the food and is free to kick the guards and other prisoners around, and if he can run the prison the way he wants it run, then he just might hang around for a while. This is not good enough. Before we undertake to do anything by way of reform or rehabilitation we must ensure that when a lawbreaker is sen-