

Private Members' Business

• (1330)

Mr. Bob Horner (Mississauga West): Mr. Speaker, the motion before us is to consider expanding literacy programs in federal penitentiaries. The federal government and Correctional Service Canada support this motion, as do I. The federal government and the CSC have already taken measures required to deal with the problems posed by illiteracy among inmates in federal penitentiaries.

The dignity of the individual, the rights of all members of society, the potential for personal growth, and the development of human beings are essential considerations in the effort to help offenders to become law-abiding citizens. The CSC initiative is in response to the Throne Speech of October, 1986, in which the federal government committed itself to co-operating with the provinces, the private sector and voluntary organizations in developing ways to allow Canadians to acquire the degree of literacy required to take full advantage of the benefits of an advanced society.

Following a series of visits to several penitentiaries, the then Solicitor General assessed the extent of the problem and decided to tackle the problem head on. The Solicitor General declared that improving basic adult education programs was a priority for Correctional Service Canada. As a result, the CSC launched a three-year program to reduce functional illiteracy among federal inmates by 5 per cent annually between April 1, 1987, and March 31, 1989.

It is important to note that my hon. friend criticized the program because there were quotas imposed. There has to be an objective in place. The CSC used the definition of functional illiteracy adopted by UNESCO, and that is the equivalent of a grade eight education. Because of the various educational systems that exist in Canada, the CSC uses the completion of grade eight in language and mathematics as a standard for purposes of comparison.

According to the mission statement of the CSC, Correctional Service Canada, as part of the criminal justice system contributes to the protection of society by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control.

The CSC knows how illiteracy affects inmates. An inmate who can neither read nor write is ill equipped to face the demands of everyday life or to find a job. Even

though it has not yet been possible to establish a direct correlation between illiteracy and recidivism, the correlation between unemployment and a lack of basic education and technical skills cannot be disputed.

According to Statistics Canada unemployment is highest among those with less than a grade eight education. Standardized tests have also shown that the illiteracy rate among inmates is more than twice that of the general Canadian population. When considering the many factors that contribute to crime, we must recognize that illiterate people have fewer options, less choice and greater difficulty in improving their lives than those who can read and write.

In practice only 150 inmates were able to complete grade eight in 1986-87. It was decided at that time that the objective for 1987-88 would be to have five times as many inmates complete the basic adult education program, for a grand total of 750. The objective for 1988-89 would be 1,200 more inmates, and for 1989-90, 1,800 more. The over-all objective of CSC was therefore to have in excess of 4,050 inmates complete at least a grade eight education during this three-year period. I think my hon. friend will have to admit that that is a very worth-while objective.

This ambitious initiative was intended to demonstrate the firm commitment of CSC to combating illiteracy among inmates. It is vital that people understand that the vast majority of inmates incarcerated in our penitentiaries will be released some day. They will be released on parole, under mandatory supervision, or simply because they have completed their sentence. To be a capable member of society they must have an improved education.

The National Parole Board takes the inmate's participation in the basic education program into account before making a decision on parole. My hon. friend talks about incentives. I think that would be incentive enough to get people to take this program. Perhaps more than anything else this makes inmates understand how important the ability to read and write is in being able to function properly in the outside world.

In 1988 the average inmate, or 57 per cent of the prison population, was serving a sentence of less than six years. During the first year of this initiative, that is during the 1987-88 fiscal year, 1,042 inmates or 139 per cent of the objective completed grade eight. In 1988-89,