

*Inquiries of the Ministry*

**Hon. Donald M. Fleming (Minister of Justice):** Mr. Speaker, I anticipated there would be a question or questions on this subject and, if I may, I should like to make a statement in relation to the matter.

**Mr. Speaker:** Order. Unless the minister has unanimous consent to make a statement in reply to this question, we must revert to motions.

**Mr. Fleming (Eglinton):** I assure you, Mr. Speaker, it is not a statement on the orders of the day, but it will amplify the answer to the question.

**Mr. Speaker:** Has the minister unanimous consent to proceed?

**Some hon. Members:** Agreed.

**Mr. Fleming (Eglinton):** The attorney general of British Columbia, Hon. R. W. Bonner, has informed me by letter that on September 20 last he made a public statement asking the government of Canada to change its prison policy in relation to the Sons of Freedom Doukhobors who had been sentenced to penitentiary terms of imprisonment. His request was, in effect, that these prisoners should be dispersed among other federal institutions across Canada.

In February of this year the government of Canada was faced with the problem of arranging for the custody of large numbers of members of the Sons of Freedom sect of Doukhobors who it was expected at that time would be sentenced to penitentiary terms for acts of terrorism.

On the basis of experience gained over 30 years of dealing with Freedomites as penitentiary prisoners, it was well known to the government that they would be unlike ordinary prisoners. In the past they have failed to co-operate in any way in carrying on the normal routine of the penitentiary. They have never been prepared to take part in any work program for inmates. They have set fire to institutional buildings and equipment. They have frequently upset the prison routine by staging demonstrations and by going on hunger strikes.

In determining the course to be followed to provide custody for convicted Freedomites, the government gave full consideration to the proposal that they should be divided in groups among existing federal institutions across Canada. Because they were required to be kept under conditions of maximum security custody it was impossible to transfer them to the four medium and 12 minimum security institutions operated by the penitentiary service. There remained for consideration, therefore, only the question whether they might be divided among the six maximum security institutions operating at New Westminster, B.C.,

Prince Albert, Sask., Stony Mountain, Man., Kingston, Ont., St. Vincent de Paul, P.Q., and Dorchester, N.B.

These institutions now hold a total of more than 4,000 inmates. The inmate population increases day by day by reason of committals from the courts. Conditions of serious overcrowding exist in every one of these penitentiaries and will continue to exist until 1964 when construction of four new major institutions will be completed.

It was the view of the government of Canada that to introduce large numbers of Freedomite inmates into these institutions would serve no useful purpose as far as the solution of the over-all problem of Freedomites in British Columbia is concerned. Moreover, to do so would be calculated, in the government's view, to create situations in those institutions leading to explosive trouble. If such trouble did develop the result could conceivably be danger to life and the destruction of millions of dollars worth of government property. At the least it would mean the complete disruption of the inmate training program which is being continuously developed in those institutions at substantial public expense.

Sixty-eight Freedomites are now in federal custody and more than 100 others are awaiting trial. Those who are in custody have already engaged in activities such as attempted arson, refusal to eat and refusal to conform with the routines of the institutions in which they have been confined.

The position of the federal government is clear. Until such time as new construction permits the transfer of Freedomite prisoners to other maximum security institutions where they can be safely held, they will continue to be confined in Mountain prison. This is a maximum security, fireproof institution in which the Freedomites can be kept in custody at the least expense and with the least possible danger to the Canadian public.

**Mr. H. W. Herridge (Kootenay West):** Mr. Speaker, could I ask a supplementary on this subject. Has the government given consideration to offering its co-operation to the government of British Columbia with a view to implementing the long term, jointly sponsored program required in order to remedy this unfortunate situation?

**Mr. Fleming (Eglinton):** Mr. Speaker, the word "co-operation" was used in the statement issued by the attorney general of British Columbia to which I have referred. I think the federal government has extended full co-operation in this matter, and that course which I have outlined now is one which will be appreciated by the hon. member as the only proper course for the federal government to follow under existing circumstances.