

Private Members' Business

[Translation]

Mrs. Monique Tardif (Parliamentary Secretary to Solicitor General of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to join in this discussion of Bill C-311, which was proposed by the hon. member for Edmonton—Strathcona and supported by about 15 of his colleagues, which is rather unusual.

This private member's bill concerns sentencing, corrections and conditional release. I interpret the focus of these proposals as being the "early" release of offenders.

The bill raises the questions of when release should occur and indeed if release should ever be granted to some types of offenders.

I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate my colleague, the hon. member for Edmonton—Strathcona, and all members of the committee on Justice and the Solicitor General, who for over six months have been studying Bill C-36, which covered many points found in Bill C-311. Sometimes a complementary bill can lead to broader, more wide-ranging reforms. I must commend all members who took part in this work. As you no doubt know, this bill is now before the Senate.

Therefore, I would like to devote my allotted time to sharing with this House and Canadians some thoughts about public safety, the criminal justice system and conditional release as it now exists, before we proceed to consider other matters.

• (1800)

Nobody should think that the decision to release an offender to the community is made lightly. The decision-making process is careful and extensive. It is quite obvious that any release decisions are bound by court-imposed sentences. I see no merit in discussing the Criminal Code and sentencing processes at this juncture, because the undertaking has been given that the Minister of Justice will be announcing a major initiative in this regard.

I will reserve comment until the sentencing package has been tabled. However, I believe it may be helpful for members to know something of the conditional-release process and the roles and responsibilities of the principal agencies of the Ministry of the Solicitor General: the

Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board.

Through these agencies, the Ministry of the Solicitor General as part of our criminal justice system deals with two fundamental issues which lie at the very heart of what defines the quality and the nature of the culture of this country.

The first of these is public safety, an issue which is of paramount importance in terms of the quality of life. The proposals recently considered by the House in Bill C-36 will enshrine in law the principle that the protection of society should be foremost in the minds of those entrusted with the administration of court-imposed sentences in the federal correctional system.

The second issue is human freedom in all its dimensions: the deprivation of human freedom, the respect for human freedom, and the quality and dignity of human freedom. This is an important consideration, given that the most extreme sanction the state is able to impose on its citizens is carried out by the Ministry of the Solicitor General.

The ministry, through the Parole Board and Correctional Service, is responsible for ensuring the safety of the public, its employees both in federal institutions and in the community, and more than 20,000 offenders under its charge each day of the year; it must carry out this responsibility in a society which places very great importance on the rights and freedoms of all its citizens. How the Correctional Service and Parole Board go about their business is a matter of concern not to just a small minority but to all Canadians.

As I said, on any given day the Correctional Service is responsible for close to 13,000 offenders in federal institutions and over 7,000 on parole or mandatory supervision, and it is recognized by correctional practitioners that the primary objective is to contribute to the protection of society. Through the recent legislation, this perception of their role has been formalized.

The common view might be that police protect the community through the enforcement of laws, while jails, prisons and penitentiaries protect society by keeping criminals locked up so that they cannot commit new crimes. Some might also argue that penitentiaries protect society by serving as a deterrent against crime.