

Parole Act

members to the National Parole Board. This enlargement of the National Parole Board was promised by the Solicitor General (Mr. Allmand) in his June 1 statement to the House on the penitentiary system and the new regulations concerning parole and temporary absences. I have not seen these new regulations. I believe that the old regulations which are still appended to the Parole Act are not by any means comprehensive.

In his nine-point statement last June, the Solicitor General promised that legislation would be introduced at the earliest opportunity to amend the Parole Act, to permit the appointment of ten additional ad hoc members of the Parole Board. He said that these ten members will be assigned in teams of two to the five parole regions of Canada and will deal primarily with day parole and panel hearings in the institutions. This step will enable the National Parole Board to deal with a considerable backlog of cases that require detailed consideration, and simultaneously satisfy the new volume of decisions on day parole that will come before the members.

The Parole Board at present is composed of nine members and 34 officers. On May 1 of this year George Street, Chairman of the Parole Board, announced that the Parole Board was discontinuing its practice of face-to-face interviews with inmates because of the heavy case load of applicants. He explained this decision on a May 20 appearance on the television show "Question Period". He explained that interviews were being stopped at the present time "until we get more members and the Board is re-organized, because we just couldn't keep up." He noted that the number of cases reviewed in 14 years by the Board went from 5,000 to 17,000 every year. Then, as the Board started to travel, he said, "We got more and more applications and more and more work." One of the most essential processes in any parole system, sir, is that of face-to-face confrontation, face-to-face interview between the applicant for parole and the parole officer. I hope, at the minimum, that the increase of ten ad hoc members will permit a reimplementation of that kind of work.

Mr. Street also pointed out that half of the Board's work deals with provincial prisons. I say in passing that there has been a good deal of criticism directed at the Chairman of the Parole Board, as evidenced in committee hearings and as voiced by the hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard). I, for one, have every confidence in the abilities of the Chairman of the Parole Board, Mr. George Street. Instead of dwelling constantly on failures and attributing these failures to one individual, perhaps we should be looking at some of the progressive and meaningful things Mr. Street has been doing in his administration of the Parole Board. I certainly want to say now that we emphatically endorse what he is doing. He is doing a good job.

I should like some questions to be answered. I do not suppose the Minister of National Health and Welfare (Mr. Lalonde), who is doubling for the Solicitor General, will be able to answer these questions. I wish to ask whether the increase of ten ad hoc members to the Board will permit reinstatement of interviews with inmates. Second, are there any plans to decentralize the Board by having panels stationed in different parts of the country so that institutions can be visited on a more frequent basis?

[Mr. Nielsen.]

Third, are there plans to increase the number of parole officers? I understand that there are some 34 such officers at the moment. Fourth, what will be the effect on the Parole Board of the new regulations regarding parole and temporary absences. Will the expanded board have some input into the system of temporary absences, which are not the concern of the Parole Act—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Mr. Nielsen: Mr. Speaker, I wish to ask two more questions.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. Perhaps with the consent of the House the hon. member might be allowed to complete his remarks, although his time has expired. Is this agreed?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. Nielsen: Mr. Speaker, my fifth question is this: has any consideration been given to restricting the Parole Board to federal institutions only? The corollary to that is, will some functions of the Parole Board be transferred to provincial parole boards, in cases where there are such boards, or are provinces to be encouraged to set up parole boards, in cases where there are not such boards, in order to decentralize this function. Lastly, when will the Huguesson report be released? If it recommends, as is widely rumoured, amalgamation of parole and temporary absence procedures under the National Parole Board, will the Board be able to handle the increased workload, given its already existing backlog?

Those are questions I should like answered before being asked to vote on this measure. Also, I must say at once that we cannot go along with the amendment proposed by the hon. member for Skeena, because inasmuch as he suggests that we ought to include on the Board two Indians or persons of native origin, or two persons to be drawn from those who have served some time in penitentiaries, or others, we should, as the minister pointed out, open the door to a wide range of people, who, it is suggested, might be left off. The female sex has been mentioned. I can imagine such a provision would open the door to insisting on their being given persons of French speaking origin and five persons of English speaking origin. Breaking down the composition of the board by race, sex and colour would be unworkable. I would be content to have the power to appoint members exercised as in the past in the hope we might get some people a little closer to the earth, and a little further from academia, making the practical decisions that are made by the board. I thank the House for extending my time.

● (1530)

[Translation]

Mr. C.-A. Gauthier (Roberval): Mr. Speaker, I will say only a few words on Bill C-191 because I do not intend to participate in a lawyer's marathon. I have always considered that lawyers were most interested in such problems as they give them another opportunity for fighting among themselves.

I am quite surprised at this bill being submitted now. We believe that the National Parole Board has enough members now. We are being presented Bill C-191 aimed at