

B.C. Prison Hostages

Mr. Leggatt: A departmental investigation is ridiculous. It will not satisfy the public in any way, shape or form. The public have been concerned about these institutions for quite some time. It is necessary to get outside the service and see that justice is not only done but is perceived to be done.

A difficult question was posed by the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) in answering one of the questions put to him. He said "Well, it's all right for you guys, but you are not on the spot." I recognize the government had a dilemma in terms of whether it should release three desperate and dangerous criminals. However, there is a precedent in this country, the Cross case.

No one in this party objected to the procedure followed in the Cross case. I do not know of anyone crying because the criminals in the Cross case are somewhere abroad. I believe that was the right approach. I hope the government took that approach.

I am concerned indeed that there is an ambiguity in the statements that were received today on the question of the release of those prisoners and the question of the protection of those hostages. I sincerely hope the government did not try to have it both ways in this case. That would be a case of compounding this very serious tragedy.

In view of the severe criticism the government has had over the years in terms of its penal service administration, and in view of this being one incident in many, we should not forget this tragedy. Mary Steinhauser should not have died in vain. We cannot go on playing the same game. We need a full public inquiry into the way these maximum security institutions are run.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Fortin (Lotbinière): Mr. Speaker, we know what tomorrow holds in as much as it is made and influenced by the Solicitor General. Another tragedy has just occurred at New Westminster. The only answer of this government is to extend, through the Solicitor General, their sincere sympathy to the bereaved family, congratulations to those who risked their lives in spite of the minister's indolence, and finally, to order an inquiry which will remain on the shelves like all previous police investigations.

Mr. Speaker, a similar tragedy occurred not so long ago, at Cowansville, in the province of Quebec; the circumstances were different but the consequences were similar. A prison guard was killed there. The next day the minister was asked what he intended to do. Did he intend to take measures or was he taking measures to guarantee maximum security in our prisons, to protect our prison guards and encourage them to work, and particularly, to protect our society. This minister, in an eloquent and remarkable endeavour, said he extended the family his sincerest sympathy, and he had ordered an inquiry.

Mr. Speaker, this did not prevent another tragedy, at New Westminster this time. The three murderers concerned who held 14 hostages at New Westminster were well-known, hardened criminals convicted for premeditated and capital murders, and they had been sentenced to life imprisonment.

Yet, the minister should understand that those three individuals who played the heros, which cost the life of an innocent person were already under the maximum penalty before taking the hostages, namely life imprisonment. Neither do they fear, regardless of the seriousness of their crimes, a more severe penalty because even before the tragedy at Cowansville, before the tragedy at New Westminster, those criminals had already been condemned, before they did anything, to the maximum penalty provided under the act, regardless of the seriousness of their murder, that is life imprisonment.

Proceeding from that principle rejected by the minister—and he is staking his political life on it—it does not matter to the inmate whether he kills one, two or five prison guards with whatever weapon he can use to commit another crime, a knife, a revolver or other weapon, his penalty will not be any more severe than before his crime. He is already under the maximum penalty.

Mr. Speaker, this is how happen deplorable and absolutely unfortunate situations such as we have just witnessed at New Westminster, when we have to find an obliging country ready to assume towards the criminals the responsibilities which we have failed to accept.

Mr. Speaker, in conclusion, I suggest that the minister will be held directly responsible of those tragedies so long as he refuses to allow the House to review the matter of capital punishment and to reinstate it in cases of premeditated murder.

Mr. Speaker, as reported in *Hansard* for May 5, on page 5452, the hon. member for Edmonton Centre (Mr. Paproski) asked the following question: Will the government consider a national referendum on the abolition or retention of capital punishment? The President of the Privy Council (Mr. Sharp) replied: The government has no such intention. When the hon. member for Edmonton Centre asked for a national referendum with a view to ascertaining public opinion on the matter, the President of the Privy Council answered:

Mr. Speaker, at every general election, the people of this country have some input. The last time they elected a majority of Liberals.

There is the government's answer and the manner,—in between tragedies—it considers the problem. So, when there is no tragedy, the government refuses to consider the issue of capital punishment, refuses to reconsider it, when it knows that public opinion is very much divided on the issue and disappointed by the administration of justice at present.

When an unfortunate tragedy occurs, everybody agrees. Then, the minister makes a fine statement or extends his sympathy. But, Mr. Speaker, tomorrow another tragedy could take place and there is absolutely no guarantee that measures are being taken by the department, since, for the government, it is a purely political issue. I think, and I know this is a serious charge, that the minister's own head or department are more important to him than the protection of innocent human lives in prisons. That is why I think I am expressing the views of many of my fellow-citizens when I say I am deeply disappointed to see that such murders, such crimes can be committed in an organized and civilized society with impunity.