

Government Orders

Ms. Shaughnessy Cohen (Windsor—St. Clair, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is always a pleasure to follow the member for Halifax, if only because very often there is nothing left to say so I can speak much more briefly.

I want to comment on how this bill fits in with the overall Liberal vision and the overall Liberal plan for Canada. I think the Reform Party is shortsighted when they criticize this bill only on the limited grounds they have set out. In reality, justice issues in many respects are economic issues. I say this because I come from a community, Windsor and Essex county, that has prospered as it leaves the recession. We are probably on the leading edge of recovery from the last recession.

I have noticed at home, and our city leaders and our citizens have noticed as well, that as our community becomes more prosperous, as we have more jobs, as we have a healthier community economically, we have a healthier community in other ways. When we look at the health of the community and we look at how we have been affected by this recovery from the recession, or partial recovery from the recession, what we see is that violent crime has gone down, other forms of crime have decreased, and the pressure of social problems has lessened. This is because the community is in better shape economically.

In the early 1980s, when the last great recession hit, I was practising law in Windsor, not as a young lawyer but as a new lawyer. I did a bit of matrimonial law in addition to my regular criminal practice. It was devastating, because as there were layoffs at the auto plants and at the feeder plants it seemed there were more marriage breakdowns. As there were more marriage breakdowns, it seemed that my practice in what were then called juvenile delinquents, young offenders, increased in terms of criminal law. It seemed to me also that I had to deal with more domestic violence in my practice.

Subsequently, when I began to prosecute I found the same thing. With economic waves and downturns and the economic roller-coaster we have experienced in the recent past in Windsor, domestic violence and other forms of violence increased. There were more robberies, more property offences, more break-ins. You could see and palpably feel the link between economic health and social health in our community.

• (1220)

When Reform talks about the justice system they should do so within the greater framework of economic development in our communities. A community with a healthy economic base and with active ongoing economic development is a community that is going to be healthy in other areas. This is part of the Liberal program for healthy communities.

The law commission is a very small part of this. I would like to point out that this is not something we have just recently pulled out of the air; this is something for which we set aside money in our February 1995 budget. In their joint wisdoms, the

Minister of Justice and the Minister of Finance agreed that setting aside a relatively small amount of money out of the overall budget for the work of the law commission was an important part of moving Canada forward, moving forward into communities like Windsor, Tecumseh, and St. Clair Beach to make them healthier.

The law commission allows us to reach into individual communities and into the broader Canadian community for advice and help as to how we can improve our justice system. As we are increasing the number of jobs in the country, over 400,000 since we were elected, as we are making the country economically more viable and as we are making it more prosperous, we are also looking at and dealing with aspects of our criminal justice system and our justice system in general that can be improved.

The Reform Party complains about the way the commission is set up. In reality, the commission is doing what the Reform Party has asked us to do. It is allowing us to go to what they call the grass roots. In reality, of course, the Reform Party's grass roots are people who think like them, who are not a majority of the country. They have a fundamental problem with democracy, which allows the majority of a country to rule.

We are not satisfied with that either. We know that not everyone who voted for us agreed with every single thing we wanted to do in the red book. We know that the people of Canada who voted for us did so because of the overall thrust of our policies, and they may have some disagreements. We are not satisfied with that. We are setting up structures that allow us to reach out to find out what is going on, what people are thinking and where we can go.

The Reform Party derides the efforts of the former law reform commission, which was summarily executed by the Conservative government. Deride that as it will, this is not the old law reform commission; this is a new law commission, and it is a commission with a difference. This commission has a special mandate, which is very different from that of the old law reform commission.

When the law reform commission was eliminated there was a cry from many parts of the country, from groups that had benefited, who had been able to persuade the law reform commission that new advances were required and changes were required in the law and who saw that come to fruition in legislation. However, this law commission, with its special guiding principles—which are not just stuff we are talking about, they are actual principles we have put into the legislation—has a very real difference, which will allow us to tap into what all Canadians are thinking about our justice system.

This law commission is mandated to take a multi-disciplinary approach to law reform and to the legal system. Like the Liberal government, it sees the justice system as part of a broader social and economic environment. It is mandated to look at what