

Government Orders

homicide cases in Canada since 1986 have focused on young people in that age group. It is therefore patently false to claim that adolescents are more likely than adults to commit murder.

To deal with this problem, the government had two options: the easy, populist and short-term solution, which included the bill before the House today, or stressing the long-term interests of the teenager and society and opting for rehabilitation. When a young person who has committed a reprehensible act is charged and tried by a judge and jury, and especially if he is sentenced to life imprisonment, it may be some consolation for the victim or the victim's family and it may be reassuring for society. However, what does society gain by sentencing a young person whom we might be able to rehabilitate through community reintegration? What do we gain by sentencing a young person to closed custody or imprisonment, a school for crime with no drop-outs and where good attendance increases the risk of recidivism?

Nothing at all, Madam Speaker. Statistics show that only 13 per cent of young people are responsible for violent crimes, while this was 22 per cent for the 18 to 25 group and 33 per cent for the 25 to 34 group.

According to the experts, the minister should have gone beyond the red book, because the main problem with the Young Offenders Act is not the act itself but the administration of justice.

For instance, it is a fact that the crime resolution rate is very low. The average for all types of crimes is around 29 per cent. Another administrative problem is the time it takes for the court to hand down the sentence. It takes far too long, especially when we are talking about teenagers, where time is a very important factor. When the time lapsed between the crime and sentencing is too long, this tends to erode the causal link between the two events and consequently undermines the credibility of the adults who make the decisions that alter the course of their lives.

Our so-called civilized and industrialized world has no initiation rites to mark the passage from childhood to adulthood. Instead, we invented adolescence. What are the messages teenagers get from our society? You are too big to be a child and too small to be an adult. You have to settle for being a teenager. You have to meet standards of acceptable behaviour. You have to go to school, because you are too young to work. You have to go on welfare, because there are no jobs.

Between the ages of 14 and 18, teenagers experience a major identity crisis. They are trying to find themselves. They want to test the limits of society. They need understanding, support, supervision, explanations, information, education, training, but they are often left alone with a list of instructions. In other cases, they are often exposed to confrontation and violence.

I have heard some quite remarkable speeches in this House on traditional family values and the need to subsidize women in the home to allow them to raise their children. But those same members were among the first to call for more repression, more punishment and stricter standards. Have we forgotten that children do not come into this world as delinquents and that the environment in which they were raised has made them what they are? Are we overlooking the fact that we are the sum of our experiences? Are we trying to disclaim all responsibility for the mess we have made?

• (1555)

I am disappointed, even sad. Sad because we do not seem to care about working to improve our collective well-being. We have the power to save our children, but we are choosing to put them in jail. Yet, are not parents responsible for their children until they reach 18? Then, why not consider alternatives like the ones suggested by the expert panel? For example, we could have added the option of imposing a suspended sentence, which would protect our society and give young persons a chance to prove their willingness to modify their behaviour.

To improve the delivery of justice we could have considered a better co-operation between the Crown and the defence, in order to reach a decision best suited for the accused. Personally, I think that the probation officer could have been involved, to find alternatives to prison.

To conclude, amendments to an act will never make up for not enforcing of that act properly. The federal minister is responsible for the Young Offenders Act, but its application comes under provincial jurisdiction. To reach his objective, better youth justice administration, the minister should have involved the provinces in the legislative review process.

He did not do that and that goes to show, in my opinion, that he is not looking for an effective, long-term solution, but rather for a short-term, popular solution, even if it is counter-productive. Once again, the federal government demonstrates that it has but one concern: to centralize. It follows its own course, irrespective of the good of the children of Quebec, among others.

[English]

Mr. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt): Madam Speaker, I have been working on amendments to the Young Offenders Act since the day I was elected. Some of the amendments made by my hon. colleague across the way I certainly could not comprehend.

This particular act we are dealing with was first tested in 1985 when a young individual in my riding killed three people: a mother, a father and their seven-year old daughter. The young offender received three years in total. There are no words to describe the feelings of my constituents.