

[English]

As the minister mentioned earlier, the amendments we are considering today respond to various criticisms that the bill was vague and open to misinterpretation.

• (1610)

Furthermore the amendments we are examining today will improve the enforcement package we have put forward. They are not draconian measures as the opposition would like us to believe. They are a fair, efficient and common sense approach to the problems criminals pose to our immigration system.

The opposition parties continue to be opposed to our legislation, yet both have admitted they agree in principle that changes have to be made. The Bloc Quebecois thinks we have gone too far with our proposal and the Reform Party thinks we have not gone far enough. I think we are on the right track.

We are here to represent all Canadians. We have listened to Canadians from across Canada and put forward what we feel is the best solution.

The main points of the legislation are as follows. First, serious criminals deemed to be a danger to the public will not be allowed to claim refugee status as a means to delay their removal from Canada. Appeals against removal orders by persons convicted of serious crimes will be decided by the minister or his designate and not by the immigration appeal division. Senior immigration officers will be allowed to terminate refugee hearings because of criminality. Further, the legislation will give immigration officers the authority to seize identity documents from international mail if it is clear they are meant to be used to circumvent immigration requirements.

The legislation will also ensure that persons with summary convictions whether obtained inside Canada or abroad will be inadmissible. Bill C-44 will allow us to stop the processing of citizenship when a person is under inquiry.

Concerns have been raised over the definition of a serious criminal. Some are concerned that rightful refugees will be turned away. This will not be the case. One of the amendments we are considering today clarifies the definition of criminality. This is the essence of much of what Bill C-44 says.

It is important to note the two conditions. To be ineligible for refugee status an individual must be convicted of a crime punishable by 10 years or more in prison and must be deemed a serious threat to public safety by the minister. Both those conditions have to be met. Those considered a danger to the public would lose their right of appeal to the IRB on humanitarian grounds, law and issues of fact. They would retain the right to

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seek judicial review in the federal court and humanitarian issues would be considered by the minister when he or she makes a decision.

Contrary to what a lot of opposition members said, this responds to a lot of the concerns brought forward by the various organizations that presented their briefs before the immigration committee, for instance the Canadian Bar Association and other groups. We listened, took note and made those changes in Bill C-44. This is a government that listens to Canadians and, as we have proven in various other areas of legislation, takes their concerns seriously when the time comes to bring forth legislation.

Unfortunately the two opposition parties continue to voice the concerns of only parts of Canada. It is easy to put forward the ideas of just one region of Canada. It is, however, much more difficult to find the middle ground that will try to satisfy all Canadians. I believe we have done that with Bill C-44.

The Reform Party continues to call for an inquiry into the practices of the Immigration and Refugee Board and most recently proposed a total ban of the board. We recognize that Canadians are tired of abuse and we have moved quickly to respond to these concerns. Bill C-44 addresses a number of concerns of the Immigration and Refugee Board to allow for flexibility, a respect of humanitarian and compassionate grounds, and the need to prevent abuse of the refugee system.

The government recognizes changes have to be made in order to make the system work better. We are streamlining the system, making sure that other points such as enforcement are stronger.

[Translation]

Our government is committed to maintaining a truly effective immigration policy, preventing illegal immigration and ensuring effective border control. These new provisions are fair and reasonable. Furthermore, contrary to what was said on the other side of the House, they are consistent with the crime-related provisions of the Geneva convention on refugees. It is a matter of justice, of democracy.

The measures proposed in Bill C-44 are not excessive and do not ignore the needs of immigrants.

• (1615)

Madam Speaker, allow me to add that the immigrants themselves admit that the system is being abused. Those who took part in the public consultations and testified before the Minister of Immigration asked us to amend the legislation as it now stands. I reiterate that our goal is not to penalize immigrants but to eliminate existing cases of abuse in the system.