

*Government Orders*

● (1210)

Another important area in the bill solves some potential problems in the present system in the area of accountability and transparency, which we need to have more of in this process. The bill makes the administration of the program much more transparent and accountable. It goes through the commissioner of the RCMP to the minister and to the House of Commons. It provides for clearer lines of authority within the RCMP structure. That makes unquestionably for a more efficient administration.

The commissioner is required to make an annual report on the operation of the program, a full report indicating what kinds of problems they face, what amounts have been paid out, the number of witnesses who have been protected in various ways, and so forth. He must make that report annually to the solicitor general. The solicitor general will then table the annual report before Parliament so that members of the House have the opportunity to scrutinize the report. Therefore it makes the whole system accountable to the House of Commons and through the House of Commons to the public.

The annual reporting requirement will mean that information will be available to members and the public on the cost and the number of people involved in the program. It will be much clearer. It is very important for both parties to the agreements where a witness is being protected that both the witness and the RCMP or other police force have a clear understanding of what the agreement and what the responsibilities and obligations of both parties to the agreement will be.

This will provide for transparency and accountability with regard to the responsibilities and obligations for both the applicants and the RCMP as administrators of the program. These protection agreements and the obligations of applicants and administrators to fulfil these agreements will provide further transparency and accountability to the program.

All these factors lead to public safety. All these factors are providing a greater feeling of security, a greater sense of safety in coming forward for the witness.

If persons have heard about other witnesses in the past who perhaps did not feel they were treated properly, did not feel that the police had lived up to their part of the bargain in protecting a person, they will obviously be less likely to come forward. However, if we can clarify the rules, if we can have clear agreements between the RCMP or another police force and the witness that provide for the rights and obligations of both and what is going to happen for them, we will not have people saying that they did not get treated properly by the police. They can go to the agreement itself and look at what is on paper.

It is kind of like good fences making good neighbours. A good agreement with clearly specified rules on who is to do what provides for a good relationship between the two sides. I think it will add to people feeling freer about coming forward to the system and providing their information.

To review some of the issues we have talked about how in the past criminals have successfully used fear and intimidation to scare witnesses to keep them away from the police so that they will not bring evidence forward. This program is very important, because individuals involved in organized crime will go to great lengths to try to ensure that a witness or a source will not come forward. As I said, it can be a terrifying experience. They can certainly sometimes threaten and exact violent retribution from the witnesses.

Enforcement agencies need the support and assistance of the public. We are talking here about the public in more than one way. We are talking about the individual who is a witness. In some cases when a witness is relocated he or she may require assistance from the public in that regard to find a new location. I am not sure exactly how that would work, but it may require it in some regard. To achieve success in bringing criminals to justice and to further investigations, the police do need that kind of information and they need people to come forward.

● (1215)

The legislation will cover agents who are involved in investigations, not only in the trials but throughout the whole process, which is why I was pleased to see the definitions I mentioned earlier. Not only is the person who has given evidence in the past covered, but so is a person who has agreed to give evidence or information in the future. In any case where because of taking part in some way in an inquiry, investigation or in the prosecution of an offence a person's security may be at risk, the person is covered by the legislation.

I talked about protection and how it can include relocation, accommodation, change of identity, counselling, financial support or any other requirement needed to ensure the security of the protectees as they are called, or to facilitate re-establishment or becoming self-sufficient in a new location with a new identity.

Let us think about a witness who has been totally innocent, has not been involved in crime at all, but happens to be a witness to a serious crime. I am reminded of the movie "Witness" in which a young boy was a witness to a crime and had to be protected. In a case where someone is totally innocent it must be a bewildering experience to be called upon to be a protected witness, fearing for one's life; having to change identity and home; and being away from family and friends. It has to be a very difficult and bewildering experience.