

Adjournment Debate

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

Mr. Bill Vankoughnet (Hastings—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington): Mr. Speaker, recently I rose in the House to ask the President of the Treasury Board what steps will be taken to facilitate an early retirement and retraining package for front line correctional service employees.

These correctional service employees are responsible for the custody and control of offenders, who, in many cases, have become Canada's most hardened and dangerous citizens. My concern stems from the fact that these CSC staff work in an environment that is continually both stressful and perilous. It is urgent that the issue of early retirement and retraining be addressed.

In response to the question I asked the minister, he was good enough to indicate "soon". However, in fairness to these employees, they have been waiting for almost two decades.

I hope that the government will introduce this legislation now, or at least indicate that in the next session of Parliament and in the Speech from the Throne reforms will be made in addressing, once and for all, this long-awaited change.

In 1967, the Correctional Service of Canada was included under Part I of Schedule I of the Public Service Staff Relations Act. This acknowledges the Treasury Board as the employer with responsibility of all aspects of personnel administration.

Since 1971, the Union of the Solicitor General Employees, which represents the interests of the major portion of the CSC employees, has been attempting to secure some form of early retirement provisions for correctional employees.

The role of these employees is unique. As I mentioned before, the environment of corrections is dangerous and stressful, not only for the CSC staff but their families as well.

During the late seventies and early eighties, 11 staff members have been murdered in the line of duty. There have been numerous staff taken hostage as a means of negotiating various deals and countless physical assaults by violent inmates who have nothing to lose.

While there has not been a continuation of staff murder, this cannot be interpreted to mean that violence or the potential for violence is no longer present.

According to the report of the Solicitor General of Canada 1988-89, there were a total of 678 assaults on staff and 26 hostage takings for the period of 1984 to April 1989. The threat of violence is always present and requires staff to be constantly on their guard.

There were also 195 incidents involving the use of gas and 743 incidents involving the use of firearms during the same five year period. As well the murders, suicides and assaults which occur among the inmate population, though they do not physically harm the staff, produce severe psychological effects. No one can remain immune to the effects of seeing violent death.

Being constantly alert to possible violence and out-thinking, the offender is wearing upon the correctional officer. Many employees spend a longer time in a penitentiary than the inmates they control.

In its report on penitentiaries in 1976, the parliamentary subcommittee said at section 258:

The debilitating effects of penitentiary work is reflected in the low percentage of individuals who remain in the service until retirement. This may also reflect the lack of career opportunities and job diversification. Employees are concerned about the fact that once they are burnt-out, it is very difficult for them to start a second career in another field. The subcommittee is of the opinion that provision be made for them to find alternative employment if they are no longer able to function in the penitentiary environment but are not yet eligible for retirement. But early retirement itself is essential.

• (1805)

It is necessary to recognize the unique nature of corrections work. Changes should include two important areas. First, early retirement would permit those employees who have worked in direct contact with offenders for a significant part of their careers, 25 years or age 50, to retire and to receive an immediate earned pension at an earlier age and shorter service than is now possible.

The second necessary change concerns retraining provisions for employees who are unable to continue their work in the operational correction service. This proposal would assist employees in acquiring marketable skills which can be applied in a second career.