

Government Orders

[English]

We believe the changes we have proposed, the distinctions we have drawn and the emphasis we have selected meet the imperative of public protection while preserving the fundamental principles of the statute and enhancing juvenile justice in the country.

I commend the bill to the House.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear.

[Translation]

Mrs. Pierrette Venne (Saint-Hubert): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Justice has finally caved in to pressures from the most conservative elements of his party. Bill C-37, which proposes to amend the Young Offenders Act and the Criminal Code, draws its inspiration from a philosophy that is repressive.

Although they criticized the amendments proposed by the Liberals as lacking in vigour, I am sure Reform Party members will be very satisfied. This bill responds to many of their demands. I remind you of the debate on May 12, 1994, on the Reform Party motion.

• (1555)

This debate gave us a chance to measure the full extent of the philosophy—I know that is a very big word—of the Reform Party with respect to youth.

How do they see young people, these people who want to punish them at all costs because they imitate adult behaviour? How do these supporters of repressive policies see young people? Listen to what was said by the hon. member for Westminster—Burnaby: “Our young people, the promise for our future, are seen by many not as our hopeful legacy for tomorrow but as strangers to be feared”. There is more: “Young people speak differently, they do not want to dress anything like the rest of us, they do not seem to value or give due regard to what we hold dear”.

The hon. member went on to say: “Indeed there is an innate sense that the fundamental social order of the community has broken down when the average Canadian thinks of youth crime”. At the time, I responded by saying that if the hon. member introduced this kind of motion, he must be convinced that young offenders were, both numerically and socially, a criminal group that was a severe threat to public safety.

At the time I objected to this motion because it reflected the hysteria of a few agitators who were using some unfortunate aspects of recent cases for clearly political ends. On the same occasion, I asked the Minister of Justice not to give in to reactionary pressures within his own party.

Today, we see that the bill introduced by the Minister of Justice is intended first of all as a concession to unruly members of his own party, who could easily be mistaken for members of

the Reform Party. A repressive bill, because its only purpose is to repress, despite the high sounding principles contained in the amendments in the first clause.

This kind of legislation would reflect a disturbing view of society, and I think what was said by the hon. member for New Westminster—Burnaby during the debate on May 12 was the most incredible and most disturbing embodiment of this view.

If these comments had not been reproduced in *Hansard*, it would have been hard to believe that this was actually said in the Parliament of a country that is supposed to be the most democratic in the world. I would like to make a few general comments before discussing the merits or lack of merits of this bill.

The attitude of these reactionaries tells us far more about their perception of the problem of juvenile delinquency than about the problem itself. Both Liberal and Reform Party members have only one thing to say about youth crime, and it is that the solution to the problem is in the penitentiary. I believe, and I am supported in that belief by my colleagues in the Bloc Québécois, that repressive legislation never achieves anything but repression.

Using repression as a deterrent will never reduce the already low rate of youth crime. Does prison prevent adult crime? Why would it be more of a deterrent in the case of a young person who is less aware of the consequences of his acts?

This bill sends a very positive message indeed to our young people. You are children and infants as far as civic duties go, but responsible adults before the Criminal Code. You do not have the right to vote or buy a house or open a business, because you are not responsible, but if you do not act like good citizens, you will go to jail, because you are responsible for your actions.

This is very simply put, but I think we must use simple terms to explain to some people that the problem is not that simple, that it is not enough to throw a young person into prison to make him smarten up, that society will not be better protected if our prisons are filled with new inmates, and that being sentenced like adults will not deter young people from committing adult crimes.

However, this is tantamount to asking that the legislation be dropped. Unfortunately, although the government means well, the bills sole purpose is to appease a faction of the public by sending young people over 16 to court for very serious crimes. This will surely reassure the fanatics and quiet them down for a few months, but this will not prevent criminally inclined gangs from continuing their activities. On the contrary!

• (1600)

Here again, we see an adult model. Just as adult criminal elements resist police by organizing, we see juvenile criminal elements banding together to resist law enforcement. The message is clear: you are criminals, act like criminals and we will treat you like criminals.