

The witness protection program is also used in areas of crime, including homicides and prostitution, which are also of great concern. If we can help in those investigations and the prosecution of cases of that nature with the bill, it is certainly worth pursuing.

I checked with one of the local RCMP offices in my riding and I was told that the existing witness protection program had been used there about 25 times in the past 20 years. Obviously it is not used constantly, but it provides a very important tool for police in investigation and prosecution for criminal offences.

It seems to me that in the future those who must turn to the witness protection program, like the approximately 70 Canadians who did so last year, will benefit from a number of programs provided by the bill. I believe members would agree that all Canadians would benefit from the improvements.

In many respects we are talking about trying to fight organized crime. Yes, there other kinds of crime involved, individual crimes. We can readily see how the witness protection program can deal with problems of organized crime. With that kind of an organized group there is much more need for witness protection.

In that sense one of the best ways to fight organized crime is with information that sources and witnesses can provide if they do not feel they are at risk of being killed, injured or maimed if they give evidence or assist the police in some other way. The bill is important in all those respects.

• (1205)

Another key element of the bill will be a clearly defined admission process and criteria so that not just anybody can qualify under the program. It is very clear from the RCMP or other police forces that want to make use of the RCMP program what the rules are, what the procedures are, and who can be admitted and how. This is very important.

The RCMP has a responsibility after the bill becomes law to thoroughly examine the applicant's suitability for the program in a variety of ways. That means not only the potential contribution the applicant can make toward an investigation, but the RCMP will also look closely at the individual, at the risk involved to that individual, what might be the risk of danger or harm coming to him, the impact on the person or his or her family, as well as the ability of the individual to adjust to the program. I suppose that could be a problem in some cases, depending on the kind of individual being dealt with. All those factors are obviously important in determining who should be admitted to the program.

Interestingly the protection of witnesses and sources does not mean just relocation, as we assume, and change of identity. It also means counselling or other kinds of support. I turn to the bill for a moment to read to the House the definition of protection in Bill C-78:

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"protection", in respect of a protectee, may include relocation, accommodation and change of identity as well as counselling and financial support for those or any other purposes in order to ensure the security of the protectee or to facilitate the protectee's re-establishment or becoming self-sufficient;

We see there are a variety of kinds of protection that can be provided and are necessary. Under the bill the RCMP is required to look at alternate methods of protection.

We talk about the kind of counselling support that a witness may need or a source may need and we think of prostitution involving children, for instance. While there is a basic need for protection in the sense of protection from violence of the child, there will probably be a need for counselling for a child who has been involved in prostitution and the violence and the intimidation associated with that activity.

We can all recognize how difficult and frightening it has to be for people to come forward who have been a witness or a source and have been involved in some way in a matter of this sort. It has to be terrifying, particularly if they are fearing for their lives and in some cases for their family or someone else who may be close to them. That is why the definition of witness in Bill C-78 includes those who might have evidence or will give evidence in the future, as well as those who might be at risk themselves, for instance their family.

The source witness protection program must, and with Bill C-78 it will, make it easier for people with information that may help investigations to come forward without fear for their own safety and the safety of their families. That to me is key. We are not only talking about the safety of their families, but by extension if we can get them to feel freer about coming forward and being witnesses or sources then it is the safety of all our families we are talking about here. The success of the program and of our crime fighting efforts in general depends on sources and witnesses and the information they can provide. Their safety is of paramount importance, which is why I am so pleased to support the bill.

The bill provides one important item that we do not have at the present and is needed. As we can see in the bill of the member for Scarborough West and the debate around that bill over the past year or so, we need consistency in how each case is dealt with. With the bill every case across the country will be dealt with in a consistent manner, which is a big improvement.

The bill will not replace other witness protection programs that exist across the country. I mentioned that provincial forces and municipal forces have their own programs. They will continue to operate. Those law enforcement agencies will continue to be able to participate in the RCMP source witness protection program, but they will now be able to do so with much more accountability and transparency in the process.