

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

Monday, November 26, 2007

Poverty

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, today Campaign 2000 condemned this government for failing Canada's children. The report shows almost a million children live in poverty in Canada and over 280,000 children in Canada use food banks.

The Liberal Party has proposed a plan which will help 30% of Canadian families living in poverty get out and will cut child poverty by 50%.

When will the government show some leadership, step up to the plate, and take action with a plan to reduce poverty in Canada?

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, actually the Liberal Party is proposing raising the GST. I do not see how that can possibly help people who are living in poverty today.

The member raises her plan. The Toronto *Star* pointed out that not only has the Liberal Party not costed its initiatives or explained how it would deal with the various contradictions in its platform toward supporting these various initiatives. The *Star* also points out that the Liberal leader has no idea of what it is like to live in poverty.

I know life was tough for professors in the 1950s, especially when they could not get--

The Speaker:

The hon. member for Brampton—Springdale.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, the government needs to stop playing games, rise above partisan politics, and take some action for the children of Canada.

The report shows that single income, first nations and immigrant families are also living in poverty. It confirms what the Liberals have been saying for months. It confirms that we have a leader and we have a party that cares. We have a national action plan to reduce poverty, versus a Prime Minister and a government that simply refuses to listen.

Are Canadians who are living in poverty being ignored because the Conservatives think they have no votes?

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, we have heard a lot about their 30-50 plan, but frankly we cannot wait that long to deal with this issue.

The fact is this government has put in place a working income tax benefit. We have put in place \$1.4 billion for affordable housing. Today we are investing more in child care and more in training than any government in history.

How did the Liberals respond to that? They voted against it at every stage. That is their stand on poverty.

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Youth Criminal Justice Act

The House resumed from November 22 consideration of the motion that Bill C-25, An Act to amend the Youth Criminal Justice Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee, and of the motion that this question be now put.

[Bill C-25. Second reading]

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.):

Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to stand before you today and speak to Bill C-25, An Act to amend the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

It is an act that is extremely important to many of my constituents in Brampton--Springdale. When we take a look at the recent deaths of youth in my riding, they have caused extreme fear, angst and anguish among those living in our community.

As one of the fastest growing cities in the country, Brampton has become a true symbol of hope for so many. However, the recent deaths of youths across Brampton have left many feeling shocked, dismayed and with a feeling of profound sadness. From youth who have been killed by gangs to people dying as a result of drunk drivers, families not only in Brampton but across Canada are suffering.

Many constituents in my riding have written to me to express their frustration about these senseless acts of violence. They, like many Bramptonians, are calling on the federal government to take a stand against the violence that is plaguing our communities.

What we need is a comprehensive crime strategy, one that commits to putting more police officers on our streets, more prosecutors in the courts, and protecting the most vulnerable, our children and seniors. We must ensure that our police officers have the resources and tools that they need to do their jobs, and we must demand that government bring forward legislation which will make people think twice about their actions.

However, in talking to many of these constituents and Canadians across the country, one realizes that the answer to fighting crime is not the republican or the Bush strategy of locking everyone up and throwing them in jail.

To ensure the safety of all Bramptonians, we need an effective program to fight crime, one that has input and involvement from our young people. Spending money today on skills training and providing

youth with opportunities is going to ensure that if we combine that with strategies to fight crime, it will actually prevent it. It will be money that is saved in the future on putting people in prison.

We need to listen to the youth of Canada. To help jump-start this process in my own riding of Brampton--Springdale, I have created a youth advisory council which will provide student representatives from all the schools in Brampton--Springdale an opportunity to speak openly and directly to their elected officials and community organizations on issues that matter to them, on issues of violence, gangs, and drugs in their schools and neighbourhoods.

It is my hope that this youth advisory council will empower students, community members and elected officials to take a stand against violence, the violence which we are discussing in this particular act today. The youth advisory council will work closely with all stakeholders and organizations to discuss strategies that will actually prevent crime, initiatives to create a safe city and rehabilitate criminals.

The Liberal Party has been trying to put an end to violence in our neighbourhoods by offering to fast-track many of the pieces of justice legislation. Unfortunately, many of these bills have not moved forward. In fact, last fall, we offered our support to the government for fast-tracking six of these criminal justice bills, but unfortunately, rather than accepting our offer, it chose to only fast-track one of the bills.

These delay tactics have resulted in Canadians having to live without effective legislation. We need to put aside political gamesmanship. We need to put aside political partisanship and ensure that we get results for the people that we are representing.

We acknowledge that the Youth Criminal Justice Act has been a significant improvement over the old young offenders legislation, and we now see that there are gaps in the legislation, specifically with respect to repeat violent youth offenders. We must address these gaps, but we must ensure that this bill is not undermined by any of these amendments that are being brought forward today.

We have been stating for some time that the Conservatives need to look at the report that was issued by Justice Nunn in Nova Scotia for reasonable reforms to the Youth Criminal Justice Act to address the problem of repeat youth violence. We believe that Justice Nunn, who led a public inquiry on this issue, actually struck the right balance with the recommendations that he provided.

Some of the changes that are being proposed in this particular bill today are actually similar to the recommendations made by Justice Nunn.

(1700)

However, there are some changes that are contained in the bill which have not been supported by nor come from Justice Nunn. We need to ensure that the changes brought forward actually concern a judge's ability to detain repeat violent offenders pre-trial.

We must ensure that when we talk about this bill and the amendments being brought forward that there is the right balance to achieve the goals to prevent youth violence across the country. In particular we take a look at this bill and realize that the Conservatives are attempting to reintroduce deterrence, a sentencing principle which many experts across the country have warned is a mistake.

Martha Mackinnon of Justice for Children and Youth, a legal aid clinic for low income youth, has stated that the Conservatives are addressing a perception that has actually been exacerbated by politicians and the media. She has criticized the government's move to bring back general deterrence for youth and has pointed out that there is no evidence that deterrence works for young people.

It has been said that this bill ignores many of the important concerns Canadians have about legislation which is going to be fair and adequate and which is actually going to produce results. Canadians and Bramptonians are looking for real leadership when it comes to fighting crime in Canada.

We need to have a comprehensive and integrated strategy that talks about the root causes of crime. We need to have a strategy which is comprehensive and talks about the rehabilitation of those who have committed crimes. We need to ensure that we provide assistance for those who are the victims. It is only going to be by putting aside our partisanship and our gamesmanship that we are going to ensure that we have legislation which is fair and adequate, and ultimately produces results for our end goal, which is to help the children of Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Réal Ménard (Hochelaga, BQ):

Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for her speech. It brought back fond memories of the time when we were both sitting on the Standing Committee on Health. Unfortunately, I no longer have the pleasure of sharing that experience with her, but I am convinced that the member for Québec does so brilliantly.

Our colleague has concerns, and rightly so, about this being a somewhat isolated bill, about the government's lack of vision and scope when it comes to strategies to fight poverty or help young people.

We in the Bloc Québécois have had longstanding concerns about the whole issue of poverty reduction. On many occasions, we introduced bills or motions on the subject. For example, we have introduced a motion to amend the Canadian Human rights Act to add social condition to the prohibited grounds of discrimination. It is pretty incredible that all the provinces are subject to that prohibition, but not the federal government.

My hon. colleague is right also to be concerned about the bill not being appropriate because it is not respectful of the provinces' demands, and those from Quebec in particular.

I would like her to share with us her views on an eventual anti-poverty strategy. What should such a strategy contain? I imagine that she will not be able to stop herself from referring to the wealth of experience in Quebec, where anti-poverty legislation was passed under Bernard Landry's PQ government.

[English]

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his great question and also for his concern in regard to fighting poverty in this country.

We have had a chance to see the extensive number of poverty levels. In a country such as ours which is probably one of the leading nations in the world in terms of our economic surplus and our economic prosperity, a million children continue to live in poverty.

Research has shown that those children who are living in poverty are perhaps in some way, shape or form going to commit some of the crimes that we are talking about in this very bill.

We need a poverty strategy that talks about targets, which has benchmarks and ultimately has a vision and a plan. That is why it was a great honour for me that the leader of the Liberal Party introduced his poverty plan, the 30:50 plan. This plan would ensure that over a period of five years poverty would be reduced by 30% for Canadian families, and children living in poverty would be reduced

by 50%. We need action and we need a game plan. In that regard, Quebec is to be commended for its great policy in regard to early learning and child care which is going to ensure that we not only prevent poverty, but provide the tools and mechanisms for families to succeed.

(1705)

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I listened to the hon. member's very thoughtful speech with respect to this bill. I could not agree more with some of her commentary with respect to the need to focus on some of the root causes and some of the programming that has to accompany our youth criminal justice system. That is exactly the essence of what we are trying to accomplish here.

One of the fundamental underpinnings of our justice system is an element of denunciation. The need to send a message of general and specific deterrence is implicit in our justice system. It is used by judges, prosecutors, aid workers and lawyers throughout the justice system.

To that point, I would ask the member whether she acknowledges that the element of deterrence and denunciation which is encompassed in this bill is a necessary part of the approach to reforming and bringing about better behaviour on the part of young people. That, coupled with the necessary programs envisioned, the necessity to help young persons along when it comes to anger management, when it comes to rehabilitations for drugs and alcohol, all of these things are part of a total package, but denunciation has to be at least part of that overall approach. Would she agree with that?

Ms. Ruby Dhalla:

Mr. Speaker, the experts across this country have stated that reintroducing deterrence would be a mistake. That is why we on this side of the House are recommending that the bill go to committee and that we ask the experts and the witnesses to put forward solutions which are actually going to achieve results to reduce crimes committed by young people in Canada.