

OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

Wednesday, November 16, 2005

Controlled Drugs and Substances Act

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure and an honour to stand in the House of Commons and speak on behalf of my constituents of Brampton—Springdale.

When we talk about the issue of safer streets, safer schools and safer neighbourhoods, that is a goal that all of us as community members try to work toward. It is one of the key goals we have in Brampton—Springdale.

Before I begin, I must take the opportunity to recognize the sincerity of the hon. member for Prince George—Peace River in bringing forward this legislation to penalize those who prey on our vulnerable children who should be able to live in an environment where they feel safe and secure.

What is unfortunate is that our government cannot support the bill based on the legal grounds that were laid out by my colleagues from Justice Canada. Research has consistently found that minimum sentences have little or absolutely no effect in deterring criminal activity.

However let there be no mistake that both myself, as the member of Parliament for Brampton—Springdale, and the Liberal government share the determination of the member to protect children from the harmful effects of drugs that cause so many problems for many Canadian families and their communities across the country.

I just want to reiterate one of the reasons that we must hold back our support for Bill C-248. The bill would contravene the fundamental principle of proportionality in sentencing. By proposing the same mandatory minimum penalty for trafficking in drugs that are found in different schedules of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, it disregards, among other things, the differences in health and safety risks associated with drugs that have been found in those particular schedules.

The fact is that research has consistently found that minimum sentencing has little or absolutely no effect at all in deterring criminal activity. It is essential to realize that to deter criminal activity we must get to the root of the problem and try to create safer streets, safer schools, safer neighbourhoods and, ultimately, safer communities for a safe nation.

I realize the sincere desire of the member of Parliament to penalize those who prey on children. I assure all hon. members that the government does share his determination, which is why Parliament set out in section 10 of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act the purpose of sentencing for drug offences and the requirement that the court consider any relevant aggravating factors, including trafficking to any person under the age of 18 years, and trafficking

in or near school grounds or any other public place usually frequented by persons under the age of 18.

However I think it is important to recognize that it will take much more than tough penalties to make our Canadian schoolyards safe. Enforcement is one of the many areas where we, as parliamentarians and as Canadians, need to take action to protect the future of our country, which is our youth, from the devastating effects of substance abuse. We need to make major inroads in the areas of prevention, treatment and harm reduction. We can do that by working together.

The Government of Canada has already put forward a strategy designed to achieve those goals, and that is our Canada drug strategy.

The strategy that we currently have in place seeks to ensure that Canadians and our young people, the future of our nation, can live in a society that is free of the harm associated with problematic substance abuse. This strategy takes a balanced approach to both reducing the demand for drugs and the supply of drugs. It ultimately contributes to a goal all of us here are trying to achieve, and that is a healthier, safer community and environment through prevention, enforcement, treatment and other harm reduction initiatives.

To strengthen its capacity to address the growth of drug use throughout society, in 2003 the government renewed the Canada drug strategy and bolstered its funding with a new investment of \$245 million over five years for ongoing measures to address the harmful use of substances. This includes an annual investment of \$9.5 million in the drug strategy communities initiatives fund for the development of national, provincial, territorial and community based projects to address substance abuse and to promote public awareness of substance abuse issues. I am sure my colleagues are aware of the benefits of this particular drug strategy community initiatives fund.

Also included in our funding of \$245 million was \$14 million to be provided annually to the alcohol and drug treatment and rehabilitation program which would really work toward increasing the availability of effective substance abuse treatment. Young people are a primary target of all activities flowing out of Canada's drug strategy. As a former health care provider who has worked with individuals who have taken the wrong path, joined the wrong crowd or who perhaps experimented with substance abuse, I know firsthand that many of these initiatives put forward by Canada's drug strategy have actually worked.

We can take the example of some of the several public education campaigns that have been undertaken. Several of these initiatives are directly aimed at youth. They include an interactive "Be drug wise" website which has been accessed by a number of youth throughout the country. As we know, in the era of technology and the advancement of young people, they are very in tune with everything that is going on over the Internet. This is something that has provided a tremendous benefit to our young people.

We as a government, through Health Canada, have released a "Straight Talk About Marijuana" information booklet, both for youth and their parents, to address some of the common misconceptions that the use and effects of drugs have, as well as any potential legal consequences. We have tried to ensure that we get the information out to the people to whom it matters most.

In addition, the government has spearheaded the development of a national framework for action to reduce the harms associated with alcohol, drugs and other substances in Canada. Provincial, territorial and municipal governments and agencies, NGOs and many others, especially in my community of Brampton—Springdale, are coming together to develop and implement a framework that will work and that will ensure we have safer schools, neighbourhoods and communities and, ultimately, will be a positive step toward ensuring we have a structure and a national approach for preventing the use of drugs and substances among our young people.

In the process of doing this, many stakeholders across the country are sharing information about best practices and evidence based research to ensure that we can utilize optimally our Canadian tax dollars with programs that work for the intended audiences. Children and young people, urban, suburban, first nations, Inuit, Métis, whether they are gay or lesbian, from minority communities, street youth, rural youth, youth of all ages, of all socio-economic brackets and cultural backgrounds, are front and centre in this goal to ensure we work together collectively as a team to have safe neighbourhoods and safe communities.

Communities across the country are doing their part to advance Canada's drug strategy. Many of them have benefited from financial federal support that has been provided under the initiatives fund that was established in 2004. A number of initiatives have taken place whereby the western ministers of health, justice and public safety have met to address the growing concerns around the use and production of crystal meth, which some of my colleagues spoke to earlier.

I am not suggesting that the solutions we face in addressing this huge challenge are easy but we must ensure that we work together collectively as a team within the framework we have, which is the Canada drug strategy. We also must move forward to ensure we can address the issue of drug and substance abuse among our young people. We ultimately must work together to create a safe nation by building safer neighbourhoods, schools and communities.