



Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice

A national faith-based organization founded in support of Unitarian values

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Open Letter to Canadian Senators and Parliamentarians

I have personally sat with the Senate since the beginning of February listening to the witnesses and weighing the issues brought up about Bill C-10 and about the nature of Canadian Society and its criminal justice system. I have tried to listen with an open mind and an open heart.

The issues are more complex than I first realized. I was unaware until near the end that the focus of many of the witnesses was to interpret new language offered that had not been in the old bill. The point is to inform the Senate the consequences of their actions. They try to answer: What is “serious violent crime?” What is “protection of society?” Are youth capable of adult moral and rational responsibility?” What actually deters crime? Do victims have rights to services equivalent to that received by offenders? Who is a victim of a crime? How much will this bill cost the system and who is going to pay for it? What programs will be cut? Where will the money for prevention come from, and for more drug and mental health courts? All this to shed light on the consequences of the Conservative desire for tougher mandatory minimums.

Underlying these are other issues. Will this net put many more people at the bottom of the crime hierarchy in jail? Will it incarcerate more aboriginal and mentally ill people? Does the government know that it will and it is still prepared to take that risk in order to make property safer? When the government and the Senate ignore the warnings of so many that it will be the marginalized that will pay, does this mean these people can be thrown away in the interests of the Canadian middle and upper classes?

The other important question is – how much will this bill cost and how will it be paid for? Will we have to build more jails? Will we need more police, more judges, as many have said, or face overcrowded jails and courts and thousands of cases dropped because of unreasonable delays? Will the government have the cooperation of the provinces, or will this cause more fractious behaviour between the different levels of government, a scenario that is not in the public interest?

You are in a better position than I am to know the answers to these questions. I beg you to reflect deeply on them and to seek out the answers. Release the government analysis of the Bill in relation to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. If this law does not meet the standards of this Convention – to do what is in the best interests of the child -- do not pass it. Take it back to the drawing board until it does. That Convention is the best standard we have, and Canada has committed its signature to it. Keep our international agreements.

The Following are excerpts from a statement by Unitarian Professor of Theology, David Bumbauch. He says, “Unitarians believe that our efforts to understand the world and our place within it are an expression of the Universe’s deep drive toward meaning. In us, and perhaps elsewhere, the Universe dreams dreams and reaches toward unknown possibilities. We hold as sacred the unquenchable drive to know and to understand.

We believe that the moral impulse that weaves its way through our lives, luring us to practices of justice and mercy and compassion, is threaded through the universe itself and it is this universal longing that finds outlet in our best moments.

We believe that our location within the community of living things places upon us inescapable responsibilities. Life is more than our understanding of it, but the level of our comprehension demands that we act out of conscious concern for the broadest vision of community we can command and that we seek not our welfare alone, but the welfare of the whole. All our lesser loyalties stand under the judgment of that great affirmation. In serving the party, the cause, the national or ethnic identity, am I serving the largest community I can envision? In failing the weak, the lost, the marginalized, have I failed my deepest defining obligations? We are commanded to serve life and serve it to the seven times seventieth generation.

We believe that those least like us, those located on the margins have important contributions to make to the rest of the community of life and that in some curious way, we are all located on some margin. We believe that all that functions to divide us from each other and from the community of living things is to be resisted in the name of that larger vision of a world everywhere alive, everywhere seeking to incarnate a deep, implicate process that called us into being, that sustains us in being, that transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves, that receives us back to itself when life has used us up. Not knowing the end of that process, nevertheless, we trust it, we rest in it, and we serve it.

Such a faith statement allows us to recognize that ultimately we are responsible to the larger, sacred context out of which we have come, in terms of which we live, and to which we ultimately return. It provides a compass by which to steer amidst the uncertainties of a chaotic world.”

I agree with Senator Lang that justice must not only be done but be seen to be done. Where we disagree is on how to achieve that. There are times when jail time is the right answer to contain the behaviour of certain troubled and violent people, but there are also times when it is not. Jail is not the only effective consequence against crime and sometimes it causes more harm than good. We need judicial discretion. When the whole community has problems with alcoholism, drug abuse, and family violence, it is no solution to isolate one individual for punishment. A much bigger investment in prevention and healing in the whole community is required.

Based on the testimony in the Senate, it is clear that we have systemic ills in our society that need addressing. It is also clear that we must support community-based solutions like restorative justice whenever possible. They will provide much more healing and ultimate community safety than a short term jail sentence with few opportunities for rehabilitation. The needs of victims for counselling and sometimes income support must also be addressed. There are many investments in crime prevention that could make us safer. I appeal to you with all my heart. Use all appropriate tools available for particular offenders, and invest as much in prevention as you do in enforcement and incarceration as we move forward with our justice system.

In faith,

Rev. Frances Deverell
President,
Canadian Unitarians For Social Justice.