



Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice

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

P.O. Box 40011, Ottawa, ON, K1V 0W8

President, Rev. Frances Deverell

president@cusj.org

September 26, 2011

Prime Minister Steven Harper,
Hon. Robert Nicholson, Minister of Justice
House of Commons,
Ottawa, Canada

Dear Prime Minister and Minister of Justice,

I am writing on behalf of the Board and Members of Canadian Unitarians For Social Justice to express our concerns about the omnibus bill on Criminal Justice (The Safe Streets and Communities Act.) Unitarians affirm that justice, equity and compassion should be our guide in designing a justice system for Canada. We join with The Elizabeth Fry Society and the John Howard Society in working to improve our approach to public safety.

- We are concerned that by lumping 9 different pieces of legislation into one act, there will be insufficient scrutiny of the laws being passed and their possible consequences. This approach is disrespectful of the democratic process and of the right of the opposition to propose changes and amendments. We request that you allow some parts of the bill to be separated from the main bill and reviewed more closely.
- We object to the imposition of mandatory minimum sentences, especially for minor drug offenses such as cannabis. Harm reduction approaches are much more effective than incarceration.
- We fear that many people will end up in jail that should not be there for mental health reasons or reasons of poverty. Under the proposed crime legislation the most vulnerable (people with mental illness and First Nations' persons) will be hardest hit. These two groups are already disproportionately represented in the jails.
- We are concerned that putting non-violent people in jail will not rehabilitate them but instead will expose them to the life of the hardened criminal. Most people in jail are considered non-violent, by police and correctional authorities. In order to prevent more men, women, and especially children, from being marginalized, victimized, criminalized and imprisoned, Canadians are telling us and politicians that they would rather see their hard-earned tax dollars spent on public housing, child care, pensions, health care, mental health services, public education, victims and other social services.
- We believe a more effective way to reduce crime would be to focus on reducing inequality in Canadian Society.

- The evidence is clear from the United States experience that this tough-on-crime approach increases the costs of the criminal justice system to the point of bankrupting the states that have tried it without significantly making society safer. Both the prisons and the court system are already stretched to their limits. Canada cannot afford to waste billions on such an ineffective approach.
- Research is clear that crime prevention programs (such as the "Pathways to Education Programs" that have proven to reduce drop out rates among high school students) are the most effective way to reduce crime rates and make our communities safer.

The government's Parliamentary Budget office projected the increase costs related to just one of bills would be more than five billion dollars – more than doubling current expenditures for the corrections system alone. Furthermore, he revealed that the provinces and territories would have to contribute the largest proportion of the increase.

Most of these services, as well as many policing and prison services are the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments. As such, we do not believe the federal government should enact their proposed Omnibus Bill until:

- 1) ...it has provided the public with a full costing of this legislation including federal, provincial and territorial costs across the country.
- 2) ...this costing shows a clear understanding of the price tag attached to each proposed legislative or policy reform and
- 3) ...the government can assure Parliament that the expected increase in costs can be accommodated without exceeding 100% capacity of the correctional facilities and without increasing our current deficit.
- 4) ...all provinces and territories have had the opportunity to have input into the proposed strategy and are willing to accept the financial commitments involved.

Let us make decisions based on the best social science research, as they are doing in Alberta, and not for petty political gain. Canadians want to live in a culture of hope. Politicians should not be terrorizing the public with misinformation about a system where crime has been in decline for more than a decade.

Sincerely,

Rev. Frances Deverell
President, CUSJ

Cc Opposition Parties