

Speech / Allocution
Hon. / L'hon. Marie-Claude Blais, Q.C.
Minister / Ministre

C-10 Safe Streets and Communities Act

Ottawa, Ontario

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Good morning.

I am pleased to be here in Ottawa today and honoured to have been invited to appear before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights to offer our government's official response to Bill C-10, the *Safe Streets and Communities Act*.

Without hesitation, we support the efforts to strengthen these laws aimed at protecting the victims of crime, protecting our children and giving a voice to victims.

I certainly want to speak about the fact that we need to better protect our children. As a mother, this legislation truly speaks to me. Our children should feel safe in their own homes, but people need to realize that when we talk about sexual exploitation and predators of children who are using the internet to find their victims, we are not even safe in our own homes. This bill will help to better protect our children.

We have heard a lot about declining crime, but let me tell you that these types of crimes are getting more and more sophisticated and we need to get serious about it.

I'd like to turn the spotlight for a moment to those who I believe should be the real focus of this bill.

As the abbreviated name for the bill implies the act is aimed at making citizens in the cities and communities of our great country affected by these crimes feel safer. More importantly the intent of the bill is to help and support the individuals who are victims of these crimes.

It should not come as a surprise that victims often feel that they are lost in the criminal justice system. Last month, I hosted a town hall meeting on the topic of "access to justice" and invited citizens to come and share with their experiences with me. We had a number of individuals come forward to share stories of dealings with the justice system and many, victims and their families, expressed their frustration with feeling, powerless and voiceless.

The process by tradition and design is most often focused on the prosecution of the accused, with the impact the crime has had on the victim taking a back seat or secondary role.

When I use the term victim, I am including those individuals that are directly touched by the crime, but also the community that bears witness to the crime perpetrated on in their streets, impacting family, friends and neighbours alike.

We'd like to believe the crimes this bill is targeting only happen in the bigger urban centers, but as I told a reporter in my home province during an interview on this new crime bill, it happens in our own backyards.

In fact, New Brunswick places third highest in the country for child exploitation. I believe strongly crimes against children deserve strong sentencing.

People in New Brunswick, like citizens in communities across Canada want to feel safe. People deserve the right to believe the laws that are in place protect them and offer the greatest security possible.

We believe the changes proposed in the new crime bill will do just that.

Moving forward, as the bill becomes law and its different components come into effect, we have some practical issues that New Brunswick will need to address with our federal counterparts.

Given our sole jurisdiction over the administration of justice, we will continue our efforts to seek federal recognition of additional costs that may fall upon the provinces with some of these initiatives.

There will be impacts on courts, prosecutions and legal aid as a result of increased penalties contained within the legislation.

As a practicing lawyer in New Brunswick for over a dozen years I have dealt with individuals on both sides of the legal process. I understand the frustration of victims who feel the system does not adequately take into account their perspective or point of view.

I have also met individuals accused of crimes that would have been better served and supported with an approach other than our traditional criminal justice system.

I truly believe that our province understands the need for early intervention work with youth and families to divert people from the justice system.

Police, prosecutors, lawyers and judges are not social workers or case workers, so we need to work closely with the other departments to find interdepartmental approaches to these complicated cases.

We need health, social development and justice working with community based support groups to find solutions. Solutions are not always in the courtroom. I believe some solutions can be found through early intervention.

The use of diversionary programs, which offer the right services to the right people at the right time, must be viewed as an option for intervention for individuals before they become repeat offenders of the criminal justice system.

New Brunswick will continue to consider opportunities for diversion in cases where that option is deemed appropriate.

As for changes to the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), our prosecution branch supports the changes and feels that this bill will give the tools required to effectively protect the public.

As per the Nunn Commission of Inquiry in Nova Scotia, we feel that this goal of protection of the public is a must.

To that point, I think from past experience and speaking with justice partners there has been an inability to deal adequately with extremely dangerous behavior. Police and prosecutors require tools to protect the public and this Act provides them those tools.

As past member of the board of Portage Atlantic, I have seen the effects of drugs and the cost of this plague on society and our government. If some feel that there is no harm in casual consumption of drugs, I have seen quite the contrary. This has resulted in the destruction of families, drugs have lead to crimes being committed to feed their habit, and in some cases suicide. Yes there are dire consequences.

We support Bill C-10 as it relates to imposing mandatory minimum sentencing in circumstance where it involves the selling of drugs to youth, in or near a school or an areas frequented by youth..

We also support the willingness of the federal government to permit exemptions for drug treatment.

In closing, I wish to reiterate our support to this bill.

Mr. Chair, we will encourage ongoing consultation with our federal counterparts on any future proposed amendments to criminal laws that may be contemplated.

We truly appreciate the opportunity to appear today before the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights to speak to this important piece of legislation.

Thank you.