

Ottawa Journal: putting victims and safety first

Our Government is committed to helping keep our streets and communities safe. We've acted on our strong mandate from Canadians by passing important legislation to deliver on our commitments. At the same time, we recognize that the job isn't done. We have a plan to take further action on several issues, including how the justice system reacts to serious violent crimes committed by individuals who are found Not Criminally Responsible (NCR) for an offence.

Under current law, offenders found NCR can be released in a few years, free to live in any community, even where their victims or families of victims reside. There is no warning or protection under current law to keep victims and other law-abiding Canadians safe. This is a gap in the justice system that must be addressed.

This is why our Government reintroduced the Not Criminally Responsible Reform Act. The proposed legislation is part of our plan for safe streets and communities. It contains several common sense measures to better protect Canadians in situations where offenders are found Not Criminally Responsible.

Our bill will put public safety first, as the paramount consideration in the decision-making process relating to the offender found NCR. This is a vital change for the protection of society and follows the spirit of putting the rights of victims and law-abiding Canadians first.

We would create a new designation, enabling a court to designate someone found NCR as high-risk. Under current legislation, a review board can release such an offender. This new designation would protect the public by preventing the release of high-risk individuals without review by a court. This includes the previous practice of unescorted day passes, which would also be prohibited for high-risk offenders.

In addition, through our proposed legislation, we would protect victims in several ways. We would require that victims be notified when a NCR offender is released; allow non-communication orders to be imposed, to prevent an offender from contacting his or her victims; and provide them with information regarding the intended place of residence of the accused.

Nothing in this bill, of course, would in any way deny access to treatment. Individuals who are detained will be held in secure mental health facilities, rather than prisons. The system will provide proper medical treatment, just as it has been doing.

We are working to build on past measures, such as those targeting organized crime, sexual offences against youth, and serious white collar crime. With stronger, more meaningful sentences, we are helping keep offenders out of our communities to better protect law-abiding Canadians. We passed those measures, despite some obstruction by the Opposition. It's time they start putting victims first, beginning with this much-needed legislation.

We are taking important action on our three main public safety priorities. We will work to hold offenders accountable for their actions, we will put victims first, and we will reform the justice system to work fairly and efficiently. Better addressing situations where offenders are found NCR is an important part of this process. Canadians deserve to know that the justice system is there to protect them. Our Government is committed to ensuring that this is a reality.

By David Tilson,

MP Dufferin-Caledon