

Public backs crime bill: Findlay

Tories aim to build prisons but cut victim services, legal aid: Opposition

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Delta-Richmond East MP Kerry-Lynne Findlay says the public strongly supports her government's new omnibus crime bill, which was passed by the House of Commons on Monday.

"We've had very positive feedback from the public. I'm not hearing the same things from the public, generally, as we do from the opposition because a lot of people feel sentences need to be commensurate with the severity of the crimes," she said.

"It's hard for the general public to understand how someone who is a violent or repeat offender could be given house arrest or conditional sentences, so the idea of treating serious crime for what it is seems to resonate with the public."

Findlay, a rookie Conservative MP, has been deeply involved with the legislation, introduced by her majority government following its election win earlier this year.

A lawyer who was appointed parliamentary secretary to the minister of justice, Findlay is the vice-chair of a justice committee that went over the comprehensive bill, hearing from dozens of witnesses.

The Safe Streets and Communities Act comprises nine individual justice bills that died when the Conservatives only had a minority government. Those bills are now bundled into one sweeping piece of legislation.

When it was introduced, Justice Minister Rob Nicholson said the legislation includes measures to protect children from sexual offenders by setting mandatory minimum penalties.

It also targets organized drug crime, cracks down on young offenders and will take away the option of house arrest for those who have been convicted of serious violent and property crimes and crimes such as sexual assault, human trafficking, child-luring and kidnapping.

The crime bill has been controversial as the opposition parties accused the Tories of fast tracking the legislation. The government was also accused of focusing only on incarceration. More recent criticism has focused on the costs for provincial governments.

The government says the bill will cost the federal treasury an extra \$78.6 million over five years, but it's not clear how much extra the provinces will have to pay, especially when it comes to court time and building prisons to house more inmates.

Both Ontario and Quebec are taking a hard stand against the potential costs, but B.C. Premier Christy Clark recently told the legislature she supports the crime bill.

Findlay said costs are part of the ongoing dialogue between the federal government and the provinces, adding the provinces had asked for these types of reforms.

NDP MLA Guy Gentner, the former Delta councillor who now represents Delta North, isn't impressed with the federal government's approach, saying the justice system won't be equipped to deal with the changes.

"I've heard the premier say, and we don't disagree, there's a need to get tough on crime, above all violent crimes against citizens. But I have to ask the question about the dismal lack of funding for legal aid services in the provinces. In Delta we witnessed the closure of the family court in 2002, we've seen money taken away from victims' services in this province, so how will the bill be downloaded on us?"

The crime bill, which had a number of last-minute amendments, is now headed to the Senate.

Findlay said her justice committee is now working on citizens' arrest and anti-terrorism legislation.

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