

John Howard Society of Manitoba  
583 Ellice Ave, Winnipeg, MB R3B 1Z7  
775-1514

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### **Conservative Crime Strategy – Tough on Tax-payers, Soft on Crime**

Responding to the Conservative Election platform released yesterday, John Hutton, Executive Director of the John Howard Society of Manitoba called their crime strategies “tough on tax-payers and soft on crime.” The conservatives have now pledged to impose 25 year maximum sentences for those convicted of murder, and eliminate almost all conditional sentences.

“Increasing the time that someone spends in prison and eliminating conditional sentences will cost taxpayers hundred of thousands of dollars per inmate, while making Canadians less safe,” Hutton noted. “The cost of keeping someone in prison ranges from \$80,000 to \$120,000 per year, depending on the level of security. Increasing the minimum to 25 years for murder would add an average of 15 years most convictions, at a cost to taxpayers of approximately 1.2 million dollars per inmate. Yet the Conservatives are proposing to do this at a time when overall crime rates have dropped the last three years in a row, and while incidents of homicide have declined across Canada over the last two years. This strongly suggests current measures *are* working, and that Harper is proposing a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist. And the cost of this ‘solution’ is far greater than most people imagine,” Hutton observed.

“Early this year, internal documents obtained by Sun Media from Justice Canada showed that the government is spending *\$250 million dollars* to build more places to hold offenders, which will be needed with longer sentences and fewer conditional sentences. This quarter of a billion dollars is in addition to increases in operating costs.”

There is a wealth of information showing that longer sentences do little to reduce crime overall, and increase the likelihood of recidivism. If tougher sentences actually reduced crime then the US would enjoy very low levels of crime, but this is not the case. It’s homicide rate is three times that of Canada, and its rate of aggravated assault is twice as high as ours. “Why are the Conservatives now trying to adopt strategies that have been proven not to work”, Hutton asked?

At the same time the Conservatives have announced that they would do away with conditional sentences for 30 different categories of crimes. “This doesn’t leave a lot left,” Hutton observed, “and is really a thinly veiled move to end conditional sentencing altogether.”

Community sentences are extremely effective in terms of increasing public safety and saving tax-payers money. Those serving sentences in the community require far less supervision, and support themselves for the greatest part, while paying taxes and meeting family obligations. Most importantly, according to a detailed study of conditional sentences carried out in Manitoba between 1996 and 2003, less than 14% of offenders serving their sentence in the community re-offended during the period of their sentence. In comparison, national studies show that approximately 45% of those incarcerated re-offend almost immediately and will be convicted of another offence within two years of being released.

‘Without the option of community sentences, two things will happen’, Hutton pointed out. ‘Firstly, more people will end up in jail, which increases the likelihood that they will re-offend three-fold. This also increases the cost the taxpayer has to bear, and reduces the amount of money available for prevention programs. Secondly, more people will end up on probation orders, where there is a lesser degree of supervision than when an individual is on a conditional sentence, which will increase the chance that person will re-offend. Under the proposed plan Canadians will end up paying more for even less safety. This makes no sense what-so-ever.’

In support of their plan, the Conservatives cited a an example from Saskatchewan saying that almost 40% of those serving a conditional offence breached a condition were re-admitted to custody. By comparison, the Manitoba study, conducted over a six year period, showed that only 14% of individuals on a conditional sentence breached conditions, and only half of those who breached, 7% of the total, had to be incarcerated. ‘The difference between the two studies is too great to be a result of regional differences – it is extremely suspicious. Either the Harper Government has not bothered to learn all the facts, or it is trying to promote its agenda with misleading information’, Hutton concluded.

For further info call

John Hutton  
775-1513 (315)  
C) 612-4570