

# Harper on crime: be thankful he's not running the world

As soon as Parliament gets back to work next month, Prime Minister Stephen Harper plans to revive his crime agenda.

A big chunk of the legislation he introduced last year before he closed down Parliament in December dealt with criminal law. There were 63 bills presented in the last session from Jan. 26 to Dec. 30, 2009. Twenty of them involved crime legislation. That's 31 per cent or one in every three pieces of legislation.

Harper passed two of the 20 bills and prorogued the other 18.

Nothing prevents him from starting all over again in March while accusing the Liberals of preventing the adoption of his crime agenda as he did when he prorogued Parliament a year earlier.

The idea this spring will be to put more people in jail and keep them incarcerated for longer periods of time in the belief that this will make other people safer. If they're in jail, they can't be committing crimes.

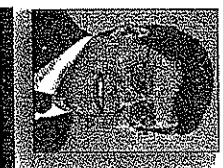
Criminal law is a big vote-getter, especially among older Canadians. They fear violence even though crime rates are dropping year after year. As they grow older, Canadians feel increasingly vulnerable to attack, particularly from young people, despite the fact that statistics show youth crime has also gone down.

The Conservatives' political timing is good. Now is the time to focus on criminal law in the run-up to the next general election. Once a campaign has begun, it's too late for a political party to work on its law-and-order base.

The Conservative focus will be on punishment, not prevention. The Conservatives say that punishing crime more severely prevents others from committing offences. There is no research so far that supports this assertion. But the Conservative government is working on it.

The Harper approach is based on a so-far unproven belief that people don't commit most crimes in the heat of passion but rather think about them ahead of time and therefore weigh the severity of the sentence beforehand should authorities catch and convict them. But research shows that most criminals don't think they'll be caught and that if they are, a good lawyer may get them off.

Jailing people for longer periods of time does make other people feel safer, but studies show it doesn't make inmates better people. There is no research that shows



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other bills would have provided for longer prison terms.

A particularly notable law tackling drug crimes would have allowed for up to seven years in jail for possessing five plants or more of marijuana. The thinking was that five plants is too much for one person to smoke and therefore that the accused must surely be a dealer deserving a hefty sentence.

The Harper crime laws could have doubled the number of inmates in federal prisons. There are 111,000 inmates serving time there at present.

A federal inmate costs \$108,244 a year to keep in jail. That's \$296 a day — the cost of staying in a nice bed and breakfast year round with three meals a day.

In all, the Conservatives spent \$2.2 billion last year on corrections. That's enough to pay for a big chunk of the war in Afghanistan. We'll find out March 4 how much Harper's war on crime will cost us this year.

In 2009, the Conservatives brought in a bill to abolish the national gun registry despite pleas from various associations of police officers who used the system seven million times last year.

There are about six million guns in Canada. Most of them are rifles and shotguns. So far, the Conservatives' continuing moratorium on registering guns hasn't led to a major increase in killings using unregistered guns, although gun sales have shot way up in hardware stores, gun shops, and mail-order houses.

The Harper crime agenda is having a psychological effect on Canadians.

Speaking to a luncheon meeting of the Empire Club in Toronto recently, noted Toronto lawyer Julian Falconer said the Conservatives' preoccupation with crime bills is giving Canadians the impression there is a serious and threatening rise in offences.

"In reality, crime rates are decreasing and have been decreasing for years," he said.

But then Falconer is in the business of practising law, while the Conservatives are in the business of practising politics. If it takes scaring people into believing that only Harper can save them from all the wicked criminals out there, well that's politics.

It could be worse if, for example, Harper was telling us all the offenders out there have weapons of mass destruction and that we therefore need to take a pre-emptive strike at them.

Be thankful Harper is running Canada, not the world.

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