

Federal omnibus crime bill to cost Ontario \$1 billion, province says

Published On Mon Jan 23 2012

Ottawa is stiffing Ontario with the \$1 billion cost of implementing sweeping crime changes, the provincial government says.

The new federal omnibus crime legislation will add another 1,500 prisoners in the corrections system, force the building of another prison and put pressure on parole officers, according to the ministry of community safety and correctional services. Bill C-10 received third reading in Parliament last month and is now before the Senate.

Prisons are already crowded and operating at 95 per cent capacity with 8,500 inmates, said Community Safety Minister Madeleine Meilleur.

And the cost of a new prison is about \$900 million and operating the facility would be another \$60 million a year, she said, adding Ontario can't afford to pay for the federal Conservative crime bill.

"Let's be very clear," she told the *Star*. "My government believes in community safety and crime prevention. But it is just unacceptable that Ontarians are expected to bear the costs of federal anti-crime initiatives. They are tough on crime but aren't willing to pay for their tough talk."

The omnibus federal crime bill combines nine previous pieces of legislation into one and some critics say it will make fundamental changes to the entire justice system. The bill includes tougher sentences on child sexual predators and introduces mandatory minimum sentences for some drug crimes.

The changes will create serious pressure in the justice system for police officers who'll have to spend more time in court, parole workers and correctional staff, said Meilleur.

Some jails will be so overcrowded they could be operating at nearly 150 per cent capacity and another 1,000 people could be placed on parole, she said.

But reforming the justice and corrections system, not simply putting more people in jail longer, is what is needed, she added.

“In Ontario we build schools, we don’t build jails,” Meilleur said. “We are in the process of modernizing our system. There are jails we have in place that were built before Confederation.”

If Ottawa wants these changes then they must provide additional funding to help Ontario pay for the program, she said.

Meilleur said she’ll push Public Safety Minister Vic Toews on the issue this week in Prince Edward Island when federal, provincial and territorial justice ministers meet.

“We expect Ottawa to do what’s right and provide additional funding to help Ontario deal with the consequences of Bill C-10,” she said.

However, the provincial Progressive Conservatives said the \$1 billion figure from Meilleur is more about “bashing Ottawa” than anything else.

“Let’s get real,” said Ontario PC Leader Tim Hudak. “There’s only one taxpayer. So I suspect this sounds like more language from the McGuinty Liberals to try to avoid their own problems in reducing costs and foist them on to somebody else.”

Parts of the bill — such as mandatory minimum sentences and getting rid of community service and rehabilitation programs — affect Ontario in a substantial way, said NDP MPP Jagmeet Singh.

Ottawa failed to consult properly with Ontario, police chiefs and Crown attorneys on the legislation, he added.

“The police themselves are indicating this crime bill is irresponsible and wasn’t properly thought out,” Singh said. “The Canadian government should be footing the bill.”

With files from Rob Ferguson