

crime bill

By IAN AUSTIN AND TOBI COHEN, The Province and Postmedia News March 14, 2012

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The NDP's Kathy Corrigan wants the federal government to help pay the costs of more prisons and tougher sentences.

Photograph by: Ian Smith , PNG files

The financial consequences of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's get-tough-on-crime bill are causing concern in B.C.

Harper and his Conservative government want tougher sentencing, mandatory minimum sentences, and more prisons – but the cash-strapped B.C. government apparently doesn't know what it'll cost.

“They have known these bills were coming for years,” said B.C. NDP MLA Kathy Corrigan. “Either they haven’t done the work and they don’t know what it’s going to cost, or they know what it’s going to cost and they won’t tell us.”

Corrigan called on Attorney General Shirley Bond to ask the federal government to help pay the costs – as Ontario and Quebec have already done publicly.

“Ontario and Quebec have said, ‘This is your bill – pay for it,’ but here they’re saying nothing,” said Corrigan. “We’re dumbfounded that there doesn’t seem to be any planning.”

Bond told *The Province* that the question of paying for the legal changes found in Bill C-10 has been discussed behind closed doors.

“We have clearly outlined our concerns about the costs of the bill and, at our recent meeting of provincial, federal and territorial counterparts, we raised these to the federal ministers and discussed the possibility of sharing some of the more significant costs,” Bond said in an email to *The Province*.

“We discussed issues around the timing of bringing some of the sections into force. We are currently analyzing the additional costs that may be incurred, and we intend to continue our discussion with the federal government about implementation costs.”

Aiyanas Ormond, a community organizer with the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), said the prison-building program will divert hundreds of millions of dollars away from needed social programs.

“They’re trying to sell this tough-on-crime thing, but I don’t know how this is going to go down once people learn how much it costs.”

Ormond said just two new B.C. facilities in Surrey and Oliver are set to gobble up \$326 million in scarce government funds – with the net result that cells will be filled by drug users, not drug kingpins.

“If you’re aboriginal, and particularly if you are a poor aboriginal drug user, there’s a cell with your name on it.

“People get addicted to drugs in prison – this certainly isn’t going to stop the drug problem.”

On Monday, the Conservatives used their majority to pass the so-called omnibus crime bill within the first 100 sitting days of Parliament as promised, despite continued opposition from Canada’s largest provinces, which are vowing not to sit back idly as the measures come into force.

The deeply polarizing Safe Streets and Communities Act, which passed by a vote of 154 to 129, will become law as soon as the bill receives royal assent. The Tories will mark their 100-day milestone on Friday.

“These are very reasonable measures. They go after those who sexually exploit children, people in the child pornography business and it goes after drug traffickers,” Justice Minister Rob Nicholson said hours before the final vote.

“This will be welcomed, particularly by victims, those involved with law enforcement and, as we know, Canadians are supportive of what we are doing in this area.”

As per his promise to the provinces, Nicholson said the implementation of the various aspects of the legislation will be “spaced out” over a period of time.

Comprised of nine bills, many of which failed to pass in previous parliaments when the Conservatives had a minority, C-10 also cracks down on pot producers, young offenders, Canadians imprisoned abroad who are seeking a transfer to a Canadian institution and ex-cons seeking a pardon.

It also provides for victims of terrorism who are seeking to sue the perpetrator and eliminates house arrest for a number of different crimes, something Canada’s budget watchdog estimated will cost the provinces \$145 million a year.

The government has been coy about the overall cost to the provinces and has insisted the entire Safe Streets and Communities Act will run the federal government \$78.6 million over five years.

iaustin@theprovince.com