

Bill Rea ? Just what is the point?

You want to see a case of playing politics?

Check out what Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been announcing lately about cracking down on hardened criminals getting out of prison on parole. The term 'life means life' has been used a lot.

The government's plans, according to everything I've seen and read, is aimed mainly at the worst of the worst; the people that very few of us would ever want to see walking down a street ever again.

The reason I'm not impressed is we already have such a system in place.

Yes, everyone who is sent to prison for murder usually gets a life sentence, and the only question is how many years must be served until that person can seek parole: Not get it, mind you, but actually apply to get out of the joint. The period can range from 10 to 25 years.

I remember covering a case many years ago in which a man pleaded guilty to second-degree murder. Because of the plea, the Crown and defence lawyers had evidently done some negotiating, and they had come to an agreement that 15 years was an appropriate time to serve before being eligible for parole. But when the judge got his turn to speak, he berated the killer at some length, telling him that while he'd be able to seek release 15 years in the future, that by no means meant he was going to get it.

The government's plan, at least as things now stand, is that life will mean life (meaning no parole) for people who commit certain types of first-degree murders. Those types include acts that involve terrorism, kidnapping or forced confinement, sexual assault, the killing of police officers etc.

I think most of us have a hard time believing that people who are convicted of such crimes are ever going to get out. I wonder, therefore, what's the point?

Last Thursday's Toronto Sun ran a story on this issue. It occupied the better part of a page, with the bulk of that space being taken up with a big picture of Harper. But the editors found room for another, much smaller photo, and that was of the one and only Paul Bernardo, Canada's all-purpose poster boy for harsher sentences (I suspect the Sun put that picture in because they feared the Prime Minister might not have drawn in readers the way Bernardo could).

Don't worry, the Sun will endorse Harper and the next election, but more about that in a couple of paragraphs.

The funny part of Sun article was that the main point concerning Bernardo was that his chances of ever getting parole amount to just about zilch anyway.

Even the Sun seems to be wondering what the point is.

The worst of the worst are already almost certainly away for life. The only way Bernardo is ever going to experience daylight on a street again is if he's in a wheelchair with someone else doing the pushing, and even that is iffy. And I think that's a pretty safe bet with other similar scumbags.

So I ask again: What's the point of this action on the part of the Harper government?

I started to quake a bit when I read Andrew Coyne's column in last Thursday's National Post, as he mentioned a concession the feds are planning in their (still-proposed) measures, that would permit one of these animals to seek 'exceptional release' after serving 35 years. It's not parole, because, as Coyne pointed out, the matter would have to be referred directly to the Minister of Public Safety.

Oh joy! Oh rapture! A major judicial issue in this Dominion of Canada is to be decided by a politician! Remember, that politician, no matter how dedicated or honourable he or she might be, knows that re-election will eventually have to be reckoned with.

I have no trouble whatsoever with policy being set by politicians, but I have a big problem with those policies being adjudicated by politicians.

We have judges and parole boards for a reason. They represent trained and learned people who can make decisions without having to worry about public opinion, meaning they are able to look at things objectively. The day when our judicial system can be micromanaged according to the will of the public will be a frightening one indeed. In the final analysis, what are lynchings but an extreme expression of public opinion? And no sensible person lives long enough to comb grey hairs without learning that public opinion can sometimes be wrong.

And let us also think for a moment about what the worst offenders deserve from our oh-so-superior society.

Yes, they should be locked up. But if we are going to put people into cells, we also have to think about the day when we might let them out.

Don't give me any rubbish about showing murderers the same amount of mercy they showed their victims. Do that if and only if you are prepared to look me in the eye and tell me you hold people like Bernardo up as role models.

I ran into a bit of heat some years ago, when it was reported that Susan Atkins, one of Charles Manson's most devout followers, was

on her deathbed from brain cancer. There was a movement started to get her 'compassionate release' from her life sentence and I wrote in this space that it should be granted, since she was about to die, was not about to re-offend and did not pose a risk to take flight. This was the same Susan Atkins who flippantly blew off Sharon Tate, then eight-months pregnant, as she tearfully begged for the life of her unborn child. But in terms of retribution, society had got just about everything from Atkins that there was to get. I received a voicemail message the following Saturday morning from some guy telling me what a jerk I was, in language I can't use in this forum. Saturday mornings are when I get the most obnoxious voicemails, since such people don't have the guts to call when I'm likely to be in the office.

I don't regret advocating for her release, because I like to think the society I'm part of is better than Susan Atkins. Indeed, if Bernardo ends up incapacitated, bed-ridden and near death, I would have few problems with him being let out for the last couple of months of his life. And if you object to my views on that, feel free to leave me a voicemail early some Saturday morning. In the words of the late Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 'I've been called worse things by better people.'

So again, we come back to wondering what the government is accomplishing with these measures.

Let us also reflect on the fact that there will probably be a federal election this year. And what political party worth its salt will dare campaign against hitting heinous criminals as hard as possible?

Maybe that's the point of this action on the part of the Harper government.

In terms of playing politics, it's not that bad, although it is pointless

