

# OPINION



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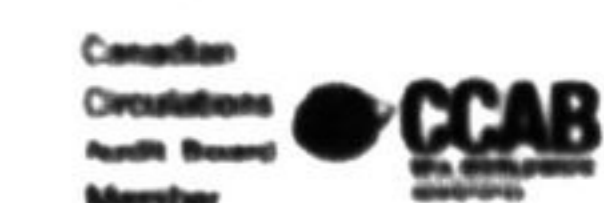
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## LETTERS POLICY

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## Editorial

# About time victims' voices heard loud and clear

**ISSUE: Criminals make deals with justice system, so victims have no say in sentences.**

**I**f you or someone you know has been a victim of crime, you might be pleased with the Conservative government's invigorated plan arming victims with a more active, measurable role in the legal process.

For some of you, it would seem just another lax attempt to tell people what they want to hear; lip service on an issue that has never changed.

But with added teeth and promised clout, victims, this time, might make a difference in how criminal sentences are handed down.

There are too many documented cases in York Region where convicted criminals have attained plea bargains with the justice system without giving victims a chance to say, "Hey, wait a minute. I want people to understand how this crime has destroyed my life" and a chance to ensure those words are taken into consideration before deals are struck.

It is frustrating and offensive that convicted criminals have been given, up to now, more say in an outcome of a trial than the family or person he or she murdered, hurt, violated or duped.

It is frustrating these criminals, who, in essence, are costing taxpayers millions of dollars every year in court and legal costs, have the upper hand when it comes to bargaining, compromising or settling a punishment; leaving victims, literally, speechless.

So, it's long overdue that a bill is to be put forward in the next few months designed to allow active victim involvement from the start of the process through to when a sentence is handed down. Justice Minister Peter MacKay stated this week, following brief hints of the plan's intent in last Thursday's throne speech.

While Mr. MacKay was still short on specifics of how the victim's role will be played out and the impact it may have, he prom-

ised it would bring substantial meaning for victims of crime.

The Conservative government, known for its tough stance on crime, insists this proposed victims' bill of rights would be far-reaching, targeting cyber bullying, sex offences and fraud.

This new bill is a step in the right direction in a country many consider light on criminal punishment, where victims have little or no voice in the justice process.

Just ask Newmarket resident Joe Wamback, who became a staunch defender of crime victims more than one decade ago after his 15-year-old son, Jonathan, was beaten to near death June 29, 1999.

Three teenagers were charged with attempted murder, but charges were reduced to aggravated assault due to a lack of evidence. Two were convicted; the third was acquitted. He felt this family had no say in the process.

Mr. Wamback took action, lobbying to toughen the now Juvenile Delinquents Act, collecting one million signatures on a petition and, in 2002, launching a charitable organization, Canadian Crime Victims Foundation, asking citizens to send letters to their MPs to request the government be tougher on criminals and support victims emotionally and financially.

Victims deserve the fundamental right to publicly address the court before sentences are handed down.

They deserve more than just courtesy updates: victims should be consulted throughout the process; their recommendations part of the sentence.

While defence lawyers insist this new bill will give victims an opportunity to "get revenge" on an accused and that it's not their role to do so, victims have, for far too long, been absent from the system. Let's hope this issue doesn't get watered down due to political wrangling and posturing.

**BOTTOM LINE: Victims' voices need to be part of the entire justice system process.**

## LETTER OF THE WEEK

### Why assume we will grow more?

*Re: More to the east, please, column by Jim Mason, Oct. 17.*

I just want to challenge the implicit assumption in Mr. Mason's column regarding input from citizens on future growth ideals. Your framing of the question, with only positive attributes as examples of the consequences of growth, implies that growth is solely a positive force, something that always benefits us.

I would have to challenge that presumption. There is accumulating evidence that, in fact, growth is detrimental to the planet and society in general.

The "growth culture" we have as an unstated assumption about how the world works is based on only a couple of centuries of quick sociopolitical and economic change on a global scale.

More and more people are arguing that this phenomenal growth has been due to the extraction and exploitation of cheap and easily-accessible fossil fuels. The rapid use of this resource has resulted in a number of consequences, some intended and some not.

There have been amazing technological changes and health care advances, but there has also been greater wealth disparity, environmental degradation and violence on a global scale.

In any kind of discussion on growth, we need to not only be aware of these nega-

tive consequences (and these cannot be avoided, otherwise they would have been by now), but we also need to include them in our world view and question the prevailing assumption that growth is good.

*So, a question I'd like to pose to readers in this discussion is this: given the other side of the coin, do we really want the growth targets imposed by the state?*

The late Donella Meadows, co-writer of a very respected study in 1972 entitled *The Limits to Growth* wrote in a book on the complexity theory, that humans often discount the negative aspects of growth, focusing instead in the immediate, short-term gains that can be made and that we often push growth in the wrong direction, making worse the social issues we try to fix through increased growth.

So, a question I'd like to pose to readers is this: given the other side of the coin, do we really want the growth targets imposed by "the state"?

Or do we tell our leaders to stop now, while there is some "country" left in the town.

**STEVE BULL**  
STOUFFVILLE

### Don't push ignorant voters to town polls

*Re: Councillors no fans of online voting; Politicians consider other plans to increase turnout next year, Oct. 19.*

I keep hearing and reading how it is essential that we bring more voters to the polls.

### HAVE YOUR SAY, STOUFFVILLE

► What do you think of these issues or any others?  
E-mail jmason@yrmg.com

I'm not sure why.  
If people can't be both-

ered to vote, will they have been bothered to research to see who best represents them?

I have had some tell me they vote for the person with the most signs because they must be the best.

I don't want those folks making these important decisions.

**DIANE WARD**  
WHITCHURCH-STOUFFVILLE

**Is there an issue about which you are passionate? You could be a Saturday Forum contributor and get the chance to have your piece published along with your name and headshot. E-mail your 450-word submission to jmason@yrmg.com**