

## Tories, Bloc vote to speed up parole bill

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OTTAWA - The Harper government and Bloc Quebecois worked together again Monday, invoking closure on a debate to fast-track legislation that would restrict accelerated parole for non-violent criminals.

The Liberals and New Democrats opposed the measure, but still lost to the Tory-Bloc combined majority in a vote of 172 to 77. The vote could allow the legislation to be passed after a few hours of debate in the House of Commons by as early as Wednesday, Bloc leader Gilles Duceppe said.

He noted the Bloc has tried to propose the idea several times, initially prompted in 2007 by the case of a pair of drug dealers who could benefit from provisions in the existing parole laws that allow non-violent offenders to be released after serving one-sixth of their sentence.

"We've been talking about this for four years," Mr. Duceppe told reporters. "The Tories refused twice to proceed and at that time, both times, the NDP and the Liberals gave their unanimous consent to have the three readings the same day. Now they're changing their mind. Don't ask me why."

The latest attempt by the Bloc and Tories followed criticism from the separatist party about the government being soft on crime for failing to endorse the bill and, as a result, allowing convicted fraudster Vincent Lacroix to secure his release after serving only 15 months in jail, one-sixth of his sentence.

The former chief executive of the Norbourg investment company pleaded guilty to 200 fraud-related charges after investors lost more than \$100-million.

But Mr. Duceppe has said the new legislation, Bill C-59, could - if adopted - apply retroactively to former Montreal financial consultant **Earl Jones**, who was sentenced nearly a year ago to 11 years in prison for a massive **Ponzi** scheme that defrauded 158 investors out of \$50-million. Under the existing laws governing sentences for non-violent crime, Jones could be eligible to get out of jail after serving 22 months.

NDP justice critic Joe Comartin said his party is open to revising the law and placing restrictions on accelerated parole for some convicted criminals, but he said more study was required to look at hundreds of other cases and the cost of keeping them in jail. He said as many as 1,500 people could be eligible every year for accelerated parole, with at least 800 receiving it.

"We have very little information on who those people are," Mr. Comartin said. "We know that Lacroix and **Earl Jones** would be part of that group, but we also know that there are other people. (There are) people, particularly, with addictions who have cleaned those up and are no longer a risk to society and we should have the ability to get out into halfway houses and get them reintegrated, fully, into society."

Duceppe noted that these other people would still have the option of applying for accelerated parole after serving one third of their sentence.

"So the smaller the sentence, the less difference there is between one sixth or one third (of the sentence)," Mr. Duceppe said.

Once adopted in the Commons, the legislation would still be reviewed by the Senate, which could do its own examination of the bill, including parliamentary hearings.

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