

CRIME LEGISLATION

National News

Tories, BQ reach deal on removing accelerated parole for non-violent criminals

DANIEL LEBLANC

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OTTAWA -- The Harper government has agreed to split up one of its crime bills to obtain the support of the Bloc Québécois and scrap the law that allows non-violent offenders to serve only one-sixth of their prison sentence.

After a week of backroom negotiations, a new bill is set to be introduced on Monday in the House of Commons, where it is expected to move swiftly through the legislative process. The goal is to ensure that the new legislation applies to convicts who are already in prison but have yet to apply for parole.

The Bloc took the government to task last week over the situation of Vincent Lacroix, the author of one of the biggest frauds in Canadian history. After pleading guilty to almost 200 charges in 2009, he ended up serving about two years of a 13-year sentence in relation to the \$115-million debacle at Norboung Asset Management Inc.

The Bloc had been trying to obtain all-party support in 2009 and 2010 for a bill to eliminate the accelerated parole provision, while the government insisted on the passage of C-39, which would oversee a more complete overhaul of Canada's parole system.

After Mr. Lacroix's release from prison earlier this month, Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe sat down with Prime Minister Stephen Harper to urge the government to take action. Party officials then negotiated an agreement.

The deal, expected to be officially announced on Monday, will likely include splitting up C-39 and moving quickly on the non-contentious elements of the bill.

"Our government will always place the rights of victims ahead of those of criminals. We are happy that the Bloc has finally decided to support our bill to end accelerated parole," a government official said. "White-collar criminals cause irreparable harm to their victims and deserve to be behind bars."

The deal is a rare occurrence in which the government and the Bloc agree on a law-and-order issue. The Bloc has been pushing for a speedy resolution to prevent the early parole of **Earl Jones**, a disgraced financial adviser in Montreal who is currently behind bars in relation to a multimillion-dollar **Ponzi** scheme.

While the Bloc and the Conservatives are working collaboratively, both parties can be expected to continue blaming one another over Mr. Lacroix's recent release.

"Vincent Lacroix would still be behind bars if the Bloc had not decided to delay the passing of this bill [C-39] for over eight months in parliamentary committee," the government official said.

However, the Bloc had prodded the government into action last week by invoking the same argument in the House of Commons, stating the government should have supported the Bloc's previous attempts to eliminate the possibility of accelerated parole.

"Because of the laxity and the partisanship of the Conservatives, fraudster Vincent Lacroix has been freed," Bloc MP Maria Mourani said in the House last week. "Does the government realize that it is responsible for the early release of the man who has defrauded thousands of small investors?"

The political stakes are high as the Conservatives want to keep presenting themselves as the guardians of personal security in the next election.

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