

NDP calls on government to solve court backlog

Millions wasted because cases never make it to trial, critic says

Vancouver Sun

January 8, 2012

By JONATHAN FOWLIE,

New Democratic Party justice critic Leonard Krog lashed out at the B.C. Liberal government Friday, saying a recent report proves the government needs to do more to solve a growing backlog in B.C.'s justice system.

“They’ve left the court system in such a mess that it’s like telling the police not to bother arresting the criminals because we don’t have the resources to ensure they’ll ever get to a trial,” Krog said in an interview Friday afternoon.

“If people can get off the hook because courts are underfunded and in disarray it’s the same as if you never arrested them in the first place. There’s no difference.”

As The Vancouver Sun reported on Friday, the number of youth and adult criminal cases stayed in 2011 nearly doubled from the year before.

There were 109 such cases as of Dec. 24, 2011, the government said, compared to 56 in 2010 and 44 in 2009. The number of criminal cases taking longer than 18 months to get to trial, the point at which charges could be stayed, also continues to grow. That number reached 2,522 as of Sept. 30, 2011, up from 2,038 when a report titled Justice Delayed was first issued in September 2010. On Friday, Krog said these statistics demonstrate a need for urgent action.

“I cannot understand why the attorney-general, seeing these numbers, isn’t prepared to say we have to have an immediate injection of cash, appoint the judges, the sheriffs and make sure these trials are dealt with before all that police work and other work is wasted,” he said.

Responding to the issue, Attorney-General Shirley Bond told reporters her government is taking action, including training more sheriffs and making attempts to streamline certain laws to help reduce the burden on the province’s court system.

“We’re already taking action and we’re going to continue to look for ways to minimize the impact of those capacity challenges,” said Bond.

“We’ve added 14 judges over the last number of months and we’ll continue to look for ways to do that.”

Bond, who would not commit to hiring new judges in the near future, added she thinks it’s irresponsible for the opposition NDP to ask for increased spending without saying where the money should come from.

“Over the last two days alone, we’ve seen the NDP talk about spending hundreds of millions of dollars, and there’s only one place that’s going to come from: that’s either taxpayers’ pockets from raising taxes or cutting services,” said Bond.

“It is a very difficult fiscal circumstance that British Columbians face today and we’re going to work hard to continue to focus on adding additional funding to areas like the justice system, but it’s not easy, and to

suggest you can simply find \$30 million in tough fiscal circumstances is just an indication of the lack of plan that the NDP has.”

Krog said the rising delays in the court system demand government shift its spending priorities.

“This has to be a priority. In government it is always a question of priorities. Millions of dollars have already been expended securing the charges against these individuals and the court process already to date,” he said. “What the attorney-general is really saying is, ‘I’m prepared to waste all of that,’ ” he added.

“I don’t think the public finds that acceptable. I certainly don’t.”