

No pardon for the victims' families

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Irked by the fact that girl killer Karla Homolka is eligible for pardon this year, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has asked Public Safety Minister Vic Toews to table new legislation in the coming months that would tighten the pardon system. Coming from the Prime Minister himself, it certainly is a good sign and some reprieve for victims of crime who see killers of their friends or loved ones walk free leaving them jailed in their grief of emotions for the rest of their lives.

Canadians received a rude shock when it was revealed earlier this year that sex offender Graham James the disgraced former hockey coach, received a pardon three years ago. "Even though he ruined the lives of boys that just wanted to play hockey, he can travel without having to admit his criminal record," Harper commented on the issue of pardons. "That, my friends, is how the laws have been written over the past few decades, written when soft-on-crime attitudes were fashionable and concern for criminals took priority over compassion for victims."

It is a known fact that Canadian laws are soft on criminals. Notorious B.C. underworld figures – James Riach and Barry Espadila of the Independence Soldiers – were acquitted of numerous charges despite the fact that their Yaletown, Vancouver apartment was found stuffed with drugs, money and weapons. All they got a mere slap on the wrist. Despite the fact the accused could not account for any evidence, they still walked away free. Then who can forget the massacre of 326 innocent people when Air India's Kanishka was blown off more than 25 years ago. Till today, the murderers have not been punished.

Undoubtedly the courts outcomes demoralize the police, which works hard to keep the public safe. It takes months of planning and hard work to gather this kind of evidence by not one but a team of policemen. And at the end of it all, the criminals walk away from the courtroom by showing their middle finger to the cops who cut a sorry figure in the eyes of the public as at the end of the day, it is the public they have to protect from these hard core criminals. And this cannot be achieved without the help from the courts.

It is believed that 10 per cent of criminals are responsible for 80 per cent of crime in the country and the laws need to be amended. According to reports, in the last 25 years, as many as convicted killers on early release or parole killed 500 Canadians.

The history of pardons in Canada dates back to the early 19th century. But suffice to say that most offenders are eligible for a pardon, save for those convicted of murder or who are branded "dangerous", not so in most of the cases. An offender has to wait three or five years before applying for a pardon, depending on whether they were convicted of a summary or indictable offence respectively. The first step is to have

fingerprints taken by local police. Once the RCMP receives the Fingerprint Form, it will send the offender a copy of their criminal record. Next, the offender must obtain local police records for their current address, and for any other address they have had for more than six months over the past five years. Those forms, plus a separate two-page Pardon Application Form and a \$50 fee, are then sent to the National parole Board. Some applicants choose to hire a non-profit organization to help with the process, at a cost of upwards of just about \$500.

For families of victims of crime, however, every day is a remembrance day. Nah-every moment is a remembrance moment, every step they walk, reminds them of some moment in the lives of their loved ones they lost in vain, every laughter and every tear they try to hide reminds them of their son or daughter lost to senseless violence. The rising sun, the beautiful moon behind the mountains of beautiful British Columbia, those Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners and those Diwali prayers, just feel so empty and the feeling of missing something, lingers. Those unfulfilled dreams and emptiness in their lives, squeezes the zest of living. But they live on - hoping their sorrows can help someone else in a similar state, heal. There is no pardon for the victims' families.♦