



Vic Toews denounced over Ashley Smith comments

OTTAWA — The Canadian Press

Nov. 06 2012



VIDEO STILL from Coroner's Inquest Exhibit -- An image from a video taken just days before Ashley Smith died at the Grand Valley. Ashley Smith was 19 when she choked herself with a strip of cloth at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ont., in October, 2007. The mentally ill teen's death, which is the subject of an ongoing coroner's inquest, ended years of detention that began in 2003, much of it alone in segregation cells at institutions across the country.

His strategy was at odds with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who last week called Ms. Smith's death a tragedy and ordered the Correctional Service of Canada to drop efforts to limit the scope of an inquest into the circumstances surrounding her death.

Mr. Harper's sympathetic response followed the release of disturbing videos of the teen's time in prison, which showed Smith being duct-taped by guards and injected against her will with powerful anti-psychotic drugs.

Under repeated questioning Tuesday by New Democrats in the House of Commons, Mr. Toews initially stuck to the script.

"This tragedy continues to show that individuals with mental health issues do not belong in prisons but in professional facilities," he said, going on to enumerate various measures the Harper government has implemented to deal with the problem.

But he then launched into a partisan attack.

“I would note that the NDP, while consistently speaking on behalf of prisoners, never speaks on behalf of the victims of these prisoners,” he said, urging New Democrats to take “a more balanced view about what it means to have a safe society.”

NDP Leader Tom Mulcair sprang to his feet with a short riposte: “Is that minister capable of understanding that she (Ms. Smith) was the victim here?”

Undeterred, Toews doubled down on his attack.

“I would like to ask that member (Mr. Mulcair), who has never once stood and spoken for victims, why is it that he is always silent when it comes to victims outside of our prisons?”

Outside the Commons, a visibly angry Mr. Mulcair said Mr. Toews simply doesn’t recognize that Ms. Smith was a victim of the corrections system’s inability to cope with mental illness.

“Mr. Toews doesn’t get that and it shows a cold-heartedness and a partisan streak that simply fails to recognize that we’re dealing with a human being who was abominably treated by the system and who wound up dying,” said Mr. Mulcair.

“And, instead of showing compassion and care and responsibility for that, he turned it into his typical partisan rant and it’s beneath contempt the way the minister answered this afternoon.”

Interim Liberal leader Bob Rae called Mr. Toews’s remarks “completely unacceptable.”

“I think he’s lowered the tone,” Mr. Rae said.

“I think by choosing to turn it into some kind of a partisan issue, he shows that, frankly, he just doesn’t get it. And it shows that he doesn’t really understand to what extent Ms. Smith really in this particular case is clearly the victim.”

A spokeswoman for Mr. Toews later sent a lengthy email reiterating his view that the Smith case “is a very tragic incident” that demonstrates the need to find alternatives to prison for the mentally ill. She did not address the controversy over the minister’s earlier insinuation that Ms. Smith was not a victim.

Ms. Smith, who was from Moncton, N.B., was first arrested at 13 for assault and causing a disturbance. She continued to find herself in trouble for making harassing phone calls and pulling a fire alarm, then was first thrown in jail at 15 for throwing crabapples at a postal worker. She eventually wound up in the federal prison system where, during the last year of her life, she was transferred 17 times among nine different prisons. She spent much of her final year in segregation due to repeated instances of self-harm and choking herself.

Ms. Smith died at only 19 years of age in a Kitchener, Ont., prison after wrapping a strip of cloth around her neck and choking herself. Guards, who were standing watch outside her cell, did not step in. They maintain they were instructed not to intervene.