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Canadians 'hardening' on refugee process, Vic Toews says

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Public Safety Minister Vic Toews says he's concerned by the hardening attitude Canadians have shown the refugee process, but lawyers and activists argue that attitude only exists because of negative rhetoric uttered by the minister himself.

Mr. Toews held a news conference in Vancouver on Wednesday to discuss Bill C-49, the Conservative government's attempt to institute tougher penalties for human smuggling. The bill is at second reading, though opposition parties have said they won't support it because it's flawed and unconstitutional.

Mr. Toews provided little new information at the news conference. He said human smugglers are looking at new points of departure to get ships to Canada, but declined to provide further details. He added he was aware of recent – and unsourced – newspaper reports that more ships could set sail for Canada in the coming months.

But Mr. Toews said it's clear something must be done because after the arrival of migrant vessels like the Ocean Lady and MV Sun Sea, Canadians are losing faith in the refugee system.

“As much as I don't try to rely on polls and newspaper reports, certainly the polling after the arrival of the Sun Sea indicated a serious drop in the support to our immigration and refugee system,” he told reporters.

“I see a hardening of the attitude of many Canadians in respect to the immigration system.”

Mr. Toews's comments came as a surprise to long-time Vancouver immigration lawyer Douglas Cannon.

“I think if Canadians are becoming less sympathetic to the plight of refugees, then politicians have to accept some responsibility for misleading Canadians,” Mr. Cannon said.

Before the MV Sun Sea docked last August, Mr. Toews said the voyage had been organized by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and members of the group could be onboard. Similar comments were made when Bill C-49 was introduced and those onboard the vessel were dubbed “queue jumpers.”

Mr. Toews repeated the Tamil Tigers and queue-jumpers claims at Wednesday's news conference.

When asked if those comments could partly explain why Canadians are viewing refugees in a more negative light, Mr. Toews said no. When pressed on the issue, Mr. Toews said tersely: “Maybe I'll

leave it at this – if you can provide me with a list of those who are LTTE and those who are not, I'll certainly consider that.”

Mr. Cannon took issue not only with what he regards as careless branding of Sun Sea passengers as terrorists, but also the queue jumpers comment. “There is no queue for refugee claimants,” he said.

Melissa McDowell, of the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Services Agencies of B.C., was invited to a roundtable with Mr. Toews. She said her concerns – Bill C-49 punishes those being smuggled, not smugglers, for instance – fell on deaf ears.

“He still maintained this bill does not penalize bona-fide refugees. My argument is it creates a subclass of refugees,” she said, adding migrants who arrive in large groups would be classified as “irregular” under the bill and treated differently.

Ms. McDowell said only a few, smaller groups were invited to the roundtable, something she called “odd.”

Janet Dench, executive director for the Canadian Council for Refugees, did not attend Wednesday's news conference but said it appeared to be politically motivated.

“We have always been concerned that refugees might be used as a political football in an election campaign,” she said.

“This is a very bad thing for Canada, which is a country that has a long and strong tradition of being welcoming towards refugees and immigrants.”

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