

QUEEN'S PARK

Have some respect: leave the politics out of it

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It shouldn't be that hard. A young woman out for a smoke is gunned down and, if you're a politician with an impressive title, all you have to do is express sorrow and anger in roughly equal measures.

But it's a skill that eludes Chris Bentley. The Ontario Attorney-General can turn a discussion on the killing of an innocent bystander into a partisan argument.

The question posed to Mr. Bentley during yesterday's Question Period was predictable given the horrific death early Saturday morning of 23-year-old Bailey Zaveda, who got caught in crossfire when she stepped outside a Toronto pub for a cigarette. It was no surprise that the opposition would raise news reports that said the alleged gunman has an extensive criminal record and was described by police as an "extremely violent" man.

"Can you explain the circumstances under which this man, the alleged killer, was on the street?" asked the Progressive Conservative Opposition Leader Bob Runciman.

But Mr. Bentley would not explain, saying that he could not do so because it would interfere with a police investigation into the crime. That done, he launched into a spirited defence of his government's record. "We've taken a very strong stand, [we're] very tough on crime as a government," he said.

And with that, we were off to the races.

Mr. Runciman said he was "sick and tired" of that kind of response and said the minister should be ashamed of himself. The Attorney-General replied that the Criminal Code comes under federal jurisdiction and said Mr. Runciman should direct his questions to a fellow Conservative, Prime Minister Stephen Harper. "Call your chum and do something about it," he shouted.

It got worse. Mr. Runciman accused Mr. Bentley of covering up the failures of the justice system, and he, in turn, was accused of chasing headlines. And then, thankfully, the allotted question time ran out.

The bitter exchange illustrates what happens when a crime occurs that suggests Ontario is on a violent, downward slide. Opposition politicians ask questions about the particulars of an incident that they know the ministers won't answer for fear of jeopardizing a criminal prosecution. And then both sides start slinging the rhetorical mud.

The exchanges leave behind the average person who doesn't care which level of government is responsible for the growing problem with gun violence. They aren't persuaded by statistics that show a drop in homicides this year, and they aren't mollified by the moves at both levels of government to get tough with young offenders or to make bail tougher to get.

All they know is that Ms. Zaveda's alleged killer had been banned from owning a weapon (and reportedly plea-bargained his way out of gun charges in 2006), and that the man accused of killing two Toronto women in their home two weeks ago was free on bail at the

time of the incidents.

Ontario's Liberal government has been playing with fire in dealing with the gun violence. In 2005, Premier Dalton McGuinty initially tried to play down the so-called "summer of the gun," saying that Toronto was filled with "peace-loving, hospitable, warm, engaging people." Later, the government had success with co-ordinating police and Crown lawyers to break up gangs, and it has pushed Ottawa on sentencing and bail reform. It has commissioned a report on the "root causes" of youthful crime, and it's moving to reduce delays in bringing criminal cases to trial.

But at some point voters who want the shooting to stop will figure out which government is responsible for the day-to-day administration of justice. And they won't be satisfied with partisan answers.