

THE SENATE'S EMPHATIC 63-31 vote to repeal the authority for no-knock search and arrest warrants in the District of Columbia and in federal drug probes shows dramatically how times have changed since 1970. Then, in what Sen. Sam J. Ervin last week called "a period of hysteria," a legislator's view on no-knock was regarded as a litmus test of whether he was "hard" or "soft" on crime. In such a climate, the controversial no-knock warrant provisions were adopted by wide margins. The Senate's reversal of that decision after just four years is a sign that the crime issue has been put in better perspective and that many senators have become much more sensitive to the need to safeguard individual rights.

A major influence on the Senate vote was the fact that no-knock warrants simply have not proved to be useful weapons against crime. The District of Columbia police, intended to be the prime beneficiaries of the 1970 law, have not used no-knock warrants at all since October 1970. Police officials fear that unannounced entries can increase the risk of injury both to police and to the citizens involved. District Police Chief Jerry V. Wilson, whose views on such matters carry substantial weight on Capitol Hill, has said that he has no objections to repeal.

Nationally, the biggest blow to no-knock was the controversial events that took place in Collinsville, Ill., in April 1973, when federal narcotics agents broke into the wrong two homes and terrified the occupants. Those raids (which were actually conducted without any warrants at all) dramatized the dangers of permitting agents to burst into people's homes without warning. In line with the administrative reforms which followed the Collinsville experience, federal drug agents have used only one no-knock warrant in the past 12 months. This record—the lack of use and the potential for harm—persuaded many senators to join Sens. Ervin and Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.) in last week's move for repeal. A typical convert was Sen. Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.), who supported no-knock authority in 1970 but last week called it "an invitation for official lawlessness."

The drug enforcement authorization bill now goes on to the House, where the outlook for the repeal amendment is not so clear. That body is generally regarded as "tougher" on crime, but a concern for individual privacy and the rights of citizens has been expanding there in recent months. If the issue receives the unemotional attention it deserves, a majority of House members may well also decide that the no-knock warrant authority serves no useful purpose in the statute books.