

Capital Punishment

Mr. Francis: The hon. member has modified his adjectives somewhat. Let me recap what has happened. The prime minister of Quebec has proposed a plebiscite in that province on the question of secession. The wording is not yet established. The details of such a referendum are by no means clear. In response to the initiative on his part, the Prime Minister said, and I think correctly, that this is not just a matter for the Parti Quebecois, through the government of Quebec, to resolve in the language they choose in a plebiscite of their timing.

The Prime Minister said that he reserved the right to a federal initiative in this matter, and it is a initiative which I, for one, am pleased to support. The referendum held under federal auspices would, I am sure, be worded much more fairly and in terms which will be more generally accepted as being objective. What the results of such a referendum would be, time alone will tell, but the Prime Minister has not closed the door on the possibility of other parts of Canada being invited to express their opinion on events which possibly might take place in that province.

I find it hard to believe that the mover of this motion could be serious and could suggest in good faith that an issue involving national unity, an issue as fundamental as this and a federal initiative to respond to what might come from the province of Quebec, should be cluttered, obscured or denigrated by the holding of other initiatives at the same time. Surely the question of national unity is a more important issue before us and before the House at this time than any other issue, with the possible exception of matters relating to the performance of the economy.

We all have to establish our priorities. I think we have a very serious responsibility to the people of Canada in regard to national unity, to the state of our economy, to the control of inflation, the creation of jobs and employment and the distribution of incomes. According to my scale of values, the issue of capital punishment is below these other issues. I hope that an expression of national purpose and national will could be achieved, if it is considered appropriate, without having too many side issues on the ballot at the same time. I consider this to be a side issue in relation to other matters. I am sure the hon. member would not want to have a clear response in regard to national unity, for example, obscured by a debate, which would be very partisan and very bitter and which would reflect very strong feelings in many parts of Canada, on the issue of capital punishment.

I am one of those who believe that this issue may well be reviewed by parliament, but I would hope not before something like five years, when we would have had the opportunity to judge what the effects would have been of a measure which was adopted by parliament, namely, the abolition of capital punishment, a measure which I voted against at the time and would do so again if I had to vote now. I believe our responsibility is still to allow a reasonable period of time to elapse before we reflect on a vote which was taken in this place, and that we do not at the time of the next federal election bring in other issues which could obscure the results which are most

important on the basic issue of national unity should a referendum be held on that subject at the time.

Mr. G. H. Whittaker (Okanagan Boundary): Mr. Speaker, I rise to support the motion put forward in private members' hour by the hon. member for Surrey-White Rock (Mr. Friesen) which calls for a referendum on the subject of capital punishment for the purpose of making a survey of public opinion on the issue. I would go even further than the motion and would propose a referendum on the subject of capital punishment, not just a survey of public opinion. I would do this because of the feeling of the people in my riding and other people throughout Canada to whom I have spoken.

The hon. member for Ottawa West (Mr. Francis) read into the record the results of a very good survey that has been taken. It reflects the opinion of Canadians both before we held the last vote on capital punishment and afterwards. The people of Canada do not agree with the results of the last vote on capital punishment. It has been said that it was a free vote, but people realized fully that it was not free when they saw the solidarity of the cabinet members who all voted with the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau). He made sure there was a sufficient number of members voting for abolition. However, the vote was against the wishes of the people of Canada.

This summer I had a very good opportunity of meeting many of my constituents when I was trying to canvass their support for my nomination for the next election. They were mostly disappointed with the way in which the government had handled the issue of capital punishment. They want capital punishment. They do not agree with the way it has been settled. The hon. member for Ottawa West says we should have some time, a moratorium if you wish, because we have already had a vote, and that we should hold off for the next five years. But that is not the wish of the people of Canada. It is not the way they want capital punishment handled. They are in favour of capital punishment and have not changed their opinion since the last vote.

● (1722)

The question of national unity is certainly very important, probably one of the most important for the country. But before it came along there was the question of capital punishment, which is so important to the people of Canada that they should have an opportunity to be heard. They have not had that opportunity so far, Mr. Speaker. They were in favour of capital punishment, but parliamentarians felt they knew better and voted against it. This is a very important issue to the people, and they want to be heard.

I do not hold that we should have all kinds of referendums. The issue of capital punishment has been debated four times in this House in the last ten years, and the vote has always gone against what the people want. It is time now to hold a referendum and let them decide the question. It is not necessary to have precedents for important issues. If a referendum were held on capital punishment, it would not mean that one should be held on every other subject. Each issue would be decided on its merits and, according to the people of Canada,