

Amendments Respecting Death Sentence

I understand that if there is any indication to the penitentiary psychiatrist that there may be a disorder of the mind, the subject is referred to three independent psychiatrists who make an assessment of the individual. We look at the recent record, the circumstances surrounding the offence, the age at the time of the offence, the relationship of the individual with the inmates and the staff, and his general progress over a period. Then, using all our resources, we come to a conclusion. As I said a moment ago we are not infallible. We screen them very carefully and no decision is taken with a greater sense of responsibility and care.

Mr. Pugh: Mr. Chairman, I should like to ask the Solicitor General whether he has at hand a record of any study made here or elsewhere in the world in respect of this. I am restricting my remarks not only to the parole board but also to the matter of sex offenders. Like the minister, I believe the parole board, and any other agency which has a connection with the matter of parole, have carried on in a model fashion. They are not swayed by emotion but rather by the facts and the presentations placed before them.

I am interested in learning what life imprisonment means in respect of sex offenders. I should like to know what records are available to the government in respect of the studies made by psychiatrists on this subject.

Mr. Pennell: Mr. Chairman, the parole board of course has consulted with other jurisdictions in an effort to find out how they deal with people who are under the sentence of life imprisonment. However, they must base their own decisions on their own experience, and upon the advice of the experts who are available to them. I should like to point out to the hon. member that those who are the gravest danger to society are often those prisoners who serve a definite sentence for a period of years. These people cannot be kept in the institutions, even though we may feel they present a real danger. They have served their sentence and then go out. We give them the best possible treatment we have available, but after they have served their sentence there is no way the parole board or the penitentiary service can keep them in prison. These are the people who may constitute the greatest danger to society. We hope that the amendment to the Parole Act may bring about some relief on this point. Of course, the house will have to wait until the omnibus bill is brought in.

[Mr. Pennell.]

The man serving a sentence of life imprisonment is there for life, subject to being released on parole, but even if released on parole he is still under sentence and the parole can be revoked and he can be brought back.

Mr. McIntosh: Mr. Chairman, I have a question for the minister which is also on the subject of life sentence. I wonder whether he has any statistics which show how many convicted murderers have died in prison, except through the normal process of hanging, which has been mandatory for capital murder.

Mr. Pennell: I am advised by the officials that since 1921 there have been 117 convicted murderers paroled. Eleven of these have had their parole revoked. Twelve have died whilst on parole. Six were deported and there are 88 still on parole. There is one further question which I believe I have not answered. I am unable to help the hon. member concerning the number who died while serving their sentence of life imprisonment in prison.

Mr. McIntosh: I have a supplementary question. Would the minister not agree that the term "life imprisonment" should be changed to what it actually means, because it is a fallacy to call it life imprisonment.

Mr. Pennell: There is no member of this house for whom I have greater respect than the hon. member for Swift Current-Maple Creek. I am sure he knows that; but I cannot agree with him on this point. My own personal feeling on this is that I believe we can rehabilitate some of these men who have been sentenced to life imprisonment. I think the record has proven this. It is not only the belief of this administration. This belief is shared by others. It has been proven that there are life prisoners who have been rehabilitated after serving time and who have come back to be useful citizens.

Mr. Pascoe: I believe the minister said that 11 persons who were on parole had had their parole cancelled. Could he give the reason for the parole being cancelled?

Mr. Pennell: Mr. Chairman, the information passed to me now shows that there was one whose parole was revoked because of excessive use of alcohol and because he was breaching the conditions of his parole. Another case involved repeated use of