

Business of the House

Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney). They can face up to the issue without making cheap political points.

I am not going to have a chance to speak in this debate, but I am not that worried. There is not a Member of this House who cannot communicate with the media as to why he or she votes the way they vote. To lay the blame on the Prime Minister is to give it to him both ways. I have had some problems with the Prime Minister on other issues, but I am not prepared to sit here and listen to the hypocrisy involved in lambasting the Prime Minister for not fulfilling his promises and then doing the same thing when he tries to fulfil a promise on something as sensitive as capital punishment. The Opposition in their hypocrisy tried to condemn him there, too.

I think the House Leader has been most reasonable in trying to come up with a deal which nobody here has talked about. We could have sat here all weekend, any weekend and had this thing—

Mr. Speaker: Order, please.

Mr. Nowlan: This leaves me absolutely cold.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Speaker: I indicated that to the degree it was appropriate I would recognize Members, and I may well recognize a few more. However, I want to warn that in the mind of the Speaker this exchange could very rapidly become a debate on something else entirely. I do not think that would be appropriate.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa—Vanier): In my opinion, Mr. Speaker, every Member enjoys the privilege and the right to speak in the House. Sixteen Members of the Official Opposition have expressed their desire to take part in this debate. If anything is important at all in this House, it has to be that Members may express themselves, speak, and present their points of view. What this Government has done by imposing closure is that it turns this into a partisan issue, it adopts with respect to this question a new policy which restricts the right to speak of the Members of the Official Opposition, and I strongly object to that policy. I think it is irregular and unacceptable, Mr. Speaker. Again I repeat that 16 Members on this side are anxious to take the floor, and we will do everything we can to make sure they get it.

Mr. Mike Cassidy (Ottawa Centre): Mr. Speaker, I deplore the Government's decision, and especially, and that is the point of order, the fact that the Government interfered in a debate that had been initiated as part of Private Members' Business. Furthermore, according to the Government spokesman, it was initially supposed to be a free debate and a free vote without any interference on the part of the Government.

I also deplore the statement by the Government House Leader, who said that, after seeking a consensus with the opposition parties, he had been obliged to announce closure.

Mr. Speaker, the Government House Leader wanted the Opposition parties to accept his proposal to finish the debate next Monday or else he would impose closure. Mr. Speaker, it was no choice at all.

Quite frankly, I think it is hypocritical of the Prime Minister and his Government, the Minister of Justice and the rest who have clearly stated they are against capital punishment, to let the debate go on and then all of a sudden insist on a vote.

I would say to my colleagues opposite, Mr. Speaker, that all Members should have a chance to participate. It was this Government's decision to have the issue debated in the House. We felt there were many other questions that were far more important to Canadians than spending days and weeks and months on the debate on capital punishment. Everybody knows now it is hardly likely this process will lead to a Bill and, subsequently, to the application of the death penalty.

Mr. Speaker, we may well ask why the House has spent so much time and effort on this issue. Didn't the Government know enough not to initiate this process or have it initiated? And why is the Government now interfering with this question instead of leaving it as Private Members' Business?

[*English*]

Mr. Belsher: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure that opposition Members would agree to any time being convenient to bring in closure. The suggestion that it will happen on Monday certainly will not be agreeable. However, if the people opposite are sincere in wanting to make sure Members have an opportunity to speak they could, through the House Leaders, talk about a limited time of five minutes or 10 minutes for each person to speak in the debate on Monday. Thus all Members could be accommodated.

Mr. Tobin: Mr. Speaker, I am one of those who is probably going to find himself in much the same position as other Members who want to speak on this Bill. Let us be clear what we are doing. The House is being asked to endorse or reject a motion which in principle affirms capital punishment as a suitable vehicle for the state to carry out the law of the land. We are talking about the House of Commons saying yes or no to capital punishment. For Members to stand up and suggest that five minutes or four minutes or three minutes is an appropriate amount of time for a small number of Members to be heard on such a fundamental question is simply unacceptable, as well intentioned as those comments may have been. I include the Hon. Member for Annapolis Valley—Hants (Mr. Nowlan) in that comment.

If there is to be something said for House Leaders going back to the negotiating table and discussing this further, then I would suggest, if there is any hope of a reasonable or rational solution being arrived at, the three gentlemen involved should go and do it. I for one cannot agree in any way, shape or form to do anything but to refuse to allow the business of this House to proceed if the Government is going to invoke closure on a fundamental question like capital punishment.