

Government Orders

One of them is my belief that this bill is better than no bill at all. It affirms that all human life has value. As well, there is the possibility that if this law passes perhaps a future Parliament might be able to build a consensus that would strengthen the protection of unborn children.

I am also faced with the reality. If this law does not pass I do not believe that Parliament ever again will pass legislation in the area of abortion. I cannot see federal parliamentarians re-opening the subject of abortion if this Parliament fails to enact legislation.

So the decision for those of us who support the pro-life position is this: Do we vote against this because, on principle, it does not protect unborn children in a manner that would be acceptable, or do we vote for this knowing those political realities that I have just set out?

One of my colleagues yesterday quite correctly pointed out that compromise is necessary in all legislation. I agree that we are called upon to do that in the parliamentary process. Every piece of legislation I know of that is presented to this House is an attempt to balance two or more competing interests and we, as legislators, try to strike a reasonable balance.

However, I believe that when all is said and done there are some beliefs that cannot be compromised. There is a set of core beliefs in all of us which defines who we are as human beings and what it is that we stand for in this world. I am at that point.

I have had to face a decision like this on a previous occasion. Sixteen years ago I was a member of a university student council. We were asked to approve a student council departmental budget that dealt with many aspects of health. Part of the money in that package would end up financing an abortion referral service. The vote that we were called upon to make was a take it or leave it proposition on the whole package. I spoke with a number of my colleagues about my concern and said that my opposition to abortion precluded my support for the package. They gave me the strong argument that if the vote was lost we would lose all the other good services included in the package. I felt then, and I believe today, that I cannot rationalize my position to that extent.

There are others in the same position as am I who have come to a different conclusion and will support this bill at second reading stage. I do not believe that they are any less right in coming to a different conclusion than me based on the same set of facts. But for me, in this debate, this is the crucial point. This is the point at which

Parliament is being asked to give approval in principle to something that I have always opposed. Accordingly I will vote against this bill.

If it is the will of Parliament that this bill be approved in principle, I will be among those who will say that it is preferable to none at all. But I will be among those who will say that once having been approved in principle there is nothing that can be done to turn it into a pro-life bill. The attempt would be procedurally out of order, I think, and would probably destroy any consensus that has developed up to this point, but that argument is for another day.

For me the way is clear; I will vote against this at second reading. But being sure in my own mind as to what I should do does not make the decision much easier. It is a free vote for members of Parliament in the Progressive Conservative Party. If in coming to my conclusion I had been pressured by my colleagues to do something against my conscience, my decision would have been easier, but that was not the case. I was and am free to speak my mind and vote according to my conscience and I think that is crucial.

As have all members of Parliament, I have received a great deal of mail on this subject. One man recently wrote to me and said that I had an obligation to do what a majority of the people want and not vote according to my conscience. I have to disagree. In the long run it would be very bad for Canada if members do not act and vote according to their conscience.

I thank the House and particularly those in the leadership of my party who have understood and been supportive of those for whom this decision has been so difficult.

Mr. Ron MacDonald (Dartmouth): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to participate in this very important debate on Bill C-43, an act respecting abortion.

I do not think I would be exaggerating at all if I stated that this issue is one of the most difficult and contentious issues that has gripped Canadians and members of Parliament, my colleagues, in many years.

It is very difficult to deal with because the legislation as proposed deals with two very fundamental issues; the rights of women and the rights of the foetus which encompasses the sanctity of life. It is a debate on a piece of legislation, the outcome of which, regardless of defeat or approval, holds little hope of lessening the passionate and, at times, gut-wrenching and divisive debate now or in the foreseeable future. But as a legislator I bring with