

Capital Punishment

capital punishment has been at around 65 per cent or 70 per cent of the population.

It is significant to note that even with this constant public support for capital punishment, the Government or Governments of the day have traditionally moved in the opposite direction toward abolishing and maintaining the abolishment of capital punishment.

There is no doubt that hard choices must be made. The decision made by myself and my colleagues in the House this evening will certainly be the most difficult any of us will ever make in this House. There have been enormous pressures put upon Members of Parliament from citizens representing both sides of the issue. We are all familiar with the often quoted passage from Sir Edmund Burke concerning the role of an elected representative. Similarly, we have all heard dismayed citizens refer to the tyranny of the majority. I have been urged by many organizations and individuals to vote not with public opinion, but according to my individual conscience. Personally, I cannot accept that argument.

It is my belief that the subject of capital punishment is radically different from any of the amendable decisions a Member of Parliament is called upon to make. An understanding of the subject does not require the availability of great amounts of technical information. One does not need to be a statistician or an accountant to understand how the death penalty affects all Canadians. It is a very personal concern. It is not a technical concern. I believe that there is hardly a person in Canada who does not hold a personal and informed opinion on the subject of capital punishment.

Canadians have a great understanding of their wants and needs as they relate to their personal security and safety. I cannot and will not ignore the concerns of my constituents. Additionally, I do not buy the argument put forward by some that the Canadian public is too uninformed or emotional to decide for itself on this issue. If the people of this country cannot have their voices heard on this very important subject, then just exactly what is our system of government all about? Can we seriously justify our actions and our consciences by smugly determining that we, as legislators, know better than our constituents?

I do not believe it is my role as an elected representative to think or decide entirely for my constituents that the death penalty is or is not a valid punishment. I do not believe, and cannot accept, that on this subject I am any more informed or knowledgeable than the people of Sarnia—Lambton, the people I was elected to represent. It must be remembered that in the time of Edmund Burke, this type of sentiment perhaps had some validity. Mass communications were an unknown in Britain in 1774. Illiteracy ran at about 90 per cent. The majority of Britains were uninformed and cared little about any issues other than those of a local nature. The thrust of political philosophy in those early years of democracy was predicated on the belief that there were two classes of people, those who ruled by virtue of their higher intelligence and fine

morality and those who were meant to be ruled. But this cannot hold true today. The people of Canada are among the best informed of any country in the world. We are not illiterate, nor are we ignorant.

It is the Canadian people, not Members of Parliament, who sit on juries in murder trials. It is the Canadian people who live in fear for the safety of themselves and their families. It is the Canadian people who have demanded and who deserve the right to be heard on this very important subject. It is the Canadian people who live in my constituency, those whom I was elected to represent, whose voices I carry to this House. I would not have it any other way.

● (2140)

I was most interested to discover that the illustrious and oft-quoted Sir Edmund Burke also had this to say about public opinion:

I am not one of those who think that the people are never in the wrong. They have been so, frequently and outrageously, both in other countries and in this. But I do say, that in all disputes between them and their rulers, the presumption is at least upon a par in favour of the people.

That is the other side of the oft-quoted Sir Edmund Burke.

What has also amazed me over the years is the number of people who believe, and I must say this belief is centred exclusively around this particular subject, that to allow the will of the majority of Canadians to prevail is tantamount to tyranny of the minority by the majority. It seems that it is only on the subject of the death penalty that this sentiment is so loudly expressed. These same people do not appear to be proponents of the philosophy on any other issue.

Well, what others call the tyranny of the majority to me is democracy. It is not always perfect. Nor does it always have the desired results. But it is the best that we have to offer.

I would like to share with the House the words of Sir Winston Churchill on the subject. He said:

Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms, that have been tried from time to time.

Democracy provides for the will of the majority to be heard. It is through the will of the majority that I was elected in 1984; and it is this majority that I have pledged to serve.

I receive dozens of letters daily from my constituents, not only on this subject but on a multitude of concerns and issues. I respond with an in-depth analysis and highly explanatory letters on the questions which I am asked by letter, by telephone and by people who come to see me. I believe I represent my constituency to the best of my ability, with diligence and interest, with my constituents' opinions at heart.

It is certainly no different on this subject. During the 1984 election campaign I stated publicly that I was in favour of capital punishment for the unequivocally proven first degree, premeditated murder of police officers and prison guards. But