

Capital Punishment

Presbyterian Church have adopted a similar position. I believe we should listen to them.

In leafing through information materials which were sent to all Members of Parliament, I came across a poster which has the picture of a hand with a stone in it. Interestingly enough, the poster, sent by the Mennonite Canada Victim Offender Ministries in Kitchener, has this thought-provoking caption for those who would use scripture pro or con in their debate: "Jesus was once asked for his support of the death penalty. His reply was: "Let one who is without sin cast the first stone".

For some of us capital punishment has a horrifying reality. It evokes memories that we wish to forget. However, in these circumstances I wish for a moment to share with the House my experiences, because as I have listened and monitored the debate, to date it has been largely theoretical.

I lived in Nigeria, West Africa from 1962 to 1967. I returned to Nigeria in March, 1976. At that time 34 very senior military officers who had been accused of plotting the assassination of the head of state were sentenced to death by firing squad. I should explain that the head of state in question, General Murtala Mohammed, was a popular leader indeed.

His assassination in a botched up coup attempt touched a raw nerve in the country. The death sentences quickly passed on the accused were designed not only as a fitting punishment but to serve as a deterrent. The executions became a public spectacle. People were invited to Bar Beach near Lagos where the executions took place. There was full press and television coverage of the event.

I can still see in my mind's eye the clergy giving the last rites, then the shooting of the firing squad, and the bodies as they lay slumped against the poles to which they were tied. An officer went about poking the bodies to finish off those who were not dead. I said to myself then, as I say it today: What a cruel waste. It achieves nothing. It is the wrong medicine for societal illnesses. It satisfies only animal instincts of human-kind.

Yes, the Nigerian State had exacted revenge, but it had also alienated many people. The families, the friends, the extended families, and the relations of the executed persons suddenly became enemies of the state, not friends. The violence had achieved nothing. It had not stopped people from employing violent means to win power.

Those who support a return to capital punishment suggest a public consultation about the method of execution. Somehow it is a very antiseptic and far from personal experience. We will be asked to weigh firing squads versus the noose, the electric chair against lethal injections or perhaps stoning, as is done in some societies. While we are at it, they will probably decide, in order that it should be an effective deterrent, that executions should be held in public for all to see. To follow this logic, why not here on Parliament Hill? After all, if we are to look at the

past record, executions were staged publicly before Confederation.

I find dehumanizing all this discussion about the best way to kill a man or woman. The whole idea is that we are somehow here to find a humane way of doing the inhumane. There is nothing humane about killing. Indeed a humane society, which is what we claim to be, will not consciously kill a human being. It will affirm the sanctity of life. Capital punishment is, I suggest, against our Canadian way of life. It is against the very principles of our existence as a free, a caring, and a civilized society.

One issue which to my mind the proponents of capital punishment have not adequately addressed is what happens if the system makes a mistake and we execute a completely innocent person. According to Amnesty International, there have been 28 cases of mistaken executions in the United States since 1900. Who, I ask, takes the blame for such monumental injustice? I have heard the argument that Canada has never recorded one such case of mistaken execution since Confederation. I am happy to hear that our record is so unblemished, but that is as far as it goes.

Tonight in his speech the Prime Minister was reminding us of the grave reservations of Prime Minister Diefenbaker about this whole matter in his criminal legal experience. The fact that we have not made such a mistake in the past does not mean that we cannot make it in the future. What if it does happen? Can anyone imagine the consequences of such an act?

I received in my mail today a letter dated June 19 from a Douglas E. Moore living in Thornhill, Ontario. In his letter he outlined his own experience and he described the horrifying circumstance when it was determined that a mix-up had occurred at the hospital and that the bullet fragments were found in the tissue samples from another unrelated case after two and a half years of his life being upside down.

Let me emphasize that other speakers before me addressed the several arguments against capital punishment. I fully endorse these arguments. However, even for those of us who strongly oppose capital punishment, there are legitimate public concerns about crime and our penal system which must be acknowledged and with which we must deal.

There is no doubt that ordinary citizens are terrified by rising crime and violence in our North American society. They are perplexed by what they see as the condoning of crime by the criminal justice system. There is a real fear in our streets and in too many of our homes. The rising tide of vigilante-ism and the public support for capital punishment are the manifestations of this fear. This has not come just out of a vacuum.

• (2110)

People come to me from across Kitchener—Waterloo and ask why the law appears to favour criminals and not the victims. There is a perception that law-abiding citizens are not receiving adequate protection from the law. It seems that the