

Capital Punishment

legislation first came before the House four months ago. At that time, the government indicated it was, in its opinion, a matter of top priority to be dealt with at once. It became obvious, shortly, that it was anything but a top priority with the government, and that almost the sole reason for its introduction in the House at the beginning of this session was that the government intended to use it to gain time. The government had no idea where it was going in relation to the major problems that were facing Canada and, instead of coming to grips with those major problems such as inflation and unemployment, for which it had no solutions, it floundered aimlessly and brought in the capital punishment bill in order to stall for time. When it suited the government's purpose the debate, which was supposedly of such great importance, was abruptly terminated for some months. Now, we are debating it again, and I suggest to the House that the story is once more exactly the same.

This government is again using this legislation as a means of gaining time. It needs time, for example, to decide what to do about the corporate tax legislation it has hesitated to introduce to this House. It wants time to sort out its inner cabinet dissension, which it hopes desperately to keep from public view. Indeed, the Minister of Finance (Mr. Turner) is to be complimented for his extraordinary ability to come into this House every day with a smile and supposed lack of concern. It is unfortunate that this serious subject of capital punishment is being used for such a purpose and in such a fashion.

It is even more unfortunate that the people of Canada have been asked by this government to believe there will be a free vote in this House on the subject. The Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) has made it abundantly clear, beyond any doubt, by some of his utterances in recent weeks that in reality the only members who will take part in a free vote in this House will be members of the opposition. In my opinion, the members on the government side of this House are, in fact, actually being subjected to pressure to do as the Prime Minister says. It would seem that really what he is saying to them is—

Mr. Allmand: I rise on a question of privilege, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The hon. minister rises on a question of privilege.

Mr. Allmand: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member, in the statement he just made, is reflecting on the freedom of hon. members on this side of the House, and I ask him to withdraw that statement. I have said on behalf of the government that this will be a free vote and that no pressure whatsoever is being applied to any member on this side.

Mr. Nowlan: Mr. Speaker, on that same question of privilege, I should like to ask the minister how he can equate that affirmation with the Prime Minister's stated position and complaint that other parties do not have a position on capital punishment, leaving the direct inference that his party does have a position?

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member cannot ask the minister the question since the minister does not have

[Mr. Cossitt.]

the floor to answer. The hon. member for Leeds has the floor, and I recognize him for the purpose of continuing his remarks.

Mr. Cossitt: Mr. Speaker, I find the interjection of the minister somewhat interesting. If he gives me a moment or so of additional time, I am quite prepared to elaborate on what I meant when I suggested I did not believe members, other than those in the opposition, would be taking part in a free vote. I suggest that the Prime Minister is, in effect, saying to those members on the government side: You can vote exactly as you wish on the subject of capital punishment as long as you listen to me and as long as you do as I say.

● (1530)

Some hon. Members: Order, order.

Mr. Cossitt: I will illustrate how I arrive at the conclusion that there is not a free vote atmosphere in this House. It is not surprising, I might add, that there is not a free vote atmosphere in this House, because it is quite in keeping with the principles of Liberal participatory democracy which really mean nothing but plug-in and get orders from above.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I have to remind the hon. member that this is a debate about capital punishment. The hon. member has been speaking about inflation and free votes and about party politics. I think at this point or very soon he should make an attempt to attack the question or initiate consideration of the matter before us which is a specific bill.

Mr. Cossitt: Well, Mr. Speaker, I recall some weeks ago at a fund-raising dinner meeting in the city of Toronto the Prime Minister—if I might conclude this portion of my remarks with a quotation which I think is relative to the point I am making—was reported to have asked a question something like this: "What is the Conservative policy on capital punishment? I don't know. Can anyone tell me what it is?" I think this is a very valid point to be raised about the Prime Minister. I think the answer which should be given to this question is that he should not judge others by his conduct or that of his party. On this side of the House, it is truly a free vote. The Conservative party has not attempted to dictatorially thrust a policy down the throats of any member of our party. The fact that it is a different story on the other side of the House should not be taken as any indication concerning what it is like over here.

An hon. Member: Nonsense.

Mr. Cossitt: I see that the trained seals are acting as one would expect. More recently the Prime Minister was quoted in the news media as telling the people of Canada, in what I consider to be somewhat sarcastic and ridiculing tones, that the Conservative party is in favour of the retention of capital punishment. The obvious intention, I suggest, was to convey the impression that the entire Liberal party supports the opposite view. I believe he is trying to conjure up some sort of ridiculous picture of the ghastly ghouls on one side compared to the lily-white Liberals on the other. The Prime Minister is following the