

Capital Punishment

Some Hon. Members: Sit down.

Mr. Keeper: A point of order, Mr. Speaker; I have a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You are favouring the Government, Mr. Speaker—

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Keeper: You can't even hear the Opposition.

Miss MacDonald: You ought to be ashamed of yourself.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Robert Gauthier (Ottawa—Vanier): Mr. Speaker, I am sorry we had this outburst. I will try to resume debate where we left off.

Mr. Speaker, first of all, I want to make it clear that I consider the death penalty is useless, and I will try to prove this in the few minutes at my disposal.

Like any good citizen, I think murder is a horrible thing. I am emphatically against crime as such, but especially against murder.

Of all criminal offences, murder is the very worst. It is the ultimate crime against the individual. It deprives the individual of everything he has. It is the ultimate act of aggression. Murder is reprehensible in every way, both in moral and religious terms, both in the way it affects society and the way it affects the individual.

It is our duty and the duty of government authorities to use every means necessary to fight murder and to prevent it. As a society and as legislators, we have a moral obligation to strive for a better judicial system, a better corrections system, a better life and a better society, and we hope, Mr. Speaker, to be able to put an end to these heinous and anti-social crimes. We hope to put an end to the unnatural act of murder.

● (1210)

Mr. Speaker, politicians are not often given a chance to decide on issues that are so clear-cut. More often, they are asked to judge situations where grey areas prevail, where there are pros and cons, where there are several ways of looking at things, and where politics play a role.

In the question before the House today, which is capital punishment, there are no grey areas. There is only black or white. One is for or one is against capital punishment. Just like abortion, where one is either for or against. These are two moral issues that we politicians have to deal with. We have been asked to deal with them as individuals, to deal with them according to our own judgment and our own conscience, and that is what I intend to do.

Mr. Speaker, we debated this question in 1976. We made our case at the time, and capital punishment was abolished in this country. Today, it is up to the proponents of capital punishment, to those who truly believe that this measure can be restored and re-instated, to make their case. They not only have an obligation to do so, they will have to provide arguments that justify a return to capital punishment.

Mr. Speaker, it is not enough to say we are for or against. We must provide arguments to support our stand. And that is why, in the few minutes remaining, I want to try and argue my case. I may not do so very convincingly, at least not convincingly enough to persuade the hardliners. However, these are my personal convictions, born of my own experience, and I stand by those convictions.

Mr. Speaker, in 1976 I voted against capital punishment, after a long period of reflection. The debate was a very difficult one. It was a very long debate, and public opinion in Canada was very much divided on the issue.

Today I just signed about thirty letters in reply to letters I received from my constituents, most of whom said: We do not want a return to capital punishment. However, there are still people who argue in favour of capital punishment. And they get an answer. I respect their opinions, but I tell them: I am sorry but we have a representative, democracy not a poll or push-button democracy with, in every Canadian home, one button "for" and one button "against", one black and one white. Canada's 282 elected representatives have been asked to vote according to their own enlightened judgment, after examining the issues, and as representatives of their ridings. And that is what I intend to do. And that is what I think all Members should do.

This morning, some people told me: Your vote should reflect the will of your constituents. Mr. Speaker, I can hardly vote so as to reflect the will of my constituents, because they are probably divided 50-50 on the issue. So I will do what I was elected to do. I will vote according to my own judgment, and I hope that those who do not share my views will realize that they are genuine and that I hold them because I have thought and read a lot about this question and have frequently discussed the issue in my riding.

And I know that young people—for instance, in schools I visited again recently—express views which differ from those we hear in senior citizens' homes. One factor is security. Older Canadians are more worried, so more of them would like to reinstate capital punishment. Nearly eight out of ten among young people are opposed to the death penalty. Indeed views differ from one generation to the next, and this is good because it goes to show that people are beginning to think about, reflect upon and read up on the issue, and this is important.

Mr. Speaker, let us deal with the arguments. My decision is prompted by a number of reasons and I will try to explain some of them. In light of representations which have been made, I happen to know for example that quite a few people do not share my opinion with respect to the deterrent impact of capital punishment. The argument we hear is that the death penalty is a deterrent since the fact that a murderer has been executed is bound to discourage others from committing the same crime. One only needs to read an article published recently in the daily newspaper *La Presse* which sums up the