

Capital Punishment

ance in the criminal community in prison for that very significant number was the first association with a criminal lifestyle.

Among the first degree group, all but six of whom are still being held in maximum security, there has been a relatively small number of incidents. Of 51 hostage-takings since July, 1976, first degree murderers have been involved in fewer than ten. There has been only one single report of an assault on a staff member by a "C-84" inmate, and four assaults on other prisoners. Four have escaped, of whom all but one have been recaptured, while there have been four escape attempts, three others involved in a plot to escape with violence, and another involved in a separate escape plot. Other relatively minor incidents have included two offences of contraband possession, a cell fire, one brief hunger strike, and five found to be participants in a minor disturbance. There has been less manifestation of severe psychological stress due to the length of sentences than some had expected. We have had a single incident each of attempted suicide self-inflicted injury, but there have been no suicides.

This population does present program problems to the correctional service of Canada. Despair is an issue. They are matters which concern my department and they are getting attention in the context of the over-all management of our penitentiary system and the maintenance of a satisfactory prison environment; but this experience of these inmates and the problems we have with them should not, in my view, since we can handle those problems, bear heavily on the subject of the debate before us.

I am conscious of public opinion, and some members opposite have referred to it more than once while I have been speaking. I think public opinion is important. But on this important subject of capital punishment I would only observe that public opinion is very much more influenced by sensational incidents, by a tragic killing which I would speculate is inevitable in any society or in any community, than by the underlying trends which I have described, trends which indicate that we are coping well in the criminal justice system with the problems of crime.

I challenge members who support this motion to come up with anything new in the experience of the last five years, with any argument that was not put forward, that was not answered or that was not considered which would justify a reconsideration of capital punishment. In all, I agree with the spokesman for the NDP who indicated that there are better ways the House could have spent this day, and better ways that the justice committee could spend six months.

● (1610)

Mr. Bill Domm (Peterborough): Mr. Speaker, before getting into some of the reasons I am pleased to have this motion before the House today, I would first like to say how pleased I am personally to be able to have this opportunity to second the motion presented by the leader of our party.

I would also like to remind the previous speaker, the minister responsible, that he has a very short memory. Just a few

months ago—I have a copy of *Hansard* here for October 14, 1980—I asked this very minister:

Will the minister give the opportunity to members of this House to vote on capital punishment?

And what was the minister's answer? He said:

I could remind hon. members opposite that this is an opposition day and they could have chosen any subject—

Including capital punishment.

An hon. Member: Hypocrisy.

Mr. Domm: Bear in mind, Mr. Speaker, that I was asking at that time for a free vote, a vote free from political pressure, free from having a leader telling his frontbenchers how to vote. I asked if he would allow a private member's bill to come to a free vote in the House. His response was that it was none of his business, that it was the House leader's business. I went to the House leader and I got jockeyed back to the minister. So what we are getting is a deferral, a postponement, a failure for every member in this House to at least be honest with the people of Canada and to give them the opportunity to respond to a committee on how they feel about capital punishment.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Domm: Mr. Speaker, we had some 30,000 signatures presented to this House today. Is that not indication enough to the members opposite? What problem creates more of an issue in the province of Quebec than the issue of capital punishment? What province has a higher percentage of people who would like to have a free vote in this House than the province of Quebec? Where are the 75 members of the backbenches? I do not see them in the House. Are they going to stand up here and give the people of the province of Quebec the opportunity to come before the committee?

The Solicitor General (Mr. Kaplan) stands up in this House today and has the gall to tell us that gun control has caused a reduction in the murder rate—

Mr. Kaplan: I said I hope it has.

Mr. Domm: —or there has been a reduction in the number of homicides. He is defeating his own argument. He has new information that might give strength to us to abolish capital punishment if we were convinced as retentionists that there is some justification. He flies that in the face of statistics showing that never in the history of this country have we had more homicides caused during the act of committing a criminal offence than we have had in the past year. Does this minister realize that 14.5 per cent of homicides today occur during the commission of a criminal offence? That is in Statistics Canada records. That is proof to me that there is a reason to review his facts in comparison with some facts from police associations who are involved in this process on a daily basis. Do they not have something to contribute? Do members to my left not have constituents who feel there is a need to review capital punishment?