

Abortion Plebiscite Act

appear inanimate. We are just as much akin to them as we are to each other. When we die, our positive and negative charges of electricity go back to a great reservoir of matter which in turn goes to make up all living things and the whole universe. So where does life begin? Life does not begin with the act of conception or the very instant that the sperm unites with the ovum. It started a few billion years ago. To try to make some artificial definition of when life begins is really quite ridiculous.

● (1720)

I think that all the planning that goes into laws about abortion, sterilization, world population and all those other things should not be based upon simple emotional ideas about whether we believe people were created in an instant by a word from the Great Being or whether life began 6,000 years ago by God breathing into a lump of clay the breath of life, when man became a living soul. These things are really beyond us and we do not know the answers. I do not think that questions like "when life begins for an individual" can be settled. I think the only basis on which we should try to settle the question of the taking of life or destroying a fetus should be what is best for society so far as we can tell. This takes a great deal of thought, and I do not think it should be settled by an emotional outburst. About an equal number of people are for or against this question and I do not see any need for a plebiscite. This matter should not be taken out of the hands of parliament. People have sent us here to use our heads and all the knowledge we have to settle problems. If we cannot do that, then I think we are avoiding our duties as members of parliament.

I do not know why this question of a plebiscite should be brought up at all. As Clementine Churchill said, the first thing that a member of parliament must remember is his duty to his country; the second thing is his duty to his constituents and the third thing is his duty to his party. That can be taken further. If anybody were to tell me that I had to vote in a certain way because the majority of my constituents felt that way, and if it were against my best judgment I would say "Sorry, I am not your delegate, I am your representative". I think this is the first concept that a member of parliament must get into his head. All this time we have spent since last January 1, starting with the capital punishment debate, really has not settled the question of the role of the member of parliament in the minds of our members. This has bothered me a great deal.

I have heard members say "My constituents all want such and such or 80 per cent of them want such and such". Mr. Speaker, I think the people of my constituency elected me because they felt I had half decent judgment; they thought I had some integrity and they wanted me to represent them. Of course, this may change. However, it does not worry me if the change is made democratically, but if it is made on an emotional basis, and with some kind of hoopla, I would say that would be too bad but I certainly would accept the will of the majority.

Coming back to the very well-intentioned bill that the hon. member moved today, I must say I do not think the matter of abortion can be settled very easily. It can only be settled after a very genuine attempt by each member of parliament to settle it in his own mind after a great deal of thought. The very idea of settling this question by plebi-

[Mr. Railton.]

scite appalls me. Members of parliament should stand up and be counted. Do they always have to feel that they are mere delegates of a constituency? In my opinion, a lot of the confusion in our society today is the result not only of permissiveness but of lack of thought. As Marshall McLuhan has indicated, the trouble with society today is television. Half of our worries and our ills and the silly arguments we get into are due to the fact that television has made this society of instant participation.

Mr. Speaker: Order, please. I apologize to the hon. member who has the floor but I believe his time has expired. The hon. member for Broadview (Mr. Gilbert).

Mr. John Gilbert (Broadview): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-40 would provide for a national plebiscite on the removal of the abortion provisions of the Criminal Code. The hon. member for Burnaby-Richmond-Delta (Mr. Reynolds) gave us his reasons for introducing the bill. His commitment to his constituents during the election campaign was that he would bring some of these contentious issues forward to see if they could be determined by way of plebiscite.

Let me hasten to say, Mr. Speaker, that this is not a bill with regard to abortion; this is a bill with regard to a national plebiscite on abortion. The hon. member who introduced it also wanted to bring in the question of capital punishment, so I imagine he thinks that both capital punishment and abortion should be determined on a plebiscite basis.

Mr. Speaker, you will recall the bill in 1970 or 1971 to amend the Criminal Code with regard to abortion. The government at that time acted on a report which had been submitted by the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs which had gone into the problem of abortion in depth and had made certain recommendations. If I remember correctly, there was an extension made to the law to include therapeutic abortion where the life or the safety of the woman was in jeopardy. We still have that legislation and I have not heard any great furore about it.

In 1967, we had amendments to the Criminal Code with regard to capital punishment and there was a full debate at that time. We did not have a plebiscite, but the changes were enacted to abolish capital punishment for a five-year period except in the case of murder of policemen or prison guards. We had that authority for five years. It expired in 1972 and we had a debate in 1973 which took considerable time in this House. It was resolved last week and will be the law when it is finally completed in the other place and proclaimed.

● (1730)

I was pleased to hear the previous speaker say that he is a representative of his constituency. We are all representatives of our constituencies, but our first duty is to the country. We were not sent here as mere automatons to reflect the feelings and wishes of all the constituents in our communities. We were sent here to exercise our good judgment with regard to the problems that face Canada whether they be economic problems or social issues.

We have a responsibility to come to this place and inform ourselves with regard to the various issues, espe-