

Capital Punishment

manner, that he would allow the House to divide, and that the consequences would flow from whatever vote we took.

Instead we have an attempt by the Prime Minister and the Government to disguise their real intentions. Instead of a straightforward motion on the death penalty they are trying to pass responsibility off to a committee of this House. The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Mazankowski) told the House of Commons on February 13, when he brought in this motion, that the motion does not indicate that the Government supports or opposes the reinstatement of capital punishment. That position was echoed by the Parliamentary Secretary this morning. Yet the motion which he introduced, and on which we are asked to vote, begins with the words that you have recited, your Honour, "That this House supports, in principle, the reinstatement of capital punishment".

Who does the Government expect to fool—no position is being taken? Ministers are divided on the issue and are not taking responsibility for this motion—yet, the motion is quite clear that this House supports, in principle, the reinstatement of capital punishment.

The issue is to be turned over to a committee of the House of Commons. That committee will have the authority under the resolution to decide what crimes will be subject to capital punishment and what the style of that punishment will be. The committee will have the responsibility of preparing the actual Bill. All three of those items are vital; what crimes should be covered, in what way the ultimate punishment should be meted out, and the drafting of the Bill. That surely should have been the responsibility of the Government, or the Prime Minister, or the Minister of Justice (Mr. Hnatyshyn).

[Translation]

Mr. Speaker, no government can resolve the issue of the death penalty by fence sitting, any more than we can execute someone partially. Either the death penalty exists in this country or it does not. The Government must put its cards on the table. The Government must clearly explain its position and take the consequences. But it doesn't want to do this. It wants to keep both sides happy.

[English]

To supporters of capital punishment they will say, "We have kept our word, we have brought it before the House". To those opposed to capital punishment they will say, "What could we do? The committee decided. It decided what crimes would be included, the style of the punishment, and it drafted the Bill."

This motion is sheer hypocrisy. It is a crass political move.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[Translation]

The motion is silent on the royal prerogative of pardon, by which Cabinet can commute the death penalty to life imprisonment. Will the present Government or future Governments who are opposed to the death penalty be able to commute such a sentence, and if so, is not the present debate absolutely

meaningless? Is it not ambiguous? Aren't we giving the impression to Canadians who support the death penalty that the House is speaking out on this issue because an execution as understood in this motion or in future legislation may well never take place, because of the powers and prerogatives of Cabinet, even if the death penalty is restored as a result of this motion and subsequent legislation?

[English]

By voting for this motion the House of Commons will agree in principle to the return of capital punishment. It will then send a committee criss-crossing Canada debating the merits of garrotte against the firing squad, electrocution against hanging, legal injection against even decapitation. What a ghoulish commission to send our colleagues on across the country.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Turner (Vancouver Quadra): The committee will also be obliged to decide what crimes will qualify—will it be only premeditated murder or first degree murder or treason or terrorism or espionage? The effect of this roving committee will be to divide Canadians even more bitterly on the subject and will not add one whit to what we already know about the subject. I anticipate many emotion-filled meetings across the country and very, very little dispassionate discussion.

• (1200)

[Translation]

We will not know until the Committee has finished its macabre task and comes back to the House to say what kind of criminals will receive the death sentence and how they will be executed. We must not forget that the Committee will not have to decide whether people will be executed, only how this will be done and for what crimes they are to suffer this punishment. By taking this approach, the Government is showing a shocking lack of responsibility, and Canadians will realize this, whatever their views on the fundamental issue of capital punishment may be.

[English]

When the committee returns to the House after 90 days or before, we start the debate all over again. We prolong the issue; we continue to exacerbate the division of the country, and the country remains divided.

What happens to the rest of the country's agenda and the Government's agenda before the House of Commons? It is behaving like some latter day Lady MacBeth, attempting to wash its hands of the issue. However, I say to the Government and the Prime Minister that it cannot absolve itself of this issue, nor can the Prime Minister. That is not leadership; that is playing games with an issue that goes to the heart of the conscience of every Member of Parliament and every Canadian.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!