

Capital Punishment

He was affectionately known by everyone as "Dr. Joe". But there are hundreds, even thousands, of Dr. Joes in our society—men and women, doctors and nurses and paramedics, as well as individuals in walks of life entirely different from medicine—passionately devoted to the enhancement and preservation of human life. That is because deep in the soul of every civilized person is a belief in the fundamental sanctity of human life. Seen in that light, the death penalty is a dehumanizing punishment that does violence not only to the life of the offender but, indeed, to the sacredness of human life itself.

The eloquent Irish voice, now stilled, of the late Grattan O'Leary said it best shortly before he died. He said:

Capital punishment is a moral wrong—A crime against humanity—Nearing Jordan myself, I frankly do not want to face my God with the sin on my soul of having been a party to condemning a fellow human being to facing the throne of God's judgment.

Unless every one of us in this Chamber could, with a good conscience, prepare the scaffold, tighten the noose or, as some would have it, inject the needle or dispense the pill to end the life of a fellow human being, let us put an end, instead, to this odious preoccupation with capital punishment.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Russell MacLellan (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Regional Economic Expansion): Mr. Speaker, first of all I should like to read the motion presented by hon. members opposite. It reads as follows:

That this House calls on the government to send a reference to the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs authorizing it to hear arguments for and against the reintroduction of capital punishment as the penalty for some classes of murder, and, requiring the committee to report its conclusions by December 18, 1981; and

That this House further expresses its view that a free vote should be permitted by all parties on a motion to concur in the report of the committee.

This motion is in the name of the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) who, as we heard earlier, is an avowed abolitionist. Although we have had some very strange motions from the official opposition, in my opinion this is the most ridiculous they have ever put forward.

In 1976, Parliament decided this question on a free vote although hon. members of the official opposition have declared it was not a free vote. We are dealing with something that they make extremely subjective. They say it was not a free vote in 1976 but, if it happens again, it will be a free vote. They do not say, however, that we should vote on it now; they say we should refer it to the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs for debate, so that the views of all Canadians may be had by December 18. This is the same committee that at the present time is dealing with the bill relating to freedom of information and which will be dealing with the bill relating to young offenders, yet they want it to deal with this question as well.

The hon. member for Nepean-Carleton (Mr. Baker) is not present. He is a strong proponent of the bill relating to freedom of information and I wonder if he would be prepared to put that aside in order to have this question debated.

If this motion were brought before the committee and debated until December 18, what would be accomplished even if all the witnesses who appeared were in favour of bringing back the death penalty? Would that be the end of the matter? It would not, because it would have to come back to Parliament and we would be back where we were when the question was presented to Parliament in 1976.

Members of the official opposition claim that they want to find out what the people of Canada think about this question, yet they say they have a petition with 30,000 signatures giving the point of view of some people of Canada. This is nothing more than a cop-out. It is a ridiculous point of view and it is a waste of the time of Parliament.

This is not to say that I do not sympathize with the point of view of people who are struggling with the question of life and death and capital offences. It is a very serious question for anyone; it is an emotional question and a moral question, a question which bothers many people.

Personally, I am not in favour of bringing back the death penalty, but that is my own opinion. I do not think it would serve any particular purpose.

I feel very sympathetic and understand the tragedy which affects people when a member of their family or a neighbour dies as the result of a violent crime. Believe me, Mr. Speaker, if I thought that bringing back the death penalty would have any effect or would reduce those crimes, I would have to think about it very conscientiously, particularly in regard to police officers and prison guards. Usually the men in these occupations who die violently are not older men, but young men. The older men are likely the sergeants and corporals and not in the position that the younger ones are. It may be that by being more experienced they avoid putting themselves in the predicament of having to deal with a crazed mind.

The people the victims leave behind are in a very difficult situation—the young mothers, the young children and, in some cases, the parents who are still alive. I am sure members on both sides of the House can relate to them with a great deal of sympathy and regret.

Would it help to bring back the death penalty? The hon. Leader of the Opposition put it as well as any of us could when, using the statistics, he said that homicides and murders have been reduced in each year successively, for the last four years. This year, as compared to the year before, murder decreased 17 per cent. This has occurred since Parliament abolished the death penalty in 1976.

● (1700)

We could get into the question of capital punishment and why there should not be capital punishment. However, these points have been debated over and over again. Of course, we must consider that the wrong person could be executed for the crime with which he or she has been charged. This is not a moot point; it has happened. Each of us who deals with this question and debates this point of view has to decide how important it is to him or to her that one person or more has died unjustly for a crime.