

Private Members' Business

The time a child can be most influenced from becoming a child at risk or a future young offender is from the day the child is born to its third birthday. We have to do more in the early formative years, even in the early years when a child is in school.

We have to have the co-operation of the provinces. We have to have co-operation and understanding of all members of the House of Commons on that very important principle and basic attack on young offenders, on future offenders and future murderers.

Certainly we have had great examples of hideous crimes in this country in the last few months. Homolka and Bernardo are hideous examples. The policy of this government is not to piggyback on the hideous nature of these crimes to sensationalize a proposal for a referendum that is not going to do what the people of Canada want.

I have a very strong interest in this because Donald Marshall is a constituent of mine. In that crime the murder happened in my constituency. Guy Paul Morin is another example. We can say that those are only isolated incidents but they are two people who are still alive as a result of those isolated incidents and there are others.

• (1800)

We need to find lasting solutions. That is what this government intends to do.

[Translation]

Mrs. Pierrette Venne (Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for North Vancouver moved a non-votable motion urging the government to hold a referendum on capital punishment concurrently with the next federal election. Reform members have outdone themselves once again. Since they realize they may be swept off the electoral map in the next election, they are trying to exercise their mandate as legislators beyond the term for which they were elected to this House.

If Reform members think we will not take this seriously, they are wrong. Their publicity-hungry leader took advantage of the summer recess to try to revive the debate on capital punishment. Once the debate on gun control had subsided, he had to find something else to keep him in front of the TV cameras. Burned by the debate on gun control where they finally showed their true colours, Reform members have completely lost their sense of reality, trapped in neanderthal attitudes where repression is the rule and rehabilitation and presumption of innocence are vague concepts thought up by criminologists.

The legitimacy of the penal system is largely based on its effectiveness and fairness. Its underlying principle is the presumption of innocence, a fundamental principle of law which

says that the accused is presumed innocent until found guilty following a trial.

Wrongful convictions undermine this fundamental principle. As the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Justice said earlier, David Milgaard, Donald Marshall and Guy Paul Morin are three names we too often forget. Nevertheless, these individuals each paid an enormous debt to society, a debt they did not owe.

In Manitoba, David Milgaard spent 23 years of his life behind bars before his release. He was unjustly convicted of murder. The Crown's principal witness perjured himself at the trial.

In Nova Scotia, Donald Marshall served 11 years in the penitentiary for a murder he did not commit. Another inmate finally confessed. Thirty-five years old today, Guy Paul Morin paid a high price for a judicial error. He was falsely accused of the murder of young Christine Jessup. He was found guilty at his first trial. After nearly ten years in the penitentiary, Morin was acquitted thanks to considerable advances in science and DNA research.

These three men would have been dead and buried years ago if capital punishment was still the law in this country. Three innocent men sent to the gallows, murders ordered by the government. For all the Clifford Olsons and Paul Bernados that roam our streets, there will be innocent people convicted of crimes they did not commit.

In the United States, according to the Criminal Justice Research Centre, every year 6,000 people are wrongfully convicted of a serious crime. To my knowledge, there has been no similar study in Canada.

The trouble with capital punishment is that it is irreversible. I realize I am stating the obvious, but we must admit that once the injection has been administered, that is it. No appeal, no new evidence that would reverse the conviction and no opportunity to review an erroneous judicial decision.

If the conviction is, as in most cases, based on circumstantial evidence or even if the police manages to get an eye witness, the fact remains that mistakes are always possible and that a human life is at stake. And we cannot change our minds after the execution. I can see the headlines: "Posthumously acquitted".

• (1805)

But do not, above all, conclude that I am forgetting the victim in all of this. His or her life has also been taken. I want to see these murderers tracked down and sentenced severely, made an example of. I am thinking of cases like that of little Melissa Deley, barely ten years old, who was taken away from her home in Surrey, British Columbia, raped and murdered.