

*Abortion*

the bottom of the list if that was the will of three or four members. This particular procedure was argued by me at great length in the last session. Thus those who are adamant that the bill should not be passed will have no difficulty killing the bill at a later stage. However, they will, in the meantime, have given to all citizens and all members an opportunity to debate the apparent inequities that seem to exist in the present legislation.

● (1610)

In the belief that no member of this House is opposed to open discussion, I am confident that Bill C-206, an act to amend the Criminal Code (abortion), will be given the approval, if necessary, "on division", to go to the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs where everyone will have the opportunity to express his point of view.

**Mr. Douglas Roche (Parliamentary Secretary to Secretary of State for External Affairs):** Mr. Speaker, the approach used by the hon. member for Vaudreuil (Mr. Herbert) is very interesting, and one that I partly support. I believe, with the hon. member, the time has come for a serious study to be made on the abortion question. In order for a committee to function it needs either a reference from the House or a second reading of a bill. In order for a bill to get second reading, there ought to be some defence by the member introducing the bill as to what he is intending to accomplish through it.

I will not be long, Mr. Speaker, because there are others who welcome this opportunity to make a contribution on a subject of deep concern to increasing numbers of Canadians, and I dare say to many members of Parliament who have not had a sufficient opportunity to express themselves and the views of their constituents on this extremely difficult question facing society today.

What is the basic situation we are facing? We are facing the results of the omnibus Criminal Code bill of 1969 that, through application of the whip, brought about a situation in which section 251 of the Criminal Code was changed to allow abortion when the life or health of the mother is in danger. Because of the failure of the Parliament at that time to spell out and define precisely what is meant by health, we left ourselves open to a growing abuse of this bill which came law in 1969, a greater abuse of the new law in terms of health which has brought us into a ludicrous situation today.

The latest statistics on abortion were released by Statistics Canada only a few days ago for the year 1978. We find that abortions rose in that year alone by 8.2 per cent. The total number of abortions in Canada in 1978 was 62,290. For every 100 live births, 17.4 abortions took place. The year after the 1969 law came into effect, there were approximately 11,000 abortions that took place in Canada. We see this rapid escalation all through the seventies to the point where we now have over 62,000 abortions per year. Even worse than that figure is the fact that 30.5 per cent of the women who had abortions were under the age of 20. That is from the statistics I just gave for the previous year.

I could go on with that type of statistic to show that the abortion law brought into this House in 1969 for the purpose of allowing a woman an abortion when there is a serious threat to her life and health is being abused. It is ludicrous to suggest that there were 62,000 cases in Canada, most of them in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, the chief provinces, resulting from serious difficulties with pregnancy. That is scandalous.

According to many experts who have studied this question in great detail, abortions are now being performed for social and economic reasons. There are many women in this country who are pregnant and who have serious economic and social problems. It is the duty of government at various levels to respond to the legitimate problem of women carrying babies. A way to respond positively to help women is not ipso facto to turn a law that was intended for a good purpose into runaway abortion, virtually abortion on demand. There are hospitals in this country that have a higher number of abortions than live births.

All of this is not news to members who have been following the tragic train of events regarding the abortion question through the decade of the seventies. There is a dispute about the effect of the present law. Some hold, as I do, that the weakness is fundamentally in the wording of the law and the reluctance of the previous government in 1969 to define what they meant by health. Some claim the weakness is there, as I do, and if we are going to be serious in trying to stop this escalation of needless abortion, we must repair the law.

Others hold that the law is okay, that it is the administration of the law, and therefore we have to go to the provinces for a total application of the law. There you get into two divisions. Some say there is too much strictness, that therapeutic abortions are not available, that there are therapeutic abortion committees in about 250 hospitals out of some 600 hospitals in Canada. Others say the application is far too weak, and that therapeutic abortion committees are nothing but a rubber stamp, largely because many doctors will no longer serve on therapeutic abortion committees. They know the character of those committees has been impugned by the willingness of doctors who have served on them to put through abortions at the request of the mother who claimed that she had a problem, but without any certifiable evidence that the problem was a serious threat to her life or health.

We had in 1976 a petition brought before this House presented by ten members of Parliament on behalf of the ten provinces. It contained the names of more than one million Canadians who had signed the petition brought about by the umbrella group, the Alliance for Life. There are several other groups promoting a tighter application of the law throughout Canada. I will not mention them all. The general umbrella group, the Alliance for Life, was able to produce a petition which was the largest petition ever brought into this Parliament.

What happened to that petition? If someone went into the lower bowels of this establishment, the petition would probably be found on some dusty shelf. Nothing happened to it. The