

Capital Punishment

In closing, I repeat that I am unable to support the motion before us today. I do not want to be part of a House of Commons that supports capital punishment. I want to build a better society for Canada because life is precious and sacred. I want to be part of a community which cares infinitely for each individual.

In the course of the weeks and months that lie ahead, I will use whatever strength and skill I have to improve our judicial system, our penal system, all those things associated with the criminal justice system.

I want to leave the House with this final thought from Jeremy Bentham who said:

The state affects the conduct and actions of its own citizens more by the standard of its own behaviour than by the penalty it inflicts on others.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina West): Madam Speaker, I believe this is the fourth occasion since 1968 that I have risen in the House of Commons to speak to this subject. It is a subject that none of us relish but one with which either society has demanded or Members of Parliament have decided we must deal.

I am indebted to my colleague and friend, the Member for St. Catharines (Mr. Reid), who sent a letter he received to Members of Parliament. It is dated May 11 and states:

Mr. Reid, I am a resident of your riding, I am a police officer with the Ontario Provincial Police, and I am also against the restoration of the death penalty.

Those people that speak on behalf of the law enforcement community concerning the death penalty, do not speak for the silent majority of police officers.

We are also indebted to my colleague, the Member for Prince Albert (Mr. Hovdebo), who sent all Members of this place a letter from a man who is now a resident of Saskatoon. He said on April 9:

In April, 1965, I was the Chief Keeper (Director) of Saskatchewan's only prison with a gallows. In that prison was a man who had been convicted of murder and sentenced to die by hanging. My job was, among other things, to ensure the condemned man was kept in good health and did not take his own life. It seemed society was not so much interested in his death as it was in killing him.

I was, in fact, a paid employee of the state, required by law to participate in the ritual killing of a human being.

I believe that what we do is what we are. The test of civilization in any society is how it treats its sick and poor, its disadvantaged, and yes, even its offenders, both civil and criminal.

This motion fulfils a commitment by the Prime Minister (Mr. Mulroney) to a free vote on the issue of the death penalty. He made that commitment during the 1984 election campaign. I fully appreciate that it is a commitment he is honouring, but I submit that it is a commitment that was, at that time, designed to pacify and satisfy the large element in his Party and among the public who understandably wanted to lash out for an ultimate solution to the worst offenders of all, those who murdered.

• (1730)

Surely the Prime Minister must know by now that the attempt to be all things to all people sadly weakened his own stand and that of many others, including those of the churches. He should know by now that the matter is not just political, but moral. His excellent speech on this matter illustrated that. But he has allowed his Government to function in a manner which sadly belies and denigrates the excellent case he made against the death penalty.

If my memory serves me correctly, he implied that all Members should have a chance to speak and vote on the death penalty. His Government's action in cutting off debate just denigrates the arguments he so ably put forth, because only about 100 out of 279 Members will have an opportunity to speak on either side of the argument.

I do not relish singling out the Prime Minister on this matter. In fact, I congratulated him on his speech. But if, as the Leader of our country, he really believes what he says, and I think he does, he should not have allowed the procedural process outlined by his Deputy Prime Minister (Mr. Mazankowski), to have taken place.

As my colleague, the Hon. Member for Winnipeg—Birds Hill (Mr. Blaikie), put it so aptly, in Canada we are not a violent people. I was saddened to hear two or three Hon. Members in this House, two Members to my left and one Member to my right, speak up when my colleague, the Hon. Member for Yorkton—Melville (Mr. Nystrom), called for volunteers to be the executioners. Two or three government Members readily volunteered. I invite those hon. gentlemen to apply for the executioner's job in a place like Russia, Chile or any other totalitarian nation where, I am sure, they would be welcome.

The motion itself, and the way in which it was presented under the rules of this House, makes it a palpable farce since the Leaders of the three Parties are all opposed to capital punishment. But because the Leader of the government Party proposed a free vote, we are now faced with this farce. If it passes, a committee will be established to travel about the country on a ghoulish investigation into which way is the best way to put someone to death, and for what reasons. No matter what the committee comes up with in three months or six months from now, I doubt very much whether its report will ever see the light of day in this Parliament or in the next one, no matter who is governing.

While this country has a million people unemployed, hundreds of thousands going to food banks, which is a nice word for soup kitchens, when we need housing and a host of things to reduce the causes of crime, we must deal with this matter. I think that it does not speak well for the priorities of this Parliament and the Hon. Members in it.

Crime rises in direct proportion to the number of unemployed, to the increased numbers in poverty to an increase of those who are functionally illiterate, to the number of those