

Government Orders

I would hope that once this bill comes back it will have the necessary amendments to protect the rights of the foetus, that it will have a clear definition of what "at risk" means when dealing with the health of a mother and, more important, that the government will recognize its responsibility to remove the economic justification for abortion that has far too long been imposed on the women of Canada.

Hon. David MacDonald (Rosedale): Mr. Speaker, this debate is not one that is easy to address and in fact it raises some fundamental issues of life and respect for life to which all of us are committed, particularly in terms of our public representation.

I want to deal this evening, in the brief time available, with what I think are the three essential aspects of the debate on this bill. They are the issues of right to life, respect for life and responsibility for life.

Over the past number of years I have been increasingly troubled by the increasing amount of hate and animosity and the decreasing amount of understanding and insight that has occurred in trying to deal with this issue. I guess I could even say that in several elections, particularly the election of 1980, I experienced the extent and the depth of the animosity around this particular issue.

This is not my first occasion, neither in this place nor in other places, to discuss this issue. In fact, as I was preparing for the debate, I looked up one of the House of Commons reports on Health and Welfare from 1967 and 1968 when I participated in the standing committee which, on December 18, 1967, issued its report recommending some of the changes that subsequently became the law which stood until early 1988.

• (1900)

Having said that, I would in no way want to suggest that I feel that I have any more expertise or right to speak on this matter than any other individual in this House. I do think, however, it is important that we understand what this debate is about. Those who have taken a strong anti-abortion position have chosen to describe their position as one of right to life. I have always felt that they had chosen the right language even if, from time to time, they demonstrated a very real lack of understanding and sensitivity and very often, and

perhaps with increasing frequency, have transmitted a message which is almost the opposite of that to which they espouse.

This is not something new. As far back as our own committee of 1967-68, in quite a lively exchange that took place on February 8, 1968, I was forced to say to one witness: "I would say though, Mr. Dehler, that your whole interpretation is founded upon a one dimensional view of life, that life can only be looked at and human life as being much more than its isolated physical aspect in its biological sense". I said that because it seemed to me that so often the discussions that took place around the issue of right to life were, at best, narrow and superficial and, at worst, even contradictory.

I guess another example of that is to suggest that I often found that people who were the most passionate on the issue of right to life were equally at home with the feeling that we should retain and, in many instances, expand the use of the death penalty. I was never quite able to reconcile that dichotomy. I believe that in the matter of life one cannot disengage for other reasons.

We must look at what the issue is with respect to this right to life. We are dealing, as almost all members have said, with a very unique form of life in terms of the foetus, but in dealing with that unique form of life we must remember that there are some very real limits and those limits are rarely, if ever, recognized or dealt with.

The Canadian Medical Association, in its own communication in response to this legislation, has said:

Abortion, as interpreted by the Canadian Medical Association, is the act of termination of a pregnancy before foetal viability.

The words "foetal viability" hardly ever enter into the discussion. But when the Supreme Court was faced with its own decision it said, and I quote here Chief Justice Dickson in interpreting that decision:

Forcing a woman, by threat of criminal sanction, to carry a foetus to term, unless she meets certain criteria unrelated to her own priorities and aspirations, is a profound interference with a woman's body and thus an infringement of security of the person.

I have to believe that the Chief Justice, in speaking not only for himself but for others in the court, was presenting something that was profoundly important. We really have to ask the question: whose life are we concerned with? I think it comes out, both directly and indirectly, in