

Capital Punishment

What is the answer? The answer is not to abstain from voting. That would be an abdication of our responsibility to our electorate. The answer is to choose the lesser of the evils, to vote for the continuation of the partial ban for a further five years at this stage of the proceedings. In doing so, I urge all hon. members to seriously consider the motion to be put in committee which will totally abolish the death penalty and replace it with a mandatory 25-year jail term. Such a course would surely satisfy those retentionists who base their arguments on the requirement to protect society from the murderer.

I would urge all members before voting to approach the question in a reasonable, analytical fashion divorced from emotional considerations as far as possible. When we allow basic human instincts and emotions to cloud our judgment, we make mistakes. On this issue, Mr. Speaker, we cannot afford to make a mistake.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Len Marchand (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development): Mr. Speaker, I do not expect to take very long in this debate. I did not intend to participate in it until recently, but I thought that I should put some of my views on record to at least indicate how I plan to vote on this serious matter. This is one of the most serious questions we will have to deal with in this parliament. I have been trying to grapple with it in my own mind and conscience. All hon. members are faced with this.

A few speakers who preceded me suggested that this is not really a free vote, that positions are set on this side of the House and on the opposite side and we are being told how to vote. That, Mr. Speaker, is not the case. It is certainly not the case on this side of the House. I have been honestly and sincerely grappling with my conscience as to how I want this situation handled. I have tried to read as much of the literature that has been passed to me by the Solicitor General's department as possible. I have also read literature from other sources.

This is a situation where there are statistics to support both sides. There are statistics to show that abolition is best. Some states have had abolition for many years. The murder rate in those areas is very low. On the other hand, France still has the guillotine which is used to kill people. France has one of the highest crime and murder rates in the world. It is necessary to look at the whole picture. Each member must make up his own mind and then decide how he will vote.

My mail is running between 95 per cent and 99 per cent in favour of retaining the death penalty. However, I feel the same way as hon. members such as the hon. member for Sarnia (Mr. Cullen) and the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Rowland). Yesterday the hon. member for Selkirk made it very plain that even though his constituents are in favour of retention, he is going to make up his own mind. That is what I am going to do.

The hon. member for Sarnia stated that he was very concerned about people being let out on parole. I share his concern. There have been many serious situations in British Columbia. Recently there was the Head case. This case caused a lot of concern among many people with regard to our whole system of parole. I have expressed this view

[Mr. O'Connor.]

to the Solicitor General (Mr. Allmand). We have to tighten up in this area. If a man is in prison for a very serious crime such as murder, perhaps there should not be any consideration of parole for 20 or 25 years. We should not go along with granting easy parole where a person convicted of a very serious crime is let out after a few years. I feel very strongly about that, Mr. Speaker.

• (1740)

I hope that when this bill goes to committee for consideration we can come up with a proposal upon which we can all agree to ensure full protection for society. Many people in British Columbia are honestly and very sincerely concerned about the slackness and the latitude allowed with respect to a number of inmates granted parole.

Now I would like to deal with a comment made by my colleague from New Westminster. He referred to the fact that a number of people sentenced to death in the United States tended to be from poverty-stricken categories and said a high proportion of them were Negroes. I tried to look up some statistics on this situation with respect to the native peoples of Canada, but I could not find any. I checked with the Solicitor General's department; apparently it does not keep statistics of that kind. However, from my personal observations over the years and from my own reading I cannot recall that very many native people had to be hanged in Canada. I would like to research this further.

I tend to believe that the proportion of native people who have received the death penalty is low compared with the total population of Canada. However, I am concerned about the number of native people who are in prisons and various other institutions right now. This is something I have discussed with my hon. friend the Solicitor General and I must express my pleasure at the concern he has shown, and the way he has responded to the situation. I hope we can go forward with a much more progressive program so that the number of native people in these institutions will continue to decline.

Over the past ten years the number of native people in detention institutions has gone down, but not far enough. The proportion of native people now in prisons is too high in comparison with that of the rest of the population. We have to do much better. As I say, I am happy with the attitude of the Solicitor General. I know he is working closely with the Department of Indian Affairs and with the various Indian organizations which made representations to him through the Department of Indian Affairs and other agencies of government.

The place to tackle this problem, though, is not in the institutions, although a lot can be done there. The work that has to be done must be done back in the Indian communities, tackling the reasons for and the causes of crime. There has to be much greater emphasis on education and meaningful social programs to help the native people play a much more constructive role in their own communities.

These were a few of the points that I wanted to make in my brief remarks, Mr. Speaker. As I say, I have had a very difficult time grappling with my conscience on this matter. After all the thinking and the reading that I have done, I believe the most sensible course I could follow at