

Capital Punishment

In answer to the Hon. Member's question, my concern is that many speakers in this debate have put forward the notion that because certain other countries do not have the death penalty, that they are somehow more civilized and in some way have a better system of justice than those countries which have retained the death penalty for certain crimes.

I simply want to point out, as I did earlier, that according to Amnesty International there are 28 countries which do not provide for the death penalty for any crimes at all, with another 18 countries which have the death penalty under conditions of military law, and another 129 countries which carry the death penalty for ordinary crimes.

I note that among the 28 countries which do not have the death penalty under any circumstance are countries such as Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Panama, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. So we have here a number of interesting countries—

Mr. Gauthier: England, France—

Mr. Wilson (Swift Current—Maple Creek): I can draw no conclusion from it other than that there clearly is a sovereign power in each of these countries and they will pass their laws in accordance with the circumstances of their respective societies.

I believe that in Canada, as in many other countries, we have a problem with violent crime, and I do not think that the answer to dealing with violent crime is to take the easy way out, to turn our backs on it. I believe we have to have a system of justice which carries a suitable punishment for the most heinous crime, and it is for that reason that I reject the argument about other countries, whether pro or con, and suggest that in this country, we should have the option of capital punishment under some circumstances.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): The Hon. Member for Ottawa Centre (Mr. Cassidy), on a question or comment.

Mr. Cassidy: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments of the Hon. Member, although I disagree fundamentally with him.

He has said that the "silent majority" is in favour of the death penalty. However, the most recent polling by Decima Research, a firm which is well known to his Party, indicates that the number supporting or leaning toward capital punishment has now fallen to 61 per cent, and it has been falling steadily through the course of this debate. Of those, 37 per cent said that they were convinced about the death penalty, and 24 per cent said that they were only leaning toward that view.

We in Parliament, Mr. Speaker, have to make tough decisions, difficult decisions on matters on which the public may have some views. I think it is significant that as we get closer to a decision on this matter, the public support for the death penalty is wavering, and certainly the intensity of opposition to its reinstatement is strengthening. In my

constituency, the mail is running 12 to 1 against the death penalty and for continued abolition.

The Hon. Member has cited the scriptures. Perhaps he could explain to the House why it is that every major church denomination in this country has come out against capital punishment. These are not government-financed bodies; rather, they are the Catholics, the Anglicans, the Jews, the Quakers, the Baptist Conference, and the list goes on. Why is it that all of the major churches, which provide leadership for Canadians on matters of conscience, are asking Parliament, in the strongest possible terms, not to reinstate the death penalty? I think we should listen very carefully to the leadership which is coming from the churches, and the unanimity with which it is coming. They are the people who do interpret the scriptures in their work, in their preaching, and they say, "Do not do it."

Should we, as parliamentarians, not give very careful consideration to that advice on a matter of conscience, given that it is advice coming from those who are charged with issues of conscience in our society?

Mr. Wilson (Swift Current—Maple Creek): Mr. Speaker, I thank the Hon. Member for his intervention. Certainly, I agree with him that this is a tough decision, and a difficult one.

I have heard a number of speakers in this debate suggest that we ought not to have reference to the polls and what they may say today in regard to this matter.

In my speech, I carefully resisted referring to the polling information or, indeed, to the feelings of my constituents, because I understand that this is a matter of individual conscience for Members of Parliament.

However, I will say that I perceive that a clear majority of the constituents of Swift Current—Maple Creek have indicated to me that they favour the restoration of the death penalty, and I have certainly listened to those representations in arriving at my decision.

I note the Hon. Member's remarks about his mail. While that may be so, I must say that my mail at this point is running about 50-50—and I do not find that surprising, given the tremendous amount of organized agitation in favour of the retention of the abolitionist position.

There are a number of groups who are very well organized, and I am not being critical of them in any way. They have their point to make, and they are out there working very strongly toward achieving it.

As I said earlier, there is no organized movement for the restoration of capital punishment, though it is clearly a view that the majority of Canadians hold.

The final point raised by the Hon. Member related to the position of the clergy and the organized churches of the country on this issue. Again, I respect their viewpoints. Clearly, we have heard what they have had to say. It is my