

Capital Punishment

someone deal with the issue? Mr. Speaker, do you think that killing someone, once we have capital punishment, will mean fewer murders? The Hon. Member said that the figure . . . I have a paper on those figures. I didn't want to use them. I have them right here and I could use them, but as far as I am concerned, this debate goes beyond mathematics. It is a debate about people and about human life, and killing someone because he killed someone else is absurd, Mr. Speaker. We have serious problems in our society, and after 15 years we are back with the same debate and we still have no solution. And so we say: We must reinstate capital punishment. This is absurd.

● (1550)

[English]

Mr. Joe Reid (St. Catharines): Mr. Speaker, I will not begin my remarks, as most of us are wont to do, by saying that I am pleased to take part in this debate, because I am not. My conscience dictates, however, that I must.

Sometimes it is casually said in light of the importance of an issue that it is a matter of life and death. However, I need not remind my colleagues in the House that the debate on which we are now embarking is a question of life and death.

I must state clearly and unequivocally that when it comes to such an issue of life and death, I opt in favour of life. If, as a society, we respect human life as sacred and inviolable, and if we recognize the rights of each person as primary, how can we do otherwise?

As has already been stated often, the death penalty in this country was abolished in 1976, even though by a narrow majority. However, if there is one thing that the people in this country want, it is a rule of law that is firm, strong, and predictable.

I take the position that it is incumbent upon those who want to restore the death penalty to justify the taking of life in the name of the state. The onus is on them, and it is a heavy onus, to prove why we should join that small band of countries that, by some means or another, inflict the death penalty.

The motion we have to address commences with these words:

That this House supports, in principle, the reinstatement of capital punishment—

That is what the debate is all about. Those first 11 words set out the real issue. As soon as anyone begins talking about first, second or third degree murder, or about hanging being too inhumane, that person is backing away from the real core issue.

● (1600)

Does any Government have the right to sanction the killing of any person? It is a simple question but one which deserves more than a simple answer. Advocates of the death penalty will skip the moral issue, but can we? I have a letter on my desk, and I assume each Hon. Member received a copy of that

same letter, which was referred to yesterday. It was written by Leslie Parrott of Toronto whose daughter Alison was tragically abducted and murdered just last July. Mrs. Parrott writes in part:

It has more than ever convinced me that we as a society cannot ever and must not ever condone killing, whether by state or by an individual, in any shape or in any form.

She continues on to talk about victims' rights and states her belief that in no way can anyone's suffering be alleviated by the deliberate killing of another. Her message is clear and unconditional. Human life is sacred and killing is always wrong. Who could have said it better?

We have already heard in the context of this debate several biblical quotations, beginning with the Book of Genesis, as justification for state killing. First let me say that the Roman Catholic Bishops, and practically all the councils of the other established churches, hold that it is abhorrent in the 1980s to turn to the Old Testament to justify a legal and moral position. If the church or synagogue or Christianity means anything today, the lessons to be learned are lessons of love. Love thy neighbour. Have compassion, understanding, charity and forgiveness. These are the teachings and principles of the church. If we take them away, we have not much left. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Life is not ours to create and it is not ours to take.

Of course, arguments will be raised in favour of reinstatement, setting out, first, that there will be deterrence if the death penalty is there. To me, this is the only justifiable reason. If it can be shown that the death penalty has a deterrent effect then we might justify the return of the death penalty.

The second argument is that the penalty must suit the crime and, third, what about popular opinion which calls for reinstatement? There are other arguments such as the cost factor, but time will not permit me to address every one of these arguments.

First, with respect to deterrence, there are many who really believe that the death penalty has an effective deterrent ability for those who commit the crime of murder wilfully and with forethought, premeditated murder, but to me this is the last group which is likely to be deterred by the death penalty because theirs is the perfect crime and they will not be found out.

The facts are that in most western countries which have abolished the death penalty—and interestingly enough, Canada is included—the rate of murder has dropped or, put in another way, it has not climbed significantly since capital punishment was abolished.

A recent Statistics Canada report indicates that the rate of 2.19 per 100,000 in 1986 is the lowest homicide rate in 15 years, down from the 2.75 rate per 100,000 in 1976. In the United States currently 35 of the States have the death penalty. There are some interesting comparisons. For example,