

Capital Punishment

convicted of crime are given proper punishment and then an opportunity to work their way back into society. At the present time the Canadian people feel there is no attempt at punishment, or that any attempt at punishment is a façade because people who are convicted of crime go to jail, learn more about crime and then are released upon an unsuspecting public.

Concerning the work of the parole board, some time ago a gentleman from my constituency was convicted of manslaughter, I believe. He served part of his sentence and was released on parole. As he went down to get the policeman who had carried out the investigation, he stopped off in another community and killed a person whom he had never met before. It is incidents of that kind, repeated all over Canada, which really lead the Canadian people to a sense of uncertainty as to whether or not we should continue the abolition of capital punishment. In other words, I would suggest that the parole board has caused a great deal of doubt in Canada as to whether or not capital punishment should be abolished.

I have a suggestion for the Solicitor General. The next time paroles are made and the person paroled goes wrong, those people who approved the parole should then go to jail and serve the rest of the sentence without any possibility of parole. That might make them think a little more carefully about what they are doing. Then we might have a system of parole in which the ordinary Canadian citizen could have some confidence. Unfortunately, that does not now exist.

The other problem I want to deal with involves the question of the police and the fear which people have. The police are our front line troops in terms of protecting society. Of all the jobs which we have people do in our society, it is the police who in many ways have the most difficult one. They are the ones who deal with what I think can be classified as the underside of Canadian society. They are the ones who try to keep the peace and protect law abiding citizens with the rules we in this chamber create. They often do not get the support they require and deserve from people in this House and outside.

When the police see the results of their work thrown away by our penal system, thrown away by the parole board or thrown away by the courts, they have cause to be worried. They are the ones on the firing line, the ones who are most in danger of being shot without warning, of being murdered in cold blood. Consequently, while I may not agree with the arguments they have proposed, I do understand fully the emotion which powers their request. This is an emotion which they share with the bulk of the Canadian people and it is an emotion which I believe we in this House ignore at our peril and at the expense of avoiding our proper responsibilities. That fear is there.

One of the tragedies in attempting to deal with the issue of capital punishment is that under our laws there are few people who have committed first degree murder who have come up for trial on a charge of first degree murder, an act that is premeditated and then executed. I have been told that there might be a maximum of 25, and perhaps a minimum of ten per year in these circumstances.

We are not dealing with murders that are committed under great surges of emotion or by accident. We are

[Mr. Reid.]

dealing with a very small number of murders which offend public opinion and frighten the public. These are exactly the kind of murders that do not call for capital punishment. It is those murderers, the public cries, who should have to face capital punishment; yet under the system as it is this does not in fact happen. It is unfortunate that the debate does not involve that central problem, because what the Canadian public has argued for in the sense of capital punishment does not in fact affect 95 per cent of the murders committed in Canada.

The difficulty I have in trying to explain this to my constituents is the gap between the knowledge we have been given and the perception of that knowledge by the people in our constituencies. We have so far not found any way of bridging that gap. It bothers me to be placed in a position of voting on capital punishment when there is such a gap between what the public wants and what the facts are as I perceive them and as a significant number of members here perceive them. The emotion and fear of the Canadian public and the reality of these facts as we understand them, in terms of who has committed murder and who is likely to commit murder, is so wide it almost seems impossible to be bridged.

If the Canadian people want a return to capital punishment, we as legislators have a fearsome responsibility thrust upon us, no matter where we stand on an individual basis or how we feel we should vote according to our conscience. If our constituents and the people of Canada argue strongly that they require capital punishment to protect them, and we in this House deny them by voting for abolition or for another five-year trial period, there is ample evidence to indicate that we are not in fact obeying the obvious declaration of the will of the Canadian people. This is a dilemma which should happen to no man, no party and no government. It is a question, not of whether I obey my conscience or my party but how I, as an individual Member of Parliament, relate to my constituents. I have an obligation to do what I think best with the facts at my disposal. If the facts at our disposal contradict or are in opposition to the way in which our constituents perceive the problem, this then puts the Member of Parliament in a position that is well nigh impossible. I find this to be an extremely difficult position to be in.

• (1620)

I regret that at this time I have not been able to come to any final conclusion as to how I will vote on this particular bill. Quite frankly, I am an abolitionist. From the evidence I have seen, I am convinced that capital punishment does not do the very thing that its proponents argue for it, that is, it does not act as an effective deterrent.

An hon. Member: Would it deter you?

Mr. Reid: I do not think so. If I really wanted to get you, for example, I would go after you. According to all the evidence and statistics that have been developed in this debate, capital punishment does not do what it is claimed to do. Consequently, I cannot accept that I should vote for a bill which may affect somebody else's life in the future on the basis of somebody's feelings.

We want to take our position in this House, particularly on an issue where we have a free vote, on our reading of