

country of this obsession with capital punishment as a panacea for every evil in society. I wish the matter were already well behind us. However, I know the thinking of many of my colleagues on all sides of the House, not just my colleagues in the Progressive Conservative party but colleagues on the government side and in the NDP as well. For them, the issue will not go away until they have been allowed to deal with it in an unfettered manner. Only then will everyone be content to live with the decision, whatever it might be.

Let us, as the motion suggests, refer the matter to the Standing Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs. Let that committee discuss all sides of the question. Let that committee investigate every available piece of evidence. Let us have a short debate in Parliament; a short one, I stress that, based on the committee's consensus. Let us have a free vote on an all-party bill or motion, whatever may be the procedure, and then forever hold our peace.

Since Canada's last hanging in 1962, there have been at least four full-scale debates in Parliament on the question of capital punishment. The Solicitor General (Mr. Kaplan) said there were four. I defer to his good judgment in that respect. There have been dozens of private members' bills. There have been private members' motions, questions in the oral question period day after day, and other motions. To my mind, there will be many more until both Houses of Parliament, the House of Commons and the Senate, finally have the one debate to end all debates on the issue.

I am hopeful that this motion today will give rise to just such a final debate. Surely, with interest rates at 20 per cent, inflation near 13 per cent—12.6 to be exact, I think—with at least one million Canadians unemployed, with the country torn asunder over energy and the Constitution, we could then turn to such urgent matters unencumbered by consideration as to whether capital punishment should be restored. As much as many Canadians would recoil at the prospect of hearing the same old tired and hackneyed arguments reshaped to a crisp, the alternative of allowing the question to simmer indefinitely would doubtless be even more repugnant.

Frankly, in any such free investigation and free vote on the matter of capital punishment, I am confident that reasonable men and women in Parliament will again repudiate the death penalty as a barbarous instrument of public policy for a civilized society like our own.

A few moments ago, the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Clark) said that he was prepared to take his chances with the evidence, with the truth and with the facts. I share that view. I, too, am prepared to take my chances with the facts.

I myself can lay no claim to original arguments for opposing capital punishment other than a deeply-held conviction that it is morally wrong. The taking of human life by the state betrays everything I know to be right and just by the standards of Judeo-Christian civilization.

Is there a shred of evidence that capital punishment has ever deterred or will ever deter a single person, anywhere in Canada, from committing a single crime? In those jurisdic-

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tions where capital punishment has been abolished, including Canada, Belgium, Holland, England and other countries which could be mentioned, there has been no discernible impact whatsoever on the crime rate. Indeed, experts have demonstrated that capital punishment may actually encourage violent crimes by triggering brutal tendencies in some people, including psychopaths in society who may subconsciously desire to be arrested and punished at the hands of the hangman.

In any event, capital punishment can only serve to further brutalize our society, which is already too inured to brutality, partly because of violence in the mass media. If we are genuinely concerned about the prevention of crime, and I think everyone in this House is, let us deal with the root causes of crime. These include poverty, ignorance, economic inequality and social injustice. As a maritimer, I would also stress regional disparity.

Lately, a lot has been said about public opinion polls. Already today a number of speakers have mentioned public opinion sampling with respect to capital punishment. It may well be that two thirds of people questioned do favour the death penalty, at least for some offences. However, I personally doubt that many who express support for capital punishment hold strongly to their views. Some do, but speaking as a political scientist, rather than as a parliamentarian, I suspect that very few hold strongly to the views which they express to public opinion samplers. When asked, in separate polls, to list the issues of major concern to them, most people do not even mention capital punishment, let alone put it at the top of the list.

● (1650)

Whatever may be public opinion on the subject, surely we members of Parliament have an obligation not to delegate to our constituents our duty to employ personal judgment on a moral issue of such basic importance. Edmund Burke's advice is perhaps too often quoted, but it is wise nevertheless and remains relevant to this debate. He said:

Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices to your opinion.

I think we politicians place too much stress on public opinion polls. Certainly the present government stresses them beyond what is reasonable. If we paid as much attention to serving the public as we do to courting their favour, we would likely be more successful on both counts.

Forgive me for concluding on a personal note, Mr. Speaker. My father was a medical doctor who devoted his life to enhancing and often saving the life of others. Although he was a surgeon and a specialist, few people on Prince Edward Island, the province I have the honour and privilege to represent, had not, at one time or another, received his medical attention, frequently following emergency calls to our home in the middle of the night. A marathon nine-hour operation to save the life of one such patient probably provoked the heart attack that killed him nine years ago at the still young age of 63.