

Capital Punishment

Today, we have a motion before us which is not supposed to reinstate capital punishment, but once it is passed, it will be a fact. It is perfectly clear: This House supports, in principle, the reinstatement of capital punishment and—then we come to something I did not mention before, because I find it inappropriate for an abolitionist like myself—directs a special committee to report on the methods to be used to kill and who is going to be killed. Therefore, I cannot talk about the motion, I will only talk about the amendment. I reject the motion, because I feel it is a bad one. That motion does not invite Canadians to reflect on the principle of the death penalty, because that principle will already be adopted, we will have approved it. This is not the way it happened in 1976. Not because it was a Bill then, but because we have here the principle of reinstatement.

Then a committee will tour the country for “three months”, or “six months” if the amendment of the New Democratic Party is passed. I should mention that “six months” have been used to make the amendment acceptable to the Chair, it is a technical necessity.

Why should we have a committee going around the country for consultations on who to kill and how, when we are against the principle of killing?

In 1976, I voted with a full knowledge of the facts, I knew I was voting against capital punishment, because I did not believe in it. We won by six votes, but I think we are going to lose this time, Mr. Speaker. I feel very sad about that, as we are using a procedure here that I believe is absolutely disgraceful.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): Questions and comments are now terminated. Debate.

● (1240)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Ferland (Portneuf): Mr. Speaker, for a junior Member like myself—I was elected to the House of Commons only thirty months ago—taking part in a debate on such a serious issue, the reinstatement of capital punishment in Canada, is quite a challenge. I do not lay claim to the verve or eloquence of many of my colleagues in the House. Nevertheless, I will try to explain to the people, to Canadians listening to us today, why I am an abolitionist, why I do not believe in restoring capital punishment in this country, and why the Government has reopened the debate on this issue.

It is not just because of a promise made during the election campaign. It was a fact that, in general, Canadians were in favour of reinstating capital punishment in Canada, especially if we look at the results of certain polls a few months ago, where 72 to 75 percent were in favour.

Since we started this debate in the House, Mr. Speaker, and now Canadians have heard both sides of the story, the views of

those in favour and the views of those against capital punishment, the same percentage of Canadians who favoured the return of capital punishment is now against capital punishment. The Hon. Member for Swift Current—Maple Creek (Mr. Wilson) said that in his riding, it was about 50-50, and I think that is how things actually stand today.

But why raise the issue again in the House of Commons? I think that in a democratic society like the one we have here in Canada, it is possible to question some of our fundamental principles from time to time. In a democracy like Canada, Mr. Speaker, we can afford to question the fundamental tenets of our society. Another thing that surprised me, Mr. Speaker, is the response of young Canadians who came to see me in my office and who are very concerned about the reinstatement of the death penalty in Canada. We must remember, Mr. Speaker, that Canada is still a young country. Confederation has existed for 120 years. Canadian citizenship only goes back to 40 years. In 1947, we were the first Commonwealth country to have its own citizenship. During five years, since I am 45 years old, I was a British citizen, although I was born in Canada. For the past 40 years, however, Canada always strived to improve the quality of life in this country, and to make its law better.

Mr. John Diefenbaker, who was a great Prime Minister and who took part in a few debates on death penalty, in 1966, was against the ultimate punishment. Why did Mr. John Diefenbaker become an abolitionist? I will quote part of what he said on April 4, 1966: “Some people claim that death penalty acts as a deterrent, but history has not proved it. Who could say that we abandoned that infamous punishment out of weakness? It is rather because juries started to look for reasons to acquit criminals.” And I could draw a parallel between what Mr. John Diefenbaker said in 1966 and the words of Mr. Andrei Sakharov, a distinguished Soviet dissident who said: “I consider death penalty a brutal and immoral institution. A state, through its public servants, takes it upon itself to commit the most terrible and most irreparable act: to take away someone’s life. Such a state cannot expect an improvement in the moral climate of its country. Those very similar statements were made by two men living in two totally different countries, under different political regimes.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, if you look at the judicial system as a whole, and if you look at the responsibility of parliamentarians in this House, they exercise the power of the state and some supporters of the return to death penalty claim that the state has the right to end someone’s life. But you and I, Mr. Speaker, both detain 1/282 of that power. And I tell you that I will never yield that tiny part of power to restore death penalty. Some supporters of capital punishment say that they are obliged to do so in their riding. They are obliged to vote for it and they are afraid they will lose the next election if they do otherwise. This is in no way a valid argument. As for me, and my constituents know it, the people of the riding of Portneuf