

Capital Punishment

I take no pleasure at finding my colleagues on all sides of the House in that difficult position, but that is what we are sent here to do. I suggest to Hon. Members of the House that we owe it to each other to be both passionate and dispassionate in this debate; passionate as the Members who have spoken before me have been in their personal views, and dispassionate as we consider the views of others.

This debate will be a great test. It will touch every Canadian—the innocent and the guilty, the judge and the jury, and the Crown and the defence. We will be judged as much by the way in which we reach the decision as on the decision itself. Let us all push ourselves to the limit to be worthy of the right to make that decision and to do it in as calm and as thoughtful a manner as possible.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Bob Kaplan (York Centre): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the Hon. Member for Simcoe North (Mr. Lewis) with considerable interest. I want to talk about his remarks. His concluding hope was that the type of inquiry implied by the resolution before us would be a dispassionate one, if that is what he is hoping for. I must tell him from my own experience of having debated the subject for a considerable number of times over the years it has been considered and reconsidered by the House that it is a pretty naive hope.

What I visualize and what I would expect this kind of hearing to be, travelling across the country, would be a gathering in each community of people who support capital punishment strongly. Many of them would have victims in their families or might themselves be victims of serious crimes. They would come forward and make their case. The other side, I regret to say, would be for a considerable part no less compassionate and motivated by their own life experiences. It does not mean to regret that; that is just part of human nature. It is part of the human condition to consider a life or death question in very passionate terms.

• (1740)

If the Hon. Member is hoping for a debate free from emotion and free from passion, I have to tell him that he is barking up the wrong tree with this kind of a study. I oppose this resolution. I believe most members of my own Party oppose it. We do not think that this is the time in which the issue of capital punishment should be debated to the extent of animating the passions and feelings of the entire country with a travelling road show of the sort to which this would inevitably give rise.

When the resolution was brought forward on behalf of the Hon. Member in the Standing Committee on Justice and Solicitor General, I was there to vote against it, but opposition Members were not successful in bringing the resolution to a conclusion in the time allocated for its discussion in the committee. That has to make me really wonder what it is the Government has up its sleeve, or if it even knows what it has up its sleeve.

The Hon. Member for Simcoe North set out a list of questions that the capital punishment debate should cover, questions that we should deal with when it is to take place, such as who is to put it into place, whether committees are to be involved in it, what the resolution is to be, what the amendment to the Criminal Code eventually, if it goes that far, is to be. I have to tell the Hon. Member that those are questions the Government should be answering not asking. The Government should not be coming to the House asking us to answer those questions. The Government has made many promises to the Canadian people which have not been kept and, in many cases, phoney excuses have been put forward to justify the breaking of them. For example, "The deficit is higher than we thought; and we cannot keep this promise". I think of the tragic betrayal of the Armenian people of Canada. The Government made one promise during the election campaign and then the Secretary of State for External Affairs (Mr. Clark) had the gall to stand before the Armenian community and say that the Tories did not realize when they made the promise, what was involved in keeping it—another promise the Government made and did not keep. Other promises have been backed away from because vested interests have been too tough for the Government to take on. The Tories made a promise that lobbyists would be required to register, that legislation would be brought in. They made a promise that there would be conflict of interest guidelines enforced on Ministers. They made a promise that there would be tighter security of staff working in Ministers' offices. That promise was broken with some excuse or another. What is the excuse for leaving this matter to the back-benchers? None of them have stood up and said, "We are here on behalf of the promise made by the Government that there would be a debate".

Each Member who is committed to capital punishment or any of them who are committed to capital punishment are trying in their own minds to work out some scenario in which they can get the support from the House of Commons and can say that this will be the implementation of the promise of the Prime Minister of Canada (Mr. Mulroney). Where is the Prime Minister? What is his promise? What is it that the Prime Minister had in mind when he made the promise that there would be a debate on capital punishment and there would be a free vote on capital punishment? No one on the government side is in a position to stand up and say that the Prime Minister wants this study to occur or that the Prime Minister has in mind that if the motion carries it will be dealt with in such and such a way.

What I think is that a desperate Government has come to the conclusion that capital punishment is a grabber, which it is, regrettably, as far as public opinion is concerned, and that if the capital punishment issue can be stirred up and can animate and engage the interests of the country, there will be a lot less concern with the subject that Members on this side of the House have been raising in the Question Period and that our constituents, when we go back home, and Canadians, when we travel across the country, have been telling us are the issues about which they really care.