

Capital Punishment

the quality of our system of Government, and indeed the quality of our democratic life.

This debate borders on the realm of unreality for those who, like myself, had the privilege of being here when Parliament voted to abolish capital punishment in 1976, convinced as we were at the time that, after a long and difficult debate, our country had finished a very significant and historic journey.

• (1200)

[English]

We thought at the time that as parliamentarians and, more fundamentally, as Canadians, we had turned a page of our collective history. We thought that we had clearly signified to the world our deep commitment to human values. We thought that we had signified our commitment to justice and to life in voting for the abolition of the death penalty. We thought that we had expressed in 1976, collectively and individually, our fundamental belief in the primacy of human life, and that in doing so we had joined the family of enlightened peoples.

[Translation]

So we are wondering today how we ever got to the point where again we would want to change everything and move backwards.

Admittedly our country has been witness to sordid crimes in recent years, often involving children. Our television screens at home have often shown scenes of horror and suffering.

The same television has enabled us to see—and feel, to a certain extent—the sufferings of parents who had just lost a child, or the sufferings of a wife who had just lost her policeman husband coldly shot dead while on duty. Undoubtedly such incidents have stirred emotions and raised fear and indignation among many Canadians.

[English]

But that same television has also magnified tenfold the tales of human suffering. It has magnified our horror and indignation by feeding us a steady diet of violent programming. Indeed, every night on prime time, we see murder, robbery, assault, rape and kidnapping. Unfortunately, very often these are American programs.

All of this makes us believe that somehow we have in the last 10 years changed fundamentally as a society and become more violent, more brutal than we were when we had the death penalty. I think this is not the real fact. Rather than numbing us to the real violence, it makes us feel weak and defenceless and leads us to believe that our penal system is faulty, that we need to protect ourselves because the state no longer can protect us from a violence which is nevertheless more often perceived than real. We began to advocate capital punishment, and as things went on some Conservative Members of Parliament decided to press on, and here now we have the Government presenting a motion to reinstate capital punishment. I think this is a very sad situation.

[Translation]

I am very sincere when I suggest that the quality of our judicial system will not be enhanced if we vote to restore capital punishment. Nor will it be an accomplishment for those who advocate the repeal of the existing statute in favour of the reinstatement of the death penalty. A man like Clifford Olson will be the real winner because he will thus bring us down to his own lowly common denominator. As I see it, such a move would make our society less humane from the outset, and we will certainly be less tolerant, less avid of freedom.

In conclusion, I should like to quote from a statement released by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops entitled “The Escalation of Violence”, which I recommend to all my colleagues:

A society which so respects the right to life that it cannot resort to capital punishment to protect itself creates an atmosphere which commands respect for other human rights. The death penalty is acceptable only in a society which is not well organized enough to find another way to defend itself against elements which would threaten the lives of its citizens, and such is not the case in Canada. Violence begets violence, and capital punishment is a violent measure. Today still, ten years after capital punishment was abolished, we harbour the same conviction: a society which respects the sacred and intangible character of human life and which gives top priority to human rights definitely promotes its own social progress, even though this may seem to be a slow and not immediately apparent process, besides contributing to the development of mankind. This conviction, confirmed in the message of Jean-Paul II when he visited our country, is based on the evangelical project where guilty mankind is reconciled with God thanks to the pardon of Jesus. Innocent, but convicted and sentenced to death, Jesus himself advocates total forgiveness: “Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing.”

I think we can admit that a society such as ours has the right to punish a criminal, the right to inflict a sanction which is proportional to the crime, but I maintain that killing a man to punish him is tantamount to vengeance, and nothing else.

In this respect, Mr. Speaker, I should like to quote former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau:

As members of society, do we have so little respect for ourselves, so little hope of bettering human condition, are we so near social bankruptcy that we accept the principle of State vengeance as the cornerstone of our penal philosophy?

Finally, I would ask all Members in this House, whether you support or oppose reinstating capital punishment, to vote according to your conscience. Discuss this with your constituents, of course, discuss it also with your families, but by all means do not vote because a majority of voters in your constituency want capital punishment back, and want society to be brought back to a state of barbarity. On the contrary, vote according to your conscience, and above all vote in a manner where liberty will prevail, rather than vengeance.

• (1210)

[English]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Questions and comments.

Mr. Domm: Mr. Speaker, I have two short observations to make and a question to ask of the Hon. Member.