

Capital Punishment

my mind, that reflects very well indeed the reasons and motivations of the new French government.

On the other hand, Mr. Speaker, I would remind the House that when an attempt was made on the life of His Holiness Pope John Paul II, he certainly did not call for either the death penalty or severe punishment against his assailant. Instead, he asked forgiveness for the culprit in whom he saw a poor, unfortunate and despondent creature who could not possibly have been very happy.

Mr. Speaker, the same can be said of President Reagan who was also the victim of an attempt on his life. Had it succeeded, it would have meant that a president of the United States had been murdered once again. I believe President Reagan's first reaction was one of sympathy for the family of his assailant, the parents of the young man who, to put it briefly, committed a senseless act.

The abolition of capital punishment is actively sought by the United Nations. In that regard, Mr. Speaker, may I say that, last September, I took part in the international conference on the treatment of prisoners, held in Caracas, and this subject was fully discussed at that time. Most Western countries agree that the death penalty should be abolished, but I must say that, internationally, some countries have not yet reached that stage of social maturity where they can face the question of collective violence versus individual violence. Capital punishment was abolished in Great Britain in 1969. In Italy, recent legislation passed to repress terrorist activity does not, however, go so far as to impose the death penalty. Finally, I trust that through the United Nations social development committee, we can do away with the death penalty worldwide.

Even though, according to the official report, the Leader of the Opposition is in favour of the abolition of capital punishment, he said recently that if he were elected leader of the next government, he would let members introduce a bill on hanging. Not only would the Leader of the Opposition not follow the example of the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) who launched the debate by introducing a government bill and making sure that he had the support of all his ministers on the matter, but he would also proceed by a roundabout way and let one of his members carry on the fight. We can only question the new style of leadership the Leader of the Opposition intends to adopt, even though he claims it is a new form of leadership. It is especially hard for us not to believe that the Leader of the Opposition takes that approach because he is afraid of not being able to get the support of his cabinet, if he had one, to introduce such a bill.

Consequently, Mr. Speaker, I think it is completely useless and inappropriate to discuss this matter, since the Committee on Justice and Legal Affairs, as indicated by the Solicitor General of Canada (Mr. Kaplan), has many other pieces of legislation and important bills to deal with, such as the access to information bill and the Young Offenders Act, instead of

considering a bill which does not require any study in the short term.

● (1640)

[English]

Mr. Tom McMillan (Hillsborough): Mr. Speaker, I rise to participate in this debate as a convinced and unrepentant opponent of capital punishment. Five years ago, after a lengthy debate, the Parliament of Canada voted to abolish capital punishment from the Criminal Code. During the debate at that time Gordon Fairweather, who is now Chairman of the Canadian Human Rights Commission and who sat then as the hon. member for Fundy-Royal, in a truly eloquent speech in the House of Commons, stated:

I want capital punishment removed from the national agenda. I believe that for far too long it has absorbed the mind, the heart and the spirit of this place.

Mr. Fairweather went on to say:

The discussion has gone on endlessly. Surely it is time for Canada to take its place among the civilized nations of the world which possess certain intrinsic values which tell us that the time has come to abolish capital punishment.

Canada did abolish capital punishment in 1976, a half decade ago. But, despite Mr. Fairweather's plea, the issue has not been removed from the national agenda. Nor, in my mind, will the issue be put to rest until a majority of members of Parliament on all sides of the House and most Canadians are satisfied that Parliament has disposed of the question, not only with thoroughness, but also with total freedom from the shackles of party discipline.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McMillan: Members of Parliament were not free to vote as they wanted when capital punishment was finally abolished in Canada in 1976 following a partial ban on a trial basis in 1967 and, I think, 1973. In 1976, the government of the day, a predecessor government to this one, insisted that all members of Parliament were at liberty to follow their consciences in voting on its abolition legislation, Bill C-84. But in a manner as dishonest as it was hypocritical, the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) used the full force of his office to whip into line dissenters in his own party, including ministers of the Crown.

Some hon. Members: Shame!

Mr. McMillan: Can any reasonable person in this House or in the country believe that in a 32-member cabinet there was not a single retentionist? Certainly there were. In fact, there were several. I knew one or two personally. Yet they were browbeaten into submission by a prime minister hell-bent on getting his own way; and the bill passed with only six votes to spare. Is it, then, any wonder that many members of Parliament and many other Canadians still question the legitimacy of the process which led to the abolition of capital punishment, and therefore, the law itself?

Speaking as an abolitionist and as a Canadian who strongly believes that the subject has long occupied too high a place on the national agenda, I think we must rid Parliament and the