

Government Orders

[English]

Several weeks ago one of my constituents, a doctor, wrote to me about this issue. The doctor in this instance is not pro-choice, but as a result of his medical practice in my home town of Orillia he has come to see the necessity of regulating access to abortion. This constituent in a letter to me and also in person relayed the experience he had as a young medical practitioner working in the emergency department of a Toronto hospital before the enactment of section 251. A young woman was brought in, and as it turned out she soon died, as a result of an unlawful abortion which was poorly done. That tragic story, which was a story that took place all over Canada, must not be repeated.

It is our responsibility as a government, it is our responsibility as a Parliament to ensure in so far as possible that abortion legislation reflects social needs and at the same time respects the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. I believe that this bill achieves those objectives. I also believe that the matter of entitlement to abortion is one which must be determined by Parliament and not by the courts. It is up to us to try to resolve this issue. That is why the government has introduced this bill.

Abortion is an intensely personal issue. It is one that is not readily susceptible to compromise, much less consensus. Nevertheless, Canadians must appreciate that there are strong differences of opinion among individuals and when those differences of opinion occur it is up to the law to balance the diverging views. That is what we have sought to do.

We are not asking Canadians to change their view as to what they think is right. We are asking Canadians to respect the views of others and to respect this new law.

In approaching this sensitive and difficult issue the government took into account all the views of the Canadian people and balanced those views in a reasonable and workable way. We would not support any amendments that did not take a similar approach and respect the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. We cannot turn back the clock to a time when women's lives were threatened because they could not attain a legal abortion. The law must determine entitlement to abortion. At the same time we must ensure that a mechanism

exists to support society's interest in protecting the foetus as well as the rights of women.

We believe that the legislation we have introduced protects these vital interests in a way that will be acceptable to the majority of Canadians. That is our objective.

[Translation]

Hon. Bob Kaplan (York Centre): Mr. Speaker, we are now at the second reading stage of this Bill, and normally, this is a time when Members speak out in favour of or against the principle of a bill. When the Minister introduced the Bill today, he mentioned studies, consultations and other work that had been done on the government side to prepare for this moment. We on this side have had only three days since legislation was tabled in the House proposing a solution that was unexpected, to say the least, to the abortion problem. I trust the House will realize that we on this side still have to consult our caucus and that we have not yet had our national caucus. Nevertheless, I am prepared to give a preliminary response to the legislation and the system proposed by the government to deal with the abortion issue.

[English]

I certainly agree with the minister that there are few issues that are as serious, that touch as many Canadians as profoundly. Some people may compare this debate in its intensity to the debate on capital punishment, but capital punishment is something very remote from the lives of all Canadians.

Abortion, pregnancy, its termination, the considerations that bear on it are immediate and, if anything, the abortion debate has the additional intensity that comes with its relevance to every family and relevance to every person in our society.

For members of Parliament it is more intense because we literally walk through the debate as we come to Parliament Hill every day, pressed as we are in the streets and in the park in front of Parliament Hill by strongly held views from lobbyists, pro and con, who besiege us as we reach our office where we are inundated with mail and telephone calls and invitations to meetings dealing with two strongly held alternatives on how the problem of abortion should be addressed.