

Capital Punishment

retaliation in Canada to try and solve a problem the solution of which we have not yet found.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that in view of that, all of us in this House should be working much harder at crime prevention.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): The Hon. Member for Bourassa (Mr. Rossi) for a short supplementary.

Mr. Rossi: Mr. Speaker, it is not a question, but rather a brief comment I would like to make, since I have an opportunity.

As I said earlier, Mr. Speaker, I was certainly in support, I repeat in support of capital punishment, and after a very serious self-examination, I am now against capital punishment.

I commend the Hon. Member for Portneuf for voting the way his conscience tells him.

In a last submission, I would like to urge Hon. Members, the 282 Members in this House to stop wondering about surveys. Let us make a self-examination and put surveys aside. Surveys will not provide us with a reason to kill human beings through capital punishment.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Paproski): Order, please. The period for questions and comments is over. Debate. The Hon. Member for Essex—Windsor (Mr. Langdon).

• (1540)

[*English*]

Mr. Steven W. Langdon (Essex—Windsor): Mr. Speaker, perhaps the greatest philosopher of our age said, "After the first death, there is no other". I think that captures the sense of significance, the sense of importance, the sense of very grave responsibility which faces the Members of this House of Commons as they face the question of whether to turn back the clock, of whether to change pace on the forward progress made by our civilized society and establish once more the death penalty.

I think that on many grounds, on grounds that could take us from statistics to the grounds of morality discussed by our churches similar to the excellent presentation by the previous speaker concerning alternatives to the death penalty, we can make our arguments. We can make our presentations, but fundamentally when it comes right down to it, I think what faces us and what faces this House of Commons is a question of whether we are committed to trying to place before the country our view of the sanctity of human life and that we as a Parliament, as a judicial system, should not have the right to be able to take the life of a human being. That, for me, is at the heart of what this debate is all about, Mr. Speaker.

I want to go through some of the statistics, some of the arguments and some of the alternatives, but I want to stress at the start that what motivates me as I think of my children, as I think of a society which their children and their children will ultimately inherit, is that we must look to build, as one of the

great historians of Canada said, the peaceful kingdom in this country. We cannot do that if we take this step to start, through the state, systematically killing individuals.

There are realities which face us. These realities are the homicide rates which exist in Canada. In 1975, the last year before capital punishment was eliminated in Canada, there were 3.09 homicides per hundred thousand population. Our latest statistics show that under abolition, the rate of homicide has actually shrunk in 1985 to 2.78. That is one reality.

• (1550)

Another reality we must face is what lies south of us. We do not live in a country that is insulated from what takes place in the rest of the world. We can look at what exists elsewhere in the world, we can learn lessons from that and we can make wiser choices on the basis of those lessons.

There are 18 states in the United States in which the death penalty does not exist. Figures for 1983 show 5.91 homicides per hundred thousand population in those states. If we compare that with those states which have the death penalty, we find that the figure is 7.66 per hundred thousand population. In other words, those states with the death penalty have a higher rate of homicide. That is a reality.

Perhaps the reality which is strongest and most powerful, the reality which we as Members of Parliament must face, is the fact that if the death penalty had been in effect in Canada since 1976, the chances are great that people would have been executed by mistake. There can surely be nothing more devastating to the humanity and civilization of a society than to wrongly execute people, for crimes they did not commit.

In February of 1977, Kenneth Roberts was convicted of murder. Just three years later, a new trial was ordered and Roberts was acquitted. Derek Cole was convicted of first-degree murder in 1978. In 1981, after a new trial, Cole was acquitted.

In 1985, John Wildman was found not guilty of murder by the Ontario Supreme Court but had been in prison for seven years for a crime he had not committed. Donald Marshall, a native Indian from Nova Scotia, had served 11 years in prison after being convicted of murder. He too was found to be innocent.

I point out to Hon. Members what they will have received from the Assembly of First Nations which has written to each of us to make the case against capital punishment. The Assembly has said that there is evidence as it sees it that First Nations citizens have been and are being punished by the Canadian state in disproportionate numbers and could be in disproportionate numbers the victims of a restored death penalty.

Canada is a relatively peaceful country, but there have been such cases outside this country. Antonio Rivera and Merla Walpole of San Bernadino, California, were convicted of murdering their two-year-old daughter. Nearly two years after