

Bill Rea ? Is death penalty obsolete?

According a story which appeared in the Toronto Star about a week ago, it seems the death penalty is losing its appeal in the United States.

Good news, if you asked me.

In Canada, it's been more than 50 years since we executed any criminals, and it's been more than 40 years since we sentenced a person to be hanged. And it was 30 years this coming summer that the issue was seriously debated in the House of Commons, with MPs deciding to keep the Hangman idle. I also remember the mid-90s, when there were lots of people carrying banners of the Reform Party of Canada calling for a free vote in Parliament. A couple of proponents I talked to tried to sell me on the idea that the 1987 vote had somehow been tainted. I didn't buy it.

There was a time when people were all gung-ho to have the worst criminals among us put to death. There were plenty of calls for it when Paul Bernardo was dominating front pages around the country. And when we have particularly nasty murders dominating the news, people will get angry and demand those responsible pay with their lives.

Think back about 23 years ago, when a young lady was shot to death at an establishment called Just Desserts in Toronto. A couple of days after this tragic incident, I received a phone call from a very angry reader, demanding I write an editorial calling for the death penalty for murderers, as well as for the lawyers who try to get them off. I remember declining the request, and I think I was able to calm the fellow down. I also think he appreciated the fact that I let him vent for a couple of minutes.

You don't hear many calls to have capital punishment restored these days. The whole idea has sort of fallen off the table. I think most of us appreciate that the very worst offenders are out of our midst for a very long time, if not for good. The likes of Bernard, Russell Williams and Michael Rafferty are going to spend the next many years locked up, and will probably die in that situation. During federal election campaigns, I have always made it a pointed to ask candidates their views on particular issues, and capital punishment was one of the ones I asked about. I stopped doing that because I was frankly getting tired of the monotonous responses I was getting. None of the candidates were in favour of the reinstitution of executions. I was covering three ridings in the 2008 federal campaign, and one out of roughly 15 candidates was in favour of the death penalty. Somewhat to my astonishment, that person was a New Democrat.

That people would have had a change of heart over something like this is really not too surprising. If it can happen to me, it can happen to anyone. I used to be in favour to capital punishment. Today, I am vehemently opposed to it.

One of the arguments I have offered over the years is it's not really much a deterrent to murder. One of the facts used to bear that out is that the United States, with the death penalty, has much higher murder rate than Canada, which does not. Granted, the explanations for that would certainly involve a number of other factors, but the argument is still there and worthy of consideration. But if Canadians can lose interest in executing criminals, is it also not possible for the something to happen south of the border?

?Capital punishment in the United States is slowly and steadily declining,? stated the story in the Star, written by Mark Berman of the Washington Post, ?a fact most visible in the plummeting number of death penalties carried out each year.?

The story also made reference to an apparent shift in public opinion. It cited one poll that stated support for the death penalty was less than 50 per cent for the first time in almost half a century. It stated other polls showed somewhat higher numbers of supporters, but the figures are still generally in decline.

The story presented lots of numbers, although it was rather light when it came to explaining them.

Indeed, considering the conservative and populist mood in the States these days, which I think was highlighted by the fact that Donald Trump is currently president down there, I might have been expecting more support for executions, not less.

There were suggestions that the length of time some criminals spend on Death Row might have something to do with it, and some of the stays have been pretty lengthy.

The story stated that in 2008, the average stay was 8.6 years. By 2013, the number had risen to 14.6 years. To get more into specifics, how long has Charles Ng been on Death Row? Since 1999, and I'm hard pressed to think of a guy who deserves to be there more, despite my views on capital punishment.

Is it possible that we're seeing a trend that has already been in evidence in Canada for many years? Although executions have been frequent in the States for many decades, I don't think there has ever been universal support for them. There have always been opponents, and the trend seems to be that more people are adopting that way of thinking.

One of the major, and I believe unanswerable, arguments against capital punishment is the possibility of executing innocent people, and it can happen. The Star story made the point that in 2015, five people under sentence of death were exonerated. That means five erroneous death sentences were caught in time. How many were not caught in time?

I do believe the worst criminals among us should locked up, for the rest of their days, if necessary. Putting them to death, however, is not the answer, and it looks like many Americans are getting the idea. Killing these people just lowers the rest of us to their level, and we can find better role models.

