

Capital punishment: facts or beliefs?

People believe all sorts of things.

Some people, for example, believe that AIDS is their God's way of getting even with those whose lifestyles differ from their own. Some believe that the devil visits them, or that the earth is flat, or that Hong Kong is the capital of Japan.

Not all of our beliefs are true, of course, and to make good decisions about social policy we need to know which beliefs are true and which are false.

Many people, when asked to rank occupations by the order of the most danger, place police officers at the top of the list. But, when we look at the facts we discover that fishermen have roughly 10 times more chance of being killed while at work than do police officers. Foresters have a job related fatality rate much higher than police. Transportation workers also have a much higher fatality rate on the job.

Many citizens believe that murder is on the rise at a dramatic rate, and that the criminals are winning in the battle of the streets. Some believe that the real world is like the television world of Miami Vice or Crime Story.

But, again, the facts do not bear out these beliefs.

The number of homicides per 100,000 has not changed significantly over the past 40 years in Canada. Our abolition of the death penalty has not led to an increase in murder as shown by the recent study of capital punishment by the Solicitor General of Canada. (This study, by the way, is available at the Malaspina College Library in the government publications department).

Most murders are committed by hit men or psychos who randomly seek out victims, right?

Well, again, this also is a false belief, for 77 per cent of all murder victims know their murderer. Many are related, by blood or marriage. The real world differs in many significant ways from the fictional world of television and movies.

My point is this: before we decide on contemporary moral issues we have an obligation as citizens and as rational agents to find out the facts. We must act on knowledge not on mere belief. We must find out all we can before we make hasty judgments based upon false beliefs and old

myths. To make a wise decision about a subject as emotional as capital punishment we need to pay careful attention to the facts and to the arguments used by both sides. We need rational assessment of the issue and not mere expression of feeling. The supposed "polls" taken by the politicians in the form of "Householders" must be evaluated as to the accuracy of findings, and as to the kind of questions they ask.

There is a significant difference between an emotional response and a rational argument, and although we have all experienced the former not all of us have experienced the latter.

We must make a wise decision about capital punishment and to do so we need to read, and study and think, not merely emote.

Over the next two days I will be reviewing for you some of the basic arguments set forth in favour of capital punishment.

I want to tell you from that start that I find all of these arguments faulty, and that I believe you also will conclude that, based upon an analysis of fact and an assessment of the arguments, the only rational decision for Canadians is the abolitionist position.

— Part Two will be published tomorrow.

Special series by Bob Lane

Bob Lane, Coordinator of Philosophy at Malaspina College, has written a special series of three essays, on the capital punishment issue.

The views expressed by Mr. Lane are his own, and The Daily Free Press is publishing them in the interests of generating debate on the topic.

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, in keeping with a 1984 election promise, has announced a parliamentary debate and subsequent free vote by MPs. The process is scheduled to start later this year, though the date for the actual House of Commons vote is, at this point, anyone's guess.

The Daily Free Press invites readers to submit their views on the issue, whether they agree or disagree with Mr. Lane's views.

Letters on the issue must conform to this paper's standing policy on all letters — name and address of the writer must be provided and will be published. A daytime phone number must also be provided, so that the letter can be authenticated (phone number will, of course, NOT be published).