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Should the death penalty be restored in the UK?

The restoration of the death penalty for serious crimes is an issue of debate in the UK because of the recent rise in violent crime. The causes, effects and solutions to the problems of violent crime throw up a number of complex issues which are further complicated by the way that crime is reported. Newspapers often sensationalise crime in order to increase circulation and this makes objective discussion more difficult. This essay will examine this topic firstly by considering the arguments put forward by those in favour of the death penalty and then by looking at the arguments opposed to the idea.

The main arguments in favour of restoring the death penalty are those of deterrence and retribution: the theory is that people will be dissuaded from violent crime if they know they will face the ultimate punishment and that people should face the same treatment that they gave out to others. Statistics show that when the death penalty was temporarily withdrawn in Britain between 1965 and 1969 the murder rate increased by 125% (Clark, 2005). However, we need to consider the possibility that other reasons might have led to this rise. Amnesty International (1996) claims that it is impossible to prove that capital punishment is a greater deterrent than being given a life sentence in prison and that “evidence....gives no support to the evidence hypothesis theory.” It seems at best that the deterrence theory is yet to be proven.

The concept of ‘retribution’ is an interesting one: there is a basic appeal in the simple phrase ‘the punishment should fit the crime’. Calder (2003) neatly summarises this argument when he says that killers give up their rights when they kill and that if

punishments are too lenient then it shows that we undervalue the right to live. There are other points too in support of the death penalty, one of these being cost. It is obviously far cheaper to execute prisoners promptly rather than feed and house them for years on end. The arguments against the death penalty are mainly ethical in their nature, that it is basically wrong to kill and that when the state kills it sends out the wrong message to the rest of the country. Webber (2005) claims that the death penalty makes people believe that 'killing people is morally permissible'. This is an interesting argument – would you teach children not to hit by hitting them?

Wouldn't this instead show them that hitting was indeed 'permissible'? There is also the fact that you might execute innocent people. Innocent people can always be released from prison, but they can never be brought back from the dead. When people have been killed there is no chance of rehabilitation or criminals trying to make up for crimes. For this reason capital punishment has been called 'the bluntest of blunt instruments' (Clark, 2005). In conclusion, the arguments put forward by people who support or are against the death penalty often reflect their deeper principles and beliefs.

These beliefs and principles are deeply rooted in life experiences and the way people are brought up and are unlikely to be swayed by clever arguments. It is interesting that in this country most people are in favour of the death penalty yet parliament continues to oppose it. In this case it could be argued that parliament is leading the way in upholding human rights and continues to broadcast the clear message that killing is always wrong.