

**Introduction to Death Penalty Forum, February 26, 2001, University  
College of the Fraser Valley, 7:00 p.m.**

Good evening, and welcome to the Death Penalty Forum.

My name is Wayne Northey. I am on the planning committee of the Fraser Valley Arts & Peace Festival, and will serve as moderator for tonight's discussion.

Lest I forget:

- ❖ Washrooms are outside, to the right, and again to the left
- ❖ There is a brief bibliography available on the table outside the auditorium
- ❖ At the end of the evening, panellists are willing to linger behind and dialogue for a while

On February 15 of this month, as most know, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that "The Canadian government cannot send accused killers to the United States to face the death penalty except in 'exceptional cases'." to quote the *Vancouver Sun* front page article, February 16.

Suddenly, the issue of the death penalty was thrust once again into national prominence by this decision. As many know, the last time the death penalty was in Canada's national spotlight was 1987, when a free vote in the House of Commons prevented its return by a margin of 148 to 127.

The *Sun* article indicated surprise at the strength of the court's arguments against capital punishment. It said: "Indeed, the court's ruling often read like a stirring speech against the death penalty.

" 'It is final. It is irreversible. Its imposition has been described as arbitrary. Its deterrent value has been doubted', the court wrote."

Nonetheless, according to the *Sun*, from a recent public-opinion poll, "48 per cent of Canadians support the death penalty, 47 per cent are opposed and six per cent don't know." (The math doesn't quite add up....) The article adds in parenthesis: "However, 61 per cent were in favour in B.C."

In 1986, I participated in a four-person forum on the death penalty in this very institution (then called Fraser Valley College) at the invitation of the Criminology Department. I was to give a "Christian" view on the issue. At the end of the four presentations, I was chastised severely with what could only be called "Christian expletives" by a fellow believer. I was so embarrassed by his rancorous personal attack, that I suggested to the moderator it would be best for him and me to talk privately afterwards. When I went looking for him, he had disappeared. So much for charitable dialogue!

Capital punishment stirs the emotions like few others in the public square. One other issue, abortion, does similarly.

In March, 1997, I took part in a dialogue on capital punishment in Fairbanks, Alaska, at an event called “The Talking Place: A Forum on the Death Penalty”. Alaska is one of a minority of abolitionist states. By drawing on the local native tradition of establishing a “talking place”, we were urged in the introduction to approach the conversation as “**a way to discuss current, controversial issues in an intelligent and civil way so [we] are better prepared to make an informed decision.**”

Tonight we are privileged to hear from four persons and perspectives on the death penalty. The dialogue is part of the *Arts & Peace Festival*, which features an outstanding line-up of events for the rest of this week. Information about the *Festival* is available at the back. Another event of possible interest is the Thursday evening Restorative Justice workshop in this college at 7:00 p.m.

The procedure this evening is simple: I will introduce each person before he or she speaks. When we have heard from all four, there will be an opportunity for all panellists briefly to interact with any of the others. Then, the floor will be opened to questions and comments. I expect the formal part of the evening to be over by approximately 9:15 p.m.

Please be patient in taking your turn. I reserve the right to limit your floor time in the interests of permitting all to have a chance to share. And please remember the Alaskan native “talking place” tradition. Tonight is a forum “**to discuss current, controversial issues in an intelligent and civil way so [we] are better prepared to make an informed decision.**”

A Catholic theologian writes: “**Despite our nods to participatory democracy, we detest dialogue. We hate debate and discernment and decision making together. But this, I insist, is where God’s project for the world is given expression: in the messy conversation between many voices, in the genuine give and take of multiple perspectives and plans and projects, in the listening and discerning and obedience of faith, in reciprocity and exchange** (Luke T. Johnson, *Faith’s Freedom: A Classic Spirituality for Contemporary Christians*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 128).”

So let the “messiness” begin!

Gertie Pool...

Glenn Flett...

John Redekop...

Rosalie Turcotte...

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Reminder:

- ❖ There is a brief bibliography available on the table outside the auditorium
- ❖ At the end of the evening, panellists are willing to linger behind and dialogue for a while
- ❖ THANK YOU!