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Voice of County Town

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We need to revise and improve our system of justice

Bringing back the gallows only part of the answer

Police officers of all ranks and other law enforcement officials as well as leading politicians have been calling for the re-instatement of capital punishment for the past two weeks in response to the murders of two Ontario police officers - both killed in the line of duty.

Over the course of the last few weeks the danger faced by members of our police forces has been driven home not only by the murder of the two constables but by the near fatal shooting of two more officers in an Ottawa suburb.

Here in Durham Region, our police chief, Jon M. Jenkins (past president of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police) and the chairman of the Durham Regional Police Commission, Mayor Bob Attersley have both advocated the return of the gallows.

This newspaper is divided on this issue. We recognize that something more must be done to protect the men who put on the uniform to protect our community. The hoodlums that wander our streets are not worth the life of one police officer.

While the police arguements for the return of capital punishment are easily justified, this newspaper does not believe that it alone will be a deterent to crime on the streets.

What is needed is a complete re-think of our system of criminal justice. As a society we have to start making some drastic changes to the way we treat convicted felons.

Perhaps what is needed more than capital punishment is the outlawing of "mandatory supervision". Under this program, a convict will be released from prison after serving two-thirds of his sentence subject, of course, to good behaviour.

According to many statistical sources, many crimes are committed by people recently released from prison or on mandatory supervision. A sentence of the court should be strictly enforced.

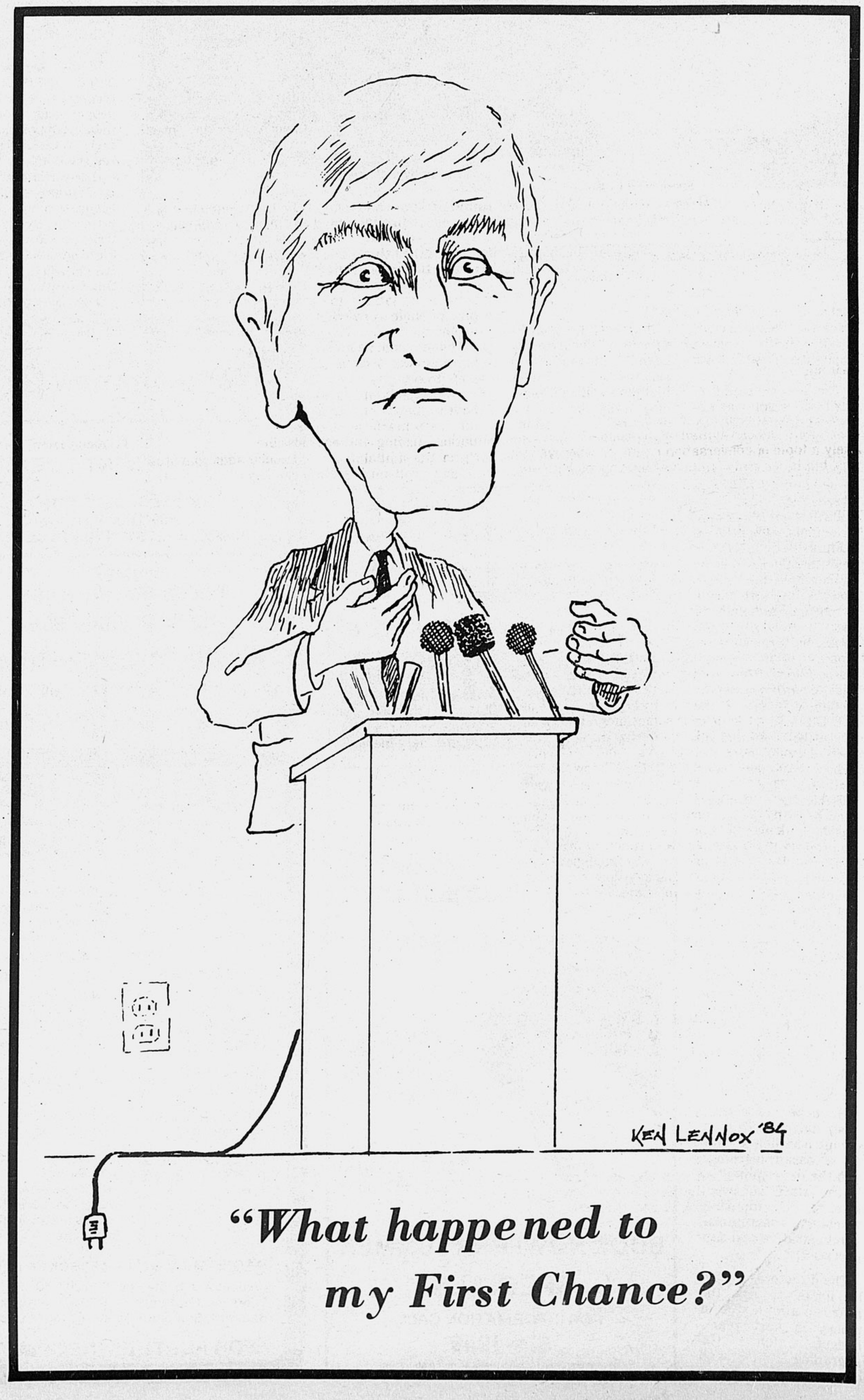
Perhaps then, these people will know we mean business.

Our justice system is also too quick to place offenders on a probation program rather than send them to jail. Perhaps this system, too, is in need of revision.

We also need to place the emphasis on the rights of the victims of crimes without endangering the civil and constitutional rights of the accused. (Under no circumstances should we abandon the concept of innocent until proven quilty.) Law abiding citizens have the right to expect that their tax money will be used to protect them from that element in our society that will victimize them for their own gain.

The other method of dealing with this situation is education. We must instill in our children a respect for law and order and for the rights of their neighbours to live quiet, decent lives unhampered by the criminal element. They must be taught the difference between what we as a society deems to be right and wrong. Youthful offenders cannot be allowed to become adult offenders and the only way to do that is education and appropriate punishment.

The new Parliament that was elected yesterday has a moral obligation to deal immediately with this issue. While capital punishment was an issue during the campaign, it was treated emotionally and did not take into consideration the entire criminal justice system. Whoever becomes Minister of Justice in the new government has a pressing and urgent task before him. It is not enough that changes be made to the Criminal Code of Canada, the money and resources must be found to deal with an ever increasing problem.

The return of the gallows is, in itself, not enough. While it may be a deterrent to some, it will not be a deterrent to all even though we are not too such sure that capital punishment should be used as a deterrent. Capital punishment, if it is to be used, should be used in precisely that manner - as a punishment.

But what is needed more than anything else is a complete overhaul of our system of justice which must be coupled with a determined effort to find the resources necessary to better equip and man our law enforcement agencies.