World Day Against the Death Penalty

By Philip Ruddock

Fifty years ago, Australia carried out its last execution. Ronald Ryan had been serving time in prison for robbery when he escaped in December 1965. During the escape, a gun was fired, and the shot killed a prison warden. After 17 days on the run, Ryan was captured, charged with murder, convicted and sentenced to death. He was hung on 3 February 1967.

Ryan’s execution sparked nationwide protests. Over the following decades, Australian states and territories removed the death penalty from their criminal justice systems. In 2010, the Federal Government passed a law that prevents the death penalty from being reintroduced in Australia.

Australia’s rejection of the death penalty is part of a global trend. Today, roughly two‑thirds of all countries have abolished the death penalty in law and practice. Unfortunately, many states continue to carry out executions.

In many ways, Ryan’s case typifies what is so wrong with capital punishment.

Firstly, no judicial system is free from error, and there is always an unacceptable risk that an innocent person will be executed. In Ryan’s case, there is some doubt that he fired the shot that killed the prison warden.

Since 1973, when the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in the United States, over 150 people on death row have been exonerated. While many of these people were cleared based on DNA evidence, most were victims of miscarriages of justice – a simple but all too common failing of even the most advanced legal systems.

Secondly, the death penalty is used disproportionately against those from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds. Ryan was of the working class – his father was a miner, his mother a domestic servant. Many on death row do not have the financial capacity to access adequate legal representation.

Lastly, the death penalty – and the lives of those awaiting execution – are too often a tool of politics. The death penalty remains a popular way for governments to show their societies that they are strong on law and order. It takes brave, inspired leadership to abolish the death penalty, especially when public opinion polls show support for capital punishment. The journey to abolition is sometimes long and difficult, but every step is welcome.

There are other reasons the death penalty is abhorrent – it does not deter crime, it is objectively cruel and inhumane, it denies an offender the possibility of rehabilitation.

Australia uses all these reasons to advocate for global abolition of the death penalty. It is not always an easy discussion to have, but it is an important one.

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*10 October is World Day Against the Death Penalty.*