

Historical views on the abolition of the death penalty can help to put the latest Sun campaign in context

The always contentious issue of the death penalty has re-emerged recently. Paul Staines (who writes the Guido Fawkes blog) has launched a campaign, which is backed by The Sun, to use the Government's new e-petition scheme to initiate a Parliamentary debate on the reintroduction of capital punishment for the murderers of children and police officers. The campaign is supported by the Conservative MPs Philip Davies, Priti Patel and Andrew Turner. [Lizzie Seal](#) looks at how public opinion has changed towards capital punishment over the last fifty years to help put this in context.

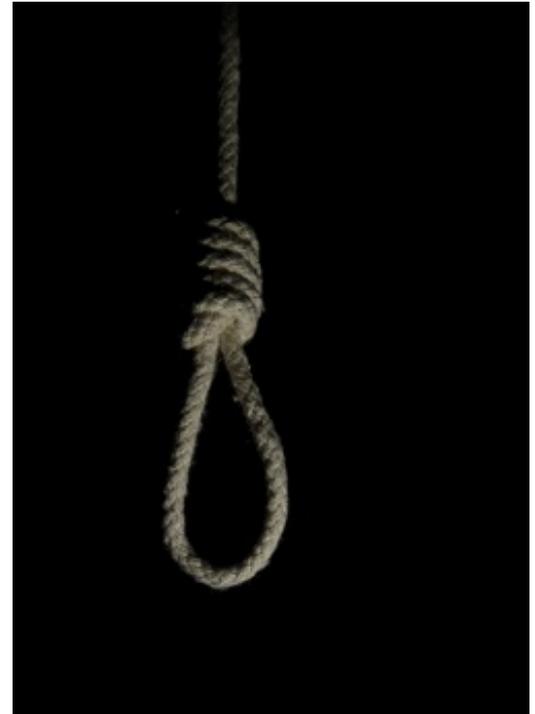


Execution as a punishment for murder in Britain was suspended following the Death Penalty Abolition Act 1965, and was abolished in 1969. The last executions were carried out in 1964. Before this, use of the death penalty had been restricted by the Homicide Act 1957, which introduced a distinction between capital and non-capital murders. Since its abolition, the issue of capital punishment has regularly re-emerged in relation to discussion of public opinion and democracy. As [Alex Massie states in his blog on The Spectator's](#) website: 'polls consistently suggest a majority of voters would like to bring back hanging'.

Credit: Chris Jones (Creative Commons)

Calls for the reintroduction of capital punishment can therefore be framed as demands for a political system that is more responsive to the views of the wider public than to the niceties of a liberal, metropolitan elite. This is the type of claim being made by Paul Staines and The Sun, which ran its story on the e-petition under the headline '[We'll force MP vote on noose](#)'. Writing in the Daily Mail, the Commons leader, [Sir George Young](#), argues that Parliament is becoming 'more responsive to the public' and that 'it does not serve democracy well' to ignore people's strong views.

This framing of the potential Parliamentary debate on the death penalty as an example of democracy in action underscores something enduringly significant about capital punishment: its highly symbolic nature. In the current example, the campaign to reinstate the death penalty symbolises people power and the need for politicians to listen to and act on voters' opinions. In 2008, The [Sun polled its readers](#) on whether they supported the reintroduction of hanging, receiving a 'verdict' of 99 per cent in favour. This story focused on the relatives of murder victims, their grief and their calls for justice, and featured photographs of relatives with small pictures of the murder victim in the bottom left hand corner of these. Here, the death penalty symbolised the need for victims' rights and increased public safety.



Historians have highlighted some of the changing meanings of capital punishment. In the mid nineteenth-century, public hanging was heavily debated and was abolished in 1868. This has come to be understood less as a victory for humanitarianism and more as a manifestation of the growing imperative for members of the 'civilised' middle class to demonstrate their refinement through the experience of squeamishness and sensitivity. Also significant were elite fears of the unruly crowd, whose perceived rowdiness at hangings and lack of regard for the solemnity of the occasion threatened public order.

Capital punishment has been more symbolic at certain times than at others. I am currently researching public attitudes to the death penalty 1930-65, the era leading to abolition. In order to capture the richness of these responses, I am using sources such as letters sent to Home Secretaries, which enable me to analyse reactions to particular, real cases at the time they were taking place (the Home Secretary had the authority to exercise the Royal Prerogative of Mercy and grant a reprieve). As research into public opinion on the death penalty in the United States tells us, people frequently support capital punishment in the abstract, whilst having reservations about its operation in practice. This is why it is important to uncover these mid twentieth-century views so we can better understand what the death penalty represented at this time.

The death penalty as a topic for collective attention became more salient after the Second World War. Newspapers debated the morality of its use in relation to certain cases, such that of Margaret Allen in 1949, who beat her elderly female neighbour to death. Whether a woman should be executed, particularly one who had grown up in poverty and exhibited 'odd' behaviour such as wearing men's clothes and going by the name of Bill, was contentious. Letter writers to Home Secretary, James Chuter Ede, expressed their concern that Margaret Allen was insane and should be reprieved (which was not given).

The current e-petition campaign is for the reinstatement of capital punishment for the murderers of children and police officers. In the 1950s, executions following the murder of a police officer were amongst the most controversial for being unsafe. Famously, 19 year old Derek Bentley was executed in 1953 for the murder of PC Sidney Miles, despite the fact that his friend, Christopher Craig, a minor and therefore ineligible for the death penalty, had carried out the shooting. Derek was under arrest at the time it happened. In 1959, Guenther Podola, a German photographer, killed a police officer (which constituted capital murder) who had placed him under arrest, although claimed he could not remember doing so after being beaten up at the police station. Both the amnesia and allegations of police brutality generated controversy over his execution. These cases caused some to question the competence of the police and the correctness of their actions, whilst others feared the murder of police officers signalled an increasingly violent and lawless society.

Public attitudes to capital punishment reflect and are intertwined with other social, political and cultural issues of the day, such as the meanings of 'sanity', the reliability of authority figures like the police and the nature of British society. In the wake of damage to the public trust in MPs caused by the 2009 expenses scandal and the recent implications that politicians are more concerned about the views of media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch than those of their own constituents, Paul Staines and The Sun cannily paint the issue of the death penalty as emblematic of democratic responsiveness.