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House of Commons

Death Penalty (India)

Backbench Business

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11.55 am

[Mark Pritchard \(The Wrekin\) \(Con\):](#)

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on this very timely debate.

I would like to start by paying tribute to the Sikh community in Hadley in my own constituency. I have regular interaction with not only ordinary members, as it were, of the Sikh community but its senior leadership. I find that interaction and dialogue very helpful, not least in being able to rise today to support this campaign.

As we head towards the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting and other important multilateral and bilateral meetings where India sits at the table, it is timely that it should be reminded that while it is the world's largest democracy and a growing economy that is seeing expansion in many areas, not least its military, the maturity of a democracy is judged not on how big the army, the economy or the electorate are, but on how that democracy treats its minorities. India certainly has an issue—if not in reality, in perception—about how it treats its minorities, not least Sikhs, and, indeed, other religious faiths, including the Christian Church. While the federal Government may express their concerns and underscore their commitment to religious freedom and religious freedom of speech, it is important that the states themselves do not ascribe powers to themselves that inhibit and restrict those freedoms.

I have no hesitation in supporting this campaign. I declare an interest in that I am the elected chairman of Parliamentarians for Global Action. One of the purposes of that group—I encourage all Members across the House to join if they are not a member—is to see the ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. I was recently in Rome with other parliamentarians and representatives of other international bodies, not least the International Criminal Court itself in The Hague, to discuss this issue.

It is important that India recognises that while it has medium-term United Nations ambitions for a bigger seat at the big table, it needs to ensure that it abides by the UN convention against torture and other cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment or punishment. It would be a big mistake for India to think that it can continue, perhaps with more gusto, to execute prisoners without the international community ensuring that the spotlight is put on to it. When so many positive things are happening in that country—that democracy—it would be unfortunate that there should be this unhelpful and retrograde distraction for it.

I will keep my remarks very brief, Mr Deputy Speaker, in order to allow colleagues to speak. I conclude by saying that India is a close friend of the United Kingdom, and friends can be candid. As a candid friend of India, I think that, across parties, we are saying to that wonderful, beautiful and proud country that it is not in its own interests to bring back the death penalty in great numbers. There is a debate to be had about the speed with which the federal Government may move towards outlawing execution. It cannot be done overnight; it has to be done in consultation with other states and must clearly have cross-party support. That will not be an easy thing, but things worth fighting for are not always necessarily easy.

I hope that the message sent out from the House today is that this Parliament is a close friend of the Indian Parliament. I hope that our parliamentary colleagues in India will ensure that the death penalty does cease. I pay credit to the Sikh community of this country and in my own constituency.