This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Fri Oct 30 4:39:01 2026 / +0000 GMT

Justice served?

by BRIAN LOCKHART

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.

In a way, that phrase is the basis for punishment in most places when a person commits a crime.

Although in some societies it is taken to the literal extreme ? which is not a good thing.

The phrase means ? the punishment should fit the crime.

For the most part, our society is doing a good job of punishing criminal behaviour.

You can argue that some crimes aren't punished enough, the justice system is woefully slow, and some judges routinely make questionable decisions, but all in all, I'd rather be in the Canadian justice system than stand accused in a lot of court systems around the world where sentences are handed out at the wave of a hand based on how the judge is feeling that morning and what bribes have come their way.

Prisons around the world vary from relatively lax systems with rehabilitation programs to chain gangs and hard labour, hard core penitentiaries, and the worst-case concentration camps and gulags where everyone is thrown together in a dog-eat-dog system and they are left to rot until death is the only escape.

The most extreme punishment meted out is of course the death penalty.

While most modern western countries have abandoned the idea of dropping someone at the end of the rope as a way to pay for their crime, there are still over 30 countries around the world that carry out executions and several more where the death penalty is still a legal option.

Our neighbours to the south have held on to the death penalty in some U.S. states.

It's hard to believe that in one place you can be sentenced to a prison term for a crime, but the same crime committed 100 yards down the road across a state line could result in a trip to the death chamber.

Although most, if not all states have started using the ?more humane' method of lethal injection, the result is the same as if you are hanged, gassed, or electrocuted.

That always reminds me of the movie, The Green Mile, set in the death row section of a prison with Tom Hanks as the head guard.

After an execution goes horribly wrong, the prison Warden is furious because the prisoner didn't die in a nice manner ? despite being jolted with several thousand volts of electricity.

Warden: ?What in the hell happened??

Head prison guard: ?An execution ? a successful one.?

Warden: ?How can you call that a success??

Head prison guard: ?Eduard Delacroix is dead.?

I have been following the case of a Canadian man who is on death row in a prison in Montana.

Ronald Smith, originally from Red Deer Alberta, deserves to be in prison.

In 1983, he and an accomplice while high on LSD and alcohol, murdered two men in cold blood. They wanted to steal their car, and Smith admitted he just wanted to see what it was like to kill someone.

Smith was convicted and sentenced to death.

That in itself wasn't a big surprise. If you're going to commit a crime in a foreign country, especially a serious and brutal crime, you will be subject to paying the price by the laws set out in that land.

Smith's execution date has been set, then postponed five times.

Currently there are some political ramblings going on in Montana that will likely get the execution schedule back on track.

Whether or not Smith deserved to get the death penalty is up for debate.

Some people believe there shouldn't be a death penalty at all, while others are all for it.

However in this case, they are planning on putting a man to death ? 38 years after he committed his crime.

In any other modern western country 38 years for a murder is considered a life sentence and the accused would most likely be up for parole.

Executing a man almost four decades after his crime, when has spent those years already serving a sentence behind bars definitely falls under the ?cruel' side of ?cruel or unusual punishment.'

Ronald Smith's case is not isolated. There are people routinely being executed in the U.S. decades after they were first charged with a crime.

Time changes people. By all accounts Smith has been a model prisoner.

That doesn't excuse his crime, but after 38 years of confinement, surely he has paid for his mistake.