



In Focus

Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965: 50 Years

Overview

The Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965 received royal assent on 8 November 1965 and came into force the next day, on 9 November 1965.¹ It suspended capital punishment in the case of persons convicted of murder in Great Britain until 1970. MPs voted to make this permanent on 16 December 1969, with Peers voting likewise the next day.

The Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965 started its passage through Parliament as a private member's bill sponsored by Sydney Silverman, Labour MP for Nelson and Colne. It received its second reading in the House of Commons on 21 December 1964, on division, by 355 votes to 170.² The Bill was sponsored in the House of Lords by Baroness Wootton of Abinger, the first woman to be created a life Peer under the Life Peerages Act 1958.³ The Bill received its second reading in the House of Lords over the course of two days—19 and 20 July 1965—and was passed on division by 204 votes to 104.⁴

The Act did not extend to Northern Ireland, where capital punishment was abolished in cases of murder under the Northern Ireland (Emergency Powers) Act 1973.⁵

International Situation Today

Although the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act was passed in 1965, it was not until 1998 that the UK formally abolished the death penalty as a punishment for all offences.⁶ According to Amnesty International, as at July 2015, 101 countries around the world had abolished the death penalty for all crimes.⁷ However, Amnesty also stated that at least 22 countries carried out executions last year, the same figure as for 2013.⁸ In its most recent report on the death penalty, [Death Sentences and Executions in 2014](#), Amnesty estimated that at least 2,466 people were sentenced to death worldwide in 2014—up 28 percent on the estimate for 2013⁹—and that at least 607 executions were carried out. This represented a decrease of almost 22 percent compared to the figures recorded for 2013, but did not include the number of people who were believed to have been executed in China, “where data on capital punishment is considered a state secret”.¹⁰

The report listed the following “reported executions” as having taken place worldwide in 2014:

Afghanistan (6), Belarus (3+), China (+), Egypt (15+), Equatorial Guinea (9), Iran (289+), Iraq (61+), Japan (3), Jordan (11), Malaysia (2+), North Korea (+), Pakistan (7), Palestine (State of (2+, Hamas authorities, Gaza), Saudi Arabia (90+), Singapore (2), Somalia (14+), Sudan (23+), Taiwan (5), UAE (1), USA (35), Viet Nam (3+) and Yemen (22+).¹¹

The report noted that three countries—Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia—were responsible for 72 percent of the 607 executions recorded by Amnesty. The report alleged that “hundreds” more executions took place in Iran in addition to the 289 executions that were officially acknowledged as having taken place in that country in 2014.¹²

The Death Penalty and International Intergovernmental Organisations in 2014

- Of the 35 member states of the Organization of American States, only the USA carried out executions.
- Of the 57 member states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], only Belarus and the USA carried out executions.
- Four of the 54 member states of the African Union were known to have carried out judicial executions: Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Somalia and Sudan.
- Nine of the 21 member states of the League of Arab States are known to have carried out executions: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, UAE and Yemen.
- Three of the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] are known to have carried out executions: Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam.
- Three of the 53 member states of the Commonwealth were known to have carried out executions: Malaysia, Pakistan and Singapore.
- Three of the member and observer states of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie are known to have carried out executions: Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Vietnam.
- Japan and the USA were the only countries in the G8 to carry out executions.
- 173 of the 193 member states of the UN were execution-free in 2014.

(Source: Amnesty International, [Death Sentences and Executions in 2014](#), 31 March 2015, pp 8–9)

UK Government Policy

The UK Government has stated that it is “opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances”, and that it “calls on all states”, both privately and publicly, to “adopt a moratorium on the use of the death penalty in accordance with UN General Assembly resolution 186 adopted in December 2014” as part of a process towards complete abolition.¹³

¹ Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965.

² HC *Hansard*, 21 December 1964, [cols 870–1010](#).

³ House of Lords Library, [Women in the House of Lords](#), 30 June 2015, LLN 2015/0017, p 4.

⁴ HL *Hansard*, 19 July 1965, [cols 480–582](#); and 20 July 1965, [cols 590–714](#).

⁵ Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965 and Northern Ireland (Emergency Powers) Act 1973.

⁶ *ibid*.

⁷ Amnesty International, [‘Death Penalty: Overview’](#), accessed 6 November 2015.

⁸ Amnesty International, [Death Sentences and Executions in 2014](#), 31 March 2015, p 5.

⁹ Amnesty International, [‘Death Penalty: Overview’](#), accessed 6 November 2015.

¹⁰ Amnesty International, [Death Sentences and Executions in 2014](#), 31 March 2015, p 5.

¹¹ *ibid*.

¹² Amnesty International, [Death Sentences and Executions in 2014](#), 31 March 2015, p 5. For further information, see the oral question on ‘Death Penalty: Worldwide Abolition’, HL *Hansard*, 20 July 2015, [cols 899–901](#).

¹³ House of Lords, [‘Capital Punishment: Written Question—HL2172’](#), 21 September 2015.

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