



Republicans fire shots at Inslee over death-penalty halt

The governor is creating a distraction and acting beyond his powers, his critics charge.

By John Stang

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The Washington Senate's Republican leader argued Wednesday that Gov. Jay Inslee's death penalty moratorium is a distraction the Legislature's most important business — creating jobs.

Other Republicans contend that Inslee usurped the Legislature's role with the moratorium. On Tuesday, Inslee announced a moratorium on executions during his stay in office, citing its inconsistent use and human fallibility factors with death sentences.

The Washington Constitution gives Inslee the authority to halt executions, said state Attorney General Bob Ferguson.

Senate Republican Leader Mark Schoesler, a death-penalty supporter, contended Inslee had no reason to call for the moratorium, criticizing the governor for not solely focusing on jobs and budget matters. "That's something so far off the public's radar," he said of the moratorium on the death penalty.

He said, "I don't know how that fits into everyday family life and what they are concerned about."

Republicans Sen. Steve O'Ban of Pierce County and Sen. Kirk Pearson and Rep. Jay Rodne, both of Snohomish County, held a Wednesday press conference to criticize Inslee's decision.

"I question the timing of the announcement by the governor. I wonder what his motives are," Rodne said. When asked about what he thought Inslee's motives were, Rodne said: "I don't want to assign motives."

The three contended that if Inslee wanted to halt capital punishment, he should have introduced a bill earlier in the current session so committee hearings could have been held. The deadline for such committee hearings passed earlier this week. They argued that the Legislature is the legal and proper place to address death-penalty issues.

They argued that the death penalty is a deterrent to murder and a valuable bargaining tool for prosecutors. They did not have statistics to compare murder deterrence in death-penalty and non-death-penalty states. They said the moratorium denies closure to the victims' families. And they said the moratorium is insensitive to the state's nine current Death Row inmates because they get a reprieve that could be revoked by a future governor.

Pearson comes from Monroe, the home of the state prison where corrections officer Jayme Blendl was strangled to death by an inmate already serving a life sentence. The inmate,

Byron Scherf, is now on Death Row in Walla Walla. "What happened to Jayme Blendl has affected every corrections officer in the state," Pearson said. O'Ban added, "An inmate can say: 'I can take this officer's life and never have to face the death penalty.'"

Inslee spokesman David Postman declined to comment on Schoesler's remarks and on the press conference.

Inslee's moratorium does not vacate any of the death sentences for the nine inmates, but puts them on hold until he is no longer governor. A future governor can reinstall the executions. Prosecutors can still seek the death penalty, but would know it would not be carried out while Inslee is governor.

Inslee and his staff had studied the matter for months, talking to a wide range of people. He said the death penalty is being applied unevenly, frequently determined by whether a county has enough money to handle an expensive capital crime trial. He also cited the possibility of mistakes being made in a capital case. Thirty-two people have been sentenced to death in Washington since 1981. One has since been freed, and 18 had their executions commuted to life sentences prior to the governor's moratorium.

Death penalty opponent Rep. Reuven Carlyle, D-Seattle, expects to introduce a bill in 2015 to repeal capital punishment. He has introduced such bills almost annually.

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