

Private Members' Business

I would hope and ask for the co-operation of all members in the House this evening to pass this legislation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Ferland (Portneuf): Mr. Speaker, I welcome this opportunity today to speak to Bill C-283, introduced by the hon. member for Churchill. In his speech, the hon. member said that his bill would clarify the current definition of election expenses contained in the Canada Elections Act.

• (1720)

Perhaps I may start with a short summary of the current definition of election expenses. Under the act, the term "election expenses" means: (a) amounts paid, (b) liabilities incurred, (c) the commercial value of goods and services donated or provided, other than volunteer labour, and (d) differences between amounts paid and liabilities incurred for goods and services, other than volunteer labour, and the commercial value thereof where they are provided at less than their commercial value. All of which are for the purpose of promoting or opposing, directly and during an election, a particular registered party, or the election of a particular candidate. The act goes on to provide examples of such election expenses, including the cost of acquiring the right to the use of time on the facilities of any broadcasting undertaking or the cost of acquiring the services of any person, and so forth.

The hon. member tabled Bill C-283, which, according to the explanatory note, provides a broader definition of the expression. The definition we are considering today provides that "election expenses" means all expenses and liabilities, including those related to opinion polls, incurred for the purpose of promoting or opposing, directly or indirectly during an election, the particular registered party or the election of a particular candidate, other than certain expenses, fees, deposits and transfers of money, such as office rental expenses, fees of accountants, and so forth.

The hon. member pointed out that the Canada Elections Act needs a thorough review. I think we all agree that the current legislation should promote and reflect our democratic system, in other words, a fair and democratic electoral system that constitutes the basis of

any democracy. Some countries are still struggling to establish their democratic system. Canada is one of those countries that has a well-established tradition of respect for rights and democracy. The Canada Elections Act has been amended several times, always with a concern for having the best possible electoral system.

Our electoral system must work in such a way that candidates are able to express their ideas, and voters are able to participate as informed and enlightened citizens in the electoral process. Rules and control mechanisms are necessary to regulate this process.

I think we all agree that a review of the Canada Elections Act was necessary, which is why the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing was created in November 1989. The Canada Elections Act has not been subject to a thorough review since the middle of the seventies. The mandate of the commission is to investigate and report on the principles, procedures and rules regulating the election of members of the House of Commons as well as the financing of political parties and candidates during election campaigns.

The commission heard a lot of evidence relating to public financing, the financing of parties and controls, the organization and financing of riding associations, political party regulations, ceiling and posting of election expenses. The commission also dealt with the following issues: Should the expenses of local candidates continue to be restricted during federal election campaigns? If so, what should this ceiling be? Should the definition of "election expenses" be relaxed? If so, what expenses incurred by candidates and parties should be excluded? Should pre-election expenses incurred by parties or local candidates be controlled or not? To what extent should volunteer labour during a campaign be considered as a donation or an electoral expense?

I understand that the commission heard the testimonies of 30 some people who considered the definition of election expenses and ceiling. It seems that most of them were in favour of a more flexible and more precise definition than the existing one.

The Ontario Commission on Election Financing recommended that the federal law use Ontario's definition of "election expenses" and consider all expenses made by or on behalf of a candidate to be election expenses, unless specifically excluded.