

*Privileges and Elections*

There was a very painful experience in 1965, during that hasty and unnecessary election, when thousands of students were disfranchised. Canadians abroad, not just public servants, but many Canadians in this mobile age are alike quite often voteless. The separation of the military from the civilian is an unfortunate situation. The problem of the Canadian abroad, civil servant, external affairs officer, private citizen and military servant, could all be covered by a system of absentee voting. I am very pleased there is special reference to this matter in our term of reference.

We should move forward to a scrutiny of our elections Act. I cannot too strongly urge the House to look carefully at, and think seriously about, what governmental arrogance is doing to committees, the creatures of this House and, indeed, to this House itself. I think the work of this committee, and the place and function of committees generally, are being vitiated and circumscribed by a government led by a man who told the House, when only a part of the cabinet instead of its head, "We are your masters". This is where the problem arises. It is just another illustration of the difficulties through which the representative institution is passing in this particular age.

Since this motion calls for a House decision, I ask hon. members to reflect, consider and weigh the implications of what can happen when Parliament, the essential instrument and institution of representative government, is down-graded and its committees diminished in their effectiveness and restricted in their usefulness. What has been done and predeclared by the government just to this particular committee?

What happens to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections may be visited upon another committee tomorrow. A vital, properly functioning committee system could strengthen Parliament and make it a more relevant, meaningful institution. Further weakening of the system will weaken Parliament. More tokenism will mean less freedom. At a time when this historic institution is assailed sufficiently from without, let none of us be a party to undermining it from within.

**Mr. Stanley Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** Mr. Speaker, it cannot be stated too often that a piece of legislation such as the Canada Elections Act is not the property of the government or any one party, but belongs to Parliament and the people as a whole. I,

[Mr. Macquarrie.]

therefore, welcome the very strong statement that has just been made by the hon. member for Hillsborough (Mr. Macquarrie) in support of the proposition that this committee should continue the traditions of the past and approach its problem free of partisan conflict.

I would like to suggest, Mr. Speaker, as one step that might be taken to symbolize the acceptance of that proposition that, like the public accounts committee, this is a committee of which it might be appropriate to name an opposition member as the chairman. I have looked over the list and there are a number who could qualify among those of the opposition parties. I hope it will not be the kiss of death for him if I suggest that the preceding speaker, the hon. member for Hillsborough (Mr. Macquarrie), who has had experience in the past with such a committee, would make an excellent chairman of this committee.

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Macdonald (Rosedale):** Why not a non-partisan person?

**Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** I heard a remark suggesting that it should be a non-partisan person. I think the hon. member for Hillsborough has demonstrated that when there is at stake a matter of party principle he can fight like any of us, but when it is a matter above party he demonstrates that he can fill that role very ably.

**Some hon. Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr. Knowles (Winnipeg North Centre):** I should also like to support the contention made by the member for Hillsborough that the rights of committees deserve all the respect that we can muster. This should apply in a particular way with respect to this committee on the Canada Elections Act.

It so happens that my colleagues and I support the proposition that the voting age should be lowered to 18. My former colleague, the present premier of Manitoba, introduced a bill to that effect several times. My colleague the member for Yorkton-Melville (Mr. Nystrom) has a bill to that effect on the order paper on the present time. I can think of other former colleagues who have done likewise. We have taken this position for a long time. It was my leader who brought in the voting age of 18 in provincial elections in the province of Saskatchewan. We are in support of it.