

Canada Elections Act

Pollsters may perceive and conduct interviews during an election as if it were a presidential election race rather than a parliamentary election. The newspapers that buy these polls and headline the results may contribute to the selling of a presidential candidate rather than informing the voter about the nationwide election. I think they do a disservice and actually create news rather than reporting it.

I should like to comment on the measure and meaning of polls, Mr. Speaker. I contend that they misplace emphasis and mislead the public by putting measurement before meaning, by putting quantity before quality. We must question whether pollsters know what they measure. It should be kept in mind that polls do not measure the electorate. At best they only measure a random sample of all Canadians, not a random sample of all Canadian voters. The undecided are distributed among the parties as if decided.

I say that polls cannot predict election results even though they pretend, confidentially, that they can, days or weeks before an election. The margin of error in polls is too wide. Depending on the size of the sample, the margin of error may vary from 2 per cent to 4 per cent and the sample has to be doubled in order to reduce this. Gallup cautions that with the margin of error at 4 per cent the poll will be accurate 19 out of 20 times. I would point out, however, that they are not measuring 282 ridings so it does not give a clear indication of what is going to happen. Apart from the margin of error or accuracy, the polls do not translate these percentages into the number of seats for each party.

My point is, Mr. Speaker, that pollsters may not know what they measure. They may measure or question an individual in his role as consumer rather than as citizen or informed voter. I think polls have some real impact upon voters. Voters may decide to stay at home, for instance, if one party is shown to have a very significant lead. A voter may be of the opinion that there is no use voting because the other side is going to win anyway. Volunteers working for parties, whether they be Liberal, New Democratic or Conservative, may be buoyed by the results of the polls or they may be deflated. This may affect the strategy of that campaign organization. It may make them focus on different things. That, in turn, does affect the voter. As a direct result that can happen.

● (1610)

With respect to third parties, a poll which indicates an increase in opinion for a third party—in this case it would be the New Democratic Party—would have a negative effect on that very third party because the polls would indicate that a minority government would be elected. Therefore voters would decide they were not going to vote for the third party but would rather vote for the one that has a chance of forming the majority government. I think that is wrong.

Clearly I think we have to limit the polls and their influence on the electorate in Canada. I submit that polls influence the journalist, the man who is interviewing the various candidates. If there is a poor showing in the polls, the journalist will lose interest because he knows that when he writes the copy that

that copy will not be printed in the newspaper under his byline. What he wants is his byline, and he does not then focus on the issues but on the polling results. In my opinion that is detrimental to the democratic process and the system under which we operate in Canada. There is already a real danger that newsmen and newspapers cover our parliamentary election as if it were a presidential race.

I submit also that polls are inaccurate because they only reflect a moment in time. They are like a snapshot. In the meantime, between the measuring and the taking of the polls, other greater events may have outdated the results.

During the May, 1979, election a CBC poll was conducted by Carleton University in which interviews took place between April 30 and May 10. They were published on May 15, but the TV debate among the leaders occurred in between. This then would not have given an accurate picture of what the polls were actually saying. I am not against polls if there were time to validate the methodology of polls. A last weekend blitz or barrage of polls is dangerous because no one can check the validity or the accuracy of these polls. Instead this would allow everyone time to concentrate on the issues, on the policies and on what the candidate is saying rather than on the polls. That would be what the news is, not the poll itself.

I am not against polls, just the publication during the final two weeks. My Polish friend is going to speak on this subject and that is why I say I am not against Poles. I would like him to know that. I am not against polls, just the publication during the final two weeks. I am not advocating censorship or a board of censors. What I propose is not something new, it has been proposed before. There is a lot of support for this. It warrants a discussion and it warrants a committee looking at the issues. The present Canada Elections Act already prohibits publication of advertising and polls on election day or even the day before an election.

I would like to see the results of public opinion polls banned for 14 days prior to election day. I am suggesting that it be done to safeguard the democratic process, and to permit the electorate a free, unhindered choice. I am proposing that this prohibition be extended to two weeks, or 14 days, for polls in the light of potential interference in our parliamentary democratic electoral process.

Mr. David Smith (Don Valley East): Mr. Speaker, thank you for providing me with the opportunity to participate in this debate on Bill C-208 sponsored by the hon. member for Athabasca (Mr. Shields). The purpose of his proposed amendment to the Canada Elections Act is to prohibit the publication in any manner, during the 14 clear days preceding the time that polls are closed in an electoral district in which an election is being held, of the result or purported result of a poll of the political opinions of electors in relation to the election. This is totally unacceptable. It is an insult to the intelligence of the Canadian electorate, and is a denial of their right to information about themselves.

At first glance it seems rather shocking to see such a proposal to muzzle the press, and to deny information to