

Canada Elections Act

If we deem all British subjects qualified as electors, we automatically recognize that Canada is still a British colony. Everywhere and in every situation we are wont to talk about Canadian sovereignty and autonomy. I think we should adopt immediately a measure granting the franchise to every Canadian citizen.

I know someone born in the United States who is probably 50 years old now. He has been living in Canada since the age of two and yet has never applied for Canadian citizenship. He is however considered as a Canadian. But because he is not a Canadian citizen he does not have the franchise under the act.

I think that a British citizen who comes to Canada should be granted the franchise only if, as any other immigrant, he becomes a Canadian citizen.

This is why I support the amendment of the hon. member for Matane, asking for the removal of clause 14(3).

[*English*]

Mr. Deachman: Mr. Chairman, clause 14(3) attempts to deal with an old problem. It attempts to settle a growing feeling on the part of Canadians that the vote in Canadian general elections ought to be reserved to Canadian citizens. This feeling became increasingly evident during the great period of postwar immigration. The idea has also become very popular among younger Canadians. We took some steps in this direction when passing the Citizenship Act of 1942, for example, which established who is a Canadian citizen. That act made it essential for anyone who wished to become a Canadian to apply for Canadian citizenship. It included a provision saying that a British subject who had been living in Canada for five years before the coming into force of the act would automatically become a Canadian citizen.

However, the dual nature of Canadian voting remained enshrined within the Elections Act. It has remained there to this day, much to the annoyance of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who have come to this country from non-Commonwealth countries and who, while waiting their five years to become Canadian citizens, saw other people coming from Commonwealth countries enjoy the privilege of participating in federal elections, even though they had been here for only one year. It is, therefore, reasonable for us to see expressed in amendments to the Elections Act a desire to cure an old anomaly.

The trouble is that the bill would not do that. The act we are considering simply entrenches the rights of a class of non-Canadian citizens who will have the privilege of voting until they die. It says that every British subject, other than a Canadian citizen, who was qualified as an elector on June 25, 1968 is deemed to be qualified as an elector.

This provision simply means that a person, let us say, who was 21 years old at the last election and qualified to vote, may continue to vote without ever becoming a Canadian citizen for as long as he lives, perhaps for 40, 50 or 60 years or more. So, if we pass this clause, we shall be creating two classes of British subjects in Canada, namely, those who by virtue of this act will be allowed to vote from now until they die, and those other British subjects who will not have the privilege of voting until they become Canadian citizens. In addition, we would have a third class of Canadian citizens who would have the vote. I sympathize with those who believe that the vote should be reserved to Canadians. I believe that is what we ought to be doing.

On the other hand, I do not feel that by passing any clause of this bill we ought to cut off people from the franchise who now have the right to vote. I am not in favour of taking away immediately the right of those who have enjoyed the franchise. I think there is a way around the difficulty, and that way was hinted at by the hon. member for Skeena who spoke a few moments ago. He suggested that we should provide those who have enjoyed the privilege of voting by virtue of their British citizenship with the opportunity to become Canadian citizens, and that we should not disenfranchise them by accepting certain amendments. I, therefore, wish to propose an amendment to subclause 3, by substituting for line 10 on page 24 of the bill the following:

will be deemed to be qualified as an elector for a period not exceeding five years from the date of proclamation of this act.

Simply put, that means this: every British subject who is not a Canadian citizen and who was qualified as an elector on June 25, 1968, will be deemed to be qualified as an elector for a period not exceeding five years from the date of the proclamation of this Act. By accepting this amendment we shall take no voting rights away from anybody. We shall provide ample opportunity for British citizens to vote in by-elections which may occur between now and the time of the next general election, to vote in the next general election and vote perhaps in the election