

Canada Elections Act

the spirit in which the present bill is presented to this House, and it is the spirit in which a number of amendments have been proposed.

I should only like to say that I hope there will be no amendments which in fact accentuate or extend the ethnic elitism which has been present in the law. I refer particularly to the suggestion of the hon. member for Brandon-Souris, who is suggesting that we should indicate a superiority not only on the part of those who come from British countries but those who come from France. I reject that proposition completely on behalf of all those Canadians who have come here from other countries and who are equally as entitled to rights under our laws as those who come from countries of British or French connection.

Many members of this House will find, if they look back into their origins, that while their names may be Forrestall, Stanbury or Diefenbaker, their origins are very mixed. I doubt very much if a majority of the members of this House could claim to have some clear line of origin from France or Britain with no enrichment from other sources. I hope that the Elections Act will reflect this plurality of our population, and that it will be fair to all people who come to Canada and make their home here. I hope that will be the principle on which the new Canadian Citizenship Act will be based.

Mr. Perrault: Mr. Chairman, I think we are all grateful to the minister for the eloquent statement he has just made. This has been a very useful debate. A number of ideas have been advanced which reflect the concern of all parties in the House and their desire to make our system of elections as democratic and fair as it possibly can be. I must, however, oppose the amendment but not because I am unsympathetic to those who have spoken so eloquently in support of the view that the right to vote should be held exclusively by Canadian citizens. I know that in taking this position I will be in disagreement with some of my great and good friends on the government side, but I think we all hold our views sincerely.

It seems to me if the parliamentary system means anything at all, or if our system of law means anything at all, it means that we are very concerned about the rights of individuals. If the amendment before the committee is successful we would be depriving at least some people in Canada of the right to vote at

the next general election in April of 1972. Let me explain that, and if I am wrong perhaps someone will wish to correct me.

If a British subject arrived in Canada on June 15, 1967 for example, and then proceeded to vote at the election in June of 1968, by April of 1972 that individual would not have qualified for Canadian citizenship because he would lack the five years of permanent residency which is necessary under the present legislation. Some members in the House are under the impression that British subjects are allowed to become Canadian citizens with only a 12-month waiting period. That is not correct. The requirement is five years permanent residency. The only person who may become a Canadian citizen on an accelerated schedule is a British subject who is the wife of a Canadian citizen.

One may well say that this affects only a small handful of people, but I think it is wrong in principle to say to a group of people who voted in the 1968 election that, even if they wish to obtain Canadian citizenship, they may not vote if an election is held before June of 1972. That principle is wrong. That is one of the small, technical reasons I simply cannot bring myself to support an amendment which would have that effect. Depending on the date of the next election, conceivably a great many people who voted in 1968 could be deprived of the right to vote. I am not prepared to support the amendment on that basis.

I can well understand those who want to achieve a middle position. Just as has been stated by the minister and others here, I cannot agree that we should preserve a cultural elite in this country and that people from British Commonwealth countries or from France should enjoy special status. That as well is wrong. That is why I lean toward an amendment which I hope will be considered favourably this afternoon. I do not intend to speak on it now but I have reference to the amendment advanced by the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra. It seems to me this is the kind of compromise which may well improve the present situation, and may well enjoy widespread support in this House.

Mr. Prud'homme: May I ask a question? Do you not think that a period of two years is long enough for people who, at the moment, are not Canadian citizens to pick up their Canadian citizenship papers? Surely, that is long enough for them to make up their minds as to whether they are going to become