

Canada Elections Act

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Champagne): The Hon. Member will have an opportunity at a later time to continue his intervention.

It being 5 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of Private Members' Business as listed on today's Order Paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS--BILLS

[English]

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

MEASURE TO AMEND

Mr. Nelson A. Riis (Kamloops—Shuswap) moved that Bill C-268, an Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (non-listed electors), be read the second time and referred to a legislative committee.

He said: Madam Speaker, I would like to begin my comments by suggesting that often many Canadians take our democratic privileges for granted. When one considers the turn-out in federal, provincial, regional and local elections, one is somewhat disappointed by the relatively small turn-out which would indicate that many Canadians simply do not take the opportunities presented to them to cast their ballots for the candidates of their choice. We have been reminded of the precious value of what we have in Canada, what we have known for many decades, by the recent developments in Haiti. For years and years its people have not had an opportunity to express their views of those who would govern them. The attempt at a return to democracy in Haiti has resulted in terrible bloodshed and harassment of voters by armed thugs and we have seen the democratic process which was attempting to reawaken in Haiti set back for some time.

It is interesting, when we consider that the United Nations identifies about 165 countries in the world, how many of these countries actually practice a democratic way of government as we do in Canada. How many of these countries actually hold free and open elections based on the principle of universality and on the right of an election to be called regularly so that the people of these countries have an opportunity to evaluate those who govern them and decide whether they want to change or continue with the status quo? Out of those 165 countries, less than 30 countries actually practice a democratic system as we know it in Canada. That really brings home to us just how precious is our democratic way of life.

Today's Private Members' Bill is really two-fold. It recognizes this precious way of government in our country, and it offers three changes to the way people cast their votes so as to make our system perhaps more equitable and able to provide a fair opportunity to more electors.

I want to begin by reminding Members that in the last federal election, at the last minute, so to speak, 510,000 people

had their names added to the voters' list. This gives us an idea of how accurate and thorough the normal procedure is for assembling those voters' lists. For one reason or another nearly one-half a million Canadians found themselves off that list and had to take steps at the last minute to have their names placed on the voters' list, either successfully or unsuccessfully.

This modest Bill attempts to do three things. It attempts, first, to allow urban voters to be sworn in and be able to vote on election day. This is a privilege, of course, that we have had in rural Canada virtually from the very beginning because in times past it was recognized that as high as 80 per cent of the residents in Canada were rural dwellers, and the assumption was that it would be difficult to find everyone at home, or to make the necessary calls to place everyone on the voters' list. In order to provide a sense of fairness, on election day, if one was living in what was designated as rural Canada, one could be sworn in, have one's name placed on the voters' list and be able to place one's ballot. Such is not the case in urban Canada. With more than 80 per cent of Canadians living in urban centres, it is time, I feel, that that same opportunity be offered to urban voters.

I suppose in sociological terms, one can make the case that the modern city often makes it difficult to enumerate voters because of the transient nature of the population. People are regularly moving, particularly in some parts of our cities, and I am thinking primarily of those living in rented accommodation. There are incredibly high levels of transition with apartment dwellers. I know from talking to some of my colleagues in the House of Commons that there is 100 per cent turnover from one election to another for a lion's share of their constituents which indicates the rather transitory nature of many of our voters.

The days when everyone knew their neighbours and could offer suggestions and assistance to help urban voters get on the election rolls are unfortunately passed for many Canadians who now live in virtual anonymity. They do not even know the person in the next apartment, in the next condominium or, in many cases, in the next house. In sociological terms one could make the case that the same opportunity ought to be offered to those living in our urban areas as traditionally provided to those living in the rural areas.

A second provision in the Bill allows candidates and canvassers to have entry to apartment buildings, condominiums or hotels which have in place a "no soliciting" policy. I recognize that a number of provinces through various pieces of legislation, usually respecting the Landlord and Tenants Act, provide this opportunity and in a sense prohibit owners of apartment blocks, hotels and condominiums from stopping canvassers and candidates from entering buildings to go door to door in order to offer the traditional presentations that we find during a federal election campaign. However, there are some provinces where this provision does not exist and I feel that because of the federal Government's constitutional control over the electoral process, it would make sense to complement what some provincial legislators have already done in the past,