

I believe that my suggestion would greatly improve the electoral process in Canada. I therefore urge strongly the members of the committee who will be studying this bill in detail to give my suggestion very serious consideration because I believe it will bring obvious improvements to the electoral system in this country.

Mr. Norman A. Cafik (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Health and Welfare): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today on Bill C-203. It is an important bill, providing for disclosure of contributions in excess of \$100 to political campaigns. It involves a limitation on expenditure in political campaigns and public involvement in that expenditure to a limited extent. As well, it contains a worth-while proposal for a tax credit for those who make contributions to the political party of their choice. In addition to limiting expenses, I am pleased to see that from the tax standpoint the bill provides greater benefits to those on low incomes, inasmuch as people on low incomes who make modest contributions to political campaigns and expenses will benefit more than those who are in a position to make large contributions. This provision will go a long way toward involving the public more directly in the political process in Canada. That is very worth while.

● (1530)

I have very positive feelings about the proposed act. That does not mean to say I have no reservations. Hopefully, when the committee reviews this bill in detail it will do so not only with an eye to the problems I intend to bring forward in my remarks, but also to the suggestions made by other members who have taken the time to study this bill and its implications. As far as reduction of expenditure is concerned, there is one point which has been overlooked in terms of reducing the cost of campaigning in Canada and at the same time eliminating what I think is a great nuisance in political campaigns. I refer to the presence of thousands, and in some cases hundreds of thousands, of electioneering signs that clutter the countryside and private and public property. This involves a lot of money and effort. I would estimate that approximately 50 per cent of the money spent by a candidate is spent on this kind of thing.

I do not think any candidate in any political party feels these signs are productive in terms of votes. However, this practice is counterproductive if you do not do it and your opponent does. Now that the whole question of election expenses has been opened, the committee should give very serious consideration to this matter. It should do something positive to eliminate the sign pollution that is generated in campaigns, and thus substantially reduce the expenditure involved in electioneering.

I would make a number of suggestions in this regard. Clearly, I have no special wisdom in the matter but I am concerned about it. I hope the committee will consider the following points and zero in and do something about one or more of them. First, the committee could consider an outright ban on signs connected with political activity. They could ban the erection of political signs on public property. That would still allow lawn signs, but not tree signs, road signs and the large four-by-eight signs which pollute the countryside.

Election Expenses

There is another possibility the committee might consider, other than banning all signs, or at least signs on public property. The committee might limit the number of signs produced, and the size, in order to have some degree of control. There are people who argue it would be a violation of a person's individual freedoms and human rights if the government were to outlaw the use of signs on private property. Clearly, a person does have a right to be identified with a party and make his identification known. I accept that argument. But I think there could still be an outright ban on signs without frustrating that principle.

An individual could very easily identify his political persuasion, if he chose, by the use of a campaign button or wearing something on his person. In addition, I think it would be quite adequate if a person were to put a sign on his car, a bumper sticker or something similar. I do not think it is necessary for candidates or their organizations to go to the enormous expense of erecting these signs, which are often torn down. God knows who does it. Everybody denies doing it, but the fact is they are torn down almost as fast as they are put up. This is a complete waste of money contributed by people who would like to do something worth while to get their particular candidate elected. I believe it would be welcomed by almost everyone in Canada if we eliminated this kind of pollution by outlawing these signs completely.

We ought to do something else in terms of reducing election expenses. We should reduce the time between the calling of an election and the taking of the vote. If I recall the elections act correctly, it now provides for a period of 59 days. In order to reduce the campaign period, the bill before us does something in terms of public advertising for the first 30 days, and so on. However, that only scratches the surface of the problem. We must reduce the time required to prepare for an election and to put one in place. This involves the establishment of a permanent voters' list in Canada. This is a very expensive proposition but it could be done under a cost-sharing arrangement among the federal government, the provincial governments and the municipal governments, all of which have elections. We could set up, in conjunction with the other levels of government, some kind of committee to look into the whole question of preparing a permanent voters' list. It could be operated by and serve all three levels of government. I realize the criteria for voting are not the same at each level. There are property considerations in municipal elections that do not apply to federal elections. However, in this age of the computer that kind of problem can be overcome.

We should prepare a permanent voters' list and keep it up to date. The cost-sharing could be on a 50-40-10 per cent basis among the three levels of government, depending on seniority: the federal government could pay 50 per cent of the cost, the provincial government 40 per cent and the municipal government 10 per cent. I am not married to those figures but it appears reasonable that some kind of cost-sharing agreement could be entered into so that a permanent voters' list could become a reality. Permanent voters' lists exist in other countries and I see no reason why we cannot have them in this country. If this were done, we could reduce the length of time between the issuing of the writs and election day to 30 or 40 days at most. That would have a significant impact upon the cost