

Canada Elections Act

Perhaps much of the constitutional debate would have been more enlightening if more attention had been paid, not just to the specifics of the resolution which bound the discussion, but also to sets of general principles and a general framework of the relationship between Canadians and their government. That is what a constitution deals with.

An election act and its subparts deal with the rights of Canadian voters to choose their peer group, which is their jury. In the case of federal politics, that peer group or jury is to be found in this chamber. Any attempt to alter the relationship between the individual voter and his or her right or obligation to choose who represents him or her is a matter which should be undertaken only after very serious thought, and only in the context of our particular form of parliament.

I stand here in this House with a sense of foreboding about the consequences of the proposed change. I think that perhaps the principle which is really basic to that sense of foreboding begins with the notion of process. As we debated the Constitution, I felt that it was most unfortunate that it was a piece of legislation introduced to this chamber by a government, by a small group of members of this House, who had a long-term vested interest. I wonder what the constitutional resolution would have looked like had we had an advisory group consisting of knowledgeable Canadians with no vested interest in this particular source of power called the House of Commons of Canada, to give us ideas and advice. If an advisory group had come up with ideas, suggestions and potential legislation for the House, after which legislation had been brought forward which all members had an opportunity to debate freely, and on which to vote freely, perhaps it would have been better.

I had the same feeling about this proposed electoral change. I think it behooves us in this House to begin an examination of this proposed change with the following in mind: let us assume that government members, members of the Liberal Party, like sitting on that side of the House and like the responsibility of forming a cabinet and deciding which legislation comes forward. But when they propose a particular piece of electoral reform, can they be objective and dispassionate about the consequences of that proposed reform, or is re-election to this chamber uppermost in their minds? I suggest to you, Mr. Speaker, that is a great deal to ask of any man or woman. It is far too much to ask of the present cabinet, far too much. Everything that has happened in this House since the formation of that cabinet leads inexorably to the conclusion that the retention of political power is the dominant principle in their decision-making.

Mr. Kilgour: It is the only one.

Mr. Hawkes: My seatmate said it is the only one.

If in the Constitution and if in the National Energy Program we see that the cabinet proposes legislation, legislation that is not good for Canada but good for re-election, if that is the dominant principle, we can expect to find it also in the government suggestion for electoral reform.

I ask hon. members to consider the following: if the first clause of this bill were that the cabinet and the Prime Minister

(Mr. Trudeau) have an obligation, were required by law to select, a minimum of 12 months ahead of time, and to make known the date of the next federal election, then we could have a different attitude toward this piece of legislation. If you approach Canadians on this matter, it comes through that they have some sense that election periods sometimes go on for too long. It is a little more difficult, and it takes a little more time, energy and sophistication to realize that it is the government, and the government alone, which can set the date of a federal general election. Therefore, it is the government, and the government alone, which knows the date of the next federal election for some considerable period of time.

We do not have to look very far back in history to find evidence that the government, the cabinet in particular, backbenchers, fund raisers and a number of people, know with increasing certainty, and with considerable lead time what the date of the next federal election will be. The campaign begins on that date. Government members have that knowledge. They can begin to plan their publicity campaigns and election material and recruit their volunteers. Under our present system they have an unfair advantage.

● (1540)

We look at the past few election campaigns and we see that taxpayers' funds were used to begin the campaign. Look at the legislation generally brought into this House in the 30-day period prior to the dissolution of the House before a general election. Look for the bribery component in most instances. Look at what cabinet ministers do with government jets in the month prior to the dissolution of the House and calling of an election. Look at what they do with press releases and the utilization of staff and their physical location. This is an unfair situation which has existed since the beginning of this nation. The only check on the use of that power is the moral fibre of those who wield it.

The bill before us runs several pages. The underlying principle is clearly that government members opposite have decided to increase the four year advantage by another 12 days. They want to reduce the possibility of being defeated, the possibility of fair play by another 12 days. I want to issue a challenge to members opposite. They can have a 47-day election period, probably with unanimous support in this House, under one condition: give us the date of the next federal election at least six months or possibly 12 months in advance so that everyone has an equal opportunity to plan, nominate candidates and raise money. The parliamentary secretary to the government House leader says to me across the floor of this House from behind the curtain "We are not as dumb as you guys. We believe in hanging on to power."

Mr. Collenette: I didn't say that.

Mr. Hawkes: That is sufficient justification for the thesis I am advancing. They say, "if this bill is allowed to pass, will I be a victim? No. I have an advantage over all of those who choose to unseat me. I have access to this chamber and to the press gallery for an additional 12 days. My opponents have 12