

Indian Affairs

this country. Yet up to that time they were cut out from the decision-making process in that they could not vote in federal elections.

Recognizing this inconsistency, and realizing that young people have become politically more mature, more aware of society and the world around them—in large part because of our modern technology and communications—we accorded them the privilege of expressing their voice in a federal vote. In 1971 the province of Ontario likewise passed legislation to lower the voting age for provincial elections to 18 years. More recently it has passed legislation to provide for citizens to vote in municipal elections at 18.

This means that young adults of Indian bands are free to mark their ballots in federal elections and in provincial elections but not in their own band council elections. They are not allowed to participate in this democratic process on their own reserves. Surely the anomaly is obvious. Why should young band members on Indian reserves be prevented from voting for the representatives of their band councils when they are viewed as responsible enough to vote for their Member of Parliament? As of December 31, 1971, the latest official figure available, I understand some 10,000 Indians between the ages of 18 and 21 years who were registered band members were not permitted to vote. The figure is undoubtedly higher today. Over 10,000 young people who are considered adults in almost every other way, including being able to vote federally and provincially, have no voice in their own reserve elections. What kind of equality is this, Mr. Speaker?

The native people have not been silent on this subject. Let me relate to the House an incident that occurred in my own riding in the fall of 1971, shortly before I introduced this bill for the first time. The young adults of the Mississauga Indian reserve voted in the provincial election of 1971. However, when they came to the polling booths for their band council election they were turned out and were not allowed to vote. Naturally they were very upset and wrote to me, to the department and to the Minister of Indian Affairs asking why they were not granted the right to vote.

The native people of Algoma are not alone in recognizing this discrepancy. Numerous inquiries and letters have been sent to Members of Parliament and to the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, queries from Indians and non-Indians alike, asking when further voting reforms will take place in this area.

I understand that several bands have taken formal action by sending petitions to the federal government, including the Saugeen reserve, the Six Nations reserve, the Thames and Chippewas of the Thames, from Ontario, the Montreal Lake and Beardy's band from Saskatchewan and the Ermineskin band from Alberta. All these bands passed council resolutions asking that the voting age be lowered to coincide with provincial and federal voting ages. Individual representatives of Indian associations have also discussed this proposal on numerous occasions.

It is only logical to allow these 10,000 young adults this democratic right to vote in elections on Indian reserves. For it is only when they are given the opportunity to participate that they can prove that they are responsible,

[Mr. Foster.]

mature citizens. It is time we eliminated the contradiction that must be in their minds, namely, why in some situations they are adults whereas in others they are viewed as not being adults.

The intent of the bill is to resolve this anomaly and to give these young citizens their democratic voting rights. I would ask the House to support the bill that is before us this afternoon.

Miss Flora MacDonald (Kingston and The Islands): Mr. Speaker, I too should like to see the democratic process observed for the largest number of Canadians possible and I commend the hon. member for Algoma (Mr. Foster) for introducing this bill. However, I want to see that democratic process exercised with the full consent of the Indian people themselves.

We have all seen and know the outcome and effect of legislation that has been introduced in this House without the views of the Indian people having been canvassed or consulted. We know the reaction to the white paper of 1969. It seems to me that once again we are perhaps being presented with a piece of legislation that did not originate with the Indian people or in which they were not asked to participate.

• (1610)

The Indian people of Canada are not limited to one band or to one region. They and their rights exist across the entire nation. It seems to me that this bill could have the effect of interfering with the internal workings of the band councils without their views being presented or without an opportunity for them to be heard. I should like to know whether the National Indian Brotherhood has been consulted on this matter and whether there has been consultation with member organizations in the various provinces. Are they all in agreement that this is what should happen in respect of local council elections, or is this just a view presented here this afternoon?

Hon. members of this party would readily accept a move to have the voting age in respect of band councils lowered to 18 provided we have the assurance that this is the wish of the Indian people. Too often in the past we here have been guilty of proceeding with legislation which we thought was in their best interests, without having made sure that this was so and that it was being introduced with their agreement. I believe the principle should be established once and for all in this House that any changes to the Indian Act and any moves that might affect the fundamental rights and practices of the Indian people should be carried out only after the widest opportunity has been given them to express their views and to formulate their position.

I would therefore ask the hon. member for Algoma to seek the consent of the House immediately to have this bill referred to the standing committee in order that representatives of the Indian Brotherhood all across the country can make their views known in order that we can be reassured once and for all that this is the wish of the Indian people. Perhaps the hon. member would amend his motion and ask that this bill be referred to that standing committee.