

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Shall order No. 6, standing in the name of the hon. member for Regina West (Mr. Benjamin), stand by unanimous consent?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Shall order No. 7, standing in the name of the hon. member for Hillsborough (Mr. McMillan), stand by unanimous consent?

Some hon. Members: Agreed.

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CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

AMENDMENT RESPECTING OPINION POLLS

Mr. Jack Shields (Athabasca) moved that Bill C-208, to amend the Canada Elections Act (publication of results of opinion polls), be read the second time and referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to rise and present this bill, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act, respecting public opinion polls, to prohibit the publication of polls during the final 14 days of an election campaign. I am sure that all hon. members present will recognize that during the last two weeks of a campaign there is usually a barrage of polls. They come out of our ears. The weekend before election day in the last campaign there was a spat of polls by the Toronto *Star*, FP Publications, CBC and CTV, all with different predictions. The most respectable poll of them all, the Gallup poll, overestimated by 9 percent the Liberal vote in the last election.

I would submit that these polls create confusion among voters and demoralize party workers, candidates, and volunteers. They not only have an effect on the parties and the electorate, but perhaps they also interfere with our democratic process. I appeal to hon. members of this House to be open-minded about polls and about my proposal. I would like very much to see this bill go to committee for further study.

There is a greater deal of interest in whether or not polls create unrealistic voting patterns. The purpose of this bill is to protect the freedom of information available to the voter and to protect our electoral democratic process. It is not censorship. Many journalists and social scientists share the concern that I am expressing today.

● (1600)

I believe in polls but I am concerned about the misleading emphasis that they create, particularly during an election and more particularly during the last two weeks of an election.

I believe in polls but I am concerned about the pretence of the pollsters. Do they really know what they are doing? Sometimes I wonder what they are dreaming of. I think we must put polls in their proper perspective. I am concerned about too much emphasis and the wrong emphasis on polls.

Canada Elections Act

Recent findings published on the "Watson Report" on March 17, 1980, showed that 92 per cent of the people interviewed who voted said they were not influenced by the polls. Eight per cent said they were influenced by the polls. I should like to remind the House that just five per cent may swing an election result one way or the other.

The program also stated that 66 per cent of those who voted and were interviewed believe that others were influenced by the results of the polls. But most people never read the results of polls; all they read are the newspaper headlines which, I submit, highlight the findings and predictions.

I have a very strong belief in our electoral process, Mr. Speaker. General elections are held to elect 282 members of Parliament from 282 different ridings. Elections are a process of our parliamentary system, but polls focus attention on party leaders, not the individuals who are running for election to Parliament. By asking questions such as "which leader would you vote for?", polls may contribute—although unconsciously—to another form of democracy, namely, leadership democracy or leadership by the one strong man.

Perhaps the leader of this party was the victim of this kind of polling in the last election, and I would even suggest that the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) suffered the adverse effect of polls in the May, 1979, campaign. If that is so, the poll or pollsters may be misleading the public as to what an election is all about, and influencing them in deciding for whom they should vote. I should like to remind hon. members that only the people of Mount Royal, Oshawa, and Yellowhead can vote for the respective party leaders when they vote for a member to represent those ridings. To ask all respondents which of the three they would vote for is to place emphasis on a false concept of democracy. Ours is a parliamentary democracy in which 282 members are elected. That is what determines the democratic process, not a misleading question about an unwarranted concept of democracy.

Rather than reflecting the results of our parliamentary elections I believe that pollsters pretend or dream of direct democracy, electronic democracy, or instant democracy, like instant coffee. I think they would like to announce the results and predict the outcome of the elections prior to the writs being issued; I think they would like to predict the results and to indicate the results before they are in, say on the weekend before election day. I think they secretly dream that some day, with more sophisticated technology, it will be possible to poll everyone so that we will not even have to go to the polls on election day although, of course, that is the only poll that counts.

The relationship between polls and our parliamentary democracy should interest all members out of a public concern, if not out of personal interest. We must face the question of possible direct interference in the future of parliamentary democracy.

Ivor Thompson of Thompson, Lightstone and Company, a marketing research firm, made the following admission:

These polls would be more accurate in the American system, but in a parliamentary system, they don't really reflect who will end up in Ottawa.