

*Canada Elections Act*

of speech. These provisions would prevent individuals, journalists, magazines, radio and television to express their views during a crucial seven-days period. For reporters, this would clearly impinge on the public's right to be informed.

If part of the population changed its mind at the last minute, this ban would make it impossible for other people to be informed. It should be noted that this extensive ban would cover all poll results, including those which show a real trend, and not only those which could mislead the population.

Let us look at the results of the last election. Does anyone seriously believe that they were really influenced by the polls? Poll results were indeed widely publicized. Western voters were certainly not much swayed by the poll results showing that the Liberal Party would do extremely well in Eastern Canada. Voters in the Prairies did not rush out to support the Liberal Party. In fact, the effect of those polls was quite the opposite.

The results of all polls were identical, although the figures did vary. Polls conducted by the CTV network, the CBC and Carleton University all pointed to a majority Liberal Government, and that was the outcome indeed.

In a previous debate, the Hon. Member for Athabasca reminded us that a voter can be influenced by the opinions of his fellow citizens. For instance, anyone who is a strong advocate of a majority Government would probably like to know which of the two major parties stands a better chance of coming out on top.

Some voters might lean toward one Party or the other, and yet prefer a minority Government. If they think that the New Democratic Party might possibly end up with the balance of power, they would support that Party only because they would expect it to hold the balance of power. I see nothing wrong with that. Those are useful data which voters are entitled to have, Mr. Speaker. One thing for sure is that the electorate is increasingly conversant with politics, elections and major issues. To my mind, we should not prevent voters from gaining access to information which so far has been available to them, lest they be influenced and likely to change their minds.

Mr. Speaker, that is not the kind of behaviour we should expect to see in a democratic country such as ours. I for one think that we ought to continue to take opinion polls. Any voter in favour of a majority Government and anxious to know which Party will likely hold a majority can conduct his own poll. However, the results of that poll would reflect the trend in his own riding alone, which might be the exact opposite of trends in the rest of the country.

● (1530)

Mr. Speaker, in a land as vast as ours, extending as it does over 5,000 kilometres, people understandably want to know that views are prevailing in other areas. This Party does not want the publication of such information to be prohibited, even though it may influence voters. It is not my view that people generally are a flock of sheep that will simply follow the leader. The results of the last elections, especially west of Winnipeg, do show that if there was a wave in the west, it was not in favour of the Liberal Party but the other way around,

even though people were very well aware of the opinion poll results.

They should also make distinctions between the works of political commentators, syndicate columnists, magazine writers or expert pollsters. Assuming they have identical talent and perception, who would suggest that a political commentator, writing in a number of newspapers, is not in a position to say after speaking to a lot of people that the Liberals or the Progressive Conservatives will win at this or that election? Mr. Speaker, people have consideration for newspapermen. If the Lynches, the Fishers, the Fotheringhams, the Vennats, the Vastels or the Deromes say they took the time to go and check in the field, their word may be taken at face value. On the other hand, admittedly commentators are not always right. But if that is the kind of information people are after, they certainly will believe Mr. Lynch or Mr. Fisher. Generally, the Progressive Conservatives trust Mr. Fisher. Should we prevent newspapermen from writing such news items for weeks on end during election campaigns? Such is not the thrust of the Bill, Mr. Speaker, but anyway! Newspapermen and pollsters create an impression, either personal or scientific. If voters are so easily impressed by observer analyses, instead of looking up the results of GALLUP or CROP polls, they will simply read the columns in the papers. We all know just how authoritative their analyses are. Sometimes, their opinions may differ, just as those of the pollsters do. Opinions do vary, Mr. Speaker, and that is another problem which might occur if such an approach were adopted.

I should like to conclude my remarks by saying that in Quebec, we feel the need to carry out opinion polls during election campaigns, and we think that the current ban on the publication of opinion polls results on the very last day is adequate. We believe enough in freedom of speech, and we rely enough on the judgment of Quebecers to make information available to them up to the very last minute.

[English]

**Mr. Ray Skelly (Comox-Powell River):** Mr. Speaker, in the time available to me I would like to make a few comments concerning the Bill before us and some of the reasons our Party is not overly enthusiastic about providing support for it. It is our feeling that there are some very high priority items which should be considered by way of amendments to the Canada Elections Act rather than the matter before us today, although it is certainly worthy of consideration and some interesting points have been outlined.

The first point I would like to make, Mr. Speaker, is that this House devoted a considerable amount of time to the Constitution of Canada. In that Constitution we looked at the democratic rights in the electoral process in a very determined way. Just to refresh the memory of Hon. Members since we are considering the Canada Elections Act, I would like to read a very short quote from the Constitution, which says that the Canadian Charter of Rights guarantees:

Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons or of a legislative assembly and to be qualified for membership therein.