

Privileges and Elections

● (5:20 p.m.)

The government did not tell the House that there would be revisions to the Canada Elections Act, nor that the voting age would be lowered. We did not even know that the government intended to refer the matter of changing the elections act to the committee or that the committee was to deal with the reduction of the voting age. All we heard was that the reduction of the voting age to 18 was to be studied. How much more discreet can the government be, Mr. Speaker? In those circumstances, how is it possible for the Committee on Privileges and Elections to study the Canada Elections Act and report to Parliament? I submit that the principle under which this committee is to work is a farce. The committee cannot function effectively. Can anyone imagine the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (Mr. Allmand), if he were on the committee, saying, "No, no; I do not think we will go along with the government's recommendation. The voting age should be 19 years." Can you imagine the hon. member for Burnaby-Seymour (Mr. Perrault) saying, "I disagree. The voting age should be 20 years."

All this is a farce, because a decision has already been made and someone obviously is trying to play the role of God around here. No doubt if the Prime Minister were here he would blush. Perhaps his parliamentary assistant is blushing a little.

Since other hon. members wish to speak in this debate, I will limit my remarks. I say, Mr. Speaker, that our House of Commons committees, as they are now, are not useful instruments. Take, for example, the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence, or on Fisheries and Forestry, or on Transport and Communications. On many occasions we have seen how those committees have failed to function as useful instruments. Approximately \$25,000 or \$30,000 was spent on ferrying members of the transport committee to and fro across Canada. They talked about transportation, but when they came back they found that some of the matters they had been talking about were *fait accompli*. What kind of nonsense was that?

It is our duty to tell the Canadian people that the parliamentary committee system really is a farce. I remember attending a committee meeting one day at which we spent five hours deciding the wording of a resolution. Finally, being thoroughly fed up, I said, "Gentlemen this is nonsense; you are wasting

[Mr. Lundrigan.]

time." They thought me a pretty awful fellow because I left. We finally discovered that the question had already been decided in a manner completely opposite to the unanimous recommendation of the committee. Many of those committee members are not here but I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that some of the members came to me and said, "We have made a mistake. We recommended something to the government but the government refused to go along with us. We are upset and, at the first chance we have, we will place our views on record." As far as I am concerned, and I speak as a representative of the people of Canada, we have a responsibility to tell our people that our committee system has failed.

Mr. Les Benjamin (Regina-Lake Centre): Mr. Speaker, I will be brief. I wish to bring out three or four points. One of those has been touched on by the hon. member for Hillsborough (Mr. Macquarrie).

May I begin by saying that if there is one matter that is the business of everybody in Canada, that is the matter of how we conduct elections. It is the responsibility of parliament to see that our people have the maximum opportunities for casting ballots in an election.

Parliament only revises our election machinery in a major way once in every ten or twelve years. No one here will disagree, I think, that this is a big job and that when we undertake it, the members of the committee and of the House of Commons, should pay the maximum attention to it. This question ought to be dealt with in a non-partisan way. If there is one matter that needs to be dealt with in a non-partisan way by any committee, it is the matter of election reform.

The hon. member for Hillsborough spoke about lowering the voting age to 18 years, and I wish to say something about that. On October 3, 1969, I addressed a letter to the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections and sent copies of it to all committee members, to the Prime Minister, to the Minister without Portfolio in charge of housing (Mr. Andras) and to the hon. member for Kenora-Rainy River (Mr. Reid). In the letter I pointed out that there are numerous private bills dealing with the matter of lowering the voting age to 18 years and that parliament has referred a number of matters to the standing committee. I said that in light of remarks made by the Prime Minister and the Minister without Portfolio, it was passing strange that those remarks should be