

Canada Elections Act

Then he outlines the reason.

We thought that instead of going right ahead and proceeding to the study of the electoral law, item by item and section by section, it would be preferable to deal with the most important matter first and to dispose of it, as it affects one third of the law, as I said. Then, when we have discussed and decided that aspect, we can come back and study the items individually and section by section, so as to permit a flow of permanent, constructive ideas, not entangled in questions of absentee voting, electoral lists, and such. This is why we thought it would be best for this committee to proceed with the permanent lists and absentee voting first, and then we would go back to the law and study it section by section.

You can see by these remarks by the vice chairman of the committee that the committee placed this matter very high on the agenda and considered it to be of very great importance. I wish to quote some parts of Mr. Castonguay's statement with respect to absentee voting. As found on page 42, he said:

Mr. Chairman, the question of absentee voting and permanent lists has been studied by committees of the House of Commons for at least 30 years, at various times; and on one occasion the system of permanent lists and absentee voting was adopted, for the federal elections in 1934.

That is the election in 1935 to which I referred.

In 1934 the absentee voting provisions related to miners, fishermen and lumbermen. They had absentee voting privileges if they were absent not less than 25 miles from their own home polling division, and were within the province in which they were living. The system of permanent lists was used for the first time at the 1935 election.

The standing committee on privileges and elections met from 1936 to 1938. They reviewed what had happened in 1935 and decided to discontinue the use of permanent lists. I feel that a fair trial was not made at that time in that the system was only tried once and was not given a second chance. Mr. Castonguay went on to say:

The failure of the system, in my opinion, is attributable to the fact that they adopted permanent lists without the working parts of permanent lists. There was a general enumeration of all the electors in Canada in October, 1934. Then the Franchise Act provided for an annual revision, which was held in June, 1935. The election was held in October, 1935.

With a permanent list, in order to vote an elector's name must be on the list; and with that very system, in 1935, the only time an elector could get on or off that list was during a three week period in June, 1935. After that period was over there was no way of getting on or off the list.

The burden of keeping the list up to date fell chiefly upon the political organizations and the candidates during that period of revision in June, 1935. The revision was not done on a house to house canvass basis.

The onus was upon the elector to go to the registrar and notify him that he had arrived in the district and wanted to be on the list. The onus was pretty well on the political parties to have names removed of electors who had left the electoral district or who had died. Generally speaking, I think everyone was in agreement that

[Mr. Stefanson.]

that list was rather obsolete in 1935—so much so that legislation was passed to scrap the list, and not even use it as a basis for by-elections after 1935.

In my opinion, permanent lists, in order to be effective, must have a biannual house to house revision by enumerators. This opinion is arrived at from a study of permanent lists in the commonwealth countries of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the British Isles. In these countries they have a house to house revision. It is at least a biannual revision on a house to house basis.

An interesting point is that in Australia, where you have compulsory registration and compulsory voting, they still have a biannual revision on a house to house basis. They find it is essential.

Now, I realize that it will be a costly process to establish a permanent list which would prove to be satisfactory and which would guarantee improvement over our present system. If it does not prove feasible to establish absentee voting on a nation-wide basis, then I think consideration should be given to establishing it on a provincial basis, or at least within an electoral district. By establishing this on a provincial basis, it would take care of the majority of voters and on an electoral basis would also take care of a considerable number of electors, including most of the fishermen in the constituency of Selkirk. The ultimate aim should be to see that every Canadian is able to exercise his franchise.

The setting up of a permanent list would also permit the shortening of the period of time between the issue of the writs of election and the date the said writs are made returnable. With the vast improvements in communication and transportation in the past 20 years, I feel that it is feasible and desirable to shorten the duration of election campaigns.

I am sure that there are many other members who would like to speak on this resolution, so I will conclude my remarks by saying that I hope that members from all sides of the house will give serious consideration to the proposals in this resolution and I hope they see fit to support them.

Mr. R. N. Thompson (Red Deer): I want to keep my remarks in regard to this resolution very brief. As I read the subject matter I asked myself, and then I inquired further afield, if perchance any of the resolutions that are brought up by private members ever pass. I was informed, no, they never pass.

Some hon. Members: Yes.

Mr. Thompson: If they do, then I am very happy to be corrected because I think this is a worth-while matter for our consideration. One of the things with which we must be concerned as we watch and take part in the operation of the democratic process, is the improvement of that democratic process to see that it fulfills its intended objective