

Canada Elections Act

the committee who worked so hard for so many months thought even at the end of their deliberations that the committee would not be able to come up with a piece of legislation. We dealt with more than 160 amendments to the original bill with which we were presented, and I believe we held nearly fifty meetings.

It is, of course, evident to anyone in the House that putting a group of parliamentarians around a table to try to come up with a piece of legislation to effectively control election expenses is a difficult task to say the least. It is like having a lot of backroom lawyers sitting around, each of whom considers himself to be an absolute authority on election expenses. Because, of course, they all had to go through an election successfully and somehow by hook, but not by crook, raise the money to present themselves as candidates.

As one who wound up after the last election owing a great deal of money to the bank, and having found himself to be his largest personal contributor—somebody had to have some confidence in me—I found myself wondering a little when we started our meetings who was going to control the money which I was going to contribute to my own campaign or, should I say, go into debt for, because I am still paying for some of those expenses. I am sure that members of this House can understand why it took us this enormous number of meetings, and, imagine, 160 amendments, some of them so arcane that many of us actually became very knowledgeable about one section of this bill, but there were other parts with which we simply could not keep up because to understand the complexity of this whole piece of legislation was very difficult.

With reference to the suggestion in the bill of the hon. member for Rocky Mountain, I would like to bring to the attention of the House that we considered at length the idea of having a special commissioner to occupy himself with abuses of the Election Expenses Act. I think there is a great deal to be said for that. Frankly, the reasoning—and I think it has a great deal of merit—is the same kind of reasoning that worked in the committee. You see, we have all of these members who for the moment at any rate are successful politicians, watching each other, knowing how the tricks can be done and all of them, as I said, experts on the subject of raising money. I think it was felt that the most effective kind of watchdog you could have in an election campaign, where you could risk having a fairly severe sentence and possibly have your election contested, would be the other candidates who were running against you.

● (1640)

Rather than set up another bureaucracy, another agent of parliament, it was felt—although I am inclined to feel still that the suggestion has a great deal of merit—that the most effective watchdogs keeping an eye on candidates in an election, abusing or running afoul of the Election Expenses Act, would be their opponents. One would presume that they would be watching very carefully for this sort of thing. That rests as a most effective method of enforcing the law. We also recognized when we worked on this act that it would have to do for one election, and that after an election was operated with the legislation there undoubtedly would be need for amendments and reform of it. After seeing how it worked out in action, under fire, we

[Mr. Stollery.]

knew there would undoubtedly be things that would have to be done to make it more effective. But we were faced, and I think are still faced in terms of another agent of parliament, with the problem that it would be premature. We were faced with the fact that we had to get something on paper to work with, and having done that we would then go through an election, find out what did not work in the act and the next parliament would make amendments. I think that was one of the really essential pillars in our thinking and also one of the reasons why we were in fact able to come up with a piece of legislation.

After we settle down to address ourselves to this problem, it was foremost in our minds that we would have to do it again, but at least that we must have something constructive, something to work with that members of parliament in the succeeding parliament would be able to analyze and would listen to the Chief Electoral Officer on how effective it was, having him really as the senior person checking and controlling.

It is for that reason that although I see merit in Bill C-107, I think it would be premature for us at this moment to consider enacting something that would only complicate a matter already so arcane that it took us nearly 50 meetings, dealing with over 160 amendments, to enact a piece of legislation. I think the hon. member for Rocky Mountain, who had a very positive attitude and who worked very hard in that committee, should be complimented on bringing this bill forward, but I think he is being a little premature.

Mr. Douglas Stewart (Okanagan-Kootenay): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. Members: Question.

Mr. Stewart (Okanagan-Kootenay): I must say "sorry" to hon. members opposite. Perhaps they will have an opportunity to call "question" in a moment or two, but I hope I will be allowed to carry on for a little while.

Mr. Baker: Is that an undertaking?

Mr. Stewart (Okanagan-Kootenay): I wish I could give that undertaking, but perhaps there are other hon. members who wish to follow me. However, I will attempt to be brief. By way of general preamble I wish to pay a sincere compliment to the sponsor of the bill for his excellent dissertation in support of Bill C-107. I think the same commentary could be made with respect to the speakers following him, the hon. member for Lachine-Lakeshore (Mr. Blaker) and the hon. member for Spadina (Mr. Stollery).

I have what I believe to be a number of relevant comments to put on the record. At least, I hope they will be relevant. I am really not aware of any particular requirement as to the drying out period for printed ink work, nevertheless I would not be surprised if that period in this instance had not yet passed in respect of the Election Expenses Act, chapter 51, Statutes of Canada 1973-74 which, as all hon. members know, was given royal assent on January 14 of this year. Yet, Mr. Speaker, we now have a bill before us which in effect proposes an amendment to section 7 of that act which contains new section 61.1 of the Canada Elections Act. I must suggest, however, with due