

Canada Elections Act

a quarter million to half a million extra electors, on to the rolls it would mean that the cost of holding elections would be considerably increased. I doubt very much whether the results of elections would be changed to any material degree. They might be occasionally; it is a little hard to say. But it seems to me that if we have—as we have in this country—universal suffrage for persons 21 years of age and over, we do in fact in a general election get an adequate and a fair cross-section of the whole population, and that after all is what the purpose of elections is.

I do think also it is undesirable to tamper with these conventional ways of doing things unless—and this is a very important qualification—one is really convinced that by changing them definite improvement will be made.

I do not know whether the hon. member for Assiniboia felt that if this change were made it would be of benefit to one particular party rather than another. I do not think he did. Personally, I do not think it would. On balance I do not think it will have very much effect of any kind, except to increase the number of votes cast, increase the number of voters, increase the cost of elections and possibly, too, impose on a lot of Canadians the duty of making up their minds about questions on which two or three years more reflection would probably enable them to reach conclusions which would be more valid.

I go back again to my own personal experience. I think I was just as intelligent at the age of 18 as I was at the age of 21, but in the interval I had had a certain amount of experience, or a certain number of experiences, sir, and for some of us experience does alter our outlook, and in some cases it does widen our horizons; it does in some cases add to our knowledge. All these things, it seems to me, are desirable.

I would not like to be misunderstood. I am not one of those neo-fascists who believe that only the good or the virtuous or the wise should be allowed to vote. I think it is just as important for those who are not quite so good and those who are not quite so wise to be allowed to vote, too.

Mr. Knowles: After all, you were glad to win the election.

Mr. Pickersgill: Well, what I wanted to make abundantly clear was I did not think that foolishness or stupidity or ignorance should be disqualifications of voters; but I do think that on balance, other things being equal, it is preferable that the voters should

[Mr. Pickersgill.]

be informed, and I think the more information they can have the better. I do think on balance the electorate is a little more apt to be well-informed if the voting age is left at 21, where it now is, than it would be if it were to be reduced in accordance with the bill proposed by the hon. member for Assiniboia. It is for those reasons, sir, that I propose, if this measure should come to a vote, to oppose it.

Mr. T. S. Barnett (Comox-Alberni): I do not intend to discuss this measure at any great length. I agree with the Secretary of State (Mr. Pickersgill) that if the change in voting age which is proposed by this measure does come into effect I would not consider it to be a matter of world-shattering importance. But it is a question, as he has suggested, of judgment on which members from various parts of the house might feel they can express their honest views.

I have listened with a good deal of interest to some of the arguments that he has advanced, and they have included some relation to his own experience as a young voter. I would feel that if we had an election in this country every year there would be a good deal more validity to his argument than appears to me to be at the present time. I might, for example, interject my own particular experience on the first occasion on which I had a chance to cast a ballot. It so happened that the federal election was held when I had reached or just passed the age of 20, which meant, as you can readily see, that before I cast my first vote in an election I had reached the very mature age of 24 or 25. This question should be considered in part at least from that point of view. I have long felt that one of the most disconcerting aspects of our society is the lack of interest which a large percentage of citizens take in the public affairs of the country.

Frankly, my principal reason for rising to support this measure is that I believe it would serve to stimulate in the young people in the country reaching manhood and womanhood a greater interest in the public affairs of our country. I base my reason for that in part at least upon the fact that a great many of our young people in the country are finishing their schooling at approximately the age of 18, and that in most of our modern schools today a certain amount of time is spent in arousing in the students an interest in the institution of government and in various other aspects of public affairs. If it were possible, assuming that an election followed shortly after the graduation of students from high school, to have them participate in an election to the extent of at least casting a vote, then I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, there