

*The Disabled and the Handicapped*

individual has the right to equal benefit of the law without discrimination based on physical disability.

In that context, there could be no happier resolution, no more appropriate resolution than the one we have before us here today.

In my view there are perhaps two really important things that count when it comes to dealing with the handicapped. The first is awareness. The second is action. In this country in recent years there has been an increasing measure of awareness of the special requirements that men and women have in trying to fulfil and achieve their full potential. I would say that a person does not become disabled because of an impairment; he or she becomes disabled when forced to live in a society which is designed for some fictitious or mythical person who has no disability.

There are some features about election law that have been particularly of interest to me, and in my book *Political Rights*, I talk about the concept of administrative disenfranchisement. It is well and good to put a law on these statute books which gives someone the right to vote. By those same laws we in fact disenfranchise certain people for good and sufficient policy reasons.

To date we have seen fit, for example, to disenfranchise judges, inmates of prisons and certain other categories of people. That is one form of expressed statutory disenfranchisement. It is clear public policy. What is not public policy, however, is the administrative disenfranchisement which results when someone seeks to exercise his or her right to vote but finds an obstacle, a barrier, a handicap that is in front of the person and in fact results in that person being disenfranchised.

● (1730)

I listened with interest to the introductory remarks of the Hon. Member for Davenport who brought this resolution before the House and, in particular, to the comments which followed from the spokesman for the New Democratic Party, the Hon. Member for Beaches (Mr. Young). The Hon. Member for Beaches is certainly recognized in this House and beyond as one of the several Members of the Canadian House of Commons who have particularly focused on redressing the long-standing wrongs which confront Canadians who suffer from both physical and mental handicaps. He should understand that I, for my part, and I think other members of the government Party who will speak later, do not intend in any way, as he suggested, merely to talk this measure out in order to have it passed by and be forgotten. As I said at the outset, there must be awareness; there must also be action. Therefore, I would like to place a couple of other considerations before the House and the Hon. Member, in particular, who expressed that concern.

There are other more general reviews taking place of the entire Canada Elections Act. I have the honour to be chairman of a caucus committee which is looking at that. I can say that the Government is particularly mindful of ensuring that the proposed reforms, which have been piling up on the public

agenda year after year as the Chief Electoral Officer has brought forth his report and made suggestions, very few of which were implemented, are comprehensively reviewed so that within a very short term—and hopefully within this session of the thirty-third Parliament—amendments to the Canada Elections Act will be brought in to deal with many changes, not only the ones cited in this resolution, to ensure among other things that all Canadians have full access to the franchise.

Beyond that there is another development, that is, the fact that the parliamentary committee on equality rights is currently reviewing all federal laws to ensure that they comply with the spirit and the letter of Section 15. Major initiatives are under way which will culminate in specific action in the near term. The ideas contained in the resolution of the Hon. Member for Davenport are certainly part of that, but I suggest that it may be inappropriate today for us to take the provisions of this resolution as necessarily the final word or indeed the best solution which can be found.

For example, it bothers me to note that the resolution addresses only polling stations in urban areas. Handicapped and elderly Canadians live in the country from coast to coast to coast, many in rural areas. I think one or two of the other Hon. Members who will speak later will touch further on the question of the distinction between urban and rural and why it would be almost hypocritical on our part to seek to end one form of discrimination while in the process of perpetrating another, namely, maintaining an urban-rural distinction between those who suffer handicaps.

Indeed, just on that point, I did a little research and I would like to put some information on the record. In the 1984 federal election, there was a total of 64,169 regular polls and advance polls. Approximately 55 per cent of those were in buildings with level access. Of this total number of polls, 19,742 were in rural areas. This represents 31 per cent of the total or approximately a third. Because this issue has come to public consciousness at a relatively recent date, although it has been foremost in the mind of handicapped Canadians who have sought to these many years to cast these ballots, and because only recently it is emerging as an issue to be addressed, for example, here in Parliament, the Chief Electoral Office does not have figures as to the number of level access polling stations in rural and urban areas respectively. However, if we make the assumption that 55 per cent of those 19,742 rural polls were accessible, it means that some 8,884 polls were not in buildings with level access.

As quoted in the *Winnipeg Free Press* of March 5, 1985, the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr. Hamel, stated that trying to find 70,000 places across Canada with level access was not only difficult but impossible. We have therefore brought into sharp relief the reality with which we must grapple, that is, taking the principle of equality and bringing it to earth in specific, concrete places in terms which in fact will deal with the question of access. It would be misinterpreting the spirit of this House and the mood of these times to say that we cannot proceed in this direction because of the difficulty of finding