

Election Expenses Bill

Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the leader of the New Democratic Party or the leader of the Créditiste party (Mr. Caouette) being carried on radio and television. That sort of news reporting is a major aspect of the electronics media and shows the importance of the media. That is the point I am making. They have not made much fuss about not being able to sell time in the last hours before election day because they will sell enough in the earlier weeks of the campaign.

Furthermore, according to the advice I have been given it is very doubtful if radio and television are interested in selling such time in the last 24 or 48 hours of an election campaign. Since according to law our elections must be held on Monday or, if Monday is a holiday, on Tuesday, the last hours of bought time would be time available over the weekend, and I am told it is not sensible to do it this way. Nor are the media people anxious to sell that time, because on Saturday or Sunday there are other events which interest their audiences much more. That is the situation—I think I have outlined it correctly—with respect to the electronics media.

An entirely different situation applies to the print media, to the written word. Background articles, newspaper attempts to dig deeper into the election situation, to make a deeper analysis of individuals as well as of parties and programs, reports on the progress of campaigns and editorial comments, all these fall within the purview of the written word, of the newspaper, daily, weekly or otherwise. In this area the printed word still necessarily outdoes, so to speak, the electronics media. My party and I have not always been recipients of the most favourable comments in printed material every day of our existence, Mr. Speaker, so that it can be seen I am not arguing for one party. I am saying that the function of the newspaper is different from the function of the electronics media. Therefore, I doubt whether the limits imposed on the electronics media are really sensible, because newscasts are often much more important than commentaries.

Applying considerations with respect to the electronics media blindly and automatically to the newspapers seems to me to be somewhat illogical and overlooks the difference between newspapers and the electronics media. In any event, newscasts and news stories carried in the newspapers and on the electronics media are much more important than any commentary. The only consolation I enjoyed in my political activities before becoming a Member of Parliament as well as afterwards was from learning that according to surveys only a small percentage of the people read editorials. Most people read news stories rather than editorials and sometimes they read only the headlines and not the news stories.

At all events, it is news stories that people are interested in, so saying you cannot make partisan comments is not of very much help. News stories will be carried in the newspapers and on the media, and when you consider the way in which news stories are written it seems to me that we shall face incalculable difficulties in enforcing the law. You will need to consider the headline—whether it is partisan,—whether it should make a positive statement instead of a negative one, and so on. You will need to consider whether the name of the party spokesman should be included in the headline, whether the name of

the party should be in the headline, whether the headline has been deliberately concocted to do harm to the spokesman or to do somebody else good. This, really, brings us to the area of quasi-censorship and I do not think it is desirable for Parliament to enter that field, although my mind is not closed on this matter in view of some of the comments the minister has made and some of the arguments I have heard.

I do not want to make a long speech. I need not go further except to say to the minister that he has not persuaded us that the basic principles of the bill will be touched in committee. I am glad he is willing to consider some change in the matter of reimbursement. Obviously, he is not willing to consider changes which would make the reimbursement more just, changes in the formula for reimbursement. I think he is willing to consider merely a change in area—

Mr. MacEachen: Wait and see.

Mr. Lewis: The minister says that I should wait and see. Let me say to him that we must oppose this bill on second reading, and that when it goes to committee we will do our very best to see that he makes the bill a workable one. In conclusion, I say that there is no reason for the government's hurry and there is no reason for pushing this bill through quickly, except a political reason affecting the Liberal party. I note that in the present political circumstances in Canada, that party needs all the favours it can get. However, I do not see why we in the opposition should help that party in this respect.

An hon. Member: Who is helping?

Mr. Lewis: We do not hesitate in saying that the bill before us is a phony. It does not deal with election expenses in a meaningful way and it does not serve the democratic process in a meaningful way. If it becomes law, and I suppose the government majority will make it law, I think it will be a disservice to electoral reform. I say this for one reason. Life has taught us that once you create an institution, once you put a law on the statute books, it takes a long time to change that law or tradition or institution established by law. Therefore, passing an inadequate bill, a bill that does not meet the principles of democratic reform—and this bill does not—is not doing a service to the people of Canada.

I reject the notion by which the minister and others say, "You cannot agree on everything but you must concede that this is a step forward." Mr. Speaker, there are some steps forward, so to speak, that are stopped in their tracks. The feet become locked, as it were, in the morass of the bill and you cannot pull out of that morass for years, years and years to come. We want to pass the right kind of bill. We want a bill that deals with election expenses in a meaningful way. If we want that, now is the time to insist on it. Now is the time for members of the Liberal party, as well as of the other parties in this House who harbour real regard for the idea of electoral reform, who harbour genuine concern for a good law dealing with election expenses, to show courage, to stand on their feet and say to the government, "This is not a political matter. Electoral reform is not a partisan question; it touches the democratic process of our society."