

Federal Elections

abused. It is a power prime ministers have had to pay for having.

There seems to be no correlation between when a prime minister calls an election and what the results are. I would say there are two exceptions, however. In 1958 Mr. Diefenbaker used the power with devastating effect and in 1968 Mr. Trudeau used the power with devastating effect and in 1968 there was another set of circumstances at play. Both Mr. Stanfield, who was then leader of the Conservative Party, and Mr. Trudeau who was then the leader of the Liberal Party, were new and both were seeking mandates. The election of 1968 was welcomed by both sides. If we want to change the system, we must first find out where the abuses are. Have there been abuses? There has been no evidence, at least in the last 20 years, of abuse.

Mr. Malone: In 1979.

Mr. Reid (Kenora-Rainy River): In 1979, the hon. member who is the sponsor of the bill says. I refer hon. members to what happened in 1979. The prime minister of the day was defeated. A new government took office. The point of the exercise is that the prime minister, having the power to call an election at his convenience, called it and he was defeated. It may be that he used the power incorrectly or he called the election at the wrong time. But I cannot understand hon. members saying that that was an abuse of power.

If you can find only one exception in the last 20 years, it seems to me there is no powerful case to be made, and the hon. member has not been able to make it.

I want to take another look at the equation. Specifically, who wins and who loses? In this case the prime minister would lose. Who would win?

Mr. Kilgour: Democracy.

Mr. Reid (Kenora-Rainy River): The hon. member for Edmonton-Strathcona says that democracy would win. I do not see how democracy would win by having an election on a fixed date.

Mr. Malone: Because the people would know.

Mr. Reid (Kenora-Rainy River): The hon. member for Bow River indicated in his argument that it would be more convenient to have an election on a specific day. But convenient for whom? It would be convenient certainly for those of us in the House of Commons. He has indicated some doubt as to whether the totality of the population would benefit from the concept of an election at a fixed time. I see no particular argument for a fixed date. If one takes a look at what actually goes on, we do have elections at fixed times. We have an election on the average about every three and a half years. By stating an election must be held every four years we would be denying the Canadian people the opportunity to pass comment on their elected representatives more often than they do now.

• (1650)

I do not advance that as a serious argument, but I do say that the arguments of convenience or predictability do not hold much water. I say that for two reasons. First, there would be no predictability, as we have seen in the last 20 years. We have had three elections where governments have lost the confidence of the House. Under the bill of the hon. member for Crowfoot, we would still have elections. Those elections would be held when the time came, irrespective of whether or not there was a fixed time. The next election, presumably, if it went to its full term, would be held four years, plus or minus 40 days in advance or behind, a total of an 80-day variation.

Again we are not looking at predictable times or fixed times. What we are looking at is a bracketing of times. We are looking basically at removing flexibility in the system and putting it into a system which would have that much less flexibility.

We have to see what are the abuses we want to correct. The hon. member has not been able to adduce any. What are the benefits we would achieve by making this change and the benefits we would get by some form of predictability? On his own evidence and in his own bill, this would not be very much more predictable than that which we already have.

If the hon. member is not able to make a case that is powerful and strong in terms of abuses and powerful and strong in terms of benefits, why should we proceed to committee? Why should we put more time into this kind of proposal when the hon. member has not made his own case?

I want to deal with some of the questions which were raised by the hon. member for Thunder Bay-Atikokan (Mr. McRae), that is the question of the American system versus the Canadian system. I must confess that I have a completely different focus of attention than he does. What we are dealing with is not necessarily the Congressional system versus the parliamentary system. We are looking at two contrasting parliamentary systems. It is important to recognize that when the American revolution took place, they basically adopted the British Parliamentary way and froze it. We have taken the British system since that time as it has developed and grown. Consequently out of that we have had two distinct political cultures.

One of the things people complain about in our system is that it is too adversarial. It may very well be, but by and large what we are here to do is to argue out different points of view. We are here to argue in this House at least three separate points of view on the issues that come before us. There is nothing in the party structures in the House that I have ever seen that has prohibited the very strong presentation of the regional point of view. In my view, nothing has stopped the government of the day from accepting those regional points of view in decisions that are made.

I can recall when I was in opposition that we had a problem with VIA Rail. The minister of transport of the day sat down with the two members concerned. We discussed it and he came forward with a solution which, while not everything that I asked for, certainly took into account the needs of my region. I