

Private Members' Business

Most of the interveners favour the development of comprehensive definitions of election expenses, a comprehensive definition which is much clearer than the definition which now exists. The royal commission will be reporting to us in the near future. It has been working on this issue for over two years. I believe it is our obligation to hear what the commission has to say on the topic of election expenses before we take legislative action in this House. To do otherwise would indicate that we have no respect for the judgment of the commission or those who provided input.

We have all had the opportunity to sit on committees of this House. Most of us have presented reports and several of us have been irritated when those reports seemed not to have been listened to. Let us not jeopardize the future recommendations of this commission by making a premature decision.

The commission will have taken into consideration the full implications of changing the present definition of election expenses. That was a key part of its mandate. It will have looked at the issue in depth, and I am sure we can benefit from its efforts.

As I said, the commission's report is expected very soon. We should provide it the opportunity to fulfil its mandate and, when it does so, we can look at its recommendations as a package. It is my view that changing the definition of election expenses could have such vast consequences for the Election Act as a whole that we have no choice but to look at this in the context of a package of reforms.

There is little doubt that if we amend the provision in the act containing the definition of election expenses we will need to amend other sections in the legislation as well. An integrated set of reforms is what is needed.

The definition of election expenses is not the only imperfection in the election laws. There are many other issues before the commission and these too will be addressed in its report.

My position is that we should wait until the royal commission delivers its report and we have had the opportunity to review its findings before proceeding with any amendment such as that presented today in Bill C-283.

Mr. Howard Crosby (Halifax West): Madam Speaker, let me begin my remarks on Bill C-283 by underlining those made by the member for Red Deer when he said

that the obligation of this House of Commons is to await the report of the royal commission on electoral reform.

To do anything else by way of tinkering or tampering with the provisions of the Canada Elections Act would be to fly in the face of the efforts being made by that royal commission which really represents not only the Government of Canada but the people of Canada in the process of electoral reform. It has given an opportunity to all Canadians to appear before the commission and air their views on changes in the Canada Elections Act.

This is especially true of the matter of election expenses which lies at the heart of the whole electoral control system. We could talk about election expenses on the one hand and the definition of election expenses, but that extends over into the limits on election spending and a number of other areas that are really at the heart of the control of elections across Canada.

I do not think there is any doubt that the proper course for the House of Commons is to examine this bill and take an interest in any recommendations for change in the elections law, but when it comes actually to changing the provisions of the Canada Elections Act we should only do so on the basis of recommendations made by the royal commission on electoral reform.

I want to make some remarks about the whole process of election expenses. I have a very personal interest in the matter because I happened to be involved in the first elections that took place in Canada under the new provisions governing election expenses. These were the by-elections that were held in 1978. Since then I have faced the application of the Canada Elections Act in four subsequent elections. It is amazing how the attitude toward the provisions has changed over those five elections.

At the outset there was a fairly flexible interpretation of the rules. Over that decade the interpretations have become more fixed and more definite. The election officials are always reaching out for clear definitions.

If I may, I will at least support the member for Churchill to the extent of saying that we all recognize the need and desirability of having a very carefully crafted definition of election expenses, but I question whether this House of Commons and members of the House are at this stage of development prepared to decide in exact terms what that definition should be. I question whether we have the ability to make that determination at this point.