

Supply

Mr. Cook: Alberta is basically in the same position, except that Alberta gets another hour, which we on the west coast do not get.

Mr. Epp: And the Yukon as well.

Mr. Cook: I am totally in agreement with the hon. member for Provencher (Mr. Epp). There are three vacancies in the House of Commons. Three constituencies are not represented here, and it does not look as if they will be for a very long time. The Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) could call byelections tomorrow. He has not done so yet, and he does not have to do so until September. Even when he does call them, perhaps in the fall, he can set any date he likes, up to 1985, for the byelections to be held. This is an area of reform of electoral law which could be addressed very easily and should be addressed very quickly.

The whole idea of this motion today is to deal with the government's bill. It is a way to bring on discussion about the bill. I agree with members of the New Democratic Party, particularly those from British Columbia, and I share their concerns about the bill. Some ridings in the Kootenays are 500 miles long. Some foresters and miners have to travel for up to two hours to get to polling stations. I have great sympathy for the point of view of members of the New Democratic Party on this matter. Everyone in this country has the right to vote at a reasonable time, and the bill would deny that to my province.

The government briefing paper to which I referred earlier was a memorandum to the cabinet dealing with this matter. I gave a copy of it to the hon. member for Provencher, not knowing he would say some of the things I wanted to say.

Mr. Epp: Say them again.

Mr. Cook: The briefing paper says:

A recent Gallup poll showed that 65 per cent of respondents (74 per cent in British Columbia) would favour legislation to delay the counting of eastern ballots until the polls are closed in the West.

This is what the government gets in a briefing paper:

This option itself is easily dismissed as impractical, because of the problems it would create in terms of keeping ballot boxes secure and making election workers put in an unreasonably long day.

Well, tough apples! It is about time eastern Canada put in a little longer day than we on the west coast do, and that is the solution right there. Ballots in the east should not be counted until polls in the west close at a reasonable time. That would solve the problem easily. It would accomplish the objective with only a little, shall we say, inconvenience to other parts of the country rather than making the west always the region which has to make do and change. Having polls in Vancouver close at 5.30 in the afternoon would deny 20 per cent to 40 per cent of the electorate their opportunity to get out and vote. Anyone who thinks that is fair certainly does not understand or have an appreciation or any feeling for western Canada. The bill is supposed to help reduce western alienation. All the government is doing is making western alienation more severe. The government will be seriously criticized for that by people in the west. I have a difficult enough time defending the national government as it is right now. For heaven's sake, the

government should withdraw this bill. It is not right. It is not what we want. It will not do what the government says it will. By the government's attempting to put it through, it will only increase western alienation.

Mr. Ted Miller (Nanaimo-Alberni): Mr. Speaker, when I listened to the speech made by the first speaker for the Progressive Conservatives tonight, I thought we would have a fairly reasonable debate on this very important bill, but we can always count on the Minister of Employment and Immigration (Mr. Axworthy) to lower the level of debate in this chamber. Every time there is an opposition day it is unfortunate that that minister comes into the House and lowers the level of debate so that we cannot deal with anything of any substance.

The minister said he was upset to be discussing this today because there are all kinds of other issues and this is not an important one. We have been debating very important issues on opposition days, and this is one. We have been debating unemployment, energy policy and interest rate policy, but what have we seen coming from this government? We have seen no change in those policies, despite what the minister might refer to as a reasoned and logical debate. I think the Minister of Employment and Immigration has done a disservice tonight not only to the opposition parties but also to his own party.

Mr. Blaikie: And that is not easily done.

Mr. Miller: Why are we dealing with this issue tonight? The issue relates to some of the other economic issues in western Canada which we have been debating over the years and on which we have been looking for some action. The minister should be aware that workers in British Columbia have already had their jobs taken away by him. There are 148,000 people in British Columbia no longer working as a result of the economic policies followed by this government, and we are in the House tonight to see that the government does not also take away their right to vote.

The history of the bill we are talking about tonight is interesting, and so is the intention of the government in introducing it. The Liberal government senses that there is alienation and anger in western Canada. It is reacting in this way as a sop to British Columbia. The government is saying it will close the polls in British Columbia at the same time they close in the rest of Canada, without looking at the implications for working Canadians in British Columbia, Alberta and Yukon. This is discrimination on a regional basis and, to some extent, on a class basis. Workers who go to work early in the morning and come home late at night have difficulty meeting their polling obligations and responsibilities. This is class discrimination, and it is discrimination against the west, which already feels alienated from the federal government.

The anger in the west is caused not so much by the fact that the east votes early or that the east votes for one party and not another but because of the cynicism with which the Liberals approach the electorate. The 1980 election campaign was