

*Privileges and Elections*

present in the office of the returning officer, although an agent could be present in the office of each deputy returning officer in the constituency. I hope the committee will recommend some modification to the Act to rectify this omission. There can be no possible objection to it.

When I was with the committee I asked the returning officers of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Quebec whether they could see any reason why a candidate should not have the privilege of having an agent in their offices as well as those of the deputy returning officers. They assured me they could see no objection to this. I hope that when the report of this committee comes to the House such a provision will be recommended.

I know there is a great deal of anxiety and concern felt by all members of the House that this matter should receive prompt attention. As hon. members on the other side have indicated, a substantial period of time has passed since this act was amended. It is hoped that those sections of the Act referred to in the resolution will be dealt with now, and the sections dealing with electoral expenses will be dealt with later. I hope, Mr. Speaker, that as indicated by the hon. member for Winnipeg North Centre (Mr. Knowles) this matter will be referred to the committee for immediate attention.

**Mr. John Lundrigan (Gander-Twillingate):** Mr. Speaker, I just want to say two or three words to associate myself with the remarks of the hon. member for Hillsborough (Mr. Macquarrie) who, in a most outstanding manner, has placed before the House the objections of most members to a principle which is much broader than the mere reference of the Canada Elections Act to the committee. The impression I received from his remarks was that there is danger of the committee system becoming nothing better than a joke. We hear a great deal about the downgrading of Parliament and the downgrading of the committee system. I have heard members of the various parties indicate that this is not too serious a matter. But I say right here and now, and I think this is a fairly non-partisan point, that out of the total of 264 members, at the moment there are only 25 members present. Indeed, at one point this afternoon there were only 16. This at a time when we are considering one of the most fundamental rights of the people, the right to vote. Surely, this is an example of the way Parliament has been downgraded.

There is absolutely no enthusiasm in this House, Mr. Speaker. If someone were to stand up and state that we were about to spend a billion dollars to encourage the development of the English language in St. Pierre, no one would get excited about it. The legislation would go through in a couple of hours and that would be the end of it. There is a complete lack of enthusiasm for the committee system. I get fed up to the gills with hearing about this committee system day after day. We just do not have one, Mr. Speaker. Last year I sat for weeks and weeks on the fisheries committee discussing the seal fishery. We interviewed many eminent people in the field of animal culture, the humane societies and people from all across Canada. We made a unanimous report to the House of Commons but the House, just weeks later, acted without any reference at all to that report. For goodness sake, Mr. Speaker, let us tell the people of Canada that the committee system is a farce.

When I came here last year I had already heard of participatory democracy and how there were going to be great changes in the rules. The hon. member for Rosedale (Mr. Macdonald), is it—rosebud or rose something—told us, especially the backbenchers, “Don’t worry, we are going to bring in rule changes to give you a much more important function in the House; you will no longer be frustrated because under the committee system you will have a chance to voice your opinions and give direction to the legislative process.” That was what we heard and what we told the Canadian people.

Today we are being asked, as the representative body of the Canadian nation, to refer the Canada Elections Act to the Committee on Privileges and Elections. Mr. Speaker, that is false. The government has stated in the Speech from the Throne that the time has come to extend the franchise in federal elections and that it will, therefore, recommend to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections of the House of Commons that the voting age be lowered to 18. But, Mr. Speaker, note that the government did not say it would make this recommendation to Parliament. Now, I do not come from the most democratic part of Canada, but in my province the Speech from the Throne refers matters to the legislature, the body elected to represent the people. We know that, according to the Speech from the Throne, the government intends to recommend to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections that the voting age be lowered to 18.