

Supply

Mr. Broadbent: I suspect that is a common tendency amongst all parties, and is a reflection of the democratic process that is based on the party system.

The crucial point I want to make is that although we do not have hard data on this question for Canada compiled by Canadian political scientists or journalists who may be interested in the subject, the reality is that in terms of the practical experience of the politicians I know, some 60 per cent to 70 per cent of Canadians who vote on election days actually vote between the hours of 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. The point is overwhelmingly clear, therefore, that most Canadians vote at the end of the day. They do not vote in the morning or in the afternoon; they vote in the early evening. The reason for this is straightforward. Men and women are at work during the day. They come home and have their evening meal, and they go out to vote. Perhaps they go out to vote before they have their evening meal, but they do it at the end of their day's work. If they are commuters, they may have a fair distance to go in returning home from work, and that too delays the time when they will be able to vote.

Another category of person about whom we obviously have to be concerned in this context of the time at which people actually vote are those who are at home with small children. Men or women looking after children during the day may have to wait until someone else returns home from work before they can be spelled off and have a chance to go out and vote. All these self-evident reasons explain why, in our rough judgment—I think members of the House in all parties will agree—the vast majority of Canadians vote in the early evening at some time between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m.

That is part of the background of my party's concern which led to the motion before the House today. Another part of it is that I, as a member of the House and a party leader, heard some time early in February that the government was in fact seriously considering changing the hours for voting in Canada. The proposal I heard, which was being seriously considered by the cabinet, was that the hours for voting would vary across the country. They would be based on the principle that voters would start to vote late in Atlantic Canada and finish late and, reciprocally, at the other end of our country on the west coast, they would start to vote early in the day and finish early. The principle behind that proposal was that Canadians would be voting at a common real time across the nation. The reason given by the Liberal members who have supported this idea is that western Canadians in particular have been unhappy with the hours which have been in effect for years, and that people in the west have been quite dissatisfied, when they have seen election results come in from Atlantic Canada but, in particular, after the results from central Canada—Ontario, and Quebec—were added, that the election was over, frequently before they had even gone out to vote. That has been the argument, and I see some hon. members on the government side nodding in agreement that that is the reason—

Mr. Smith: We are trying to be responsive.

Mr. Broadbent:—behind a proposal—which, as I said, I heard about early in February—the government would make and which has now been put to the House in the form of a government bill presented for first reading.

I want to talk about the reality of this alleged perception or concern. If we take into account the elections since 1957—and there have been ten of them—fully eight of the ten elections have not had their final outcome determined until the results from western Canada were included. I repeat that in eight of the ten elections we did not know which party—or parties, if we had minority governments—would form the government until the results from western Canada were in. In fact, of the eight, the results of four of those elections were not known until the results in the province of British Columbia were known.

The point I am making is that the talk about the need to change hours because of a perception in western Canada that the ball game was completely over and that the people in the west somehow did not count—although obviously every man and woman has one vote—was largely, in my judgment, based on a reaction to the last general election. I can well understand that. Many people were very unhappy that a fellow named Pierre Elliott Trudeau and the Liberal Party were elected to be the Government of Canada. As a New Democrat I understand that, just as my Conservative colleagues will understand that, because the west is roughly divided between the New Democratic Party and the Conservative Party. In that particular election it was entirely understandable that the majority of Canadians in the western part of our country should have been unhappy. They knew that a majority government was elected before the results from the west came in.

• (1750)

The point I want to make, and it is a serious one, is to question whether we should tinker with an electoral system which has made it possible for the majority of citizens to vote between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m., to take into account certain feelings that were produced in one general election. I think this is a very basic question.

When I heard of the proposed changes in hours I wrote to the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) on February 10 this year and made it clear on behalf of this party that it would oppose any changes of the kind being discussed. I indicated that I should like to hear from him about the government's intention and his argument for it. I received no answer except the usual acknowledgement from an official that the letter would be brought to his attention. I did not receive the commitment I had been seeking that the government would not proceed with the bill, nor did I receive a reply to the substance of my concern. Of course, it is the Prime Minister's right to reply or not and I am not quibbling about that.

More than three months ago this party made it clear that it did not like the hours that were being proposed, and I will come to the reasons for that in a moment. I urged the Prime Minister not to proceed with what I heard was the government's intention to change the hours of voting in