

*Canada Elections Act*

the elections act should receive constant review and scrutiny and that the ultimate aim should be to provide every Canadian with the franchise. I also realize that the elections act has to be written in such form that it is practically foolproof and so that abuses of the act will be at a minimum.

Having expressed my views on the need of constant review and scrutiny of the elections act, I wish to point out to the house a situation that exists in my own constituency. I am referring to the fishermen on lake Winnipeg being disfranchised. In 1958, when the election was held on March 31, the fishermen were able to vote because at that time of year there are no fishing operations going on in Manitoba and therefore the fishermen were at their respective homes. The situation in 1962, with the election being held on June 18, was entirely different. The fishermen were then out on their fishing grounds on lake Winnipeg and consequently were unable to vote.

I am sure that other members have constituencies with similar though not identical situations and perhaps not on as large a scale as exists in the Selkirk constituency. Several hundred men there are engaged in fishing and they were disfranchised. Yet at the time of the election they were in their own constituency, as all of lake Winnipeg is within the boundaries of the Selkirk constituency. These men are vitally interested in public affairs and were distressed about not being able to vote.

At the time of the last election I checked the elections act thoroughly and consulted with the chief electoral officer to see if there was any way in which these men could be accommodated. However, under the present elections act there is no provision to look after this type of situation. I was asked why they could not vote at the advance poll. The situation is this. The summer fishing season on lake Winnipeg starts on June 1 and ends early in August. The fishermen generally leave home about one week before the season opens or around May 24. The advance polls were open on Saturday, June 9 and Monday, June 11.

The amendments to the elections act in 1960 provide for more advance polls so that now anyone who will be away on election day can vote at an advance poll. This was a forward step. Each advance poll is set up to accommodate a certain area and only those on the voters lists for the polls in that area can vote at the advance poll. This means that the fishermen would have had to come back to their homes to be able to vote at the advance poll. They could neither vote at the advance poll nor at a regular poll in the vicinity of their fishing grounds.

I was also asked why the advance polls were not held earlier. The answer to that is that the official nomination day is two weeks before election day, and in this case it was on Monday, June 4. Then there has to be time given to print the ballots and distribute them to the deputy returning officers for the advance polls. Therefore the dates of Saturday, June 9 and Monday, June 11 were the earliest dates that the advance poll could be held. My understanding is that the only way to assure the fishermen of their franchise is to set up a permanent voters list and use absentee voting. I understand that the province of Manitoba has amended its voting regulations so that the fishermen can vote by mail.

So far, Mr. Speaker, I have only mentioned one category of people who have been disfranchised but no doubt there are many others. Another large group no doubt would be construction workers. These workers would be scattered all over the country. By setting up a permanent list and using absentee voting a person would be able to vote for a candidate back in his or her home riding regardless of where he or she might be working. I feel it is desirable to achieve this. An absentee form of voting has been established for service personnel and I believe that this privilege could be and should be extended to all Canadians.

Permanent voters lists have been established in Great Britain, Australia and many states of the United States. As far as I know they are working with a reasonable degree of success. My understanding is that absentee voting was used in the federal election of 1935. I also understand that at that time it did not meet with too much success. However, I am inclined to believe that the failure was not due to the system but rather to the application of it. My experience has been that in most cases when new legislation is introduced unforeseen things develop which generally require ironing out. No second chance was given to this system when it was tried out in 1935.

I want to refer very briefly to the minutes of proceedings and evidence of the standing committee on privileges and elections when they met in April, 1960. Mr. Castonguay, the chief electoral officer, appeared as a witness before that committee. First of all, I wish to read what the vice chairman said, as found on page 41:

Now we come to the main item for discussion at this meeting, which was considered by the meeting of the subcommittee on agenda and procedure. The subcommittee recommends that the matter of permanent lists and absentee voting be the first topic for consideration by the committee.