

Canada Elections Act

Mr. Epp: Mr. Speaker, I do not know whether the hon. member is directing that question to me. I do not believe it is in my power to give such an assurance; I believe that is the Speaker's role.

The present situation is one in which members of the Armed Forces and their spouses can vote in their home ridings. This has not been the case with teachers, and the argument has been that they were not under contract with the Department of National Defence and thus did not qualify as public service electors. Consequently they did not have the right to vote.

I was made aware of that fact through past involvement as a teacher. Friends of mine teaching abroad, especially in Europe, found they could not vote, so they contacted me and asked me whether I would bring forward a private member's bill which would right this anomaly. This was done and, as I have already said, this proposal was encompassed within Bill C-426, introduced in the last session on June 21, 1977.

Although the teachers we are speaking of worked for the Department of National Defence, under contract with that department, the argument has always been that they were on leave from their school boards and, as a result, when their term of service was completed they would return to the service of their school boards. Therefore they were really in a state of limbo; they simply did not have the right to vote.

We are speaking about a fairly large group of people. I do not have statistics for the present school year, but we are looking at between 400 and 450 electors; I think that is a fairly accurate estimate. We received the support of the Canadian Teachers' Federation and their provincial organizations, as I have said, as well as the Canadian School Trustees' Association.

When one looks at what has transpired one sees the government has in fact been playing footsie with this amendment. It could have amended the Canada Elections Act well before the Election Expenses Act. In a bulletin issued by the Canadian Teachers' Federation dated January 11, 1977, it is stated that they had the understanding that this topic was to be debated in the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections on April 13, 1976. I quote from this bulletin:

For some reason they—

That is, the discussions.

—were sidetracked from any earnest consideration of the problem. The CTF president and the Minister of National Defence have both made subsequent representations to the President of Privy Council.

I should like to quote an extract from a letter from General Quinn, then commander of Canadian forces in Europe, dated December 3, 1976, regarding a bulletin dealing with the topic of federal voting rights. He had this to say in part:

—MND has advised the CTF that he would recommend that the MND support a CTF request to the President of Privy Council to again seek an appropriate amendment to the Canada Elections Act to ensure the franchisement of Canadian teachers serving in our overseas schools.

That was followed up by a letter from the then president of the Canadian Teachers' Federation to the Minister of National Defence asking him to use his good offices to bring in an

amendment which would permit teachers under contract with DND to vote. A similar letter was also directed to the President of Privy Council (Mr. MacEachen). We have had to wait until today to see what I regard as a legitimate, just, and fair request placed before the House of Commons.

The most interesting correspondence is that sent by the hon. member for Northumberland-Miramichi (Mr. Dionne), in his capacity as the then parliamentary secretary to the Minister of National Defence, to the President of Privy Council, dated November 26, 1976. In that letter he had this to say:

It is therefore the request of my minister that the matter be referred to the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections for resolution during this session of parliament. Such action would remove a serious cause of discontent amongst overseas teachers. I am sure you can understand that these individuals find it extremely difficult to comprehend why they cannot vote, when the people with whom they work day by day have the franchise.

Mr. Dionne (Northumberland-Miramichi): Hear, hear!

Mr. Epp: The hon. member for Northumberland-Miramichi recognizes his own words, so that is an achievement in itself. What should be remembered is that these teachers are assessed income tax. They have had to pay their unemployment insurance premiums and make Canada Pension Plan contributions. To all intents and purposes they were Canadians serving on Canadian Armed Forces bases in the service of their country.

While some might think that this is a rather small victory tonight, I hope the amendment will carry with the unanimous consent of the House and will be an indication of our support for these teachers who are serving their country. I feel that this is an important step in the democratic process. The right to vote is their inalienable right, one that is being recognized at long last.

For myself, I am very pleased that while the government has not seen fit to pass Bill C-426, in essence this is what is happening this evening. I am therefore glad the government has approved that bill.

Mr. Leonard Hopkins (Renfrew North-Nipissing East): Mr. Speaker, as I said previously, as an ex-teacher I wish to thank members on both sides of the House for their continued lobbying and for the good rapport which exists in the adoption of this motion.

● (2142)

I was an elementary schoolteacher for seven years, a principal for four years, a high school teacher for five and one half years, and a vice-principal for one and a half years. In the five and one half years spent at Canadian Forces Base, Petawawa, I came to know many people in the Canadian Armed Forces. After my arrival in Ottawa I became involved in NATO and familiar with the conditions under which people work and live abroad.

What we are dealing with tonight is not an item of partisan politics but rather an item of the basic right of a Canadian to vote in a Canadian election. There are 309 teaching personnel overseas with the Department of National Defence at the