Canada Elections Act

time. It does not try to project or, as was stated earlier, to massage unreasonably. I think elections are decided by very different forces—by tradition and party loyalty, by region, by leadership and, above all, by the issues of the day. I think these are the real motivations.

● (1650)

I think 1980 was a typical election in that respect. In my riding opinion polls did not change the dislike of my voters for the 18-cent oil excise tax. It did not change the dislike of the voters in my riding for the failure of the government of the day to provide the mortgage tax credit scheme or the failure of the government of the day to provide some kind of new economic order. It was the government of the day that failed, not the opinion polls.

I suggest to the author of the bill that he has thought out his ideas carefully, but he should go back to them. If he does not like polls, perhaps he does not like their results. The simple answer for all of us is that perhaps we should do a better job and change the results. If the author of the bill considers this an abuse of the system, perhaps he should reconsider and examine whether we are afraid of a technique which tells us about ourselves and because of that fear he is ready to stifle a more fundamental liberty. In my judgment the best road to follow is to expand our information, to let this bill disappear without any further discussion, and to keep on with our efforts to broaden our understanding of ourselves instead of trying to stifle our understanding of ourselves.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Cousineau (Gatineau): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise this afternoon on this abomination now before the House. It is an abomination, Mr. Speaker, that one should have the gall to introduce Bill C-208 sponsored by the hon. member for Athabasca (Mr. Shields). This bill will prevent the publication of the results of opinion polls during the 14 days prior to a vote in any riding where an election is being held. The introduction of this bill, Mr. Speaker, shows a lack of respect for our democratic process and the Canadian electorate.

[*English*]

The usual reason given in defence of attempting to deny the public access to information which may be of interest, if not of assistance to them, is that the publication of the results of opinion polls, either at any time during an election period or during the last week or two before polling day, unduly influences the voting behaviour of the electorate. It is argued that the publication of the result of an opinion poll showing one party with a substantial lead will create a bandwagon effect in which the voters will flock to the leading party in a desire to be on the side of the eventual winner. That is nonsense. It is an argument usually made by parties and candidates who have lost elections. If they had won, there would be no mention of undue influences, only of how accurate the poll was and how

perceptive the electorate were. Therefore it comes as no surprise that it has usually been Conservative members of this House who have introduced bills proposing the prohibition of the publication of the results of opinion polls.

[*Translation*]

But where were all those voices last year and after May 22, 1979; where were those voices during the Thirty-first Parliament? They were all silent, Mr. Speaker. We did not hear any Conservative members talk about that, there were no motions or similar bills introduced.

[*English*]

The next argument of the supporters of bills such as Bill C-208 is that polls are inaccurate and therefore misleading, and that results should not be published in order to prevent the misleading of the electorate. I should like to refer to an article "Can We Believe the Polls?" It appeared in the February 13, 1980, issue of the *Toronto Star* and read as follows:

> While as a nation we are not as poll happy as Great Britain, clearly the polls are becoming an increasingly important part of our political life. Although there are those who would like to ban or control the use of public opinion polls in election campaigns, political realists recognize that they are here to stay and that their use by politicians, journalists and academics alike is likely to continue to increase.

> This raises the fundamental question: Can we believe what the polls tell us? The answer would seem to be a qualified "Yes".

> Those who use (or misuse) the information provided by the polls often overlook the fact that all polls, regardless of how carefully they may be done, are subject to error. But unlike other types of "error" that we make in forecasting trends in the weather, the stockmarket, etc., the error in polls is precise, predictable and based on sound mathematical probabilities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion issues a comment at the end of every report and points out that the figures given are not accurate and there is a margin of error of 4 per cent more or less in 19 out of 20 surveys it makes.

[*English*]

However, because a given poll is based on only one sample, there is no way to determine whether it is that one "bad" sample in 20. Therefore the probability of it being off by more than a certain percentage can only be estimated and the appropriate caution introduced in its interpretation, hence the standard Gallup statement. But how far out must an estimate be in order to be "bad"? This is determined by such things as the sample size, the methods used in organizing the survey, and the level of possible inaccuracy a client is willing to accept. The common Gallup level of plus or minus 4 per cent is quite commonly accepted and occurs frequently in nationwide random samples of about 1,000 respondents. While it is possible to reduce this somewhat by using larger samples, this is seldom done because it is simply too costly to justify the small gains in accuracy that are made. Conversely, very small samples become highly inaccurate and therefore are seldom used by reliable firms.

For these reasons most samples commonly used in Canadian polling have between 700 and 1,200 respondents. Larger sam-