

*Canada Elections Act*

hon. member for Coast Chilcotin (Mr. St. Pierre), I have a particular reason for taking part with some pleasure in this debate. It happens that the hon. member and myself are from the same department of the same newspaper in the same city, Vancouver. We both served in it at one time. No matter how much we may have disagreed in the past and still may disagree on many other matters it is good to think we agree in principle on such an important issue as he has brought forward, the reform of the electoral law of Canada.

This subject is long overdue for action. Over the years members of all parties, such as the hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard), have taken up this issue at the election committee level and urged that reform take place. For many years it has been the plight of many Canadians to be disenfranchised because of no absentee voting procedure for them.

Naturally reference has been made to the larger constituencies in different parts of Canada, particularly in British Columbia. In the area from which I come, the lower mainland of British Columbia and in particular my constituency of Surrey, there are hundreds if not thousands of industrial workers who are disenfranchised by the lack of absentee balloting every time a federal election is held in the summer. We have hundreds of fishermen in that area, many miners, and many hundreds of loggers who are away from their homes when elections are held. They would like to vote for or against the candidates in their own constituency but they are out of the constituency long before the advance poll is held. As the hon. member for Coast Chilcotin has pointed out, advance polls are of little or no use to many Canadians because they do not have an absentee ballot to use when they are hundreds of miles away from their own polling booths.

The proposals the hon. member has made summarize so well the need for action in this regard that I will conclude what I have to say in about one more minute so that I will not contribute in any way to talking out the motion. I would simply add that the hon. member's point with regard to armed services voting is also very good. As matters stand members of the armed services are the only group of Canadians who are made distinctive at the time of federal elections or, if you prefer, are discriminated against by the fact that their votes are tabulated separately. I am sure

[Mr. Mather.]

that the principle involved in the hon. member's motion is such that it will commend itself to all members in all parties. I would hope that if the principle is not approved in the house tonight the house could at least agree to send the motion to the appropriate committee as being material requiring action and having the blessing of the members of the house.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. André Fortin (Lotbinière):** I should like to comment briefly on this motion from one of our colleagues, to amend the Canada Elections Act.

Mr. Speaker, I wish first to congratulate the hon. member for taking the lead in trying to have the Canada Elections Act amended, although I must tell him that I do not quite share his views. I shall try to set forth my reasons quickly. I wish to point out that some parts of the motion, particularly the last sections, will encourage the fraudulent practices now prevailing in the Armed Forces and among civil servants stationed outside Canada. This motion does not change anything to the way they vote which I think is basically wrong.

Mr. Speaker, so as to bring the discussion back to its true framework and to show how important this matter is, I should like to say first of all that Canadian citizens must have every opportunity to cast their votes. I therefore agree in principle with the hon. member's proposals since it is an attempt to improve the efficiency of the vote. It can be noted by everybody at the time of an election—whether the last election or the previous one—that the rate of absentee voting keeps increasing, for the simple reason that people, because of the government inaction or the people's indifference for governments, have lost any interest whatsoever in public affairs. It can be seen that the number of non-voters keeps increasing from one election to the next. Of course, there may be several reasons for that, but we would be led to discuss political issues, and I do not want to turn this into a political debate, since the matter being looked into is the Elections Act.

Therefore, Mr. Speaker, it is my opinion that the hon. member's attempt has merits per se. We should aim at giving every Canadian citizen a chance to vote if he knows in advance he will be away from his constituency on polling day, since it is in the interest of Canada as a whole to give every Canadian