

Canada Elections Act

they campaigned by buggy in the snow and ice of Ontario and Quebec during elections of that period. It has been updated very little since that time. It is rather like the rules of our own House of Commons, very slow to yield and very slow to change.

I should like to suggest that there is an easy way in which we could bring about improvements of this kind to the Canada Elections Act, without having to procrastinate and pass them along from parliament to parliament. We should include in it a clause which says in effect that in the first session following a general election the Canada Elections Act should be referred to the committee on privileges and elections of the House of Commons, and there be amended and updated.

There are no people who are more concerned, and more able to deal, with this piece of legislation than the members of the House of Commons themselves. They are the ones who are affected. They are the ones who understand what the act is about and who understand what happens in respect of the votes of the people when the act is not properly amended and updated. I submit that legislation such as this, in our changing times, should, for the protection of the electorate of Canada, have built into it a clause of this nature so that the act would automatically be referred to the committee on privileges and elections in the first session following a general election. If this had been done, for example if this little clause for which I plead had been passed during the parliament of 1965-68, I am sure we would not be here this afternoon pleading for this small amendment. If you, sir, were to pick up the routine proceedings and orders of the day and look at the public bills that are before the House of Commons today you would find a number of them on the subject of changes to the Canada Elections Act. These are all good bills which contain good proposals, requiring the attention of the house for the purpose of improving the Canada Elections Act.

My plea, therefore, is that we find a way automatically to upgrade this act at every election. My specific plea this afternoon is that we settle now the problem of these students by inserting this clause in the Canada Elections Act, so that the students will be able to vote during the next election, if it happens to be called at a time when they are moving to the universities.

Mr. Heath Macquarrie (Hillsborough): Mr. Speaker, I should like to congratulate the hon.

[Mr. Deachman.]

member for bringing to the attention of the house in this private members hour a matter of great importance. I recall very well the disappointment among the university community during the 1965 election. Many of our young people were disfranchised. It is unfortunate when any Canadian, student or otherwise, is disfranchised and unable to cast his vote. It is particularly regrettable when young people, who would otherwise be casting their first vote, find that they are prevented from doing so, as was the case during the election of 1965, one which was hastily called to bring about a certain desired situation which it did not bring about.

One aspect of the hon. member's bill which comes immediately to mind is that it is a suggested amelioration, and a good one; but as with so many aspects of the electoral machinery it is merely a stop gap. It is a bandaid where we need a significant restructuring of the whole organism. I realize also that every session in preceding parliaments we have had a number of private members bills which have suggested changes to the Canada Elections Act. Many of them have been good; many of them have been overdue. I would suggest, however, that while there is merit in making some improvement, we must face up to the fact that the Canada Elections Act is in basic need of overhaul, redrafting, amendment, and revision.

To be specific, I suggest that the hon. member's suggested improvement could add a safeguard for students at Canadian universities. But there are many students who are not studying at Canadian universities. A student who is taking postgraduate work at McGill University would be protected by this legislation, but if he happened to be at the London School of Economics or Harvard University he would be disfranchised.

● (5:20 p.m.)

I mention these facts to indicate that we are moving toward some basic improvement in our election machinery, but we are constantly going to discover after the fact, or after an election, to be more precise, that certain segments of the Canadian society have not been able to cast a vote.

These things have been tried in other jurisdictions and they have worked, but there are measures whereby the broadest possible participation of the potential electorate may be guaranteed. One of these is the system of absentee voting. Under such a system a student at Harvard would be entitled to cast his