

In the last Manitoba provincial election, 900 mail-in votes were received and were mostly from urban voters. Manitoba's Chief Electoral Officer advertised the details of the postal vote and felt that the subsequent results were satisfactory.

The present policy of centralizing polling places serves the needs of the office of the Chief Electoral Officer, but it ignores many of the needs of the voting public, especially of those Canadian citizens who are disabled. Centralization makes it easier for electoral officers to organize the vote count, but it makes it more difficult for many voters to reach the voting place. Centralization again may cut the costs of the office of the Chief Electoral Officer of running a national electoral organization, but at the price of depriving many Canadians of their votes. It is totally contradictory for the federal Government to espouse a policy of maximum voter participation on the one hand, and a policy of restricted access to polling places on the other. This centralized policy, in my view, should have been ended years ago when this committee made that recommendation. It is certainly not too late for this House to instruct the Chief Electoral Officer to do it now before the next election comes.

● (1720)

Many of the problems the disabled voters encounter at polling stations can be solved by educating the people responsible for those facilities. This includes deputy returning officers and their staffs. If these individuals become familiar with the needs of the disabled voter at the very outset of an election period, the many potential conflicts and problems of accessibility could be eliminated. Since the polling station personnel must go through an orientation session as a requirement of their job, this additional information regarding disabled voters will entail very little extra cost in time.

As I said at the outset, I am not convinced at all that it would take an amendment to the Canada Elections Act in order to provide disabled individuals with the full right to exercise their vote. Simple political will to make sure it happens could make it so. There are some physical difficulties in some electoral ridings, I suppose, with electoral returning officers continually going back to the same places that they found to be suitable in the past, such as old church buildings, schools, and that kind of thing. Simply because it has been good enough for those returning officers in the past does not mean to say that it is good enough for the person who is trying to exercise his vote, such as disabled elderly Canadians.

There is another issue that I want to touch on, one that does not deal specifically with accessibility at the polling stations, that is, the accessibility of individuals who are confined to psychiatric institutions and simply because of that they are denied the right to vote. By the way, Mr. Speaker, the Province of Ontario finally smartened up last year and amended its Elections Act to allow individuals who are confined in psychiatric institutions to exercise their right to vote, and to recognize that simply because an individual may be mentally disabled at some point in his or her life does not mean to say that that person cannot exercise good judgment in casting a

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ballot in an election campaign. It also displays a certain kind of mental attitude toward individuals who are mentally disabled or who are temporarily mentally disabled. The results of two elections in Ontario, the series of by-elections last fall, when amendments to that legislation were in effect, and the recent election of last Thursday proved that there were no difficulties or problems created by those amendments at all. The effect of these amendments was very much appreciated by many of those individuals in those institutions because it helped them to recognize in the period of recovery that they were treated as able-bodied citizens and treated with some respect for their illness.

The Canadian Mental Health Association and other organizations appeared before the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections about three or four weeks ago and made a very strong case for an amendment under the Canada Elections Act which would remove that blatant discrimination against people who are mentally disabled or mentally handicapped. We are not talking about the criminally insane. We are talking about people who suffer a mental disability, and if anyone has taken a look at the studies over the last several years about the effects of high unemployment in this country, the effects of the tremendous social pressures placed on people, they will realize that any one of us could suffer a mental disorder at any time.

It seems to me that in that light politicians, and especially the ones here for this debate, should act in a responsible way. They should not talk out this motion. Even though I do support the motion itself, I do not feel it goes far enough in addressing the problem. At the very least if it were referred to a committee, as the Hon. Member for Davenport suggests and requests, the matter could be fully aired and debated. Witnesses could be heard and they could make their own case in a much more substantive way than we possibly can here.

Mr. Patrick Boyer (Etobicoke-Lakeshore): Mr. Speaker, the resolution before the House in the name of the Hon. Member for Davenport (Mr. Caccia) states:

That, in the opinion of this House, the government should take the necessary steps to ensure, that the Chief Electoral Officer, in future elections, make all polling stations in urban areas easily accessible to the elderly and the handicapped.

Many resolutions come before this House, and each in its own way and for its own reasons has special interest and importance. I think that today Members would agree that this resolution has a poignant message because of what it symbolizes in the long and continuing struggle to ensure that all Canadians including those who suffer physical handicaps shall enjoy the full birthright of Canadian citizenship.

Section 3 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms states something that has long been part of our birthright but is now an expressed guarantee, specifically:

Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons—

That guarantee is supplemented by the guarantee contained in Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms now in force since April 17, 1985, which guarantees that every