

Canada Elections Act

France. I think most of us who have read history realize just how much love and interest France lavished on her people here. This was pointed out very dramatically by Mayor Jean Drapeau of Montreal who told how the French colonial governors scurried back to France, leaving their children tied to the kitchen and the barn. Quebec's code is "I remember", and I suggest that Quebec does remember.

The hon. member for Brandon-Souris was the only one who suggested extending these rights, however. The burden of the comments of other members has been that only Canadian citizens should vote. The dispute has settled on the question of whether British people who have had special voting privileges should retain them provided, as recommended in committee, that they voted in the election of June, 1968. Another amendment suggests a five-year waiting period. The amendment presently before us suggests a two-year waiting period and the movers of it feel that this is sufficient time to enable people to obtain their citizenship papers.

The speaker who preceded me suggested that taking away the special rights presently held by British subjects is retroactive legislation and therefore bad. I do not fully subscribe to this, Mr. Speaker. There are occasions in which retroactive law must be passed—in fact most budgets come in with retroactive provisions and this is necessary for the public good. In the case of the proposed sale of Denison Mines, and I was one who approved the government action there, hon. members will recall that the government said legislation would be brought in retroactively if necessary.

I do not believe that retroactivity is of itself wicked, but I suggest it should be brought in only when there is a clear demonstration of public interest. In this respect, I find myself powerfully moved by the speech of the hon. member for Ontario, who pointed out facts which all members should consider very seriously. There are people who have been in this country for 40 or 50 years, who have voted in every election and have served the country in war. Now, they are elderly and some are impoverished. How can we explain to them that, although they could vote in the election of 1968 and all preceding elections they cannot vote in 1972 unless they hold a citizenship certificate which will cost them \$10. This is strange to them and they will resent it deeply.

[Mr. St. Pierre.]

● (4:00 p.m.)

Mr. Speaker, I suggest that if for 103 years British subjects resident in Canada have had special status it will not hurt to continue that status for a few more years. I am unable to find myself in sympathy with the amendment before us. However, I am in sympathy with its spirit. Practically speaking, it will be unfair to British subjects who have lived here, worked for this country and voted in our elections. Anticipating that subsequent amendments will be moved which will merely extend the period in which some people must apply for Canadian citizenship, may I say that they, too, will do the spirit of this country more harm than good. I intend to support the bill as recommended to the House by the committee, which sat long hours in study of this matter. It said that the British subject who was qualified as an elector on June 25, 1968 and who has since that time been ordinarily resident in Canada, should for his lifetime retain his special privilege which has been granted to him in the past. I think that the date of the passage of this bill is the proper date with respect to any new system of eligibility for voting in Canadian elections.

Mr. Walker: Will the hon. member permit a question? He emphasized heavily that the people of whom he was speaking, British subjects, have been here for 30, 40 or 50 years and that they have voted in many elections prior to the one in 1968. Is the reverse of this question also not correct, namely, that there are many who voted for the first time as British subjects in 1968 who do not come within the category of persons that the hon. member was speaking about generally?

Mr. St. Pierre: I do not know the answer to that, Mr. Chairman. I do not know how many British subjects voted for the first time in 1968. Nevertheless, I think that my suggestion with respect to a cut-off date is practical, and would be fairest for all concerned.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matte: Mr. Speaker, I would like to indicate that we fully and wholeheartedly support the amendment proposed by the hon. member for Matane (Mr. De Bané), especially since when I first spoke on this matter, I pointed out this unacceptable gap in the Elections Act.

I also noted that the hon. member for Abitibi (Mr. Laprise) had already introduced a bill dealing with the privileges the Elections Act gives to British subjects.