

a proposal before the House to reduce that from the present 63 days. Many people could be out of the country or away at college or doing anything at all and, under the present system, they could be disenfranchised. It could be argued that if there were a fixed date for an election, people would still be disenfranchised, but the number would be few because, generally speaking, they would know the date of election.

This bill provides that an election be held forthwith on the defeat of the government as is the case at the present time, and I would not want to see that changed. A government should never remain in power when it has lost the confidence of the representatives of the people. On the other hand, although this bill would make the date of the election flexible, it would give the government the opportunity to set a date for the election if it should lose the confidence of the House. It also has the advantage that instead of having a general election, the Governor General could call upon the Leader of the Opposition to form a government. That might well save the expense of an election, if the leader could get the confidence of the majority of the members of the House. An exact date would have a great deal of merit. But that has some disadvantages. This bill has suggested that 40 days be added or taken away from that particular date. That concept has some advantages and some disadvantages and is another reason why the bill should go to committee to be discussed. We should not think because we have one method now—that of calling an election only when the government wants to call one—that there is no better way.

● (1640)

The strength of the present system gives the Prime Minister of the country or a premier of a province the opportunity to call an election at a time most advantageous for his particular party. It might not be most advantageous for many people or in line with the general thinking of the population. Consequently, the present election system favours the party in power. That might be all right if you are in power, but if you are not in power, people could have different views with regard to that point. Putting the power in the hands of the prime minister or a premier of a province to call an election when he or she wants and when it is most advantageous for a particular party gives an advantage to one party rather than to the people.

However, there are some disadvantages with regard to a fixed date for an election. Some people say a fixed date means you have a four-year election campaign. I am not so sure that is so. In the period from April, 1977, through to 1979, thousands of people in Canada wanted an election, but it was not called until well on into 1979. The election was called almost at the time it was mandatory. Campaigning went on in anticipation of that election for almost two years. I suppose in the United States it goes on for four years. That same situation occurs here, too. I start my election campaign the day after I am elected by trying to serve the people who elected me. I think every hon. member should be doing that. All of us look forward to the next election whether it is a fixed date or not. I do not think that aspect will change very much. However, I think this bill has enough merit to go to a committee so we can

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get input from the people in the provinces. I emphasize the words so splendidly spoken by the mover of this motion that the bill not be talked out but that the merits of it, or otherwise, be looked at by a committee in order that we can have the best general election act possible in the country.

Hon. John M. Reid (Kenora-Rainy River): Mr. Speaker, I have listened with great interest to the speeches made by hon. members concerning Bill C-252. When I look at a piece of legislation, I always ask myself the following questions: who will win, who will lose, who will benefit and who will not benefit. Immediately I see that the person who will not benefit is the prime minister of Canada. He would lose the power to call a general election at his convenience.

I think hon. members will recognize that when the prime minister does call an election at his convenience or otherwise, he has to live or die with the decision he takes. There is responsibility in the decision in that he must abide by the results of his action.

I thought it would be interesting to take a look at what has happened in the past. I ask hon. members to cast their minds back to 1957. An election was called by the then prime minister, Louis St. Laurent. He was defeated. We had an election in 1958 called by the then prime minister, the Right Hon. John Diefenbaker, who won the most overwhelming electoral victory Canada had ever seen. In 1962 an election was called by the then prime minister, the Right Hon. John Diefenbaker, who suffered the most significant loss of parliamentary seats that has ever been suffered by a prime minister. Such was the majority gained in 1958 that he was able to continue in power until 1963. In 1963 the Right Hon. John Diefenbaker lost the confidence of the House of Commons and he was eventually defeated at the polls. In 1965, the Right Hon. Lester Pearson called an election without a cause. He was rebuffed by the electorate. In 1968 an election was called by the newly elected leader of the Liberal Party who later became prime minister, the Right Hon. Pierre Trudeau. He received a substantial majority in that election. In 1972 he called an election at his convenience and was severely rebuffed by the electorate. He hung on to power with two seats. In 1974 the House of Commons again voted non-confidence in the Trudeau government, but his government was restored to power by the people of Canada.

Mr. Kilgour: That was a real tragedy.

Mr. Reid (Kenora-Rainy River): In 1979 the Right Hon. Pierre Trudeau called an election and he lost that election significantly. In 1980 when the House expressed non-confidence in the Conservative government, the government headed by the Right Hon. Pierre Trudeau was restored.

Mr. Kilgour: That was another tragedy.

Mr. Reid (Kenora-Rainy River): Even though a prime minister may have this power to call an election, if hon. members look at what has happened, this power has not been