

*Private Members' Business*

There is a place in this House for private members' initiatives, a very important place. Private members' business should have more priority than it does, but I am concerned that this issue is more complex and the impact more far reaching and is far too involved for us to resolve within the context of a private member's bill.

The proposed definition in this bill is more all inclusive than the current definition. It says that election expenses mean all expenses and liabilities and then lists specific exclusions. The current definition simply lists those items included. The definition contained in this bill is seen as broader than the current definition of an election expense.

Before we examine this definition any further, it should be pointed out that the definition of election expenses is central to the regime set up in the elections act for the control of election activities.

It is therefore impossible to agree to the contents of this bill without considering how it affects other provisions in the act and the way electoral campaigns will be run. Any change in the definition of election expenses will have far reaching consequences.

One of the significant consequences of changing the definition of election expenses is its impact on spending limits. As we all know, the act imposes a limit on spending of election expenses for a candidate during an election. The limit is based on a formula related to the number of names on a preliminary list of electors and the candidate's electoral district.

Those of us in this House will know by experience, but for the sake of those reading or anyone watching this debate, we should mention that the base amount begins with a dollar for each of the first 10,000 names. It is 50 cents for each of the next 10,000 and 25 cents for each name over 25,000.

As I understand it, the limit is then adjusted if the number of names on the preliminary list is less than the average for all electoral districts or if the number of electors per square kilometres is less than 10. The spending limit is also raised annually in relation to the consumer price index.

Since the expenses definition in this bill is more inclusive and broader than at present, this will almost certainly mean that candidates will reach their election expenses limit faster since more items will be included. In other words, the inclusion of many more activities and expenses within the definition would increase the total expended.

This would mean that unless the limits are increased, the definition may create hardship for parties and for candidates. I have to indicate my strong, personal objection to increasing those limits. It is time for politicians of all parties to start setting an example of fiscal responsibility and respect for taxpayers' dollars.

It is time to lead by example, and it is not the time to increase the amount of money we can spend on elections or any other thing. I sincerely hope we are all aware of the importance of spending limits and financial controls for the electoral process. They are there to provide some assurance that one particular candidate cannot because of access to more funds have an unfair advantage over the other candidates in the campaign.

We talk a lot in this House about a level playing field. This is the level playing field which allows all candidates to present themselves fairly to the electorate.

I cannot over-emphasize how critical this concept of spending limits and the related concept of election expenses are to our democratic system. Not only does the definition of an election expense affect spending limits, it will have far reaching implications with respect to other provisions in the act.

It is one thing to suggest a new definition for a single concept in a piece of legislation, it is quite another to consider all of the implications the new definition may have on the piece of legislation as a whole. That is what this bill is missing, it is missing the over-all comprehensive assessment of the election expenses scheme and that is why I cannot support it.

As I mentioned earlier, the royal commission has been receiving both oral and written submissions on the issue for two years. Included in the submissions I understand that some 30 interveners have commented on issues related to the definition of spending limits on local campaigns.