

Election Expenses Bill

other sources. Clearly, if a candidate cannot get some basis of support generally, he ought not to be entitled to any kind of lump sum contribution from the public treasury. I want to emphasize that I strongly endorse the principle of contributions from the public treasury under proper conditions, namely, that the candidate receives a specified proportion of the votes cast in his constituency and that the contribution from the treasury be in some way related to the amount of the general contribution that the candidate receives.

Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I want to emphasize equally strongly that the contribution from the public treasury should be toward the expenses of the candidate generally and should not be directed toward particular expenses of the candidate or party. Under our democratic institutions I think the party or the candidate should decide how funds are to be expended. This is a decision to be made by the candidate and the party, and not by Parliament. I feel that this is a matter of principle which is departed from in this bill. The contribution from the public treasury should be a percentage of the expenditures in all legitimate categories made by the candidate, up to a prescribed ceiling.

• (1600)

Again, Mr. Speaker, if there is to be a contribution from the public purse toward the expenses of a candidate or party, it seems reasonable and clear that there should be an over-all limit. If the public treasury is to make such a contribution, in my view it is necessary for over-all limits to be placed on the expenditures of candidates and parties. There should be an over-all limit, not simply a limit on the spending of the candidate or party on such things as advertising and publicity. I question the wisdom of imposing limits only on advertising or publicity expenses of a candidate.

Moreover, clearly it is useless and it is wrong to limit simply the spending of a candidate or party on publicity while leaving completely open the amount that can be spent in other categories. For instance, most of us in politics recognize that the publicity you get in the news columns or on the news shows of the networks is worth much more than advertising. Yet this bill, as I understand it, while limiting the amount that a candidate or party can spend on direct advertising, does not limit in any way how much the candidate or party can spend on extravaganzas designed to create news and be reported on news shows. I mention this to show the absurdity of restricting spending in areas like publicity while imposing no ceilings or restrictions at all on the over-all spending of candidates or parties.

This bill is put forward as a reform measure at the eleventh hour. As I said, I cannot support it. I am strongly in favour of electoral reform and I am certainly anxious to see contributions made from the public treasury, under appropriate conditions. These should not be to meet selected categories of expenses but to meet expenses generally. The party or the candidate should be allowed to decide how the money should be spent; it is not for Parliament to tell candidates how to run an election. I would favour that, provided there is an over-all limit on expenditures. That limit should be incorporated in any provision providing for contributions from the public treasury. It is

[Mr. Stanfield.]

nonsense and absurd to introduce a bill which simply limits expenses on publicity but leaves the sky as the limit for all other kinds of expenses. I say this is an absurd bill. I cannot regard it seriously as a measure put forward in terms of electoral reform.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stanfield: The bill has been brought in at the eleventh hour. The Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) made a commitment in 1968 to give this whole matter top priority. As far as I can see, he forgot about it. Indeed, a few months ago he made it clear that the government could not introduce the bill in time for it to be effectively implemented during the next election campaign. Then, as a result of the public razzing which the Prime Minister took, he decided to honour the commitment he had made in the campaign of 1968 and this bill was produced in great haste.

There is much evidence of the obvious haste with which this bill was produced. For example, newspapers are not to be allowed to indulge in partisan political comment for 24 hours before the day of the election. That does not mean that election activities will have stopped. We saw a good example of this in 1968 when the Prime Minister was involved in what was not, perhaps, in the narrow sense political activity but in activity which was widely reported. This activity on the night before the election, it is thought, had a widespread effect on the way a number of people voted the next day.

What does this kind of restriction mean as contained in the bill? What does the restriction that newspapers cannot comment for 24 hours before election day mean? Does it mean that there can be no interpretative news stories about what might well be the crucial, final moments of an election campaign? Does it mean that there will be no stories at all about the climax of the campaign? Of course, the government might say that this is not its intention, but that is not good enough. In legislation, intentions do not count—words count.

Speaking of intentions, what are we to make of the intentions of this government? Five months ago the Prime Minister said, both in this House and in an outside interview, that there was no possible way in which a viable law could be passed before the election. I do not regard this as a viable law and I certainly agree with him to that extent. I quote the Prime Minister when he answered the hon. member for Regina-Lake Centre (Mr. Benjamin):

I am told, Mr. Speaker, that would be an impossibility.

The Prime Minister was saying that it would be impossible to introduce such legislation in time for it to be effective in the next election campaign. I continue:

Even if the legislation were passed now—

And this was said almost four months ago.

—unless we were going to have an election very late indeed, or even beyond the constitutionally permitted time, it would be difficult to have legislation effective in time for that election.

That is what the Prime Minister said in February. Now, because of public razzing, he has brought forward the bill before us.

Mr. Woolliams: It is all window-dressing.