

when it comes to an issue of red tape vs. common sense, Jean-Francois is usually on the right side. He was on the right side the other day when he protested the rejection of two petitions which had been forwarded by his constituents.

It is a fundamental principle of democracy that the electors should have no difficulty in making their wishes known to their parliamentary representatives; if not personally, at least by letter. The post office recognizes this and charges no postage on letters to or from members at Ottawa during a session or ten days prior to it. It is also in accord with democratic principles that a group of individuals should have the right to contact parliament as a whole by way of a petition. That their petition must contain certain specified phrases may be a rule of parliament, but it is a rule which should not be too closely insisted upon.

In the present instance, certain electors of Temiscouata wished to protest a proposed change in their riding under the redistribution, and Mr. Pouliot presented two petitions from them to that effect, believing that these would be received and go to the redistribution committee. But they got tangled up in red tape. The rules say that petitions should be addressed to "the Honourable the House of Commons in parliament assembled." These were addressed to "Mr. Speaker and members of the House of Commons." The prescribed words, "the petition of the undersigned humbly sheweth," were omitted, as were the closing words the rules call for, "and your petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray." Moreover, the petitions were not divided into paragraphs, each beginning with "that"—evidently a particularly heinous fault. On these grounds the petitions were turned down.

It is no wonder that Mr. Pouliot protested. Mr. Gordon Graydon backed him up and said: "We should not be governed so much by the form as by the substance of a petition such as this. When the common people of Canada decide that they want to petition the House of Commons, we should place as few obstacles as possible in the way of their getting their views tabled in the House. I suggest that we waive any technicalities in this matter and allow the petition presented by the hon. member for Temiscouata to be tabled as he suggests."

Hansard does not record that Mr. Graydon's remarks evoked a cheer, but they should have done so. At any rate, Mr. Pouliot got action. The Speaker explained that "the House is not seized (what a word!) of a petition addressed to the members without mentioning the words 'in parliament assembled.'" The omission of "and your petitioners as in duty bound will ever pray," was not so serious. The learned authority "May" agrees that while those words are "generally added," they are not necessary. In any event there was a way out. Mr. Pouliot could move that the petitions go to the committee on standing orders—which he did. And no doubt the committee on redistribution will finally get them.

But what nonsense it is to insist on stilted and archaic forms of expression. One of these days someone will faint if "sheweth" in a petition appears as "showeth", or if a bill is "entitled" instead of "intituled." Let red tape perish!

The Ottawa Journal
Wednesday, May 14, 1947
Those Letter Rules

The other day Mr. Pouliot complained in the Commons that the house had refused to receive some petitions from electors in his riding, Temiscouata, because they were not couched in the prescribed phraseology. The petitions had to do with redistribution, and their natural destination was the special committee dealing with that problem. Mr. Graydon in the discussion supported Mr. Pouliot's contention that since the desire of the petitioners was clearly expressed the wording of the document should not prevent them from being heard.

This week the question came before the standing orders committee of the house, and it refused to accept the petitions on the ground that they were improperly worded and did not conform to precedent—the reason also was advanced that to let them go on to the redistribution committee would be contrary to the ruling of the present and former speakers.

This time it was Mr. Knight of Saskatoon who, in the standing orders committee, opposed so fine an example of red tape and hampering custom. He took the ground that any citizen should have the right to take his case to parliament, and that antiquated rules should not stand in the way—"the spirit is much more important than the letter."

However the majority were against him, and against Mr. Pouliot and Mr. Graydon. We think it was an unfortunate ruling. We do not know what the Temiscouata petitioners ask, and it does not matter. What matters is that they have something they want to say to the House of Commons and are refused a hearing because of their ignorance of certain formalities set out many years ago.

Mr. SINCLAIR (Vancouver North): Mr. Speaker, is not this matter already before the redistribution committee of the House of Commons?

Mr. SPEAKER: I have been listening to the hon. member and awaiting to call attention to the fact that he should not discuss on his motion the redistribution of representation, as that matter has been referred to a committee of the house. Of course he is allowed to discuss the form of the petition which has been refused by the clerk of petitions.

Mr. POULIOT: Here is the report to which I refer, the main part of which I shall read in a few moments. There was also a letter and a petition from his worship the mayor of Squatteck, which will be submitted in due course to the committee on standing orders according to the procedure which has been established. But, sir, there are two points which I desire to consider in my brief remarks. They are the two points which have been raised by the committee on standing orders. This is a question of parliamentary procedure, and I took the trouble to analyse what was said about that matter.