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CHANGES IN THE CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

In the House of Commons recently, Mr. Donald S. Macdonald, President of the Privy Council, moved the second reading of a bill to revise the Canada Elections Act, one of the major changes in which is the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 years. Mr. Macdonald explained to the House why the establishment of a permanent voters' list would not be an advantage in Canadian elections and replied to many questions that had arisen in the study of the Act.

Excerpts from his statement follow:

...We are now engaged in study of the bill resulting from the general committee study of the Canada Elections Act. During the time that I have been a member of this House, there have been a number of recurrent themes in the criticism of our Elections Act. These themes have included: Why must our election campaigns last so long? Why cannot the system of enumeration be made more effective, particularly with regard to urban dwellers, so that many eligible voters are not left off the voting lists? Why cannot all Canadians abroad be put in a position to exercise their franchise?

In the study of the Elections Act, which was carried out by the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections the committee, and subsequently the

Government, devoted themselves to trying to solve these particular problems so far as they can be solved. The most popular solution which has been put forward, particularly in the editorial pages of the press, has been the establishment of a permanent voters' list. This question, as I have already indicated, was studied by the Representation Commissioner, Mr. Nelson Castonguay, the former Chief Electoral Officer and a person well skilled in the matter, whose report was presented in April 1968. This report was considered by the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections which committee, in a report tabled in the House on May 22, 1969, concluded that a permanent voters' list would not be appropriate or particularly helpful in dealing with Canadian electoral problems, and the committee reaffirmed that view in the report tabled several months ago.

One can see by reading the Representation Commissioner's report and by perusing his evidence before the Standing Committee that a permanent voters' list is not without disadvantages. What does not appear to be generally known in this country is that in Canada at the federal level we have already tried and rejected a system of permanent voters' lists. In 1934, the Parliament of Canada enacted the Dominion Franchise Act, which was to provide a system of permanent voters' lists. The Act called for the establishment in 1934 of a basic list of electors, followed by an annual revision between May 15 and July 1. An election was held under this system in October 1935.

There were 60 days between the date of the issuance of the writ and election day, and a subsequent special committee of the House reported on April 6, 1937, and concluded that the basic lists prepared in 1934 were almost obsolete within six months after they were completed and that the annual revision held in 1935 was not an adequate remedy for the situation. On the basis of these conclusions Parliament repealed the Dominion Franchise Act in 1938.

CONTENTS

Changes in the Canada Elections Act	1
Feathered Friends for Singapore	3
Visits and Visitors	3
Canadian Forces Support Staff Badges ..	4
Large-Scale Mineral Prospecting	4
Theology Schools Merge	4
Sale to European Air Companies	5
Military Museums Meet	5
Stamp Collectors Show in Montreal.....	5
Flood Relief to Romania	5