

Supply—Secretary of State

Before taking my seat, Mr. Chairman, let me thank the hon. member for Skeena for the kind words he said about me a few moments ago.

Mr. Herridge: Mr. Chairman, I feel I must rise at this time to correct any misunderstanding, misinterpretation or exaggeration that may arise out of the remarks made by the hon. member for Port Arthur. I do not want anyone to think that C.C.F. campaigns are based on thousands of cups of tea and coffee. They are based on a challenging philosophy, on broad humanitarian principles and on programs supported by dedicated people; and the C.C.F. is represented, in the riding in question, by a candidate who is a personality.

Mr. Aiken: Mr. Chairman, as a footnote to the discussion that has taken place with respect to amendments to the Canada Elections Act, and specifically the one referred to by the hon. member for Kootenay West, may I comment that whether or not the amendments made last year to the Canada Elections Act had anything to do with it, the results of the recent by-elections were much better under the amended act than under the old act.

Mr. Howard: About half an hour ago I fell into the error, occasioned by practice, of seeking to make inquiries about matters of government policy, and advancing suggestions. As I say, I fell into this error in raising the question of absentee voting and inquiring as to government policy. I confess my error now. I think the government has its finger in too many pies, and that it has too much authority over the affairs of parliament. I should have known better than to fall into that trap of words, as it were, in trying to give to the government authority over decisions on balloting matters or changes in the elections act when this is a question primarily within the control of parliament itself and of the standing committee on privileges and elections, which traditionally has considered these amendments and proposed changes to the act in a non-partisan way as far as possible. I felt I had better clear the record with regard to that particular error of mine before the government decided that this was another matter in which it could become engaged and upon which it could make statements of policy from time to time.

However, that does not preclude the opportunity of using the House of Commons as a forum, as it were, where particular matters such as the absentee vote may be discussed. It is true that in the committee last year I was a minority of one, I think, when this question of the absentee vote was considered; but no matter by what majority a man has his views rejected he should, in my opinion,

[Mr. Dorion.]

continue to press those views on every occasion because it is the little drop of water that wears away the mighty stone. Persistence brings results. I was a minority of one then, but perhaps I am in a better position here where I have colleagues close to me; by using this forum I am increasing my support.

To me, absentee voting is a vital matter, and I believe people should not be denied the right to cast their ballots on election day because of circumstances beyond their control such as the nature of their employment. Perhaps I can expand this theme now and indicate to the committee an area where additional difficulties will arise depending on the time of the year in which, specifically, the next federal election is held, though my observations will apply to other federal elections as well.

I mention the next federal election specifically because it will be the first general election at which our native Indian people will have the right to vote as a group. It is true that in the past, because of service in the armed forces, some Indian people have had the right to vote, and others have had the right to vote by virtue of the franchise. It is also the case that in at least two of the constituencies where by-elections have been held, native Indians have taken part in the voting. However, as I say, the next general election will be the one in which they will be casting their votes for the first time, at least for a number of years. I believe it was in 1918 or 1919 when they last had the right to vote in a general election.

On the west coast of British Columbia the absence of any provision for absentee voting could cause a great deal of misunderstanding and, possibly, anger directed against the government, the returning officers and everybody else concerned including the candidates. In British Columbia, as I have said, we have a provincial system of absentee voting. An elector, if he is on the voters' list, can cast his ballot in any polling division in the province. I should explain that a high proportion of the native population on the coast is engaged in the fishing industry, and during the salmon season the great majority of them are anywhere but at home in their own villages. They travel from their home villages following the fish. They move down from the interior to work in the canneries and fish out from the canneries.

When a provincial election is held—and native people have had the right to vote in provincial elections since 1949—these native Indians can vote by virtue of the absentee voting provision. If a federal election is called to coincide with the fishing season, most of these native Indian people who will