

Canada Elections Act

● (1642)

There can be no doubt that the recommendations of the all-party committee were sound and that those of them which are incorporated in the bill before us are sound. The leader of my party has made it very clear, however, that we are concerned about the anonymous donations provision. There is a sense of deceit about it. We have doubts about the good faith of the government, and even about the propriety of the indexing provision in a time of restraint. Until I saw the bill, I did not expect that those two clauses regarding anonymous donations and indexing would find any place in the measure. Our leader made this very clear.

I should like to state emphatically, now, that as long as those clauses are in this bill we in the Official Opposition are prepared to use whatever devices can reasonably be used, whether in the House or in the committee, to ensure that the measure is not passed until it has been changed along the lines I have indicated.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton): I say this in the course of debate so that there can be no doubt about our intentions with respect to it. I regret very much that I must take this approach. It is unfortunate that somehow, from the understanding which was developed between all parties on the committee, we have come to this. Why should this have happened? How can the government's position be justified, in face of the principle of openness, the principle of disclosure? How can one justify the importation into this legislation of an element whose effect is to permit substantial donations to be made by national companies, wealthy individuals, international corporations and a whole host of other people?

In an area of disclosure such as the seventies, this has no place whatsoever in our democratic process and we stand against it as firmly as we possibly can. It offends parliament. It offends the political process, a process which I believe was in some way renewed by the passing of the election expenses legislation.

I find it inexcusable and improper. I am not suggesting that hon. members who support the Liberal party from the back benches are responsible for this offence against propriety. I do not believe they had anything to do with it. Discussions obviously took place during the summer. The campaign committees, the bagmen, the fund-raisers of the Liberal party, obviously influenced somebody, and I suspect it was the federal cabinet which was influenced. I suspect and, frankly, I hope it was done without the knowledge of the Liberal party caucus. I would be greatly shocked if I were to find otherwise—if, for example, I were to learn that the hon. member for Ottawa West (Mr. Francis) was in agreement with what is being done. He has been a man of principle all his political life and, as I say, I would be surprised if he or others of my colleagues over there would agree that it is proper to do indirectly what the statute, or the principle of the statute, says we cannot do directly.

[Mr. Baker (Grenville-Carleton).]

I turn to the question of indexing. My leader has indicated that as a result of indexing election expenses and allowing contributions to reflect a different cost of living base than had been originally discussed, a new burden of some \$12 million would be imposed on hard-pressed Canadian taxpayers. The legislation was designed to give political parties equal opportunity; if one party is given an opportunity to spend, the other is expected to match it.

So far, the arrangements have not been tested during a general election. The figure which has been given is the figure for an election called in 1978. God knows what it would be for an election called in 1979, given the rate of inflation! I think it is inappropriate that an indexing proposal of this kind should be put forward at a time of restraint. The government has talked on many occasions about limiting the practice of indexing. The Minister of Public Works (Mr. Buchanan) says it may be necessary to reconsider the social welfare programs and think about putting a cap on old age security benefits. He was musing in public, Mr. Speaker—philosophizing, trying to imitate the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau), I suppose, and the President of the Treasury Board (Mr. Andras) has since denied such intentions.

However, that was a view expressed by a member of the very government which is now prepared to index election expenses. Not too long ago the President of the Treasury Board, speaking of public servants, the RCMP and the armed forces, mused aloud that perhaps a cap should be placed on retirement pensions. In this case the hon. gentleman never rose to deny he ever said it.

● (1652)

This government which is prepared to penalize its public servants now suddenly finds itself in the position where it is going to lay upon itself a great benefit. It is going to extend indexing in a way that can only be considered inconsistent and, indeed, in terms of those who need some reflection of the cost of living in their income, reprehensible. This bill does two things that are in bad faith. This government has broken faith, not just with parliament or the opposition but with those among their number who supported a long time ago the provisions of the original Election Expenses Act.

I felt that the Election Expenses Act brought something new into our political life. It brought in the public. It brought in a new light, in the sense of the people who are involved in it. I am sure no member of this House of Commons, no matter where he sits, is happy to be a member of this public body, this body in particular. The Election Expenses Act has gone a long way to opening up the process to everyone, just as television in the House has opened up this chamber to the world. That sense of openness has been welcomed by all right-minded members of this House. However, the government is prepared to begin closing the doors, to begin allowing in the shadows of corruption with regard to election financing.

Mr. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, perhaps the hon. member would answer a question.