

*Canada Elections Act*

[*English*]

**Mr. Doug Rowland (Selkirk):** Mr. Speaker, by the time someone of my distinct lack of seniority rises to speak in a debate such as this, the minister who is piloting the bill must wonder why in heaven's name we do not all sit down. Since he has had the courtesy to come into the House, I thought I would let him in on a little opposition strategy. Debate is initially an attempt to impress upon the government through rational and cogent argument the virtues of the opposition's case. If the government does not then immediately accept the rationality of those arguments and make the necessary amendments that will incorporate our thinking in their bills, we adopt the tactic of the Chinese water torture, that is of repeating our arguments incessantly until hopefully the minister, out of sheer horror at the prospect of having to hear them again, decides to adopt our suggestions. It is in the noble cause of reducing the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Macdonald) to a quivering mass of jelly that I dedicate these few remarks.

This is the first appropriate opportunity I have had publicly to thank the chief electoral officer, Mr. Duhamel, for the extremely competent and eminently fair way in which he conducted the Selkirk by-election. Though it is not particularly relevant to the bill, I should like to put that on the record. He did a wonderful job under sometimes difficult conditions. I should also like to draw the attention of this House to the exemplary conduct of the returning officer for the Selkirk constituency, Mr. Grant del Bigio, whose impartiality was unquestionable and whose accessibility to the candidates and their agents left absolutely nothing to be desired. In all of this, I might add, he was most ably assisted by his wife, who is both charming and competent.

At the risk of sounding unctuous, I wish to say that the legislation before us is not really an appropriate vehicle for partisan speeches. All hon. members must be equally concerned to ensure that the electoral laws of this nation provide the greatest possible opportunity for electors to exercise their franchise with the minimum possible opportunity for the abuse of that privilege and right. I mention these truisms only because the bulk of the remainder of my remarks will, in the interest of brevity, be devoted mainly to a discussion of what I consider to be shortcomings in this legislation which, on the whole, represents a considerable improvement. In short, my remarks are offered in the spirit of construc-

tive criticism. I hope that hon. members will accept them in that light, and that when we come to the Committee of the Whole House debate we will give consideration to at least incorporating the principles of the suggestions I am about to make into the legislation.

One of the major considerations in any electoral law should be that of ensuring that it eliminates to the fullest extent possible any artificial inequities between individual candidates and between the various political parties contesting an election. It is in the interest of the proper functioning of the democratic system that members be elected, in so far as is possible, by the exercise of a rational choice by the electorate on the basis of such considerations as the candidate's ability, training, experience, the merits of the program which he and his party espouse, and the quality of leadership that his party displays. We should, for example, seek to eliminate the effect that the amount of money available to a candidate can have upon his fortunes at the polls.

I would reiterate the point made by my colleague, the hon. member for Broadview (Mr. Gilbert) that there is a need for a companion piece of legislation to this reform of the electoral law which will regulate election expenses. This need still exists, despite the fact that the Barbeau committee report on election expenses is now so old it is growing whiskers. I understand that the President of the Privy Council contemplates taking action on this question shortly, and I welcome the undertaking. However, I think it would have been more appropriate to introduce that legislation prior to the bill we have before us.

However, there remain means that we can employ within the context of this bill to reduce the effect of financial disparities upon the outcome of an election. This can be done by reducing the length of time allotted to campaigns when an election is called. I understand that the standing committee examined this problem at some length and reached the conclusion that the type of machinery—such as permanent voters' lists—which would be necessary for a reduction in the length of campaign time would be prohibitively costly. However, I do not feel like giving up on the idea yet, and I hope that the committee stage of this bill will provide an opportunity to seek means of achieving the highly desirable goal of reducing the length of time devoted to campaigning.

Another principle that should govern the drafting of electoral law—