

Canada Elections Act

In their efforts to convey information, the pollsters frequently oversimplify and create at least the impression of prior bias.

Prior bias is an essential ingredient in opinion journalism, and as a political columnist I'd be lost without it. But the polls have developed to a point where they have more influence than those of us who seek to provoke interest and discussion by offering comment on political events.

Of course if there is a bias and an inaccuracy—and as the hon. member for Athabasca indicated, there is really no way of checking that three or four days before an election is held—there can be a disruptive effect upon the outcome of an election, and I believe that is wrong and does constitute an infringement upon the orderly process of parliamentary democracy.

In an article on Tuesday, May 6, 1980, in *The Globe and Mail* the very famous Goldfarb talked about the ability to manipulate. He used the word “massage”, and I quote:

We ask people questions, then we take the data and massage it to make it mean a lot more than they intended. We are looking for insights or clues. We supply the figures, but we also come up with . . . interpretation—

That really suggests to me that it is not an exact science. It is a science which can be misleading and manipulative. As far as I am concerned, it does not and should not have a place in our parliamentary process during a time when people want to assess and judge the pros and cons of political parties, leaders or positions.

The hon. member for Athabasca also pointed out the fact that in polls there is a tendency to single out leaders, individuals, or certain issues and that in the whole process the individual member of Parliament who is running for office in a given constituency is nothing but a glorified door-knocker. I think it does tend to take away from the importance of the individual member of Parliament.

I suppose it is fair to say that, if we were to believe the polls, the late right hon. gentleman from Prince Albert would never have been the prime minister because the polls said he could never win. Of course I can only conclude by saying that the late and great Mr. Diefenbaker, who was a great friend of this House, had an opinion of polls. He suggested that only dogs knew how to treat “poles” at election time. In many respects there are some of us in this House who share that view because of their record in the past. We believe that this measure and this issue should be brought to the attention of the House and considered by a committee. I was very surprised that the spokesman for the Liberal party pretty well closed the door on that opportunity, because if we are looking for a process of electoral reform and improving the election process, this surely is a measure we should look at very carefully and seriously.

Let us at least analyse it. Let us not just close the door and suggest that what we are doing and what we are allowing to happen is right. Let us at least be bold enough to say that there are some concerns and some expressions of opinion both in favour and against the issuance of polls just prior to an election. Let us look at this. Let us have some expert witnesses put forward their cases, and then we could have a clear and informed hearing on the issue. Members of Parliament could debate the pros and cons. This bill would provide the opportunity and avenue for that to occur, and I earnestly solicit the

support of all hon. members to ensure that that process takes place.

Mr. Douglas Fisher (Mississauga North): Mr. Speaker, I am not going to take very long, but I want to place on the record the fact that I dislike very much the conditions of this bill. I listened to the hon. member for Athabasca (Mr. Shields), and as he spoke I had the impression that he had considered his arguments seriously and developed them well, but I think he missed the point.

I do not like the underlying suspicion of voters which rests behind this bill, and I do not like the underlying attack on the freedom of our press.

I would like to express my opinions a little more positively, if I may. I believe that voters form their opinions logically and that voters have their reasons for forming their opinions, and I believe that polls tell us the score. They are not the score itself. The hon. member for Vegreville (Mr. Mazankowski) spent a little time talking about the accuracy of these devices and about their reliability, and I toss back at him the idea that, if the scoreboard is wrong, that does not change the score.

I would like to quote, if I may, from the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* of April 1, 1980. I think the paper put the issue into some perspective. It said:

That issue is the control of information—

The issue in this kind of bill.

—which should be shunned by Parliament as an invasion of citizens' rights. The public is entitled to have all information possible about public affairs and, if a difference can be made, it is above all entitled to that information at election time. . . . What is the issue here is an attempt to have Parliament decide what is accurate and what is inaccurate in the field of public information. The taking of this step would be very dangerous interference with the normal flow of such information. The decision as to accuracy can properly only belong to the public.

A leading Montreal pollster, Yvon Corbeil, has said that studies have shown time after time that polls have almost no net effect on voting patterns, and I agree with that.

I would like to try to put this bill into a little bit of perspective. Please note that it does not try to stop polls, simply their publication. If polls are so pernicious, why would we want them to continue in the midst of an election when our party planners and our leading politicians would have access to the information and would be forming decisions, but the public would be denied that information? Allan Frizzell of Carleton University raised an interesting point along this line. I will quote him directly:

What they are saying is “We want to know what is going on but we don't want you to know what is going on.”

Stifling polls limits our freedom to take a look at ourselves and to understand how we collectively make a decision. It curtails the proper process of an election. It does not help the understanding of an election; it clouds it. The assumption that we are operating on with this bill is that polls change the vote totals through some kind of bandwagon effect instead of simply reflecting popular sentiment.

Any pollster will tell us that his poll is an historic document. It takes one dot in time and measures public opinion at that