

Canada Elections Act

I mentioned during the last session, the twenty-third parliament, that the Indians of the province in my constituency have expressed great concern over the right to vote. This concern has perhaps been expressed in a way which to some is not too clear as to its logic, but I have, for instance, heard it said that the Indian believes that when the white man gives an Indian a privilege the white man exacts a fair price from the Indian at some time in the future. That, of course, is not the point and certainly does not illustrate the attitude adopted by any Canadian government of recent times, but we must accept the fact that in certain areas of Canada today there are many Indians who still distrust any legislation which might possibly infringe or encroach upon some of the privileges granted to them in the past.

I suppose it will be said that this bill, because of its nature, will protect those rights and will therefore neutralize this argument and that no longer need this fear exist.

For this I compliment the hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard) in that I feel it is indeed a step forward, and that conceivably a committee of the house could examine this problem to determine what effects his bill might have on our Indian friend and his right to vote.

I would like to read to you a resolution which was passed by the Indians of my province, which has been endorsed by the Canadian bar association and supported by the association of the friends of the Indians. It reads in part:

That no section of the Indian Act should compel an Indian to become enfranchised without his consent and that no power to compel enfranchisement should exist in the minister. The threat of compulsory voting rights is presently holding back the progress of the development of the Indians and, therefore, any compulsory section should be removed.

I do not entirely subscribe to the full meaning of that resolution.

Mr. Fisher: I do not understand what it means.

Mr. Smith (Calgary South): It is probably not understandable from where the hon. member sits, but I will send him a copy and perhaps educate him. However, I believe the point is well taken that there is still some doubt, some question, as to what future status the Indian would have. While a committee would have the benefit of examining the problem as a whole, I rather like the suggestion which has been made many times by the Indian association, that an independent body should be set up by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration to examine the different relationships of Indians in one area as opposed to another, because, after all, the

Indians of eastern Canada have been exposed for some three generations or more to the white man's way of life. What we require in the province from which I come in a way of bringing about more integration and greater hope for the Indians is more assistance on the reserves and a better standard of education and then, eventually, a resolution or a bill of this nature would indeed, in my opinion, have greater meaning.

I close by suggesting that the better approach would be by way of having an independent body, whether a royal commission or not, examine the relative merits of legislation of this type and the effect, not just on one area but of all the ten Canadian provinces. I support most of the principles of the bill introduced by the hon. member for Skeena, but I suggest he is premature in introducing his measure at this time. However, I would heartily subscribe to some forward step being made on the basis of the suggestion I have offered.

Mr. Arnold Peters (Timiskaming): Mr. Speaker, I think we have discussed a great many things this afternoon in relation to this bill which the hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard) did not have in mind, and which he certainly did not expect to be solved by this particular measure. All he is asking, as I understand it, is that the Indian be given the right to vote.

When we give the right to vote to any of our citizens we obviously do not say: you must vote. They are given the right to vote if they wish, and I think we are sufficiently adult to work out a method in the parliament of Canada by which that right can be given to the Indians, while at the same time depriving them of none of the rights which they presently enjoy by treaty or otherwise.

It is quite true, as one of the previous speakers has pointed out, that this bill does not solve all the economic problems of the Indians, nor will it bring about many of the other things which I am sure we all hope the Indians will accomplish in the near future. With this in view, I move, seconded by the hon. member for Kootenay West (Mr. Herdridge):

That this bill be not now read a second time, but that the subject matter be referred to the standing committee on privileges and elections.

Mr. J. S. Speakman (Wetaskiwin): Mr. Speaker, may I say that I am heartily in agreement with the comments made by the hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard) because I, too, feel that the privilege of voting in federal elections should be extended to the Indians who are, after all, the first Canadians.