

Canada Elections Act

A number of Canadians are working on CIDA projects that we have in Africa, South America, Central America, the Caribbean and so on. They too should not be disenfranchised and should have the right to vote in elections. Some methods have been suggested as to how this can be done, and I think they make sense. I would go even further than that. I believe all Canadians throughout the world, even if they are on vacation, should have the opportunity of attending at the embassy or the high commissioner's office to fill out the necessary forms so that they can vote in a general election in Canada.

Although the Government tends to agree with the purpose of this Bill, it would be premature to go further at this stage since Mr. Hamel's report, to be tabled at the beginning of the new session, is going to discuss the problems related to the voting rights of those living outside Canada.

As a matter of fact, this problem has been discussed many times since 1963. But it has to be reviewed again, now that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the right to vote to each Canadian. Section 3 of the Charter reads as follows:

Every citizen of Canada has the right to vote in an election of members of the House of Commons—

The Justice Department is presently studying the meaning of this right for Canadians who happen to be outside the country on polling days and who cannot vote. They can be classified as follows: the students; the CIDA cooperants; the private corporations' employees; the travellers; and the permanent expatriates, as I have suggested before. At the same time, the office of the Chief Electoral Officer and the office of the President of the Privy Council (Mr. Pinard) are assessing the technical problems involved here.

To grant voting rights now to one sub-group, the civil employees of the Armed Forces abroad hired locally, is to open the door to all the other groups at a time when the studies referred to above are not yet completed. A comprehensive review of "absentee voting" by the Standing Committee on Privileges and Elections should follow Mr. Hamel's report, to be tabled soon.

At the moment, both the Department of National Defence and the Department of External Affairs maintain permanent lists of Canadian Forces and Public Services electors based on the information available on personnel departmental files. Such an information is not available in respect of locally engaged Canadians employed by the Department of National Defence outside Canada. Therefore, the Chief Electoral Officer would have to keep and maintain a permanent register of electors, like as they do in countries with absentee voting systems such as the U.S.A., Australia and France. In Canada also, in the Province of British Columbia, I understand they keep a voters' registry.

But one must understand that, with regard to absentee voting, there is only one acceptable security offered, that is, a permanent list or continuous electoral rolls in which you have

a registration card signed by each elector which is in the Office of the Returning Officer of the elector's constituency.

More than a year or two may be required before this could be put in place, and certainly there are some 15 million people in Canada who would be able to take advantage of it. Whatever the cost might be, and it might be considerable, I think it is important that Canadians world-wide have the opportunity of voting in elections.

I may say that although there may be some administrative difficulties, it is not something that could not be overcome. The Bill that we have before us, I would say, is somewhat inadequate in that it does not go far enough, and all Canadians should be included. I would suggest that it be referred to the Committee on Privileges and Elections at the appropriate time, probably today if this Bill goes through without having been talked out.

Mr. Stanley Hudecki (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of National Defence): Mr. Speaker, it is with mixed feelings that I rise and continue discussing this subject. I must, first of all, compliment the Hon. Member for Ottawa-Vanier (Mr. Gauthier) for his excellent presentation, for the amount of research work that he has done, and for his good judgment in selecting this particular issue. It is particularly applicable because it must be remembered that school teachers and administrative support staff in the Canadian Armed Forces schools have officer status and are subject to the Canadian Forces Code of Service discipline as contained in the National Defence Act and may be tried by a special general court martial. Therefore, they have a status very close to that of a member of the Canadian Armed Forces and have, by law, been deemed Canadian Armed Forces electors.

This shows that the Hon. Member has done a very thorough job in researching this particular issue, except for the point that has been brought out by the Hon. Member for Dauphin (Mr. Lewycky) and by other spokesmen that it just does not go far enough. For that reason, it should be thought out and worked out carefully. As far as I understand, from the information that I have, it is in the process of being considered. It is being researched and will be brought forward by the Electoral Officer, Mr. Hamel, and in that form will be then considered properly in the proper committee and will undoubtedly come forward as an improvement in the Electoral Act.

I only hope that the Hon. Member will receive the credit that he deserves for the work that he has done, and I hope that this will be signified—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): Order.

[*Translation*]

Order, please. It being six o'clock, the House adjourns until eleven o'clock tomorrow morning, pursuant to the provisions of Standing Order 2(1).

At 6 p.m., the House adjourned, without question put, pursuant to Standing Order.