

Federal Elections

Therefore, for these two reasons, I would not support this bill at this stage, although I think there is a concept here which is really worth looking at. I go back again to say that I think it should be looked at in a much broader way, than just in a private members' bill. This is no reflection on the private member. I welcomed the fact that he raised it. However, we must also remember that the basic parliamentary system is based on the idea that the executive has the confidence of Parliament, and that when it loses that confidence of Parliament, that is, when it is defeated by Parliament, the government ceases to exist and an election is encouraged.

[Translation]

Mr. Henri Tousignant (Témiscamingue): Mr. Speaker, the purpose of Bill C-252 is to provide an element of predictability in the calling of federal general elections at fixed dates, thereby replacing British North America Act section 50 which reads as follows:

Every House of Commons shall continue for five years from the day of the return of the writs—

Section 50 could be repealed or amended to read as follows:

Every Parliament shall continue until dissolved by the Governor General, which shall be not sooner than four years less forty days, nor later than four years plus forty days—

In fact, it would be established that general elections would be called at fixed dates every four years.

Of course, when the bill was introduced in the House, one of its supporters, the hon. member for Crowfoot (Mr. Malone), emphasized certain positive aspects, but with very little conviction, it must be admitted. It has been said, for instance, that if the dates were fixed we would be able to gather on Parliament Hill on July 1 and hand out certificates and other things. That is a positive aspect of rather limited value. On the other hand, we must recognize that such a decision, in my opinion, would lead to radical changes in the operation of Canada's current political system. A government in office must indeed enjoy a certain flexibility. It will always be argued that such a flexibility will be used only for political and partisan purposes, the fact of being able to extend a mandate somewhat, and hon. members opposite believe that the intent is simply to leave enough room for the government to call the elections at the best time, at the most appropriate opportunity.

However, it must also be realized that in order to administer the country properly and run the country's business, a government must have a certain flexibility. It must be realized as well that at times when crises occur and a government cannot set a date to adjourn Parliament and simply forget what is happening. For all these reasons, I find it somewhat strange to have such a bill before the House when we have so many more important matters to discuss. We could discuss setting fixed dates for sessions, such as is the case for the National Assembly in Quebec. We would then know when the session would begin and when it would end. There are many other

important issues that could be discussed in this House. We could talk about parliamentary reform.

However, I do not believe that the bill now before the House should receive so much attention or deserves as much consideration as the hon. member opposite seems to want to give it. I shall therefore be very brief and simply say, Mr. Speaker, that I do not consider it most urgent or necessary to approve this bill. In my opinion, if we were to decide that this bill is more important than we realize, I would prefer that it be referred to a subcommittee to be studied in depth. However, for my part, Mr. Speaker, I do not agree that this is so, and I must say that I really cannot support this bill.

● (1630)

[English]

Mr. Gordon Taylor (Bow River): Mr. Speaker, I should like to say a few words on this bill and commend the hon. member for Crowfoot (Mr. Malone) for bringing it before the House for discussion. This bill in no way suggests that we eliminate the British parliamentary system in favour of the American system. It provides that the government must always maintain and retain the confidence of the House in order to stay in power. In spite of what the hon. member for Thunder Bay Atikokan (Mr. McRae) suggested, I think that is the difference between the two systems. At no time does the bill suggest that the government should stay in power for four years if it loses the confidence of the House. But, as the hon. member for Crowfoot said, it provides an element of predictability.

As things are today, we do not know when an election will be called; it could be at any time during a five-year period. The only thing that we do know is that it must be held five years from the time of the last election. That is the only fixed date we have, and it is seldom used by governments in this country, provincial or federal.

I think the hon. member should be commended for his bill and I should like hon. members of the House to consider the merits of it. Does the bill do away with some of the difficulties we experience today as the result of having no fixed day for an election? If so, the sensible thing would be to send the subject matter of the bill to a committee where necessary changes could be made to it. The hon. member for Thunder Bay-Atikokan mentioned he also had some thoughts along this line and it is possible that other members have as well. If the bill should go to committee, then we could receive input from different parts of the country and in the end, have a better Elections Act than we have at present.

One of the objections that I have to the present act is that it disenfranchises too many people. For instance, an election may be called during holiday time. No one knows how to plan his extramural activities in order to make sure that he is in the constituency at the time of the election. There have been elections in the months of June, July, August and September and, as a result, many people have claimed that they were disenfranchised. The election must be called within a limited number of days from the date of the proclamation, and there is