

Canada Elections Act

support the principal of the Bill. I do have one slight reservation with regard to the requirement that there have to be 50 electors before the service is offered. However, that is something that can be considered in Committee.

On behalf of the New Democratic Party, I commend the Hon. Member for Esquimalt-Saanich for his Bill. We hope it will receive speedy action, perhaps even before the next session.

Hon. Marcel Lambert (Edmonton West): Mr. Speaker, I wish to speak to the amendment which is before us. I do not want to repeat the procedural disputation we had previously. In this matter of considering the qualifications of those able to vote in a federal election, we start from the basic premise that a voter must be a person in a constituency and living within a certain polling subdivision. That is the basic rule.

As we know, a person who has moved during the election period may be able to correct his or her non-enumeration by going to a court of revision. In the usual instance of two months for the electoral period, the individual must return to his or her constituency to ensure they are on the electoral roll or that they get inscribed thereon through a court of revision. Conditions vary around the country with regard to ambulatory patients, those restricted persons and patients in hospitals.

First of all, I do not want to throw a wet blanket on this, but I suppose an electoral officer and his officials would be as welcome as a skunk at a hen party in a treatment hospital, going up and down the corridors to take the vote. The first consideration of health would immediately throw out that suggestion.

It used to be in some of the teaching hospitals that the polling station was set up in the nurses' residence. Under the present act, persons who are resident for a certain period prior to enumeration and resident at the time of the election could vote at the hospital. Other than that, patients in hospitals must return to their home, either on advance polling day or on election day.

There is one restriction that should be imposed. I cannot go so far as to say that ambulatory Canadians waltzing around in other parts of the country or the world should have the right to vote by dropping in at some point of reference and voting either by mail or otherwise. We have seen in other countries the gross difficulties that are caused by the mail-in vote. Usually most of the mail-in stuff has to be done before election day. People do not know for whom they are voting. There are any number of difficulties about voting.

There is a high proportion of Canadians who, resident in their homes, do not go out to vote. Either they are tired, it is raining or for some other reason they cannot be bothered going out to vote. It is not as though 95 per cent of Canadians vote and 5 per cent are disenfranchised because there are some restrictions on them.

In the case of hospitals, many doctors would hit you on the head for suggesting that their patients be disturbed in order to vote, to be placed on a gurney and transported to some central point in the hospital to vote, or have a troop consisting of the DRO, a porter, and scrutineers traipsing from room to room to take the ballots of patients.

Who knows the constituency of residence of the individual patients? Who are the candidates? What are the types of official ballots? These are important points. I am not saying that technically it cannot be done; certainly it can be done. You could arrange to have almost 100 per cent of the population vote if you wanted to spend the money and go to all the trouble and possibly follow up the reasons for people not voting.

● (1420)

In any event, with a mobile van moving around in a city constituency where there is a higher concentration of hospitals, the question is whether the van can get to all of them. It would certainly require more than one van in certain places and none in others. I do not know how one would cover the area in rural constituencies. Perhaps my Hon. colleague's riding of Esquimalt-Saanich may be covered by a mobile van moving at speed during the day. Perhaps Victoria could be covered. I am wondering about northern constituencies such as Skeena and Prince George and Peace River. There is no way that these constituencies could be covered even if there were several mobile vans. These questions need to be looked into.

In so far as persons who are restricted to their homes are concerned, I would think that that would present the greatest difficulty. A dear young thing with a couple of small children may say, "I cannot get away from home right now". A van would have to call at that home. That is nonsense because her husband has four hours at the end of the day free from employment to go and vote. Those people who want to vote will find the opportunity. In many cases, if people want to vote, they can. It must be remembered that people have a duty to vote. It is a freedom. People have the right to vote. That is what this democratic country must have as its foundation. Surely to goodness it is not up to the Government of Canada to take these people by the hand and lead them along a plush carpet to the polling station.

In any event, I am in agreement with the motion that the subject matter of this Bill be referred to the committee. There are many things that have been discussed by Hon. Members today with regard to electoral reform, and there are many other things that can be discussed.

The question was raised about prisoners. Well, there I draw the line. I was one of the first to participate in bringing polling stations to mental hospitals where there is a voluntary section. May I say that I do not know whether these patients gained anything by the visits of people electioneering in the hospital. Not very many patients exercised their right to vote. If patients in a mental hospital are attached to a poll and an address is given, in many instances that would stigmatize all those persons who are on the voters' list as being people who are patients in a mental hospital. I do not think that that is information that must necessarily be made public.

With those few remarks, I hope that the committee will get on with this subject and will not emulate the committee that