

Canada Elections Act

to me. As the last speaker said, I believe that the only poll that is important is the poll on election day. I always liked what the late Right Hon. Member for Prince Albert used to say about public opinion polls. He said, "Poles are for dogs." That is my feeling as well. I do not believe that the banning of public opinion polls during an election campaign will interfere in any way with freedom of information being made available to the general public.

As a matter of fact, what concerns me so much about public opinion polls being conducted presently without any controls or regulations over their production or reliability is that the general public is being fed misinformation. Carleton University polls have proven over and over again that they are experts at misinformation rather than at information about what the general public is thinking, what the delegates to the upcoming Progressive Conservative leadership convention are thinking or what is the reality. It would be healthy for the press of the country—and I mean the entire media—to have to go out and obtain the facts, not live off polls which really do not contain much hard information about the realities of the moment.

● (1610)

Mr. David Smith (Parliamentary Secretary to President of the Privy Council): Mr. Speaker, I have listened with interest to the debate this afternoon. We have debated this issue in the House of Commons before. I think the Hon. Member for Cumberland-Colchester (Mr. Coates) has a basic flaw in his argument, in that he seems to approach the subject with the premise that if Canadians are aware of what other Canadians are thinking, somehow they will be influenced by it. Then he cited a number of examples in which polls have been way off.

I agree with one point he made, the one concerning the Carleton University poll on the Winnipeg convention. It was out by about 8 per cent because of the fact that some Tories were lying to them. There is no doubt about that.

He suggested the reason people in British Columbia did not know who would win the election was that no public opinion polls were published. I suggest the reason they did not know was because it was close. Certainly the Parties were polling. They may not have been releasing the poll results, but certainly Hon. Members of the House are fairly well connected with groups in British Columbia that were in fact polling. For example, I am sure NDP Members knew what the polls were showing. If they were unable to predict the election, I suspect that it concerned the fact that the election was a close one.

The basic problem with this Bill is that it interferes with free speech. Once we start doing that, how do we enforce it or where do we draw the line? What happens if the Detroit *Free Press* or a Detroit television station, because of its great interest in Canada and the following it has here, decides to conduct a poll? Obviously we could not enforce anything against that newspaper or station. Should we put ourselves in the position of some East European communist countries, where people huddle by their radios listening to the news on the "Voice of America" to find out what is going on in the rest

of the world? Will we try to put a blanket of secrecy over polling throughout the country so that people in Windsor cannot listen to Detroit radio stations or buy the *Free Press* to find out the results of a poll?

There is a large body of evidence to suggest that the fact the public may be aware of opinion polls does not make opinion polls fulfil their own prophecies. I suppose the most famous one was in 1936, the famous Literary Digest poll which predicted that Landon would defeat Roosevelt. Of course, we all know that that poll was so far out that the Literary Digest did not last much longer.

What about the Truman-Dewey election in 1948? All the polls showed that Dewey would win, but did they influence the American people into electing Dewey? No, they did not. They elected Harry S. Truman, as we all know.

It seems to me that there is some sort of fear that Canadians will act like lemmings or sheep. I have greater confidence in the maturity, the wisdom and judgment of Canadians that in fact they will not act like sheep. Let us look at western Canadians, for example. Prior to the 1980 election, the opinion polls showed throughout the campaign that the Liberals would probably win. They did win the campaign. Does that mean that people in Alberta and in other parts of western Canada, such as Edmonton from where my good friend comes, all suddenly jumped on the Liberal bandwagon? Of course not. Why did they not jump on the bandwagon? The reason is that they were not influenced by the polls.

Another matter which must be pointed out is that a law has to be practical. This Bill provides that no person shall publish the results of a poll by any manner. In Toronto we have Allen Garden where people stand up on soapboxes. It is a smaller version of Hyde Park in London. What if someone walked down the streets of Toronto, asked people how they would vote, got up on a soapbox in Allen Gardens and said that he had just conducted a poll?

In British Columbia they have hamburger polls. I think they are at the PNE or something. The Hon. Member for Esquimalt-Saanich (Mr. Munro) may be familiar with them. One buys a hamburger at some place in Vancouver and indicates whether it will be a Bennett burger or a Barrett burger. If this Bill were in place, it would mean that they could not sell Bennett burgers or Barrett burgers. The point I am trying to make is that it is impractical. Once we start interfering with freedom of speech, where do we draw the line?

We on this side of the House are not afraid of the principle of freedom of information. We are not afraid.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Corbin): Order, please. Pursuant to Standing Order 24(2), it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings.

[Translation]

Shall all items listed under Private Members' Public Bills be allowed to stand by unanimous consent?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.