

Private Members' Business

That is why I have had this bill sitting on the Order Paper for over a year and why I have sought to advance it. Unfortunately, because of the luck of the draw, I have simply not been able to do so.

This is a significant but small move as part of what I believe should be a larger package of reform. I am happy to support the hon. member in his efforts. I wish the government would give its unanimous consent today to allow this bill to proceed to committee where we could study it in some detail. As I say, it represents a substantial improvement in the law and we are happy to support it. I hope the government will do so in order that we can get on with this important matter.

Mr. Doug Fee (Red Deer): Madam Speaker, I too am pleased to have an opportunity to speak on Bill C-283 submitted by the member for Churchill.

This bill would involve an amendment to section 2 of the Canada Elections Act. Specifically, it proposes changing the definition of an election expense.

I am not going to imitate the opinion of the member for Kingston and the Islands but I must agree that the definition of "election expenses for candidates and political parties" is vague and can be subject to widely differing interpretations. At times the application of the definition can seem to be quite arbitrary and this has led in many cases to confusion and the possibility for both intentional and unintentional abuse.

This is my first term in this place and the election of 1988 was my first. I was lucky to have an official agent who was a stickler for detail. He insisted that we follow his very strict definition of what an election expense was. We did, but there are still many, I do not want to call them debates, but we had a lot of active discussions about what was and what was not an official election expense.

I have talked to more experienced members in this place and know that the concern about interpretation is not limited to new members. The problem has been recognized and it is already being addressed outside the context of this bill. The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing was set up by the government in November 1989 to do a comprehensive review of electoral legislation.

I am advised that the commission has heard and read many submissions which address the definition of election expenses. The sponsor of this bill and all of us who

have been through the electoral process understand why these submissions have been made. The very fact that this topic was considered to be an issue by so many people should tell us that it is time to consider a clear and comprehensive definition of election expenses.

Many of the submissions to the royal commission contained recommendations on how to change the legislation with respect to election financing. Most of the recommendations contained proposals to change the definition of an election expense. This is a recognition of the pivotal role played by the definition of election expenses in the application of the election financing laws. Proposing a new definition for election expenses is no doubt a challenge. However, there are so many related issues to examine and questions to consider.

The Canada Elections Act contains many complex rules with respect to accounting for election expenses. Therefore, the definition of an expense must be very carefully laid out.

Decisions involving finances have to be made quickly and candidates and their parties have to be aware of their rights and obligations. I do not agree with the haste put forward by the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands. I do not think there is a great hurry because we have about two years before the present mandate expires. We have two years before the next federal election is required.

There are many important initiatives that have to be completed before this mandate does expire and I look forward to seeing them completed. However, at the same time, even two years goes quickly. Time seems to compress itself.

• (1740)

I do think it is important that we proceed fairly quickly because in order for the electoral process to work properly in the next election and in subsequent elections, candidates and their official agents must be able to judge whether their particular expense will qualify as an election expense or not. This is one of the fundamentals. It seems that the process could be improved through a revision to the definition of election expenses.

The member for Churchill has made an attempt to improve the electoral process by introducing Bill C-283. We, and many members of this House, can applaud him for his efforts although we do not necessarily agree with all the results.