

Election Expenses

There are a number of reasons for that, Mr. Speaker. The reason that strikes me is that I view the centralizing of power in the hands of either a national office of a country as regionally diverse as ours or any other country, as suspect. I think, regardless of party, that the local riding association should have a tremendous amount of influence on the collection of funds in that area. I have no quarrel, for example, with the regulations related to disclosure. In my view, there will be avenues for working around them if political parties in this country so wish but I do not believe that is true of the local level. For example, in the Assiniboia constituency I have always had an agent of some renown, who has put in considerable time and effort, in charge of the books and the funds that are contributed, and in charge of the payment of bills. He should be able to act as the official agent of the party in the collection of funds in that area and it should be clearly spelled out.

One of the things that concerns me is the centralizing that has occurred in connection with that other parliamentary system of government, that of Great Britain, where a considerable amount of power is given to the national headquarters of the party. This power is used to bring about a situation in which often the wishes of the local organization, in respect of candidates are overruled. The headquarters of the party may have an exclusive program of what I call parachuting candidates and controlling expenditures in a given riding. I believe that would be a move in the wrong direction, regardless of party. The local organization must continue to have autonomy over the collection of its funds, expenditure of its funds and indeed, as has always been the case in our party, have complete say about the candidate involved and some of the local issues involved as well. So the amendments I have proposed, Mr. Speaker, are to strengthen that provision within the act.

The hon. member for Skeena (Mr. Howard) has moved an amendment that complements the kind of change I am trying to bring about. I think the major amendment is the one that reads:

"electoral district agent" in relation to a registered party, means a person whose name is recorded in the registry of agents of registered parties maintained by the Chief Electoral Officer pursuant to subsection 13.1(1) and who is designated as such by the chief agent of the party.

That at least moves in the direction of maintaining local autonomy. It still gives the national party some say about a local agent. If they have an objection, at least the local constituency organization has some influence.

Questions have already arisen in the discussion of the first amendment we have dealt with today, on the workability of many aspects of this legislation in terms of the kind of bureaucracy and kind of public expenditures it entails. Anyone who has been involved in a campaign for public office would certainly be aware of the difficulties of an agent of a party sitting in Ottawa, Toronto or maybe even Regina, trying to ascertain the moneys raised in a given local electoral district. In my view it is an almost impossible job. This legislation, if it passes, provides that the only agent of a party may well be a representative of the national party. This provision will create an incredible bureaucracy, in my view, within those given parties. How it will ever be administered by the parties is beyond my understanding, and it does not matter which party.

[Mr. Knight.]

● (1740)

In the last general election we ran into immense problems trying to keep track of funds, in the way the Elections Act would require. Agents in the riding ran into immense difficulties. I have the privilege of representing a riding which covers 20,000 square miles and includes two urban populated areas, Weyburn and Assiniboia. Ontario members might not consider these as large urban areas; however, in Saskatchewan, they are considered as urban areas of significant size. In the election, the opposition parties held at least one meeting in Assiniboia, as did the party I represent. They held two or more meetings in Weyburn, undoubtedly because of its population. During the campaign, which lasted between 40 and 60 days, I held public meetings in 30 or more smaller communities ranging in population from 50 to over 500.

These public meetings were attended by people of different political persuasions and, as was traditional, the hat was passed and contributions ranging from \$1 to \$100 were made. Sometimes people will give you \$5; at other times they will give you \$50, \$75 or more. Some people write a cheque; others give you cash. A national agent who must keep track of funds contributed to party members will be faced with a nightmare. How can he possibly keep track of contributions made across the length and breadth of such a wide and diverse rural community as mine. I can tell you that any agent trying to keep track of donations will be faced, literally, with hundreds of hours of frustration and headache.

Even at the local constituency level it is difficult for people to keep track of donors of funds. For instance, at any one meeting 20 or 30 people might contribute money. If you hold a meeting in Weyburn, out of a crowd of 700 or 800 people you might get 400 or more contributors. Imagine trying to trace their names and give receipts for income tax purposes. The bill requires that where certain contributions are made, receipts are to be given. There is a provision with regard to the number of contributors who contribute over \$100. You must find out who has given what at such meetings and provide receipts, so that people may use them for income purposes, as is their right. That being so, I suggest that an agent at the national level will have an impossible task. That is why I am bringing forward a suggestion with regard to the local electoral district agent.

There is something else with which hon. members are undoubtedly familiar. It quite often happens that people may contribute to the campaign of a candidate representing a party which they do not support. In my riding, for instance, and I am sure in the ridings of Conservatives, Liberal and Social Credit members, this kind of thing happens quite often. People who support another political party will give funds to your party, merely because you are running for parliament.

Mr. Nesdoly: Sometimes these people support two political parties.

Mr. Knight: As my colleague for Meadow Lake suggests, sometimes people support two political parties. He is well versed in Saskatchewan politics.