

*Canada Elections Act*

The same impossible demand was made by the opponents of female suffrage. It was claimed that women lacked the experience to vote intelligently, that most of them really did not want the vote anyway, that they would tend to vote in blocks and would be easy prey for demagogues, that such a volatile electorate would destroy our institutions and, finally, that they were just not ready for the franchise—some day maybe, but not just yet. These were the arguments of those who opposed female suffrage in Great Britain and the United States.

In respect of our youth at the present time, there are those who, on the one hand, seem to fear the influence of the youthful voter, whether it is expressed or whether it is merely felt. There are probably many members of the House of Commons as well as people outside the house who somehow fear the influence of the youthful voter. On the other hand, there are those who see in our youth a new generation—impatient, idealistic, and having a more thoughtful attitude toward national and world affairs. Between these two attitudes of fear and caution on the one side and praise and urgency on the other, there is probably a middle road of truth.

According to several surveys, young people in their teens show no significant difference from older people in their attitude to or understanding of political issues. If such be the case, why not leave the voting age at 21, an age that has long been recognized as the legal attainment of one's majority? If the need for change is pressed upon us, then why should the voting age be set at 18 rather than 17 or perhaps 19? The answer in part is that the establishment of 21 years as the age of responsibility in voting has no relevance in the 20th century. As is well known and as was mentioned previously, the present standard is borrowed from ancient English common law which designated 21 years as the minimum age for knighthood. This was supposed to be the age at which a young man would be strong enough to bear the weight of armour. We all know there is no magic to the age of 21 years. There is no guarantee that a person will assume adult responsibility as soon as he reaches his 21st birthday.

● (5:20 p.m.)

What justification is there for selecting 18 years as the voting age in preference to 21? The fact is that those falling between the ages of 18 and 21 are considered adults for many purposes. They can marry, begin having families, pay taxes, drive cars, serve in the

armed forces, and so on. Eighteen years seems a good age to have as the voting age; it is approximately the age when young people leave high school to enter the labour force or to proceed to higher education.

Studies in the United States have shown that persons 21 years of age are among the most delinquent voters. It has been concluded that the reason for this is that by the time these young people have turned 21 many have become so far removed from the stimulation of the educational process that their interest in public affairs has waned. Consequently, some of these young people may be lost as voters for the rest of their lives.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for lowering the voting age is that Canadian politics needs the transfusion of enthusiasm and interest that younger voters would give it. Through the years young people have been a great help to political parties and candidates—as helpers but not as voters. Since young people have played important roles in many campaigns it is disturbing to find they can persuade others to vote but cannot vote themselves.

Lowering the voting age to 18 years would tend to bring about a better and more equitable balance in the electorate of this nation. As the life expectancy of our people rises the number of older voters increases. A corresponding expansion in the number of younger voters would broaden the political base and perhaps provide concurrently a more balanced approach in the nation's general political outlook.

We know from history that it is usually a difficult task to expand the electorate. Often a strong measure of agitation is required, as was demonstrated by the Chartists, the suffragettes and the United States negroes. In due course political parties and leaders somehow become capable of embracing new ideas and people, but the process generally is slow. In time the federal government will extend the franchise to those between 18 and 21 years of age, but by then it will be following the practice of most provinces in Canada. To date, five provinces have lowered the voting age either to 18 years or 19 years, and the question is being considered seriously by other provinces. It seems a pity that the federal government is not giving leadership in this matter. Our youth generally deserve this right. Recent public opinion polls have shown that the number of people in favour of lowering the voting age to 18 years has increased considerably.