

Canada Elections Act

I encourage my colleagues to get this matter into a legislative committee so that we can have a thorough examination of the issue and bring in legislation that is deemed acceptable to all sides of the House.

Mr. John Oostrom (Willowdale): Madam Speaker, the Bill before us today addresses a very serious aspect of our democratic system. I thank the Hon. Member for Nickel Belt (Mr. Rodriguez) for bringing it to the attention of the House.

Democratic governments are governments of the people and for the people. If a government is to remain strong and vibrant with a solid vision of the future, then it must have among its decision-makers the brightest and the ablest individuals in the country. There can be no higher calling except that in the service of one's country. The Bill we have before us today proposes to extend the leave of absence provisions respecting a candidate in a federal election to a candidate who is successfully elected as a Member of the House of Commons. The Bill will ensure that they can return to their previous employer after they leave the House of Commons.

By ensuring that an individual can return to his previous employer, the Government of Canada increases the talent pool from which people can seek public office. Seeking public office is a very serious undertaking. When making such a decision you must consider your family, the time, your economic future, and your commitment. Once you commit to seeking public office and become elected you belong to the people. Your decisions and actions will be geared to making Canada a better place in which to live. Your personal life, due to the time commitments, becomes neglected because the greater good of the people will be the priority. You are put under a microscope with millions of eyes observing and analysing your every move and action. Your statements will be analysed. You will receive criticism and praise. Yet, when you make a commitment to seek public office, you are expected to be able to perform under pressure. With everything that an individual has to contend with once elected to office, there should not be the added worry of having to think about the economic well-being of the family once the elected term is over.

● (1805)

If one is a wealthy individual, there are no economic concerns once the elected term is over. However, if you come from the segment of the population which is accountable to an employer then concerns are of major importance. The employer is not obligated to take you back after your term as a Member of Parliament is over. I wonder if this is right.

There are two schools of thought in this area. There are those who say that the employer should not be responsible for an individual once elected to public office and to give an extended leave of absence. Once the individual leaves a company, that person is no longer contributing to the economic health of that corporation. In many instances, the company has to go out and hire one, perhaps two individuals to staff the vacated position. The employer may have spent a great deal of

funds and time to train you, and now the company feels that their investment has not yielded any benefits. The company may not find anyone with the skills or knowledge to fill the vacant position, and consequently that affects the well-being of the company and also the other employees which are dependent on it. Technology may have made these individuals redundant, then the company has a non-productive person on staff to hinder its operations.

There is another major consideration and that is conflict of interest. Individuals who hold public office could be seriously compromised should decisions have to be made which would affect the company from which they have an extended leave of absence. For example, what type of pressure would be applied to an individual whose career is in the banking industry if Parliament had before it a Bill affecting that industry? That individual could face some very serious choices. He could declare conflict of interest, much the same as municipal politicians do whenever they vote on an issue which they, their families, or business could profit from. However, municipal affairs have a very narrow spectrum of issues. A piece of legislation in the House of Commons will affect millions of Canadians.

If an individual refrains from participating in a piece of legislation because of a conflict, is that individual being fair to the constituents who elected him? The legislation may have a major impact on their lives. Members of Parliament are expected to make very tough decisions, decisions which will be fair to all. Yet if the elected Member declares conflict of interest and does not participate in the process, then the people lose their voice and interests in the decision-making process. I wonder if that is fair or right. Certainly, in this instance, there is a major dilemma for the elected Member. Should the elected Member participate in debate? How could he ensure that the involvement will be non-partisan? How can the employer be prevented from applying subtle pressure on this individual? Certainly, the conflict of interest possibilities leave many areas which need to be addressed for Bill C-237 to be effective.

● (1810)

With all the legislation the Government and the committees discuss, individuals will have the very difficult task in many instances of being able to identify a potential conflict of interest. There is the possibility that elected individuals would always be looking over their shoulders for accusations of potential conflicts of interest.

This brings us to another disadvantage. With possible conflicts of interest always being present, the effectiveness of elected individuals as legislators could be impaired. They may become timid and non-committal, thus leaving the Government in the hands of the bureaucrats and the electorate, without a voice in Parliament. Democracy would not be served if this occurred.

The opposite point of view is that by an employer guaranteeing an elected Member his position once he ceased to be a